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Improvised Lives: Individualization, Youth, and the Transition to Adulthood in Rural China

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Improvised Lives:
Individualization, Youth, and the Transition
to Adulthood in Rural China

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Anthropology

by

Michael Strickland

2012
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Improvised Lives:
Individualization, Youth, and the Transition
to Adulthood in Rural China

by

Michael Strickland
Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology
University of California, Los Angeles, 2012
Professor Yunxiang Yan, Chair

The youth of China in recent decades have borne the brunt of rapid social change. Those born in the 1980s and early 1990s, and who came of age in the early 21st century, grew up under conditions not merely different from those known to earlier generations, but conditions that were radically new for China. This much is no surprise, having already been witnessed and commented upon by any number of researchers and scholars and with increasing frequency since the start of China's Reform Era in 1978. These observations, however, have often come piecemeal, and what has been most lacking is a more precise and theoretically coherent understanding of youth experience. In this dissertation I draw on individualization theory to examine the collective experiences of a number of rural Chinese
youth as they made their way into adulthood in the early 2000s. Looking by turns at the environment in which they grew up, their struggles to find jobs and get ahead, their choices in marriage, their fixation on material comfort and success, and the fraying and diffusion of their social ties, this text seeks to build a portrait of a particular group of youth, and through them depict and describe a systematic change in Chinese society. The road to adulthood for Chinese youth is no longer what it once was; traditional models and structures have fallen away, with new and unfamiliar structures arising in their place; old norms have been upended or, where they still stand, can no longer be met by the same means as before. The result of all of this is that young Chinese have greater personal freedom than ever, and yet also less security. And if they hope to meet the ideals of life success that they, their families, and Chinese society at large holds out for them, then there are no set paths to follow, and they must improvise their own way forward.
The dissertation of Michael Strickland is approved.

Karen Brodkin

Nancy Levine

Cindy Fan

Yunxiang Yan, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2012
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract of the Dissertation  
List of figures  
Acknowledgments  
Vita  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The research population</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The research setting</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissertation overview</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Chapter One | Geographies of Modernity  
Individualization and Tradition in Rural China  

| Individualization, existential risk, and the self-scripted biography | 31 |
| Defining Jiaxiang | 43 |
| The differential geography of individualization | 53 |
| Concluding remarks | 60 |

## Chapter Two | The New Chaos of Work  
Strategic Education and the Instability of Employment  

| The strangeness of modern education | 67 |
| Individualizing structures of the school system | 75 |
| External risks, internal uncertainties | 90 |
| Concluding remarks | 103 |

## Chapter Three | Free Love  
Individual Desire and Social Necessity in Marriage Choices  

| The balance of tradition and modernity | 110 |
| Structural pressures, incentives, and the marriage market | 119 |
| Refusal, acceptance, and choice | 127 |
| Stepping outside of the normative boundary | 136 |
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Percentage of middle school students who continued to high school, nationwide: 81
Figure 2: Percentage of high school students who continued on to higher education, nationwide: 87
Figure 3: Jining Urban Household Average Annual Consumer Expenditures, 2009: 100
Figure 4: Preparation for a 15 km cycling race, Jiaxiang: 163
Figure 5: Kitchen in rented apartment, essentially unequipped and unused: 168
Figure 6: Model kitchen for a luxury apartment, Jining: 169
Figure 7: Living quarters, rented apartment in Taian: 173
Figure 8: Living quarters, rented apartment in Qingdao: 174
Figure 9: Living quarters, rented apartment in Jining: 175
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Introduction

Most fieldwork projects probably do not end quite as they began, and this one was no excep-
tion. My research began in the fall of 2008, and over the course of the project my objectives
gradually evolved until, by the end of it, the research had turned from questions about
friendship and sociality among young people to the lives of Chinese youth as they were
making the circuitous transition into adulthood. It was, ultimately, about young people and
their everyday lives, their goals and pressures. It was about their searches for jobs, their anxi-
eties about marriage or whether or not they would be able to afford to buy a house. It was
about the way they whiled away the hours with friends and tried to sort out their present
and future lives. The results of that research, and what they have to say about the greater
structural changes in Chinese society, political economy, and modernity, constitute the
body of this dissertation. But as I said, this was not how the research project started. Here in
this introduction, I wish to step back and give a brief assessment of the project as a whole, to explain how it began, how it changed, and the ultimate form that it took.

The original proposal for my dissertation project was for a focused study of friendship ties among young people, and more specifically young men, in rural and semi-rural China. This was not a topic that I had chosen casually; it was, in fact, a direct outgrowth of my prior work on fictive kinship, and modern practices of sworn brotherhood specifically. In the spring and summer of 2005, I taught English at a small medical college in Shandong province, China, and there I met a young man named Taishi Jiang.¹ One day he began to tell me of his five “brothers.” These were not genetically related kin, as it turned out, but jieyi xiongdi, or sworn brothers. This was the very first time that I had ever heard of this particular phenomenon, an ancient but still extant practice in many parts of China. Taishi Jiang later invited me to visit his hometown, a place called Jiaxiang in the southwest of the province. There I began to meet and make connections with some of his acquaintances and old friends, including his five brothers. As that summer ended I left for the U.S. to begin my graduate studies, but the next summer I returned to China, first to the same college I had taught at before and then to Jiaxiang, where I conducted a short-term fieldwork project on sworn brotherhood.

In the course of that project I became interested in the friendships that my mostly young, mostly male subjects were involved in. Sworn brotherhood, after all, is a variety of close and intimate friendship, but regardless of whether or not young men had sworn brothers, their peers and friends played a manifestly important part in their lives. Friends were

¹ All personal names used throughout are of course pseudonyms.
sources of emotional support, certainly, but also sources of badly needed material support as well. When a young man could not do something himself, when he needed money, when something was troubling him, or even when he simply was bored or lonely and wanted to kill time, it was often to his friends that he would turn. These perfectly ordinary relationships are both ubiquitous and indispensable in most people’s lives, and yet remain sadly undertheorized in anthropology.

After what I had found in my study of sworn brotherhood, and after a wide-ranging review of the relatively scant literature on friendship in anthropology, sociology, psychology, and other fields, I was confronted with an evergrowing list of questions that, eventually, became the targets of the research project. In the face of China's omnipresent and continuous social change, how were the roles and expectations of friends evolving? How were these changes reflected in the social networks of young people? How did instrumental support between friends vary according to their personal circumstances? As some young people left their rural homes and scattered to make lives for themselves elsewhere in the country, what became of their old ties? And as some of them climbed the socioeconomic ladder, would the roles of their friends and the kinds of support they needed from them change? These were not just general questions on the nature of friendship in China, but reflected back on key social transformations of the Reform Era, such as the rise in both social mobility and the freedom for migration.

But by the time that I found myself back in Jiaxiang to start the project, something unexpected had happened. Most of my initial informants, whom I had met in the summers of 2005 and 2006, had been college students at the time, and during the summers they re-
turned home for their breaks from school and were relatively free. In the idle two months or so of their summer breaks, they would tend to seek out their old friends, catching up in conversations at each others' houses, or going out for long meals and drinking with one another. Or perhaps they would travel to another city to visit some of their current college classmates, or go sightseeing, such as to the provincial capital, Jinan. In any case, the summer meant ample time for them to both speak with me and for me to observe their interactions with their peers.

Yet in the fall of 2008, when I had finally returned to China, many of these informants had just graduated and they were already either working or looking for work. A few who were medical students, were still in school but in their hectic final year. A handful of them became engaged to get married or were seriously considering it. Quite suddenly, it seemed, because of work and a host of other prosaic reasons, they had far less time for their friends. New priorities and responsibilities—work, making money, buying a home, marriage, having children—had entered their lives.

Thus there was a new, clearly identifiable pattern emerging in these young men's lives. Whereas before they had had plenty of time to socialize with friends, now they were more constrained, taken up with the anxieties of everyday work and plans for the future. They were increasingly independent, moving out from home or graduating from school. And they were all faced with the same litany of fateful decisions and weighty obligations, yet with each of them trying to navigate their way through on their own.

In a way, what was happening was obvious. These young men in their twenties were making the transition into adulthood, each of them gradually working their way through key
turning points: employment, marriage, buying a home, having children. I had anticipated this to some extent before my fieldwork began, but I had underestimated just how overwhelming, complex, and daunting this transition would be for them. My informants were consumed with uncertainties about how to move their lives forward, repeatedly having to adjust course in everything from work to their personal lives.

This had two consequences for the project. On the one hand, it made the initial topic more difficult to pursue on a practical level. My informants' lives had become both far busier and less stable. Virtually no one I met over the course of my fieldwork maintained the same status for the full time that I was in Jiaxiang. Individuals changed jobs or started families, and nearly everyone moved or migrated at least once, whether it was to another town or another province. The mobility of my subjects, combined with their busy lives, made it exceedingly difficult to maintain continuous contact with all of them. Needless to say, this was a hindrance to the research, though one I could do little about. On the other hand, if the priorities in my informants' lives had changed, then it was only sensible that the research focus should follow. Though I did not neglect the question of friendship and sociality completely, it was superseded by my informants' other, newer concerns. My aim, therefore, was not to impose a set of theoretical priorities on my informants; I started from the beginning, on the level of what was of most immediate importance to them: careers, making money, finding girlfriends or spouses, having fun, preparing for the future, settling down—in short, finding stability, security, and success. The project gradually became about finding a way to make sense of and explain the constant upheaval, uncertainty, and insecurity that had come to characterize their lives.
Still, theorizing the observed facts of people's lives is never straightforward. Perhaps it should go without saying, but experiences in the field do not “present themselves, even to the most hardened sociologist, as conveniently labeled synedoches, microcosms, or allegories of wholes, cultural or theoretical” (Tyler 1986:131). Most of what went on in my informants lives each day could not be easily categorized or abstracted into generalized social theory. And even though the conclusion that my informants were transitioning into adulthood may seem uncontroversial enough, they did not themselves usually articulate it in this way. From time to time a few of them might reflect on the state of their lives and how it was changing, but for the most part they were not concerned with trying to fit their everyday lives into some grand arc. Their preoccupations were usually more practical, personal, and immediate. They wondered over whether or not to break up with a girlfriend, or how to meet one in the first place; if they should stick with the job they had, or take the risk to try something else, maybe start a business of their own. Their concerns, then, were both specific and mundane, though important enough to them. If they really were making a transition into adulthood, it was not always apparent and not often on their minds.

Therefore I maintain a sense of wariness about interpreting my experiences and observations. An ethnographer can only see so much, and in the hectic, highly mobile lives of my informants I could not observe everything they did or that happened to them, nor ask and answer every question. I am only too aware that the data I was able to collect captures only a tiny fraction of the reality of what my informants went through day by day. Trying to then assemble all the disparate and isolated facts witnessed during my time spent in the field, to forge a coherent narrative from them, and to then determine how they relate to the over-
arching patterns of social reproduction and change in China at large is a treacherous process. Much must be left out and unsaid, and much of what my informants did or that happened to them in the course of their everyday lives simply cannot be made to fit within any of the chapters to follow. This text therefore is not offered as a grand definitive statement on Chinese youth culture, or transitions to adulthood, or anything of the sort.

Other accounts of more specific topics relating to contemporary Chinese youth have been done, such as on their education and work lives (Hoffman 2000), romantic and sexual culture (Farrer 2002), or even their identity as a generation of single children born under the one child policy (Fong 2004). Notably, of course, most of these studies have been conducted in urban areas, not in the countryside, and so unless we were to assume that there is no meaningful difference between the experiences of urban and rural youth, then this leaves the majority of Chinese youth underrepresented in the literature. This study goes some small distance towards rebalancing the situation by offering the voices and experiences of youth from rural backgrounds.

Even so, this study is not primarily about rural youth as such. Admittedly, it could just as well have been conceived of as a comparative study of the lives of rural and urban Chinese youth, or, for that matter, as a study contrasting the collective biography of youth born in the 1980's with those who grew up in previous generations. Such alternate approaches would perhaps allow for a conceptually neater analysis with greater thematic particularity, but they would also be somewhat artificial. The chapters that follow all deal with quite sizable subjects, any one of which could easily support a full study of its own. But had I been insistent on pursuing any one topic in isolation it would have meant systematically
discounting other dimensions of my informants' experiences during this period of their lives, and the greater shape of what was happening would have been missed.

This dissertation is concerned with the lives of youth, and young men in particular, from a rural area in Shandong province. It is about the problems, decisions, and turning points that loomed in their lives as they made their way into adulthood, and how they faced them. Above all, it is a common biography for a particular generation from a particular area of rural China—and through this, a reflection of an ongoing transformation in Chinese youth, the life course, and individualization.

*The research population*

My research subjects were mostly young men from a county town in Shandong province, a fact which is significant in itself. There are three dimensions here, running along the lines of gender, age, and geographic origin, and I will briefly address each in turn.

The inclusion of more women in the subject population would certainly have been desirable, but as a practical matter it was not feasible. My own position in relation to potential informants presented difficulties in this instance. Simply put, as a (relatively) young, foreign man, most young women were shy around me. I had made some early attempts to interview women in my first project on friendship, but very few were willing to speak with me, and those who did were often very inhibited. One memorable failure was a short attempted interview with two young women from a township south of Jiaxiang, who dissolved into em-
barrassed giggles at nearly every question I asked. Older women could be more straightforward with me, but communication with women of roughly my own age, especially if they were single, was, as a rule, fairly constrained. This is not to say that women's experiences and perspectives were not included when I could get them, and I am grateful to a handful of young women who were, relatively speaking, open to answering occasional questions. Nevertheless, the great majority of my data comes from working with men, and therefore I would emphasize that what follows in the remaining chapters should not be construed as describing Chinese youth in general, but is rather directed more towards describing the experiences of young Chinese men. If this is not necessarily what I might have otherwise chosen, it does not so much detract from the research as merely narrow the scope of its relevance. After all, there are real gender divisions that cannot be overlooked, and the experiences of young men, the pressures they face and choices available to them are distinctive from those that exist for women. This will become clearer in later chapters, particularly in chapters three and five.

The age range of this population (roughly age 20 to early 30s, with the majority in the range of 22-27) was a more deliberate choice, and more significant. There is already a well-developed literature on age and the life course, and the period of youth carries its own peculiar features that distinguish it from both childhood and later adulthood. It is a time of frenetic status changes in an individual's personhood, and most of the major events of the normative life course—first employment, marriage, parenthood, and the like—are anticipated to occur in youth (Bohn & Berntsen 2010). Youth is a difficult, composite status, contextually variable and relative, often better understood as a discourse and set of power relations than
as a definite life stage (Berger 1963; Durham 2004; Bennett 2007), and it is most marked for what it is not: adulthood. Though legal adulthood may be automatically conferred by age, social adulthood is another matter, and entails passing a series of varied goalposts. Those who fail to fully attain to those normatively prescribed goals, even as they advance in age, may remain as somehow less than full adults (Jenkins 1990). It is noteworthy that the Chinese term for an adult, *chengren*, quite literally means to “become a person” (Tu 1976).

I would stress, however, that this is not a study of Chinese youth culture as such. Though that would be a worthy subject for examination, my focus here is not on youth as a particular social position or status as differentiated from adulthood. It would be more appropriate to say that my informants were in transition; some were, by certain measures, already adults, while others who happened to be at the exact same age were still youths, but in all cases there was some degree of ambiguity. To frame this as a study of youth culture then would be to overlook this liminality.

Moreover, such a view easily risks being ahistorical. Youth and the transition to adulthood are structured parts of the life course, but the life course itself evolves over time. The youthfulness of my informants is important not just as defining their social position against (other) adults, but for how they are oriented within China’s recent history as a particular generation born into a particular time. There is thus a distinction to be made between the life course as an abstract “plan” of what an individual’s life “should” be, and the life course as a matter of lived fact and historically shaped. And certainly, the two do not necessarily agree with one another at all times. In periods of rapid social change, the life course as
a normative plan may be out of step with the life course as lived fact, or, equally, generations may develop correspondingly different expectations of what the life course as plan must be.

This sort of disjuncture between age groups is as true in China as anywhere. The many shifts in governance, political economy, and ideology over the last century have left indelible and clearly differentiated imprints on each generation (Davis-Friedmann 1985; Hung and Chiu 2003). There are those who came of age before the CCP established power in 1949; those who matured in the early years of heady revolutionary ideology in the 1950s; the lost generation who grew up under the Cultural Revolution; and now those who have come of age in the Reform era. In popular discourse there is a simple system that divides the generations by decade, e.g. the “80’s generation” (80 后的人) and “90’s generation,” etc. My informants by and large fell squarely into the 80’s generation, except for a small handful born in the 70’s and very early 90’s. Of course, historical turning points do not line up perfectly with the decades, and the commonly imagined characteristics of the 80’s generation are not necessarily so different from, say, those born in the 90’s or the very late 70’s.

Margaret Mead (1970) once proposed in her study of generation gaps three types of socialization, differentiated by how knowledge flows between young and old. Mead suggested that many societies could be described as what she called postfigurative, where knowledge and norms of behavior were passed from adults and elders to the young. In times of social change, however, where established norms might cease to apply, both young and old might learn from their peers, a situation Mead labeled configurative. But when social change became truly and overwhelmingly rapid, in what Mead described as prefigurative societies, the youth might find themselves innovating and formulating new cultural patterns, with the
older generations having to learn and adapt from the young. If pressed, one could debate whether China in the present should be named as cofigurative or prefigurative, but the exact label is not terribly important here. Mead's classifications serve simply as a reminder that in times of social change the young may not be able to find guidance for their own problems among their elders or in established practice, and this is to some extent the situation that Chinese youth find themselves in now.

The litany of changes that has confronted the 80's generation is long: the extension of public schooling, the diminution of the welfare system offered through work units, the rise of private businesses and entrepreneurship, the growth of wealth and income inequality, the ongoing shift in demographics, the dismantling of the socialist job assignment system, changing family structures, the birth of both a consumer and youth culture, the influx and influence of extranational media and globalized brands, increased social and geographic mobility—the list is almost endless. From school, to work, to marriage, to sociality and the very business of everyday life, Chinese youth deal with institutions, life opportunities, and systemic social risks that did not even exist in the years before they were born. The disjunction between China's current youth and their parents' generation can be vast, but, even more than that, there is now a multiplicity of life options open to young Chinese. Old constraints have loosened when they have not dissolved entirely, and Chinese youth must now navigate their way through novel structures, improvising their way through a critical period of both individual and societal transition. That being said, the 80's generation was more or less the first to grow up under in the Open and Reform Era, giving rise to a interesting series of consequences. As children, they never knew the Maoist policies that had so powerfully shaped
their parents' and grandparents' lives (albeit in different ways, of course), and while they were growing up, the all-encompassing system of work units, rationing, state-owned enterprises and collectives was already beginning to loosen and fray. As adolescents they were the first to navigate an education system that had been reformed, expanded, and intensified, while finding themselves exposed to a new and burgeoning pop culture with heavy influences from abroad. Yet this generation has not always been the first to break new ground. By the time they were in their late teens and ready to find work or go to college, formal state-organized job assignments had been done away with years earlier, and new practices of individuals being responsible for finding their own employment had already taken root.

This complex break between the so-called 80er's and earlier generations reflects not only differences in their respective pasts, but in their likely futures. One cannot look at the multiple generations alive in China today, from children to the elderly, and stitch together a prospective life course from where each now stands. The middle age of the youth today will not look like their parents' lives in the present, nor will their eventual old age resemble their grandparents' lives as they are now. The total life trajectory of each generation, on average, is different, and therefore if we are to understand something about contemporary young people's lives and their transition to adulthood, the experiences of older generations will not serve as a reliable reference. Thus, this study should not be misunderstood as one that approaches “youth” as an ahistorical category. The question of this particular youth generation's life trajectory figures prominently here, but it is conceived as rooted in specific history.
Finally, and perhaps most importantly, is the matter of these young men's geographic origin. I will defer most of the discussion on the importance of this to the next chapter, but I will note that almost all of my informants were from Jiaxiang, either the eponymous xi-ancheng (county seat town) itself or one of the surrounding towns and villages (the small remainder of those who were from outside the county were still mostly people from rural areas in other parts of Shandong, whom I encountered through my contacts with people from Jiaxiang). In some sense, their hometown is rural. Jiaxiang’s central town had an official population of about 100,000 at the time (JNSTJJ 2010:43)—quite sizable compared to a village, certainly, and yet far from being even a minor city. The city of Jining, about forty five minutes to the east by bus, is relatively small, but the gap between it and a town like Jiaxiang in amenities, wealth, services, and job opportunities is immediately visible. Meanwhile, my time in Jiaxiang included frequent excursions to surrounding townships and villages, and a majority of my informants came from outside of the xiancheng.

These three qualifications just discussed (predominantly male, young, and rural) help to triangulate this subject population, but what may most define them is their lack of definition.

Within just the past decade, a number of curious new terms have crept into colloquial Chinese vocabulary. There is the so-called yizu or “ant tribe,” defined as the youth in major cities who, despite having college educations, labor in low-paying jobs with few prospects, and who, due to their relatively poor income, must make do living in tightly crowded, marginal neighborhoods—they are packed together and busy like ants in a nest, in other words. Then there are fangnu or “mortgage slaves,” a term that encompasses many young people
who have pitched their savings (and, often, their parents’) into a home purchase. There are so-called *luohun* or “naked marriages,” marriages that take place without the couple having yet bought a home, something that has long been considered a prerequisite to marriage.

The appearance of all of this new terminology reflects the emergence of novel social categories generated by both the upheaval in prior norms and the arrival of new institutions. The ant tribe in particular has attracted both popular and academic attention (Lian 2009). The very existence of this group points to an array of problems, as such well-educated youth as make up the ant tribe are not “supposed” to be trapped in such low-status and unstable work. Their hard-won educational credentials are meant to be a virtual guarantee for professional or white-collar work and good salaries. Yet the ant tribe is not an anomaly; it is the natural outcome of other accumulated changes in the Chinese job market, urban migration, demographics, and above all, the system of higher education. As will be explained further in chapter two, the emergence of this social category is just one of a number of consequences that has come about thanks to reforms to higher education in the late 1990s.

Yet if the problems facing the ant tribe are acute, they are not entirely unique to them. Uncertainty about the future, the struggle with finding adequate employment, and compromised living conditions are all problems that can also be found among youth elsewhere in the small towns and small cities, among those with a college education and without. If the ant tribe has coalesced as a definite social category, it is perhaps because of their novelty, the relative visibility of their communities, and the apparent incongruity of having high educational credentials and being trapped in marginal employment. Social theorists are not immune to the attraction of novelty, after all, and social science research often tracks new
phenomena and new populations like the ant tribe. To be fair, there are good reasons for this, and an understanding of the ant tribe and similar new social categories in China is both necessary and valuable. But all the same, the pursuit of the cutting-edge or novel phenomena can lead us to neglect the mundane, ordinary majority. Few of my informants would fall neatly into any of the newly recognized and trending social categories, and none of them belonged to the ant tribe, but this is not because they did not face similar problems. Many of those I worked with were college graduates trying to make do in less than ideal jobs, eking out a minimal living in what was (one hopes) a temporary situation. But they would not count as members of the ant tribe simply because they were not located in the right place. As a whole, my subject population would not constitute a well recognized category of their own, either. They are not a “tribe” of any kind, nor any other kind of emically recognized, distinctive group. They are not all single children, and therefore not collectively defined by the effects of the one child policy. They did not all move from the countryside to the city, and so could not be labeled as migrants. They are “rural youth,” but this is not a terribly precise or strongly marked social category. If anything, they are defined most by their lack of particularity. Although it is possible to speak of “rural youth,” this is not often thought of as a very particular social category; it is too wide open, too general and indistinct.

From a certain perspective this is a disadvantage, and if the young men I worked with were a more neatly defined and discrete population, then more definite statements could be made about them. They and the trajectories of their lives could be contrasted against other well noted groups, providing greater theoretical clarity. But defining a research population can risk a kind of methodological and theoretical prejudice, in that to formally bring a mass
of individuals under one label is to assume that they hold something meaningful in common among them, that they have some shared experience that is sufficient to describe and explain some part of how they live. In casting a loose collection of individuals as a coherent social category, one may then lose sight of both the differences that lie among them, and the ways in which they may blend and overlap with alternative groups. Although I recognize the various dimensions that link my informants together—male, young, rural—I do not wish to assume that these features entirely unify them or define their experiences, nor that those shared features necessarily and always outweigh the diversity among them.

The research setting

When I began my research, I specifically had it in mind that I would not be doing a community study. My interest was in friendship and social relations, and so, if anything, my focus was on social networks rather than community and place. I anticipated that I would be travelling in and out of the town fairly often, tracking down acquaintances and referrals of informants. After all, one individual might have friends scattered around different places, even across the entire country. Simply because some individuals picked up and left, whether temporarily or permanently, did not mean their standing friendships and other ties did not still endure. In the end, much of that proved true, and although the vast majority of my time was spent in one place, there were quite a few occasions when I might spend several days or a week in another town, visiting informants from my fieldsite who had moved elsewhere. But
of course, as I recounted above, the plan changed, and the nature of the project shifted with it. It was still not a community study, exactly, but, as alluded to above and explained more fully in the next chapter, the place itself did take on a peculiar and unexpected importance for reasons. It is therefore all the more necessary to consider the total geography of the fieldsite—physical, economic, and social.

The project was centered in Jiaxiang county, located in Jining prefecture in the southwest of Shandong province. Shandong is technically a coastal province, but Jining itself is situated in the interior, and lies almost exactly midway between Beijing and Shanghai, with key rail lines running through Yanzhou, one of the subdistricts of the prefecture. Jiaxiang, then, is just one of a dozen counties and districts that make up Jining prefecture.

It is worth acknowledging that Jining prefecture has a unique place in Chinese cultural history: Qufu, the home of Confucius, is a subdistrict. A moderately sized town, it has prospered on the steady stream of tourism attracted by the three historical sites of Confucius' home, temple, and family lineage cemetery. Liangshan, the realworld setting for the tale of Robin Hood-esque outlaws of the classic *Water Margin Chronicles*, is also a county of Jining, immediately north of Jiaxiang county. The city of Jining promotes itself as the capital of the Grand Canal, which once ran from Hangzhou to Beijing and passed alongside the city. Meanwhile, the official Jining Statistical Yearbook in each annual edition gives a precis of the prefecture's history that it traces back thousands of years all the way to the Xia dynasty (though city did not gain its current name until 1271 in the Yuan dynasty; JNSTJJ 2010:30).

All of these things may count as sources of pride for local residents if and when they are prompted to think about them, but in watching and speaking with my informants it is hard
to say just how meaningful all this vast and distant history really is to everyday life in the present. Certainly, most people do not spend much of their time pondering the nature of Confucian values and how to apply them in their lives, least of all because he happened to live within the vicinity. While traces of Confucian influence could be found in contemporary cultural practices in Jining, the same is true for much of China, and my experience in the field would not warrant putting any exceptional significance on this cultural legacy for understanding the modern lives of young people in Jiaxiang.

In truth, Jining is not so extraordinary or unusual; plenty of other cities throughout China have their own claims to fame and deep historical legacies. Materially and economically, Jining sits no higher than the fourth “tier” of the urban hierarchy that exists in the popular imagination. The prefecture in its entirety has a population of a little more than eight million, the majority of these being residents in smaller towns and villages scattered among the counties that surround the urban core.

One man from Jiaxiang who had a job in Beijing told me once that the capital was too large, stretching as wide across as the distance from Jiaxiang to Yanzhou or Zoucheng, two large towns on the east side of Jining city. His complaint was that Beijing was inconvenient and expensive to get around, but his comment also makes for a vivid illustration of the relative size of these communities. In other words, Jiaxiang, Jining, Yanzhou, and the wide bands of countryside between them could all fit comfortably within the physical limits of Beijing's main metro area.

Jiaxiang county is immediately west of the Jining metro area, with the remnant of the Grand Canal and a wide swathe of rural areas lying between them. Buses run continuously
back and forth from Jiaxiang to Jining's bus depot, taking about forty-five minutes. A tiny, one-building airport, converted from an air force base, lies at the southern corner of the county, serving all of Jining (it is formally called the Jining-Qufu airport, because, as one person put it, elsewhere in China “everybody knows Qufu, but nobody knows Jining.”) A highway runs across the northern end of the county, though without any exits, and the single rail line that passes through the county is not a major one. Many of the trains do not even stop in Jiaxiang. The county as a whole had a population of roughly 800,000 and growing at the time of my research, distributed among the eponymous county seat town, or xiancheng, a number of very small townships (variously classified as zhen and xiang), and several hundred villages of varying size. The population remains predominantly rural, despite ongoing growth in the county seat, and with little exception (such as a small number of Hui people) it is almost exclusively ethnically Han.

The counties within Jining vary slightly in their economies. Qufu, as mentioned, runs on its tourism industry and a small university. Zoucheng is notable (and comparatively rich) for its extensive coal mining. But the differences among the other counties are not great, and Jiaxiang does not particularly stand out in any special regard. A “development zone” where a number of light manufacturing factories are located exists to the east of the xiancheng on the boundary with the Jining urban center, but these are well separated from the community. Jiaxiang is notable for its stonecutting industry, and a neighborhood of stone-sculpting businesses lies on the far northeastern outskirts of the xiancheng. But mostly the county's economy runs on agriculture, some coal-processing, and the assorted small businesses common to most Chinese towns. Though Jiaxiang is not quite the poorest county in Jining, up until
2010 it did have the lowest proportion of people with non-agricultural or “urban” hukou of any of Jining’s counties at just 13% of the county population (JNSTJJ 2010:43).

The reaction that my presence as a foreigner could provoke was often telling about the economic status of a place. I first realized just how informative this could be during a weeklong stay in Qingdao one summer while visiting a friend who was then living and working there. When shopping in a mall or at a more expensive market like Carrefour, I attracted no special attention. But in cheaper, lower status shops and markets, it was a different matter. One hot afternoon, in the tight streets of my friend's neighborhood, I stopped by a small chaoshi to buy some ice cream, only to see the two proprietors sit up straight at the sight of me, and one of them asked the other “What's he doing?” It was a familiar response, one that I had encountered countless times in more rural areas, but showed that even in relatively cosmopolitan Qingdao my presence could still elicit a reaction, depending on the exact location. People might expect to see a foreigner in certain parts of town, shopping in certain kinds of stores or eating in certain kinds of restaurants, but not in others. Reactions to my presence (or, equally, the presence of foreigners in general) thus became a crude means of gauging the economic geography.

It should be noted, then, that for much of the time I was the only (visible) foreigner in Jiaxiang, although at various times there were also supposedly foreign English teachers who came to teach at one of the high schools, and on very rare occasions others might pass through the area as well (usually business people visiting one of the factories in the area), often leading to gossip. Somehow, though, I never saw any of these other foreigners myself, and only knew of them through hearsay. At the same time, the town was not nearly small
enough for everyone to know of and recognize me. Even after many months there, I consistently overheard terms like laowai ("foreigner") and other references to me from passers-by every time I stepped out the door. This is still in marked contrast to Jining, where I usually attracted little comment on the street, although there was some surprise when, for instance, I went shopping in the farmers’ market rather than one of the chain grocery stores.

The local dialect in Jining and Jiaxiang is a variant of Standard Mandarin and sometimes jokingly referred to as jipu (as in “Jining Putonghua”). Though not as different from Standard Mandarin as many of the more southern dialects, it nonetheless takes some getting used to. Pronunciation is fast, nasal, and indistinct, without most of the retroflex sounds typical of more northern dialects, meaning sounds like shì and sì are not distinguished. Syllables tend to blur together, and most words are pushed into the fourth tone, or qusheng. Altogether, these features increase the number of homophones and the potential for confusion, making the dialect that much more difficult. Still, I enjoyed casually learning the unique and esoteric vocabulary of the local dialect: bunao instead of bucuo for “not bad,” gelebeizi for xigai or “knee,” henang for “bruised, blemished,” and so on. But, without intending to, I also acquired a little bit of the local pronunciation. This maybe had a negative effect on my Standard Mandarin as, like some local speakers, I began to confuse the pronunciation of many words. I was a little chagrined when I began to realize that in conversations with nonlocals I was “mispronouncing” certain words or using non-standard expressions that they couldn’t understand. Yet my occasional and inadvertent Jining pronunciation seemed to amuse and please some people, and may have lent me a small amount of “covert prestige” (Labov 2006).
I first visited Jiaxiang in the summer of 2005, returned over the next two summers, and then again in the fall of 2008, when I came to reside there for my doctoral research fieldwork. I made occasional trips outside of Jiaxiang to other parts of Jining and to other cities in Shandong. I met with informants in Jinan, Weifang, Zibo, and Qingdao. But Jiaxiang remained the center of my fieldwork until September of 2010, when I relocated to Jining. Strictly speaking, my time in Jining was not a part of my fieldwork, or at least, it was not intended to be. But my experience in Jining nevertheless shaped my analysis of my Jiaxiang fieldwork. Despite being less than an hour apart, the two places were perceptibly different in their level of wealth and, for lack of a better word, their degree of urbanism. As far as Jining may be from a metropolis like Beijing, it was nevertheless markedly different from the Jiaxiang xiancheng: larger, more populous, richer. In short, it was more urban, though as we shall see in the next chapter, the exact meaning and implications of that are terribly complex.

And yet for all of that I still knew that I would not be able to avoid the influence of the local context entirely. I decided for reasons of both practicality and methodological rigor that I should try to limit myself, at least primarily, to people from a single county, and for the most part, I did so. Realistically, however, I could not ignore informants who were from elsewhere, especially as my Jiaxiang informants' own social networks extended to other places.
Dissertation overview

Each of the chapters that follows addresses a certain cross-section of the experience of young men in and from Jiaxiang. Together, they compose a holistic, multifaceted view of the lives of youth from Jiaxiang in the first decade of the 21st century—lives ruled by change, uncertainty, and instability. Youth from Jiaxiang are very much left in the lurch. They, their parents, their peers, and most everyone around them continue to hold many of the expectations of an earlier time, expectations that often are no longer feasible or else cannot be met in quite the way the used to be. Young men (were) expected to get a permanent job, buy a house, get married, have children; in other words, to settle into a very particular sort of adult life of a very particular pattern. But if the goals appeared to be relatively clear and straightforward, the path to achieving them was not. Institutional supports and guides have been worn away, leaving young people to increasingly fend for themselves. If the conventional life of job, marriage, house, and children is what they aim for, they must improvise their own means to achieve it.

Chapter one presents an overarching theoretical framework with which to interpret youth experience in rural China by weaving together individualization theory with an awareness of Jiaxiang’s place in the greater rural-urban social geography. Individualization theory, as explained more fully later on, offers much for making sense of the lives of Chinese youth in the present day. The origins of individualization theory, however, are in Western Europe, and thus its concepts and applications have largely been based on observed phenomena in contemporary European societies. As such, it cannot be simply transplanted into another
context in its entirety, and some careful thought is required to adjust and temper the thesis to the realities of rural China. In the process, it becomes possible to better elucidate how and why the lives of rural youth bridge the gap between tradition and modernity, rural life and urban, convention and individual liberty.

Chapter two turns to examine the domain of education and work. Youth from Jiaxiang face a series of challenges and dilemmas in school, the pursuit of educational credentials, and the search for lucrative and meaningful employment. They make strategic choices in a complicated landscape of options and risks, choices that have obviously fateful consequences for their personal futures. The current problems of education and employment, however, are in many ways historically novel, and the conditions that Jiaxiang's people face in finishing school, finding work, and making a living are all intensively individualized.

In chapter three, I turn to the problem of marriage, or more precisely, the problem of finding and/or settling on a partner for marriage. Marriage is one of the key milestones in traditional Chinese life, and one of the prime markers of the transition into adulthood. But, as is well known, there has been substantial change in marriage practices within the last two or three generations, shifting from a condition in which young men had little to no say in their own marriages to one in which marriage itself can be questioned. But this shift has not been total and unequivocal, and the increased individual freedom in partner selection and how and when one marries is not uncontested. Chapter three therefore seeks to give a full view of the conflicted combination of external pressures, social obligations, internal desires, and individualized freedom that young men from Jiaxiang contend with.
In chapter four I widen the scope to look at materialism and the overall standard of living for youth from Jiaxiang. One of the foremost issues of China’s Reform Era has been the rise of a driven, unabashed materialism. Individuals, and youth especially, are seen to be aggressively pursuing material wealth, indulging in conspicuous consumption, seeking leisure over “eating bitterness,” and, almost by dint of these facts, withholding themselves from political and community engagement. All of this is an accurate, but incomplete, description of life for youth from Jiaxiang, and chapter four aims to fill in the gaps by looking into this confusion of young people's materialist desires, ambitions, practical and financial limitations, and differential responses to societal and political concerns.

Finally, in chapter five, we return to the subject with which the project originally began, the friendships of young men in Jiaxiang. Friendship and individualization together create a challenging but rich set of theoretical problems. The social ties of young men from Jiaxiang are pervasive, influential, and yet inconspicuous in their everyday lives. They are a source of vital and practical support; friends give one another introductions to potential spouses, loans of money, go into business together, and provide numberless minor favors. But even more than this, young men's friendships operate as both a mechanism for and a result of their individualization. Among the uncertainties they face in other domains of their lives, young men's friendships become of ever greater importance, even as they may be strained by outside circumstances.
“No change, right?” Taishi Jiang said as we rode to his home from the bus station, watching the town pass by. We were cramped into a sanlun, sitting facing one another on the thinly padded seats with my one suitcase awkwardly squeezed between our knees.

This was to be the beginning of the my fieldwork project, having only just stepped off the bus and found myself back in Jiaxiang after a little more than a year from my last visit. The previous night I had flown directly from Beijing to Jinan, the capital of Shandong, where Taishi Jiang met me (taking time off from his classes at medical school in another

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2 A kind of three-wheeled pedicab, the front end an electric bike or motorcycle, the back half a small cart with two narrow, thinly padded seats that face one another.
city) to accompany me back home. After one night spent in a cheap hostel in Jinan, and then a four hour bus ride the next day, I was finally back in Jiaxiang.

But what he had said then in those first moments back—that the town was unchanged—struck me, because I was not so sure it was entirely true. There had been change in the town in the year I had been away. Perhaps it was not anything dramatic or radical, but even at a casual glance it was not quite the same, either. Some of the roads had been fixed up. Some stores had closed, new ones opened. There seemed to be more cars on the streets than there had been before and fewer sanlun, more electric bikes and mopeds and fewer old-fashioned bicycles. Over the course of my fieldwork that followed, there were still more changes in the town. A block of about a dozen shops near the apartment I rented saw almost half the stores turnover, some more than once. Old hutong were demolished and streets were widened. New housing developments, with five and six-storey apartment buildings, were begun or completed. These physical changes in the landscape of the town symbolized and reflected changes less visible: growth in business and the local economy, a slow and quiet influx of people from surrounding towns and villages, increasing wealth and rising living standards. Those changes might in turn point to still others, longer and more abstract, in the political economy, in family structures, and in relations between individual agents and broader structures.

But in a way this is the story of all of China for the past thirty years and more. Nothing written on China, whether it be an academic monograph or an everyday piece of journalism, has been able to ignore the economic boom and accompanying social transformation...
that was set off with the beginning of the Open and Reform Era. One way or another, every account of China and Chinese society has had to acknowledge these sweeping changes.

And as much as anyone, anthropologists working in China have had to contend with this flood of transformations, which they are obliged to not only observe and document, but to try to explicate under the terms of social change, modernity, political economy, and neoliberal governance. The effect of this on the China literature has been profound. There may be few if any societies in the world that do not experience some form of change, but social change itself has become the pervasive and inescapable theme for all studies on China, such that an ethnography set in the PRC today cannot not speak to questions of social change in one form or another. And yet, there are risks to this constant and intense focus on social change. For all the transformations that have taken place in the past generation, we must be careful not to lose sight of what has endured—or at least, what has changed more slowly and less radically. After all, not everything changes all at once, or at the same pace, and in some sense Taishi Jiang was not wrong: there is much in Jiaxiang that has changed only slowly, if at all, over the years. This is the paradox for understanding the lives of youth in rural China: from a historical perspective, small town China has changed dramatically and undeniably in the Reform Era. And yet, when compared against contemporary urban life, small towns like Jiaxiang do appear more “traditional.”

The predilection for studying change has perhaps shaped the research choices of many scholars working in China, drawing their attention to the places and issues where change is most visible and most dramatic. Many of the ethnographies on China in recent decades have been set in the cities, and though this preference for urban fieldsites may be in-
fluenced by pragmatic factors, one of the reasons is that they are the locus of many of the most theoretically interesting subjects, from the appearance of a white collar workforce and middle-class to the emergence of rural migrants as an underclass (e.g. Hoffman 2000; Rofel 1999; Fong 2004; Farrer 2002; Zhang 2001; Zhang 2010). Standing in stark contrast at the opposite end of the spectrum are the rural villages, which are perhaps most studied as being the source for many of the migrant workers who have literally helped to build the cities in the east and south of the country over the last twenty to thirty years. And the youth generation, and more especially the youth of rural towns like Jiaxiang, stand in a particular relation to this unceasing flow of societal change. Socially, geographically, economically, they are caught in the middle between the visible extremes of urban and rural life.

What is needed here is a coherent theory of both how and why this new situation has come about. Chinese youth in Jiaxiang (and elsewhere, for that matter) are continually faced with challenges for which there are few established precedents. Their lives are unstable, subject to numerous existential risks, and little if anything is guaranteed for them. They must question what manner of life it is they desire for themselves, and then they must actively work, plan, strategize, deliberate, and struggle to achieve it. In this first chapter I wish to lay out a broad if rough theoretical framework through which to understand the issues I observed in my informants' lives and how they dealt with them. To do this, I will draw on the concept of individualization as developed by Ulrich Beck and other theorists, a concept that is extraordinarily apt for making sense of the tumult, uncertainty, and complexity of the lives of Chinese youth. I will first review the individualization thesis, its features, implications, and its current potential shortcomings. But as we shall see, individualization cannot be
applied directly to the case of youth in Jiaxiang without some modification. If we are to truly understand how young men from rural China improvise their transition into adulthood, we must take account of the geographic and historical particularity of their lives.

**Individualization, existential risk, and the self-scripted biography**

As with any theory that has gained some level of general acceptance, the individualization thesis has many proponents with their own interpretations, including Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman. Here, however, I take the longstanding work of Ulrich Beck as my reference point. Though there are of course commonalities among these many theorists, Beck's work charts a reasoned and nuanced middle course; whereas Giddens work frequently gives individualization an optimistic cast, and Bauman has tended more to highlight the pain and anomie that can come of individualization, Beck's portrayal of the phenomenon lends it a measured ambivalence (Howard 2007b).

As elaborated by Beck, Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, and others, individualization describes a complex set of phenomena that was first seen unfolding in Europe in the late 20th century. As more recent research has begun to explore, however, individualization is not an exclusive trend of Western societies, but is present and ongoing in many parts of the world, including China (Beck 2010:415). The problem for the moment is to determine what in the individualization thesis may be applicable to the case of China, or a community like Jiaxiang more specifically, and what does not or cannot translate across contexts.
Beck goes to great lengths to elaborate on individualization and its subtle, ambiguous implications. It is a multifaceted theory, and difficult to summarize. Attention must be paid to several dimensions without shorting any one, drawing in a wide-angle view of multiple structural changes, their manifestations, prerequisites, and consequences. One of the challenges for this dissertation, or any work aiming to address processes of individualization, is to try to keep all of these facets in view at once. The review offered here is unfortunately and unavoidably oversimplified for the sake of brevity, but I have tried to highlight those aspects of individualization which will be most relevant for the discussion going forward, and hope that subsequent chapters will serve to build upon the bare groundwork provided here.

In brief, individualization describes a breakdown in traditional norms and institutions, or at the very least a lessening of their control. Individuals are “disembedded” or pulled out and away from institutions and collectives in which they were formerly en-sconced. Potentially they may then be “reembedded” into new institutions or collectives, though Beck contends there are essential differences between the kinds of institutions of old and those individuals are now likely to reembed themselves in (2001:29). In any case, the initial disembedding makes individuals simultaneously both freer to make their own choices, independent of those institutions, and increasingly responsible for their own fates. Individual lives cease to be normatively controlled by community dictates This is most apparent in what Beck describes as the DIY biography or “life of one’s own” (2001). Crudely put, prior to individualization there existed a self-same or “standard” biography, which is to say that the trajectory of an individual life, the rough shape of it, was largely fixed. This was especially true in family life, where, for most adults, eventual marriage and the rearing of children
were the assumption. By definition, however, under individualization such biographical milestones are no longer fixed and automatic, but optional. Does one get married, or not? If so, when? Does one delay marriage and family for the sake of career, and for how long? What about children? What was formerly just assumed must now be questioned, considered, and deliberately decided upon. Individuals must continually ask themselves what it is they want, who they are, and where they are headed. Any given choice about how to lead one's own life may carry substantial consequences, but it is a choice; nothing is strictly obligatory.

The DIY or individualized biography, however, is not necessarily the centerpiece of individualization. If anything, it is only the most visible piece of a larger puzzle. In order for the DIY biography to exist at all there must be simultaneous adjustments within both governmentality and social structure that allow for—and compel—individual choice and responsibility. Alternatively, one could say that the individualized biography carries its own set of prerequisites and implications, several of which are worth noting here.

First and most simply is that the self-scripted biography is paradoxical. It means the freedom to choose, but simultaneously makes the act of choice itself obligatory. Nothing is automatic: one is compelled to make self-determined choices time and again. The liberated and autonomous life allows anything but rest and passivity.

Second, the individualized life ironically does not necessarily lead to a unique life. There are perhaps three different ways by which individuals can respond to individualization: they can follow the “default” or traditional biography; orchestrate an unconventional biography of their own design; or simply suffer through the anomic experience of individualized risk and instability (Mills 2007). In fact, given the choice, many do elect to still conform to
what may be perceived as a traditional biography, following certain guideposts—work, marriage, family—in the most conventional way and by a conventional schedule. The essential difference is that if one wants the traditional biography it must nevertheless still be chosen and worked for; one cannot expect it to simply fall into place, or be arranged by others. This does present a certain methodological challenge, however, as the continued popularity of a conventional biography and lifestyle within a given community may partially mask a genuine movement towards individualization. We will return to this point later on, for it leaves us with a special problem when we try to interpret liminal and dubious cases of individualization.

Third, though it posits the erosion or loss of traditional norms, the individualization thesis does not suggest the absence of structure. On the contrary, as Cosmo Howard points out, individualization is not the retreat of social structure, but a transformation of it (2007a:8). Thus, even as individualization implies the weakening or loosening of old normative constraints, new structures grow into place that shift risk and responsibility from a collective onto the individual. On this note, individualization does also share some crossover with theories of neoliberalism, since it describes a shift in the nature of governmentality in which law and social policy deal less with larger social units, like the family, and instead deal directly with atomized individuals. To put it another way, governments (as well as businesses, charities, and other bureaucratic structures) increasingly presume that the individual, rather than some larger unit or a collective, is the proper basis for the administration of rights and welfare, and by the same token they both allow and require the individual to take on more responsibility for his or her self-determination. It is this displacement of responsi-
bility, decision-making, and accountability onto the individual that makes the self-scripted Biography both possible and necessary, while also creating the illusion of structure being dis-
mantled, when in actuality it is still as present as ever, only changed and obscured.

Fourth, along with this mode of governmentality and invisible structuring comes an-
other level of fragmentation. Not only are individuals autonomous and atomized, but it be-
comes difficult for them to even make an identification with certain social groups. Beck's thesis proposes that both individuals and the risks they face are born out of structural condi-
tions, yet the nature of individualization is such that each individual views his or her life situ-
ation in isolation. To state it more plainly, individuals may share in the same problems, but rather than coalescing into a group around shared interests and fates, they face their prob-
lems alone and separately. Structural causes for personal fates and outcomes are hidden from view, and individuals see themselves as primarily responsible for their own successes and their own failures (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2001:24, 47).

What all of this should make clear is that individualization is not quite what it may appear to be at first glance. It is, despite the name, not about individualism per se, nor can it simply be reduced to the notion of self-scripted biographies, or neoliberal governmentality, or eroded traditional institutions and disembedding, or the paradox of personal liberty and personal responsibility. It offers freedom of choice, but also the compulsion to choose. It offers alternatives to tradition, yet may nonetheless result in conformity with tradition. It dismantles structures only to replace them with others less conspicuous. It does not do away with collective problems and risks, but creates the illusion that such problems and risks are not collective at all.
Given its expansive, multifaceted nature, it is easy to confuse individualization with other processes. While neoliberalism may promote individualization for its own ends, the two are not reducible to one another. Similarly, the emphasis on the dissolution and breakdown of traditional institutions and constraints begins to echo Emile Durkheim’s concept of anomie, and indeed, anomie is one possible consequence of individualization (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2001:7). But the two are not equivalent, and anomie is not the defining feature of individualization. Beck insists that where some may find uncertainty and disillusionment, others find liberation from stifling constraints. The moral value of individualization is in this sense itself individualized, a matter of choice. After all, certain minorities and social groups have leaned on individualization to a degree, as their causes and advocacy often takes the form of asserting the right to individual determination of their own lives and lifestyles, especially when these may run counter to traditional norms.

Certain parallels between the individualization thesis and prior sociological theories of modernity may thus naturally present themselves, but the individualization thesis that Beck has articulated is not exactly synonymous with the concepts of individualization outlined by Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, or other early theorists (Nollmann & Strasser 2007). Nor should the usage of “traditional” and “modern” in this case be confused with older, linear stage-based theories of social development, as Beck is careful to portray the current wave of individualization as contextually and historically specific, even going so far as to draw a distinction between a “first” and “second” modernity. The first modernity (i.e. the various and sundry social transformations witnessed in Europe and North America beginning in the mid-late 19th century and theorized by Weber, Durkheim, and their approximate contempo-
aries, each in their own ways) consisted of a relatively direct dissolution of the traditional order and the rise of an industrialized—and individualized—society in its place. This is gestured at in Durkheim's dichotomy of mechanical and organic solidarity: in one a corporate whole, in the other plurality and differentiation. Second modernity, however, is for Beck not a mere reiteration of this set of old transformations, but a furtherance of them. What is unstable becomes more so; individuals are thrown deeper into uncertainty; and the industrial state society is broken open into a multicultural, transnational world (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2001:26).

As wide-ranging as Beck's study of individualization is, it is not comprehensive, as he himself acknowledges (Beck & Grande 2010), and there are several dimensions that remain to be explored. These include variant forms of individualization, the historical and processual nature of individualization, and its geography. What seems clearest in Beck's work are the effects of individualization. Less certain are the causes of it, or rather, the exact mechanisms by which it comes about. As much as individualization is a phenomenon of second modernity, it did not appear all at once and fully formed. Individualization has its own precursors and elements, some of which may have a much greater historical depth than has so far been realized. Some of the very particular institutions and structures that have facilitated individualization, both in Europe and China, have long roots. This will be addressed in some greater depth in the following chapters, most notably in the case of modern school systems discussed in chapter two, and the impact they have on individual biographies.

The historical perspective on individualization is still somewhat underdeveloped. As alluded to above, the parallels between individualization theory and other theories of moder-
nity suggest that individualization itself may not be a radically new phenomenon. Arguably, the individualization of the current era may have its own distinctive features, but it could also be taken as a kind of generic process that has recurred at various moments throughout history whenever traditional structures break down. At the very least, the process of disembedment (and reembedding) is a familiar one, having been observed by early sociologists like Durkheim, while Weber’s examination of the Protestant ethic is interpreted by some to reflect a kind of individualization (Howard 2007a). It is possible that the current wave of individualization is not entirely unprecedented, even if it does have its historically particular features. Still, the notion of individualization as a repeatable or cyclical historical process has not been very well articulated so far.

In much of Beck’s work on the subject he is understandably preoccupied with the task of defining individualization and describing its nature, features, and specific manifestations as they exist in the here and now. Consequently, his work depicts individualization in Western Europe as an already accomplished fact, or at least well advanced. And in order to properly explain what individualization is and what it looks like, Beck must contrast it with a recent past where institutionalized constraints dominated and individual options were buffered and limited by those same constraints. This may at times give an unintended impression of a stark divide, in which traditional institutions suddenly give way and individualization springs forth fully formed. But the reality of course is more complicated, as Beck acknowledges, and he is careful to note that even within a given society individualization may exist to greater or lesser degrees in different regions and among different demographics (Beck & Beck Gernsheim 2001:5). Some work by Beck and others has addressed this prob-
lem implicitly; Beck, for example, draws some comparisons from East Germany from before and after Germany’s Reunification to illustrate the contrast of traditional structures and individualization. But the fine details of how individualization arises and proceeds from its first inchoate beginnings, or how it appears when still muddled with the vestiges of binding institutional structures, or how it might tend to vary across rural-urban geography is not so well understood.

Evidence for individualization in Europe and North America has been available for some time; the individualization thesis itself describes trends that have been at work since the mid 20th century, including the emergence of a more “fluid and variable” life cycle (Hirschhorn 1977:437) and at least basic systems of state-organized welfare that, however weak or fragmentary they may be, allow individuals to avoid total dependency on any one collectivity, such as the family, thereby granting them the freedom and flexibility to undertake personal risks in their own biographies (Mayer & Schoepflin 1989). Individualization in China has proceeded along a different path and is as yet much less well studied, but at the start of the 21st century the evidence for it is certainly plentiful (e.g. Delman & Yin 2008; Yan 2009, 2010; Hansen & Pang 2010; see also Cook 2002). Over the last several decades the state has relatively loosened its hold over both individuals and institutions. The hukou system endures, but is not so restrictive as it once was. State-owned enterprises still exist, but have waned in importance. And whereas the state once provided safety nets, job placement and security, and housing and other benefits, those have all been weakened when they have not been entirely unravelled. Those who have been cast into the private sphere must generally fend for themselves. The result has been greater insecurity for most, especially the youth
generation who have matured into this inchoate and unstable system. As the state has ab-
solved itself of many responsibilities to individual welfare, and individuals are then in turn
obliged to cobble together their own lives, and their own security, with little aid or guidance.
In a word, there has been individualization, and upon multiple levels, from social entitle-
ments to personal lifestyle. Most of these developments occurred only over the last several
decades, but not quite all; as in the West, some of the seeds of contemporary individualiza-
tion were planted much earlier. To take but one example, China's legal system has evidently
grown more individualized over time. Whereas traditionally a collectivity might hold some
partial responsibility for the crimes of one of its members, the modern system of criminal
punishment consigns responsibility more squarely onto the individual. This can indeed be
counted as a form of individualization, but it is one that began, albeit tentatively and slowly,
well before even the founding of the PRC in 1949 (Mühlhahn 2010). Thus, even if most of
China's current trend towards individualization can be traced to the policy shifts of the Re-
form Era, it is important to remember that individualization itself is not solely a product of
contemporary economic and social changes.

But none of this means that Chinese society in the present is totally individualized, or
that individualization in China exactly mirrors the patterns observed in Western Europe.
China is, after all, starting from a very different set of conditions, having had neither Eu-
 rope's cultural democracy nor its philosophical underpinnings in individualism (Yan 2010).
The feature of transnationalism, or cosmopolitanism, for instance, is problematic. Beck em-
phatically argues against a “methodological nationalism” that assumes society (and, presum-
ably by extension, culture) has a more or less one-to-one correspondence with nation states
The notion of second modernity instead suggests that societies now bleed out beyond national borders, and that the very real increase in mobility and transnational migration has scattered and mixed distinct cultural identities. If ever nation states actually constituted discrete communities, it is no longer so. For Beck, “second modernity” is in large part defined by its transnational and cosmopolitan character, which he and Sznaider urge should be taken up as a new methodological premise. Yet this very point perhaps reveals the geographic bias of individualization theory and its origins in Western Europe, for it is there that transnationalism is most sensible and most evident. The issue is not merely one of transnational migration and the physical movements of individuals, though this is a part of what Beck refers to, but of the diffusion of information that follows in their wake, the mixing of cultural identities, and the spread of social issues over and beyond national boundaries. Transnationalism—or, relatedly, cosmopolitanism—in this instance is not a mere attitude or outlook, but an empirical state of conditions, which Beck and Edgar Grande identify as having two main components: a set of problems that are global rather than national in nature, and a diversity of types of “modernity” (2010:417). It is hard, though, to find the parallel in China to European transnationalism. The various countries of western Europe all have substantial foreign born populations, while China at the end of its 2010 census counted a little under 600,000 foreign residents in the entire country (NBS 2011). Meanwhile, international travel, much less emigration, remains a remote possibility for most Chinese, particularly those from rural areas like Jiaxiang. Granted, in the Open and Reform Era China has gained far greater exposure to outside cultural influences, and there may be some modest evidence for a cosmopolitan turn (Tyfield & Urry 2009). But even as it
has relinquished many of the forms of discipline and management that were common in the Maoist years, the Chinese party-state continues to maintain (or seeks to maintain) tight control over cultural and ideological matters, while on many levels asserting the primacy of both the nation-state and national identity. Thus, if transnational and cross-cultural influences are not entirely absent from the picture, it is hard to see them as central to the processes of individualization taking place in China; at the very least, they cannot be said to have the same influence that they do in Western Europe. And that, in turn, must lead us to carefully consider precisely how the understandings of individualization and second modernity that have been developed thus far can translate from their original context of Western Europe to China.

All of these qualifications and caveats aside, a case can and will be made in the chapters to come that life in Jiaxiang is indeed individualized, while at the same time retaining some vestiges of the traditional structures that so constrained life in the past. New options are available, and with them come new risks, but young people in the xiancheng do not have complete liberty to compose their own biographies as they see fit. Norms of the past linger on, even if weakened, and this, therefore, is the challenge. Instability and uncertainty reign in the lives of Chinese youth everywhere, but the nature of that uncertainty is not everywhere the same, which is to say that individualization itself is not the same between the cities and countryside. And therefore for young people from a rural area like Jiaxiang, the range of possibilities, risks, and choices they are presented with cannot be understood apart from the place from which they’ve come.
At the end of 2011, China's urban population crossed the fifty percent threshold, becoming the majority for the first time in history (Chan 2012).

China's urbanization is one of the major narratives of the Reform Era, and it is a narrative that trades in certain imagery. It is a story of mass migration of rural residents from the interior of the country to the east and south, of the resultant explosive growth in cities, and the rise of urban wealth and development borne on the cheap labor of those same migrants. Researchers were at first perhaps slow to grasp the full import of this shift. “China has been known through most of the twentieth century for its peasantry and peasant revolution; understandably, therefore, it has not been easy for many Chinese, and some foreign observers, to accept the predominantly urban character of the late twentieth-century Chinese population” (Fincher 1990:54). Subsequently, however, the effects of urbanization have come to absorb a great deal of popular and scholarly attention.

This would all be of little interest if urbanization only meant a change in the physical landscape of buildings, but what is assumed—and has by now been well documented by ethnographers working in China over the last two decades—is that China's urbanization is part of, or a metonym for, a raft of other changes in family life, political economy, and social structure. There are the relatively obvious large-scale shifts, such as people (especially younger people) leaving behind agricultural occupations for wage work in either industry or the services sector—a shift that, it must be said, is monumental, given how long the peasantry has stood as the foundation of Chinese society. Other changes are more subtle, such as

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\text{Defining Jiaxiang}
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the distancing and loss of social cohesion felt among neighbors in urban residential communities (Zhang 2010:119; Fleischer 2007). The point, therefore, is not merely that there are differences between city and countryside, as must seem obvious. Rather, the point is that there has been a continuing evolution in the relation and contrast between urban and rural areas, which in turn defines the opportunities available to youth depending upon where they live, study, or work. In the simplest terms, the problem here is to try to understand how individualization differs in a small town like Jiaxiang from in a city. But before we can turn to that problem, we must first find our footing. Where exactly does a town like Jiaxiang fit in the hierarchy of China’s social geography, and where do young people from Jiaxiang fit among the stereotypical images of the urbanization narrative?

In this discussion, the two terms “urban” and “rural” pose an obstacle. Like so much terminology, they are polysemous and do not carry the same meaning in all contexts. The urban-rural distinction is widely used by academics, by ordinary Chinese, and by the party-state and its many agencies, but to often different purposes. Even the claim that China’s population is now more than fifty percent urban is, of course, very much dependent on precisely how one cares to count who is or is not urban, a problem that is not aided by the multiple and sometimes contradictory official criteria of different statistical agencies (Ma & Zhou 2005). By one official definition, county seats like Jiaxiang’s xiancheng are classified as urban, and their residents will hold urban bukou. Or rather, they hold “non-agricultural” bukou (非农; in this instance the Chinese is more precise than the usual English translation). Residents of smaller towns within Jiaxiang county, on the other hand, are still classified with agricultural bukou. This sharp distinction in bukou status does indeed have some legal impli-
cations (residents of the xiancheng do not have any allotted farmland, for instance), but it is not reliably indicative of living standards. Moreover, under this definition of the urban-rural dichotomy, a town such as Jiaxiang is classed directly along with major urban centers like Shanghai, and the vast and many gradations between them are elided, while the close connection between the xiancheng and its surrounding townships is erased.

Between the urban and rural extremes, grounded at one end by megacities like Beijing and the smallest and remotest of villages at the other, there is a wide range of other types of communities, which includes places like Jiaxiang. A three-way distinction of cities, towns, and villages is a little more accurate, if still imperfect. Places like Jiaxiang stand far from the cosmopolitanism and wealth of a place like Shanghai, or even smaller cities like Hangzhou, and yet nevertheless cannot be easily lumped in with the rural village stereotype. These middle-ground communities, though hardly static, have not undergone such traumatic transformations as the cities, nor even the villages. They are a part of the same tide of changes, but do not seem to embody the extremes and excesses so well. Towns like Jiaxiang have grown in size and population in the Reform Era, yet not so spectacularly as have the major cities; they have seen a steady flow of people lost to out migration, but they have not been demographically gutted like so many villages (Xiang 2007). In truth, despite the apparent urbanization of the Reform Era and the state's general emphasis on large cities (Ma 2004), there is some sign that China has urbanized less than might have otherwise been expected given the level of economic growth (Chang & Brada 2006). And, although it is the boom of the cities that attracts the most attention, much of the so-called urbanization of the Reform Era has
actually taken the form of growth and economic diversification in towns and townships like Jiaxiang (Ma & Lin 1993; Ma & Fan 1994; Guldin 1996, 2004).

Fei Xiaotong argued for recognizing small towns as distinct entities thus:

“... back in my early years when I investigated the rural areas, I strongly believed in the existence of a social and economic entity located in between the rural communities and the urban centres. This social entity is an organization mainly composed of the members of the rural population who are not engaged in farming. In terms of its geographical location, population, economy and surroundings, this entity is both different and inseparable from the countryside” (Fei 1986:18).

He goes on, however, to warn against stereotyping small towns as such, and proceeds to list five different subtypes of small towns based on their primary economic activity (distribution, consumption, transportation, etc.). Indeed, this is exactly the problem. The typology of “city vs. countryside” is certainly inadequate, but splitting the difference to add the category of “small towns” is only a marginal improvement. And yet a scheme with further subdivisions would quickly become unwieldy.

The fundamental economic differences and, especially, the division of labor between the towns and cities should not be overlooked merely because they seem self-explanatory. The geographic structuring of the division of labor—and with it, job opportunities and wealth—has a simple and direct effect on young people's lives. It is this differential, in essence, that has been the driving force behind China's vast urbanization and migration of the last thirty years.

Jiaxiang xiancheng resembles many other county towns in southern Shandong. Dusty streets are laid out at right angles, though not on a completely regular grid. Shopping areas are concentrated on a few principal streets, while tucked away behind them are sizable areas
filled with gated xiaoqu, or blocks of apartment buildings, which themselves all follow an almost identical format: rows of buildings, five- or six-storey walk-ups, arranged so that the long sides of each building face north-south. There are a couple of narrow streets where the daily farmer markets are held, with a frequently shifting mixture of farmers laying out produce on tarps on the ground, and more permanent vendors who specialize in selling meat, or soy products, or fish. Many of the buildings are no more than fifteen years old, but they often look older. The entire town takes no more than ten minutes to traverse by sanlun or electric bike, though at its edges it is fringed by more industrial businesses, a few gas stations, a freight truck depot, and the like. At the margins of the town the streets then transform either into roughly paved narrow roads that lead off into the nearby villages or, heading towards either the county government building or towards Jining, wide open boulevards that are sparsely travelled. Slipping out into any of the zhen one finds communities that for the most part resemble the xiancheng but are just smaller, with only a couple of streets and no apartment buildings. The villages, for their part, look much like the hutong of the xiancheng, being mostly just clusters of pingfang with narrow and sometimes labyrinthine alleyways running through them.

In a typical village in Jiaxiang county there is little differentiation in occupations. There is almost always at least one small convenience shop, owned and run by one of the local households, but usually not many real businesses beyond this. Vendors with other goods, like tofu or bean sprouts (which are highly perishable), may ride through on small three-wheeled carts at various hours of the day. Larger villages may serve as a hub for several nearby smaller villages and hold tiny outdoor markets, where villagers lay out goods pro-
cured from somewhere else: fruit, fish, cheap plastic children's toys, household items, and so forth. But the majority occupation in the villages is still agriculture. Nearly every household will still engage in some farming, even if their incomes may be to some extent supplemented by or even dependent on children or relatives who work elsewhere.

It is interesting to note that as one moves incrementally up the scale of communities—from the smallest of villages to the larger ones, then to the tiny townships, to the xi-ancheng, and eventually all the way to such megacities as Shanghai or Beijing, there is an equally gradual and fairly predictable increase in the number and diversity of businesses. Going out from the small villages and entering one of the zhen, which usually act as a nexus for immediately surrounding villages, one can find a few streets lined with shops: more family-owned convenience stores, shops specializing in hygiene products and cosmetics, a few restaurants, barber shops, perhaps one or two “netbars” where people can go online, etc. These are almost all getihu (individually owned businesses), with few or no chain or franchise businesses.

Moving up into the xiancheng one finds the same and more: domestic chain store clothing retailers, banks, curio and gift shops (principally geared towards youth), a few finer and more expensive restaurants, supermarkets, the occasional bakery, and KTV parlors. But only once one moves higher into a genuine city such as nearby Jining is one likely to find movie theaters, bars, department stores and shopping malls, car dealerships, office blocks and corporate headquarters.

Forms of employment are inevitably entwined with this same hierarchy, and only in the urban centers does the ecology of labor reach its most complex, with intricate relations
of services. Job opportunities in urban areas are, if not necessarily always more plentiful, then certainly more diverse than those to be had in the countryside, and often more desirable. Places of higher education and the jobs associated with a college degree also tend disproportionately to be located in urban areas. The importance of this point should not be overstated, but it nevertheless has a significance for the geography of individualization and modernity that should not be overlooked merely for its simplicity. In Jining, one of my informants worked in a company whose major service was in helping other companies to establish themselves or make investments—i.e. they handled much of the paperwork and bureaucracy of obtaining the various necessary business licenses for newly started companies, among other things. Such a job simply was not available in Jiaxiang, where most non-manual labor work takes the form of self-employment or employment in a small private enterprise, with the remainder mostly going to work in either government departments or state-owned companies, such as a bank or utilities office. The most enviable and high-paying white collar jobs are only to be found elsewhere, in the solidly urban areas, and the same is also true for work in “creative” industries; opportunities for those interested in working in publishing, advertising, music, film, or the like are meager in a town like Jiaxiang. This structuring of employment opportunities has relatively simple but nonetheless powerful implications for rural youth as they go about trying to establish a career for themselves, as will be discussed more fully in the next chapter.

Despite all the expansion and construction of the last decade, Jiaxiang very much remains a small town; though it is too large for everyone to know one another, it is still small enough that perfect anonymity is impossible. Almost any time I walked with someone else
down the street we would run into at least one relative or acquaintance of theirs. In time this began to happen to me, and I also became aware of the potential for gossip, as I found people reporting my own whereabouts to others and who I was with at the time. For myself this was not a problem, but I did begin to feel how restrictive the community could be, and it is hard to escape the fact that there was perceptibly less space for the unconventional.

But as Fei suggests, small towns are perhaps socially and economically closer to the rural communities that surround them than they are to cities. By most any practical measure, Jiaxiang xiancheng is far closer to the supposedly rural townships that surround it than it is to Jining, even if the physical distances are essentially the same. The difference between life in one of the zhen and in the xiancheng is really a fairly minor one of degree, not of kind, and despite the fact that in 2009 the average annual disposable income of residents in the xiancheng was twice that of those with agricultural hukou in the county (12,100 to 6,076; JN-STJJ 2010:578), the zhen, xiang, villages, and xiancheng are all well integrated. Indeed, my informants came from all parts of the county—xiancheng, townships, and villages. It is not very far from the xiancheng to any of the surrounding smaller communities, as there are frequent buses, and a ride by electric bike or moped such as many people own from the central town out to Zhifang, the township at the southern end of the county, or to Macun in the north, takes no more than half an hour. Those who live and work in the xiancheng might make several trips a month out to see family or relatives in one of the surrounding communities, often taking along items they had bought in town, such as commercially packaged food or basic toiletries. In short, while there are clearly perceptible differences in the living
standards between the xiancheng and rest of the county, they are not so absolute as the stark urban-rural dichotomy would make them appear.

Yet if a small town like Jiaxiang has changed over the years, it is nothing compared to the major cities. Metropolises like Shanghai and Beijing may seem virtually unrecognizable from what they were twenty or thirty years ago, and a few cities, like Shenzhen, have risen up almost out of nowhere. And if academic attention has settled on places where social change and dramatic transformation are concentrated, then it will be little surprise that so many studies have fixated on the two extremes of China's social geography, the megacities and the villages.

But crucially, this geography is not as closed as it once was. During the collectivist period, the strictures of the hukou, or household registration, system, held the vast majority of the populace in place, hardening and widening the social and economic divide between cities and countryside (Cheng & Selden 1994; Mallee 2000; Wu & Treiman 2004). The hukou system is still in effect, though much relaxed, and how much and what effect it has on limiting rural migrants of various types is an exceedingly complex and contested question (Li 2006; Li et al. 2009; Zhan 2011). Consequently, as indicated above, there have been several decades now of a net movement of people from the countryside to the cities. On the individual level, however, the picture is far more complicated, as my own informants showed.

When I asked, some of my subjects would say that there were indeed many outmigrants from Jiaxiang who had gone to join the ranks of the “floating population.” But this claim is somewhat relative, and on further inspection it becomes, if not wrong, at least a great deal more nuanced. There are certain stereotyped images of rural-to-urban migrants:
those of men who arrive in Shanghai to work on construction sites, or women who travel to Beijing to become housekeepers or waitresses, or there are young people (teenagers and those in their early twenties, for the most part) who go to work in the factories in Guangdong and Fujian (Solinger 1999; Zhang 2001). If these typical images of migrants exist it is because there are, after all, plenty of migrant workers who actually do fall into these categories. But they do not represent all migrants, and the reality of migration is far more complex, ambiguous, and variegated (Fan & Huang 1998; Goodkind & West 2002; Wang & Fan 2006). What are we to make of people like Li Kui, who went to Suzhou to work in a Nike factory, but came back only a few weeks later? What of people like Cao Jun and his sister, who both at different times moved for work to Yantai, a middling city in the east of Shandong province, and subsequently returned to Jining? Then there are many cases like that of Sun Zhen, who moved from Jiaxiang to Juye, a town one county over to the west in Heze prefecture, no larger or more developed than Jiaxiang itself. Or take the case of Xin Gongzhen: he went to work in Guangzhou for half a year (though at a small export-import company, rather than a factory), then returned to Jining, later moved to Taian (an equally small city immediately north of Jining), where he opened a photography studio in partnership with his sister and brother-and-law, and then moved south to a small city in Jiangxi province to open another studio—all in the space of about two years.

In short, the stereotypical story of rural-urban migrants does not represent everyone and, frankly, does not truly apply to any of my own informants, at least not in its standard version. Though many of my informants could fairly be called rural migrants themselves, their “migrations” were often complex, transitory, opportunistic, and elliptical. What can be
seen in the examples given above are relocations that were frequently to places within Shan-
dong, or even just a few counties away, and often for periods of only a few months or maybe
a year or two. More significantly, many of these migrations were “sideways” rather than “up-
wards” on the rural-urban hierarchy.

Capturing the full sociological reality of a town like Jiaxiang, in all its dimensions, is
obviously more than is possible in the brief space here, and is not really the task in any case.
But the discussion above should suffice to show that Jiaxiang—and by extension those
young people who grew up there—does not fit neatly with a stereotyped image of either ru-
ral or urban China. Towns like Jiaxiang xiancheng are simultaneously urban and rural and
something else entirely, being entities that are distinct from the surrounding countryside
even as they are inextricably tied to it. And this geography is of direct relevance to the ques-
tion of individual biographies, for it structures the basic opportunities open to youth and
their knowledge of them.

*The differential geography of individualization*

It would be difficult to underestimate the gulf in information between the cities, towns, and
villages. Once, while waiting in the Jiaxiang train station on a cold winter evening for a train
that would be taking me to Qingdao, I sat reading a book, *Cao*, by Han Han. A native of
Shanghai and quite young, Han Han is a renowned writer, blogger, race car driver, and all-
around celebrity with tens of millions of fans, whom *Time* magazine (and other English
news outlets) has profiled on more than one occasion, calling him a “torchbearer” for the 80’s generation (Elegant 2009). He is easily one of the most famous living personages in China. I had to admit that I was curious as to what all the interest and adoration over him was about, and one of my more educated and urbane informants had recommended the book to me. While sitting there in the barren waiting room of the unheated train station, and having only gotten into the first few pages, a young man, perhaps in his early twenties, came over to engage me in conversation. He looked over the cover of the book in my hands and asked “Who's Han Han?”

It is no great insight to observe that the distribution of information and knowledge is neither perfect nor even. In a society as large as China, knowledge of even the most popular icons, events, trends, fashions, and so forth does not reach everyone and everywhere. But the mapping of how knowledge and information flow is a subject of study unto itself, and has serious implications for individualization. As that moment in the train station reminded me, even someone as famous and recognizable as Han Han is not known to everyone. But others I encountered were familiar not only with current Chinese intellectual figures, but with various foreign cultural trends. I met youth who were versed in European fashion brands like H&M, American TV shows like The Big Bang Theory, and niche musicians like DJ Shadow. By itself, such knowledge may not be especially meaningful; perhaps it is even frivolous. But insofar as other knowledge about alternative norms, identities, and subjectivities may be transmitted along the same channels, this exposure to urban and/or international influences is suggestive.
Of course, geography does not strictly determine the flow of information, nor, for that matter, the range of options that individuals may avail themselves of. Some of those I met in Jiaxiang were as tapped into selected media as any urbanite, and no doubt there are plenty of urban residents who do not concern themselves with keeping track of various public discourses. Yet it would be disingenuous to claim that there is no disparity at all between cities, towns, and villages in either the flow of information or in what lifestyles can be had. Whatever the root cause or causes may be, urban life, and more particularly urban life under the Reform Era, seems to come with a wider exposure to more ways of living.

During a trip to Qingdao I arranged to meet with a friend of an informant, Kong Jiarui, then 23 years old, who had been working in the city at the time. We met up and sat down at a moderately expensive Sichuan restaurant to eat and talk, and he quickly became remarkably voluble, speaking freely and spontaneously about everything from his work to the one-child policy. Throughout most of the meal there were two women in their thirties sitting at a table beside us, smoking and chatting. Kong Jiarui never seemed to give them any notice, but after they got up and left he suddenly and smoothly segued from a discussion of how society was liberalizing to them. “Those two women, you saw them smoking?” he asked, before launching into a brief discussion about how this was something that would have been unusual to see in earlier years. Though smoking rates are high among men, there is in general less acceptance of women smoking. Or at least, that has been true in the past, but is no longer so much the case in the cities. On the other hand, it is still very much true in rural places like Jiaxiang. In the xiancheng, women rarely drink in public, and are even less likely to smoke. Any given night at any given restaurant will show a clientele that is over-
whelmingly male. Almost never are women seen in a group by themselves. Young women who do publicly drink or smoke risk being seen as of questionable character. But of course it was not just a matter of gender segregation in social activities or permissible behaviors. Certain styles of dress, or men wearing their hair long and dyed, or prominent tattoos, were all things that attracted attention and negative (though discreet) comments. In more urbanized and cosmopolitan areas such things are not necessarily more common, but they are viewed with greater tolerance.

These urban and rural variations in the boundaries of permissibility may sound familiar and undeserving of much notice. But this is not so simple as a difference between rural conservatism and urban liberalism, as if these were original and static facts that require no explanation. As Kong Jiarui made clear, the boundaries of what individuals are permitted have loosened and expanded everywhere, including in the countryside, and by most accounts Jiaxiang was more socially liberal than it once had been. Yet there remained an apparent divide between places like Jiaxiang and places Qingdao.

Zhu Jianke, a young man I met in 2009, told me on several occasions that urban China and rural China “are like two different countries.” In the Reform Era, despite the increased flow of people from place to place, the economic divide between cities and countryside has only yawned wider (Li & Luo 2010). The urban-rural divide that has been carefully analyzed by social science researchers and scholars is of course visible to Chinese themselves, and people in Jiaxiang had a clear sense of where their town stood in relation to other parts of the country. But there was more nuance to this than the standard urban-rural dichotomy might suggest. Locals also compared Jiaxiang to other towns of similar size, to the
megacities and the lesser cities, and to different regions of the country. Towns in prefectures in the north and east of Shandong province (like Qingdao, Jinan, Weifang, and Yantai) were described as wealthier and more developed, while Jiaxiang, by contrast, was felt to be “undeveloped,” “poor,” and “dirty.” Thus there was a more sophisticated geography, one that took account of local character and overall regional differences.

Earlier social theorists such as Weber (1978:1212-34), Simmel (1976), and Durkheim reasoned that urban life brought with it a kind of liberation, that the sheer numbers of people and the diffusion of personal relationships in cities would mitigate social pressures for conformity: “… as society spreads out and becomes denser, it envelops the individual less tightly, and in consequence can restrain less efficiently the diverging tendencies that appear” (Durkheim 1984:238). Louis Wirth proposed that a combination of sizable population, density, and “the degree of heterogeneity” found in cities was necessary for this effect, and his description even sounds vaguely reminiscent of disembedding and reembedding, in that “While on the one hand the traditional ties of human association are weakened,” the city dweller “as an individual … is bound to exert himself by joining with others of similar interest into organized groups to obtain his ends” (1938:22). Robert Redfield (1947) similarly crafted a notion of a folk-urban continuum, in which the “folk” pole of the continuum was defined in large part by the society in question having little to no division of labor (excepting on the basis of gender), thus creating homogeneity.

As much as such ideal types and definitions of rural and urban society may be useful for conceptual exploration, it is not my intention here to try to fit the youth of Jiaxiang or the community in which they had grown up into a particular typology. Attempting to set a
label on Jiaxiang according to one typological scheme or another—to define it in relation to Redfield's sense of “folk society” or Wirth's urbanism or by some other term—is unlikely to lead to anything productive. Rather, this history of these theoretical concepts serves to show that certain trends, however partial and ambiguous, have been apparent for quite some time.

But this profusion of life options in the cities, as obvious as it may seem, is not actually a given. By some accounts life in Chinese cities did not always bestow many liberties, much less the necessity to make choices among them. Even in the early 20th century, life in the cities could easily be circumscribed by one's neighborhood, thus replicating the sense of the intimacy and confinement to be found in small towns (Lu 2010:41). And during the Maoist years, virtually all urban residents worked within state-owned enterprises or collectives, and much of their social lives was contained within their work units (Whyte & Parish 1984:237-238; Gold 1985:164; Ruan et al. 1997:83; Davis 2000:270). Therefore, if urban life in China now somehow offers individuals more freedom to live as they wish, this cannot be explained away as merely the intrinsic result of urbanization itself. Clearly, agents of the state (and perhaps also less overt and more informal authorities, like the managers of work units) have the potential to delimit, police, and discipline the lives of their members. Or rather, one could say that even in dense and diversified cities it is possible for structures to arise—or be imposed—that orchestrate individuals' lives into fixed patterns. That space now exists in which individuals may carve out lives distinct and different from traditional models cannot be taken as an inevitable development. It is worth recalling Beck's point that individualization is not structureless, but is in fact its own kind of structure, and we should not assume then that once one moves into a large or populous community that social constraints
fall away of their own accord. The freedom of choice that Wirth and others saw in urban life in the West at the early twentieth century was no doubt very real, yet they may have misattributed the cause for it; it is not necessarily the result of merely combining population, density, and heterogeneity, as Wirth suggested. What is required is an alteration in the basic structures of governance, the weakening of norms, the promotion of individual control over individual fate—in a word, individualization.

Life in the cities is not entirely free, of course, and life in the small towns is not wholly constrained. But there is a genuine and perceptible gulf between them, one that is felt by those who grow up in the rural towns and that shapes the possibilities open to them. Again, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim maintain that, even with the freedom to choose, the choice that many make is to conform to tradition. The traditional biography, therefore, becomes simply one more choice afforded by individualization. But if this is true, then the fact that the traditional biography remains so prevalent in places like Jiaxiang could be misleading. It would not then be evidence of enduring traditional norms per se, but merely one of the expected manifestations of individualization. Yet it is at least just as plausible that something of the old norms continue to exert a force over youth in Jiaxiang. Individualization is not an absolute state, after all. The local economy limits the scope of what occupations they can hope to achieve; social norms and expectations constrain the possibilities for unconventional marriage or family arrangements; and, on a most basic level, life in the xiancheng is presumed to be of a lower standard than that in the cities.

Young people in Jiaxiang are freer than they once were, gifted with new and greater opportunities, even if they are often burdened by the same. But they are not completely un-
bound, and are still more constrained by old norms and tradition than they would be in an urban environment. For many of those in Jiaxiang, part of growing up in such a rural town is eventually leaving it, even if only for a time. They leave for school, or for jobs, and in the process they may find themselves wandering down unexpected paths. There are risks, and no guarantees of success for those who leave the xianchong, but to stay is to close off certain possibilities completely. To live in the xianchong means to concede to and settle for a certain kind of life.

Concluding remarks

During my fieldwork Jiaxiang xianchong was made up largely of a few hutong areas and larger portion of loufang, or multistory apartment buildings, all between three and seven stories tall (any taller and they would need elevators, which thus far had been too expensive to be justifiable, but one high-rise was just beginning construction at the end of 2010). One afternoon, as I sat with two young women at a Western-style fast food restaurant they had chosen (one of two in the town, and both domestic Chinese chains), they pointed out the window and described how things had changed in the last decade. “None of that was here before,” one of them said, indicating a block of loufang across the way. “It used to be all pingfang.” The face of the town, in other words, had changed dramatically, even within just the last decade.

And yet, at the same time, Taishi Jiang’s sentiment noted at the beginning of this chapter is still apt. For all that it has changed over the years, when compared against the
cities Jiaxiang truly is more traditional, in the plainest and most neutral sense of the word. The great trends that have been so well documented in the cities are also there, but they are far more tempered. And the norms of previous generations continue, albeit much weakened and sometimes in adapted form, in the expectations of parents, family, and others.

The question of the balance between change and continuity raised at the beginning of this chapter is not an idle one. The individualization thesis includes as a necessary step the breakdown or erosion of traditional norms, and studies of China over the past several decades have gathered an abundance of evidence of just such “detraditionalization.” But even so, this does not mean that all norms have been erased, or that disembedding has occurred everywhere and to the same degree. As Ulrich Beck repeatedly, and so eloquently, describes it, individualization allows for but does not promise radical individuality. It only proposes that people must make choices to construct their own lives, and indeed that is what young people in Jiaxiang have come to do. If and when traditional norms persist, however partial or compromised they may be, they somewhat complicate the picture of ongoing individualization. In a sense, most young men from Jiaxiang still strive to live according to a traditional script. There are particular milestones they aim to reach and that they feel obliged to achieve. But the means to achieving them are less certain, less reliable, than they once were. An over-abundance of options, all with their own risks and costs, complicate decisions about how to proceed towards their goals, while new possibilities and ways to live may lead some young men to question the very goals themselves. And all throughout they must increasingly rely upon themselves.
The historian Charles Tilly (1984) makes several useful distinctions between types of comparisons: there are, for example, those instances where scholars emphasize the uniqueness of each particular case, versus those in which they emphasize the commonalities among cases. If we are to compare individualization in Western Europe and China, then either approach, or some balance of both, could be used. We could highlight the shared features of individualization in each case, thereby making an argument for individualization as a general or potentially universal process, or we could turn to look at the idiosyncrasies of each case, which might paint individualization in China and Europe as two very distinct phenomena, rooted in particular, local circumstances. But there is also what Tilly calls an “encompassing comparison,” in which differences among several cases are understood by their relationship to one another, such as when “attributing the characteristics of communities to their varying connections with a nearby metropolis” (1984:125). It is in fact this last type of comparison which is being suggested for China’s small towns and urban areas with regards to their levels of individualization. Insofar as individualization is a general type of process, which can take on varying forms and degrees, it not only operates differently in small towns and large cities, but it operates differently in part because of the structural relationships between communities. In plainer terms, the improvised biographies of young men from Jiaxiang, including the choices open to them and the limits and risks they must contend with, are not (just) a product of growing up in a small town, but are the result of the contrast between the countryside and cities.

Individualization provides a repertoire of concepts for making sense of the contrast between different kinds of biographies, between normative structures that leave no choice
and individualized structures which demand it. But for rural Chinese youth, these choices are quite literally structured upon the geography in which they live and move. All of the questions of what education to obtain, what jobs to pursue and how, of whether or not to marry and have children, and generally how to live, cannot be answered without reference to where they are. Continuity and change, popular notions of “modernity” and “tradition,” are all mapped onto the actual geography of villages, towns, and cities, and to understand the choices that young men in Jiaxiang make and the risks they contend with we cannot neglect the simple but powerful role of place, and of the differentials between the confinement of small town life and the precarious freedoms of the city.
In the fall of 2008, Liang Kan was working in Jining as an associate at a law firm. Having just graduated earlier that year, this was his first job. Generally speaking, the salary of a lawyer in China is not very much, but he did well enough and the job was stable. Within a year he was married to a young woman he had met through a matchmaker, and they moved into an apartment that his parents and in-laws had bought for them. Within less than a year after that, his first child was born. All the while he continued on in his job, day after day leaving home on his electric bike for work and returning home in the evening to his wife and daughter, his adult life basically settled.
This must sound like the most typical story of someone making the transition from youth into adulthood: graduation, then a job, marriage, buy a house, have children. But the reality is that Liang Kan's story was not typical at all. In fact, he was the only one among my informants whose life followed such a straightforward path in the time that I had to observe. Each and every other young man who was making the transition at the time saw some deviation from this nominally typical course. Some of those I met may never even achieve all of these “goals.” They might not marry, or own their own home, or have children. Some may not want to; some may be unable to. But it is in those first two steps—leaving school and becoming employed—that I witnessed the most variation and instability. Liang Kan's example was therefore not the norm; it was the anomaly.

Beck has written on what he calls the “normal chaos” of love (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995). What can be seen now among China's youth generation could just as well be called the normal chaos of work. The employment histories of most of my informants, even as young as they are, already show multiple shifts and jumps and detours, both of their own choosing and for reasons beyond their control. The sole consistency among them is the very lack of consistency in their employment. Almost no one, whatever their education level, settled directly into a steady job after leaving school, and what jobs they did take often proved short-lived rather than the start of a lifelong career.

This state of affairs may sound unremarkable; after all, employment instability is common now in many countries, including the U.S. But this now normalized chaos in the work lives of young men from Jiaxiang should not be taken for granted. When it comes to education and employment, those of the 80's generation have grown up with a system (if
that is even the right word for such a loose and not entirely coherent set of policies, structures, institutions, and practices) that has already radically changed from what was in place when they were children. A series of changes both deliberate and unintended have accumulated throughout the Reform Era, four of which are most prominent: the establishment of compulsory and universal education to the end of middle school, the rise of the *gaokao* in importance, the expansion of higher education, and the dismantling of the job placement system. As we shall see, these four elements account for much of the structural change within which the current youth generation must maneuver, strategize, and improvise—in short, a new and highly individualized path from youth to employed adulthood.

As noted in the last chapter, individualization entails a transformation of structures such that individuals become obligated to make conscious choices about the course of their lives, and this is precisely what has resulted in the sphere of education and work in China. Whereas in the past many young people could expect to quickly settle into an occupation and remain in it for years, if not their entire careers, young people in Jiaxiang at the beginning of the 21st century face incredible uncertainty. The way in which both the education system and the job market have evolved over the last thirty years has created new risks. Former structures and institutions that would have made much of the process of finding employment virtually automatic have been incrementally replaced, with the result that responsibility for advancing their own education and finding work has been squarely placed on the shoulders of young people themselves.

This chapter is concerned with both education and work in the lives of young people: two broad subjects, each of which could easily fill entire volumes on their own. Neverthe-
less, they are inextricably tied together, and the choice to address them both here is a neces-
sary one. For under the political economy of education that now prevails in China, and in
much of the industrialized world, the state draws implicit and explicit connections between
education policy and the quality of the workforce, while on the individual level one's educa-
tional credentials, perhaps more than any one other factor, determine one's employment op-
portunities. But of course, this was not always the case.

Understanding exactly how individualization has manifested in the normal chaos of
work, and how the current political economy of education promotes that individualization,
requires a careful examination of the new, specific structures that have taken shape. In this
chapter, I aim to briefly sketch out the history of the political economy of modern educa-
tion, address the individualized structures that have emerged with and within it in China,
and finally discuss the ways and means by which young men in Jiaxiang cope with those
structures, crafting their individualized biographies through a series of fateful decisions from
adolescence into young adulthood.

The strangeness of modern education

In the school systems of most countries today there are to be found divisions of primary,
secondary, and post-secondary levels; a sorting of students into multiple grade levels accord-
ing to age; and an assumption (or at least an aspiration) that students will study full-time for
a majority of the year according to a fairly fixed curriculum. Granted, there are many sub-
stantial variations and contrasting models of school systems, but these basic features are so commonplace that it is easy to forget just how peculiar they are, and that they are not inevitable. Alternative systems of education can and have existed throughout history, both in the West and in China. In some very loose sense, then, there is something that could be called the modern system of education, a set of structures peculiar to modern history and common to industrialized state societies. These structures have been so widely adopted and replicated that it is sometimes difficult to see past them, but it would be impossible to truly understand the normal chaos of work in the lives of Chinese young people without first understanding these powerful, and yet nearly invisible, structures of modern education.

Until the latter part of the 19th century, children in much of Europe and North America went through an early if somewhat gradual integration into the workforce (Kett 1978; Katz & Davey 1978). Children as young as ten would leave their family to work as servants in other households or on farmsteads, often tasked with menial work and chores. They might move back and forth between their birth home and other households several times, on into their twenties. As they grew older they could expect to take on more substantive or important work, but in any case their productive lives still began well before what would now be considered adulthood. Consequently, school attendance was relatively short and erratic, with students leaving and returning to school throughout the year as their own personal circumstances dictated, often with decreasing attendance as they grew older. When they did attend, there was comparatively little structure or age division in classes. This began to change in the 19th century, however, as industrialization gained pace, altering the landscape of labor. As productivity increased employment needs declined, and young people were increasingly
squeezed out of the work force, leaving them redundant. This, perhaps, created an opening for the ideological push to expand education, and thus bring “idle” young people under the watchful and disciplining eye of school instructors. Moralistic and ideologically driven reformers then sought to expand education to more fully encompass the population of children and youth at every class level and to make schooling itself more regimented. Progress in this direction was slow, but ineluctable, unfolding over the course of several generations.

The process seems to have flowed from the top down, with the youth of upper class families often on the leading edge of the transformations, while the working class youth were usually the last to change, setting up a dynamic whereby once certain practices became relegated to the working class, middle and upper class reformers branded them as problematic and in need of remedy. The habits of leaving home to board with another household and work as a servant, for instance, endured longest and ultimately died out among the working class, replaced by a new practice of youth continuing to reside with their parents for a longer time than they ever had before (Katz & Davey 1978:92).

This continuous push and pull between the economics of industrialization and moral anxieties over “idle” youth ultimately led to a ratcheting up of the education system. School increasingly came to dominate the lives of children and adolescents, with more people attending for a larger part of the year and for longer periods of their lives. In 1900 high school enrollment in the U.S. was only 10.6%, but it climbed steadily over the following decades, almost year by year, already having reached 51.1% in the 1929-1930 school year. Apart from a slowdown during World War II, it continued to climb until more or less plateauing in the 1960s in the low nineties, with little room left to grow (NCES 1993:36-37). On the face of
it, this numerical trend indicates that young people were incrementally being held back from entering the labor force for longer and longer, and both primary and secondary education became practically universal (some regional and demographic disparities notwithstanding). But it also masks more profound underlying changes in the social roles and standing of youth. This had already become apparent at least by the 1940s, when pioneering studies like A.B. Hollingshead’s *Elmtown’s Youth* (1949) documented the emergence of a new and distinctive youth culture, but it was not until Philippe Ariès' *Centuries of Childhood* (1969) that the full scale and historical depth of this transformation began to be realized. Although other historians would later call certain of Ariès' conclusions into question, his work nevertheless sparked interest in the social history of childhood and youth, and a notable part of both his own work and those who followed was an examination of formal schooling, how it has changed in the last several centuries, and how these specific changes align with changes in the nature of youth as a life stage and the labor relations of youth (Wilson 1980). The emergence of a novel youth culture in North America in the early 20th century can therefore be understood not as a spontaneous phenomenon, but the consequence of long trends that had already been evolving for the better part of a century.

It is historians, then, rather than sociologists or anthropologists, who have been best placed to observe and analyze this long, slow transformation in the nature of youth as it played out in the West over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries. And even after several decades of scholarship, it would be hard to overestimate the complexity of the subject, as the expansion of school enrollment implicated concomitant changes in the organization of schooling, the political economy of education, the economic roles and power of young peo-
ple, the definition of youth and its contrast to adulthood, and the ideologies regarding childhood and adolescence.

Viviana Zelizer has observed that in prior centuries young children were of negotiable value. Though parents would mourn the death of a child, it was seemingly with a greater sense of detachment than for the death of someone who had reached maturity, and in the event of a child's wrongful or accidental death, courts would award parents financial compensation in proportion to the child's estimated value as a laborer. Yet by the early to mid-twentieth century the situation had essentially reversed, and children had become “economically 'worthless' but emotionally 'priceless’” (1985:3). The latter half of this argument regarding the normative emotional bonds between parents and their children goes beyond the scope of this chapter, but the first half—that youth are “economically worthless”—is a sharp statement that cuts directly to the problem of the political economy of education. Early reformers and advocates who pushed for extending schooling and keeping children out of the labor force seemed motivated mainly by moral, ethical, and ideological concerns, but whatever their reasons, the system they championed both depended upon and dictated profound economic changes.

Whatever other functions it may serve, the formal education system that now dominates in China as in much of the world has two major economic roles. On the one hand, in its more advertised role, it serves to prepare young people for the various types of work they will eventually take up. From the perspective of state actors the education system is an es-

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4 I do not wish to make too much of what may be only a coincidental similarity, but it nevertheless should be noted that young children in China were not always mourned to the same degree as adults, either (Baker 1979:76; Waltner 1986).
sential component in the grand projects of national development and the cultivation of an advanced, internationally competitive workforce (Wan 2006). A parallel logic works on the individual level; as ethnographers like Vanessa Fong (2004) and others have shown, Chinese youth themselves have embraced a hope and belief that education is the surest means to individual advancement under the Reform Era economy, as they recognize that their own job prospects hinge upon their educational credentials. Yet on the other hand, and in its far less often commented upon role, the modern education system also withholds youth from entering the workforce. It defers them from full employment, perhaps for years, and well past the age where, historically and traditionally, they would have already begun participation in regular work. In this sense, enrollment in school becomes the only acceptable “occupation” for youth, and formal education serves as a buffer, a means to keep young people from otherwise flooding into and crowding the labor market (Kett 1978). Youth who participate in the labor force can be doubly problematic, as they not only increase competition for jobs, but hinder the state’s objectives of developing a certain type of workforce.

Along this line, one of the most eloquent and trenchant critiques of modern education comes from Joseph Kett: “Society no longer depends on young people for anything in particular (unless it be as soldiers) and has been forced to create for them a succession of contrived roles and institutions not tightly woven into the community structure” (Panel on Youth 1974:29). Kett’s assessment may be somewhat dramatic, and one may not wish to go so far as to deny the merits of a formal and liberal education altogether, but his point is still worth considering. Chinese youth interestingly differentiate between being in school and being “in society,” as though being enrolled in school puts them at a remove from full and
normal social participation. The two roles of education noted above are not mutually exclusive, though, at least not where China is concerned. In the late 1990s, the central government initiated a rapid and massive expansion of higher education, partly with the objective of furthering the program of economic development, it is true, but also, if more quietly, with the aim of heading off a wave of high school graduates from entering into a job market that was already overcrowded and thereby driving up unemployment (Tang 2002; Bai 2006; Wan 2006). The state therefore consciously and deliberately used the education system as a means of regulating the flow of young people into the labor market, an acknowledgment of a function that it otherwise achieves by default.

But it is also curious to note that these two roles of the education system need not go together, either, or rather, that is to say that preparing young people for future work does not necessarily entail holding them apart from adult working society. In his study of Chinese small towns, Fei Xiaotong mentions a traditional fishing community where illiteracy was high. In his discussion with the local people, he realized that the primary local occupation of fishing required a certain practical education on the water. “This knowledge which they use to make their living is gained not from books or classrooms but from their elders and their own experiences … This being the case, they argued, why spend several years in school to learn a few thousand characters which have nothing to do with their livelihood?” (1986:60). Something similar was no doubt once true for the farmers and peasants who constituted so much of China’s population, with rural youth being expected to participate in daily chores and thus acquiring the kind of knowledge that they would ultimately depend on to make their living. Today, there are vocational and technical schools at the high school
level that offer some practical education, while internships exist in some fields at other levels, but it is nonetheless remarkable just how much of the school system is now wholly removed from any form of production.

By no means do I wish to argue that the history of youth relations and the political economy of education that played out in the West can be interpolated directly to China. The history of education, schooling, and youth in China is a subject unto itself. And yet, in the very broadest view, if not in the details, there is a basic commonality between how the education systems in China and the West have evolved over the last century. Like their counterparts in the 19th century U.S., primary schools in China during the Qing dynasty were not age-graded and there was no age-specific, standardized curriculum beyond the canon of classical texts (Leung 1994:392), and over the course of the twentieth century China’s education system would be repeatedly influenced by various Western models (Hayhoe 1989; Niu 2007). In Jiaxiang, as I was told, this remained true up to the 1970s, with primary schooling being informally organized and often taking place in a neighborhood home. As for China’s contemporary school system, again, one does not have to look very far to identify a number of differences with Western education systems, from the breakdown in the grade structure to the means by which students gain entry to college; these variances have been well documented by other scholars and the significance of several of them will be addressed further below. But it is nonetheless important to note how in China, as in the West and most of the world, education has become systematized under state control, and that such an arrangement works in concert with certain structures of age-based labor relations. Even as they are ostensibly being prepared for future jobs, youth are largely sequestered from the labor force.
There is not sufficient space here to go further. Extended education has other, knock-on effects on young people's biographies, delaying not only the start of work but also other markers of adulthood, such as family formation (e.g. Fussell 2002; Furstenberg 2010). But the outline of the social and cultural historical work on the subject given above, as rough and partial as it is, should be enough to show that the intersection of youth, labor, and education is exceedingly complex and has surprising depths. The modern system of education that first emerged in the West, and has now been imported to China, represents an extraordinary departure from what went before. It creates a relationship between education and employment that now appears almost natural and yet is historically peculiar. But above all else, this system of modern education sets the conditions for the normal chaos of work—the individualization of education, job-seeking, and employment—that now dominates in the lives of Chinese youth.

Individualizing structures of the school system

When my research started to wind down and it came time to prepare for writing the dissertation, I began to turn back to the scholarly literature. For nearly two years I had tried to immerse myself in my fieldwork and had given little attention to current publications, and so I felt the need to refresh my memory of all the past literature on China’s Reform Era and catch up on the new. Knowing that I needed to address the role of work and education in my informants' lives, I decided to start by going back to look at some of the anthropological
work from the 1980s and '90s, when some of the modern reforms to education and employment were enacted. This, I imagined, would provide a background for understanding the state of work and education in young people's lives in the start of the new century.

And yet, even though the literature was interesting and informative, it was surprisingly not as relevant as I had thought it would be. A number of the articles, for instance, made mention of a 1988 documentary called *River Elegy (Heshang)*. Widely viewed in China at the time of its original broadcast, it raised critical and unflattering comparisons between the then current levels of development of China and the West (see, e.g., Pye 1991:465; Marr & Rosen 1998:167). Those who discussed this documentary viewed both it and subsequent public response to it as emblematic of an important shift in the popular mindset. It marked a turn from the time of the Cultural Revolution little more than a decade earlier, when foreign culture was fiercely rejected, to a new direction in the Reform Era, when Western countries were admired and considered worthy of emulation in many respects. The only trouble was, none of my informants were familiar with the *Heshang* documentary, much less could recall having seen it.

I asked several of my informants, all below the age of 30, if they could name either the five black classes or five red classes that had been official designations during the Maoist years. None of them could name more than a couple, and I was even told to just look up the information online if I really wanted to know. On the one hand, this gap in their knowledge

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5 This was both an amusing and mildly frustrating response I encountered on more than one occasion. When asking questions of my informants and trying to determine their own understandings of a given subject, they would sometimes simply suggest that I go online to search for the information. Interestingly enough, it seemed that almost any basic question I could think of had been asked by others online, posted onto forums or pages where others could volunteer their answers. Everything from "what were the five red/black classes" to what defined the ant tribe to more esoteric questions had already been asked by ordinary
perhaps should not be so surprising. The class label system was abandoned before they were born, and so most of the current youth generation have never had cause to think much about it. And yet, on the other hand, this perhaps does deserve some reflection. The class label system of the Maoist years was hardly a minor, forgettable feature of the revolutionary period. It was all-encompassing, affecting every one and every family in multiple aspects of their lives, dictating their options for employment, housing, and even marriage (Kraus 1977; Pye 1991; Deng & Treiman 1997). Even if the young today never had any direct experience with the class label system, their parents and grandparents certainly did. The point here is not simply that the youth generation is not very knowledgeable about aspects of life in recent history; that much is perhaps only to be expected, especially given how little their parents talk about the details of the Maoist years, and that the youth themselves did not come of age until the late 1990s. Rather, the question is how we are to assess the continued relevance of China's recent past to the present. We may assume that many of the policies, events, and reforms of prior decades had effects that persist into the present day. The black class labels of the Maoist years, for instance, changed the fortunes of many families in ways that had lasting repercussions. And although few of the current youth generation may have seen or remember the documentary *River Elegy*, it did capture a certain strain of self-critical pessimism about the state of China's development in comparison to the West that still has echoes today.

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Chinese somewhere online. There is hardly space to discuss it here, but this does raise an odd kind of methodological problem as to how to assess young people's cultural knowledge, one that may require serious thought in future research.
History does matter to China's youth generation at the turn of the millennium; without question, their position cannot be understood without reference to the many paths of change that have led to the present. But at the same time, my informants' ignorance and indifference to certain elements of recent history (elements that anthropologists had judged significant and symbolic only a few years ago) does give reason for caution. We must be increasingly selective in our application of the history of the Maoist years (and even the early Reform Era) towards explaining current conditions. It is possible that social change in China has outpaced even the very scholarship that focuses upon it, at least in some limited respects. Recent history, not only of the Maoist years but even of the early years of the Reform Era, may therefore be of less help in explaining the conditions the youth generation faces than one could wish for. Yet this very lack of relevance of recent history tells us just how far removed current conditions are from those of more than twenty years ago.

It is easy, not to mention rhetorically expedient, to contrast the Reform Era with the Maoist era that preceded it. But the Reform Era itself has now stretched on for over three decades, and in that time there have been multiple and repeated changes that have created divisions within the Reform Era itself. Thus while the school system and employment structures changed markedly between 1949 to 1978 (Deng & Treiman 1997), conditions in the later 2000s were already starkly different from those that prevailed in the 1980s and even early 1990s. Understanding the structures in which young people from Jiaxiang were educated and found employment is therefore not as simple as drawing a line between the Maoist and Reform Eras. For youth from Jiaxiang born between the mid-1980s and early 1990s, their education and employment prospects have been shaped by four historically incidental
structural changes: the beginning of compulsory education through middle school; the rise of the *gaokao*; the expansion of higher education; and the end of the job assignment system.

Compulsory nine year education, meaning that all children of the appropriate ages were expected to complete elementary school and middle school, was only implemented in the Reform Era (Delany & Paine 1991). Under the current law, then, high school is not mandatory, but nevertheless the great majority of middle school students currently make their way into one form of high school or another, though there are different types of schools, from “keypoint” high schools to technical and vocational schools, with a gap among them in status and desirability. But at the time when most of my informants were in their early teen years (roughly in the late nineties), only about half of middle school students nationally succeeded in making it into high school.

In rural areas like Jiaxiang, however, the reality of compulsory education still falls some distance from stated law and policy. Shortly after I arrived in the field in 2008 I met Han Jia, 19 years old and working as a hairstylist in the *xiancheng*. As I later learned, he had never graduated from middle school, and his work life had begun when he was just 13. After brief stints as a dishwasher and an electrical welder, which included working in other parts of Shandong, he trained to become a stylist and started working in Jiaxiang when he was 14. By the time he was 20, at an age before my college-educated informants had even graduated and found their first jobs, he had already been working for seven years. His case, while unusual,

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6 In Chinese, *chuzhong*, or junior middle school, whereas high school is often translated, somewhat confusingly, as “senior middle school.”
was not unique, as on occasion I encountered workers who were unquestionably too young to be out of school.

Still, cases like Han Jia's are far fewer now than they were in the past. Official data for Jining claims that as of 2008 high school enrollment was up to 88% of those in the relevant age range, putting local numbers in line with national figures, although what disparity there might be between the Jining urban core and the more rural districts is not stated (JNSTJJ 2010:10). For Jiaxiang county the number is likely somewhat lower, but based on my own observation, the statements of others, and the raw data for the county's population age structure and school enrollment numbers from the same year, it does appear that a majority of young people aged 15-18 were attending some form of high school by at least 2008.

For the 80's and early 90's generation in Jiaxiang, the compulsory nine years of education meant that most (though certainly not all) of those born into this period were tied together in a shared, collective experience up until the time they were 13 or 14 years of age. From the end of middle school onwards, however, paths began to diverge. A small number would not make it into high school at all, and would then have to enter the labor force. Like Han Jia, they typically worked at restaurants, hair salons, small shops, or else in some form of manual labor. Some started small businesses of their own if they were able to work up the capital and loans necessary. The majority, however, did find their way into high school. Jiaxiang's “No. 1 Middle School,” as it is formally called (a high school, despite the name), is viewed relatively well and is therefore correspondingly difficult to place into, but there are

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7 There were, of course, age and gender divisions in job occupation. Within Jiaxiang at least young men were unlikely to go into construction work, which was seemingly dominated by middle-aged men with low education backgrounds. Shop sales positions and restaurant service jobs more frequently went to women.
other high schools with lower entry standards in the area, and one private high school which is open to virtually any student whose family can manage the fees. Given the option, most students will pursue a high school education if at all possible—if only because their families may compel them to. Individually, they have good reasons for this choice, as it betters each individual's chances of obtaining a better, higher-paying, safer, or more prestigious job.

Fig. 1 Percentage of middle school students who continued to high school, nationwide

![Graph showing percentage of middle school students who continued to high school nationwide from 1991 to 2010.](image)

Adapted from Ministry of Education data (2012a)

Beginning at least from high school, if not before, young people must start making strategic decisions about their futures. High school normally spans three years. As at all lower grade levels in elementary and middle school, students are placed into ban, or homeroom classes, which typically range up to about seventy or eighty students. This group of
students take all of their classes together throughout the day, meaning that their group of peers whom they can interact with is fairly constrained. At the end of their first year, the students will then choose between one of two tracks, either wenke or like, roughly “humanities” or “sciences.” Depending on their choice, they are then sorted into new ban, which they will stay in for their second and third years. The humanities track students will be taken up with classes on history, geography, and the like, while the sciences students study chemistry, physics, biology, and so on. The choice of curriculum track will determine which version of the college entrance exam they take at the end of their senior year, which will then define their options for college.

Although there has been some degree of devolution in the Reform Era with government authorities ceding greater control to school principals to run their classes and curricula as they wish (Delany & Paine 1991), the college entrance exam is something of a limiting factor, as all students must prepare for it. It therefore imposes a kind of shared experience on high school students. The exam, or gaokao, was regularly held once per year in July when most of my informants were in high school (though it has since been moved forward into June). The details of its administration are complex; there are like and wenke versions, but also different exams by province. What is most important for the students, however, is simply their final score, which ranges up to a possible maximum of 750. This one score decides their options for college. After learning their score some weeks later in mid summer, they will fill out a form listing their preferences for the schools and majors they would be willing to enroll in. Each university and department has its own score cut-offs for eligibility, which the students must weigh carefully. Schools also assign different score thresholds to each
province, such that, generally speaking, someone from Shandong must have a higher score than someone from Ningxia in order to meet the cut-off. Several of my informants who did not succeed on their first try in the *gaokao* went into a “review” year, studying and waiting for the next year's exam to try again, and in that time some of them relocated to other provinces such as Liaoning and Inner Mongolia to take advantage of the beneficial score differentials.

But all of this barely even begins to scratch the surface of the complexity and strategizing that students must put into their school selection form. Students naturally hope to get into the best program they can with whatever score they have, but each program has a quota and will only accept so many students. If a student's first choice program fills up its quota before they are selected, then they will get bumped to their second preference—although if that has already filled its quota, too, then the student will get bumped again, even if their score would otherwise easily qualify them for entry. Very careful strategizing is thus required to optimize one's chances of getting into an acceptable program.

Thus, as early as age fifteen young people in Jiaxiang had to begin to think about and plan for possible future careers. They had to choose their curriculum track, for which they needed to consider possible college majors, for which they in turn had to consider careers and employment opportunities. And once they are set down a certain path it is difficult to change it. Changing majors in college is a rarity that, due to the tightly regulated admissions process, requires special permissions. This is not to say, of course, that young people have their careers fully laid out before the end of high school, as there is far too much uncertainty involved for that. But they, and their families, must nevertheless face and cope with a pro-
gressive narrowing of options along a series of critical junctures, of which the *gaokao* is only one.

But perhaps the *gaokao's* most important implication is that, even as it creates a more or less uniform experience for high school students, it also individualizes them by laying responsibility for personal advancement on each individual student. Those young people who leave school and must seek out jobs frequently rely on instrumental aid from relatives or peers in finding employment, but neither *guanxi* nor family wealth can have any direct bearing on how a student performs on the *gaokao*. It is, at least nominally, a purely meritocratic test, and therefore aligns opportunities for advancement with individual performance. After the scores are released, of course, family resources may have a role to play; a student who wins a place in a top school may not be able to attend if their family is poor, while those with the financial means or connections can leverage them to get their child into a better school than their score might have otherwise have allowed. But overall the exam itself and the entire, elaborate apparatus that has evolved around it over the last several decades, places the burden of responsibility for success or failure on the student's own self.

A great deal of attention has (rightly) been paid to the grueling and pressured life imposed on Chinese high school students by the current educational system and the demands of preparing for the *gaokao* (Kipnis 2001; Fong 2004, 2007). Understandably, then, the *gaokao* has a certain prominence, both in the minds of Chinese students and in the writings of scholars. But there is the question of what comes after. For nearly all of the young men I worked with, high school (if they attended it) was already behind them; they were now living through the consequences of their individual educational successes, failures, and choices.
Apart from the time leading up to exams, the pressure is generally far less in college than it is in high school, and comparatively speaking my college-educated informants had a great deal of free time during their studies. A joke has it that Chinese college students “study twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, two weeks a year,” i.e. they study intensely at the time of final exams, and hardly at all the rest of the term. Unless compelled by teachers, they were apt to sleep in, skip classes, stay up all night in netbars playing online games, or go to the nearest shopping center just to stroll around. And yet this does not mean that, having made it into college, young people become complacent. Once it comes time to graduate, the pressure returns in full force. Should they sit for the exam to proceed on to graduate study in their field, if possible? If not, then they must put themselves forward to apply for jobs, casting in their resumes and sitting for interviews. But if they do get offered a job, should they take it? How are they to decide if it is really what is best for them and their future? Should they move elsewhere in the hope that the job opportunities will be better or more plentiful in another city, another province? If and when they do finally land a job, the pressure remains: the pressure to “make money,” as so many simply put it. The gaokao is therefore a high point in the lives of many young people, but it is not an end in itself, only the means to get into college, and that, in turn, is understood to be the means to finding a good job that will lead one to a “good life.” The gaokao is thus perhaps best understood as only the most visible and institutionalized of a series of junctures at which young people's lives might turn in different directions.

The logic is simple: that the higher one's educational credentials, the better one's job prospects. This is true enough to maintain widespread interest in college education, but it
perhaps should go without saying that there is no guarantee that a college degree will bring employment, let alone desirable employment. The ant tribe is demonstration enough of this, as are many of the college-educated youth from Jiaxiang, as I will describe below. The primary causes for this, ironically, lies in the last two remaining factors: the end of the job assignment system and the expansion of higher education.

Beginning from 1949 onwards, the state experimented with various means of guaranteed employment (for urbanites, at least), despite a series of challenges related to an over-supply of labor, underemployment, unsustainable pension and benefits systems, and the like (Emerson 1983; Taylor 1988; Davis 1992; Jefferson & Rawski 1992). In addition to job placement for students when they graduated from school, there were also other mechanisms, for instance the dingti system, which allowed young urbanites the chance to inherit a parent's spot in a state-owned enterprise (Davis 1988). These mechanisms greatly constrained individuals' employment, to the point that they often had little to no say in where they were to work. Individuals did not begin to become responsible for finding and securing their own employment—with all its attendant challenges and risks—until the late 1980s, as many adults began to xiahai, or take the plunge into the private sector, a trend that accelerated through the 1990s (Solinger 2002; Tsui 2002). By the early 1990s, the job placement of college graduates was dismantled, and college graduates could no longer passively expect a job to be assigned to them. Instead, they had to become active in determining their own employment. Thus by the time that my college-educated informants were graduating from university, all of these various mechanisms for job assignment and security had disappeared, and they were compelled to find employment on their own in an open and chaotic job market.
Reforms to higher education proceeded apace, and by the late 1990s, as college was becoming increasingly marketized (Yin & White 1994), the central government decided to expand college enrollment, broadly defined to include regular four year colleges and post-secondary vocational schools. This created a surge in the number of new college entrants between 1998 and 2002 (see chart below). This also meant, however, that the expansion of higher education was at least somewhat forced. It is not so surprising then that a decade later, as my college-educated informants were graduating, the number of college graduates had already begun to exceed the labor market's demand for them and their skills (Bai 2006).

Fig. 2 Percentage of high school students who continued on to higher education, nationwide

Adapted from Ministry of Education data (2012a)
From 1998 to 2010, the number of enrolled college students in China rose from 3.4 million to over 22 million, with just under 5.8 million graduates for the latter year (only counting those from standard programs; MoE 2012b, 2012c). My own college educated informants from Jiaxiang were a part of this surge, and so faced the problem of increased competition; had they gone to college only a decade earlier, they would have been counted among a special group, but as it is, much of the advantage they and their families might have hoped for was diminished by the swollen ranks of college students and graduates.

It would be easy to think that this expansion of higher education is only relevant to those youths who succeed in entering college, but the impact of this structural reform reaches across the entire youth generation. Even those who are not college educated are affected, due to the simple and ineluctable forces of diploma inflation (Bourdieu 1984:143). In the hard logic of the supply and demand for high-status, high-paying jobs, the value of educational credentials is in proportion to their rarity. Jobs that once could be obtained by young people with only a high school diploma now may demand undergraduate degrees, and jobs once reserved for college graduates may now require postgraduate degrees. In other words, “the economic benefits of school attendance accrue from the differential advantage it bestows” (Katz & Davey 1978:114). Ironically, then, as young people have eagerly pursued higher education degrees their numbers have undercut the individual benefit of having a college diploma. Given the realities of China's job market competition, however, young people have little choice but to try to work with the system and forge ahead. If a college degree is not enough of an advantage to help them gain their desired employment, then they have an incentive to continue on to a graduate degree. Meanwhile, those with only middle school or...
high school degrees are consigned to lower status work that was formerly held by those with less education. The expansion of higher education, therefore, has meant much more than a simple growth in the numbers of college graduates, and has actually shifted the whole spectrum of employment opportunities against the scale of educational attainment.

The hierarchy of low-status and high-status occupations thus remains largely intact, inasmuch as less skilled manual labor jobs continue to go to those with the lowest educational credentials while white collar work continues to go mostly to those with relatively high credentials. But the shift in the educational goalposts does have its consequences, as it keeps youth involved in the school system for years more, further delaying their entry into the world of paid work.

All of these trends—the institution of a compulsory nine years of education, the rise of the gaokao, the end of the job assignment system, and expansion of higher education—have combined and culminated into a radical alteration of exactly when and how young people make the transition into the adult world of work. And collectively, these discrete trends, coming into play at different points of the Reform Era, have led in a single direction: towards greater individualization. Whereas there was once little choice to be had in one's own employment, there is now almost too much. Amy Hanser captures the situation well:

[Y]outh in the big cities … faced many forks in the road before them. How will I go about looking for work? Should I stick with my specialization from school or strike out in a new direction? Should I accept a new job offer and quit my current job? … How difficult will it be to find another job? Will the salary be reasonable? Will it offer professional advancement? Will it be interesting? (2002:197).
The conjoined structures of education and employment impose both responsibilities and choices on young people. If they are to make it into college, they must do so principally upon their own ability, as measured by standardized testing. If they neither inherit their occupations from their parents, nor have them chosen for them by state authorities, then they must turn to introspective questions. Though some young people in Jiaxiang received their parents’ “help” in finding a job or choosing a college major, more than ever before they are compelled to make choices by reference to their own, individual desires. And yet that requires not one choice, but a series of them, with young people asking themselves questions like those above as they try to sort through multiple interests, risks, and constraints.

External risks, internal uncertainties

Being employed is not itself a matter of choice, for the simplest and most obvious reasons; paid work is a necessity for all but a select few. Beyond this one fundamental requirement, however, comes a series of choices in which young people must apply a difficult and subjective calculus of their own needs, desires, and values against a complicated field of options. The freedom, and necessity, of choice enters upon two questions: when to make the shift from education to the workforce, and what employment to pursue.

These two questions are not easily put to rest, and they may rise up again and again. For some, even once they have graduated from high school or college and taken on a job, the
possibility of returning to school to further their education remains. And for virtually everyone, the possibility of switching jobs in the hope of finding something better is almost always there. And it is perhaps in their work lives that these young men’s biographies are most individualized, even more so than in school. For those who seek to obtain white-collar work, there is less chance of their being able to find an appropriate job through their personal guanxi if they are the first of their family to go to college and their family are all located in the countryside. The necessary connections may simply not be there. More fundamentally, the more diverse and specialized jobs become, the less likely it is that a young man's family or old friends will have connections in their particular industry. Therefore, if they are to find a job, they must work through other channels.

Youth unemployment is not a new problem, naturally. In the 1950's an oversupply of workers in collectives and state-owned companies had resulted in a lack of job openings that threatened to leave many of the youth generation unemployed. At the time, the Chinese party state utilized its control over the state enterprises and pensions to entice older workers to retire, freeing up positions for younger workers to enter into (Davis 1988). But current youth unemployment is of a very different character, due in part to the liberalization of state policies with regards to education. By the 1990's, the state had decided first to universalize primary and middle school enrollment, and then to expand higher education, serving the same purpose. Yet unfortunately, this strategy has proven imperfect, having mostly only postponed, rather than resolve, the unemployment issue. The explosive growth in college enrollment naturally led to commensurate growth in the number of college graduates each year, spilling out into a job market that was highly competitive. After having expended years
of effort and, often, some large part of their families' finances, these young people find that their college educations may well have been for nothing. Crucially, however, the state is no longer solely, or even primarily, responsible for out-of-work graduates.

By way of example, of Taishi Jiang's graduating medical student class of 74 people, 37 (50%) “returned home” (回生源地), 27 (36%) continued directly on to graduate school, 9 (12%) had obtained employment, and 1 had a “continuing status” (meaning that for whatever reason the student did not choose to have their hukou status revert back to their prior place of residence). The “returned home” category covers those who had not found formal employment by the time of graduation and so had their hukou and personal dossiers sent back to their former place of residence, wherever that might be (88% of the class was from Shandong, and the remainder from just four other provinces). Strictly speaking this does not mean that no one in this group had yet found a job. It is conceivable that some had secured work and their new employers simply did not notify the school to request their personal files. I was told that this would be unusual, though, especially for a reputable or well-established employer. It is safe to assume that most, if not necessarily all, of those who “returned home” were not employed by the time of graduation. So, in this particular class, roughly half were perhaps unemployed, a third continued their studies, and only a little more than a tenth had secured definite employment. Of the nine in the class who had obtained employment, however, only one went to work in a hospital. Another took a job at the Personnel Bureau in his hometown in eastern Shandong, a job quite unrelated to his education, while Taishi Jiang himself took a job at a medical insurance company in Qingdao, and the other six all found work with a certain pharmaceutical company in Jinan.
In the case of Taishi Jiang's class, and as medical students conducting their internships at a hospital in Zibo city in Shandong, they were left little time in their final semester for job hunting. Others are not necessarily so constrained. A number of my college-educated informants would leave campus months before their graduation date to pursue work, sometimes even starting their new jobs well before classes were officially over. Though this was not expressly sanctioned by their schools, it was common nonetheless. Taishi Jiang himself started his job months before he received his diploma, even though his school strictly opposed students leaving their assigned internship hospitals before then.

Taishi Jiang's case was obviously not typical among his classmates. He went to extraordinary lengths to find the job that he did. He travelled first to Jinan, Shandong, for a job fair. Then he went to Beijing, where he stayed with a classmate's older brother for several days. He went through two interviews and a job fair, though, tellingly, he did not submit any resumes at the Beijing job fair, as he felt when he arrived there that he was not competitive with the students there, who largely came from better schools than he did. But luckily for him he received a call from a medical insurance company based in Qingdao who wanted him for an interview. He rushed from Beijing to Qingdao, and after a round of interviews landed an entry-level job with the company.

Most did not have the will or means to go so far to find a job. Bai Yong, following his college graduation from medical school, obtained a job at a hospital through representatives that came to his college. The hospital was located in a minor city just across the border from Jining in Henan province, several hours away by bus. His work there, however, was not as a doctor treating patients, but more as a lab technician. He made do living in an employee dorm-
mitory and received only a meager salary. Most of his classmates, he told me, had strived to make it into graduate medical school, precisely because there were so few desirable jobs available to them with “only” an undergraduate medical degree.

Many others did not find jobs that were directly related to their majors of study in college. Yan Zhen, who studied Korean in college, ended up returning to Jiaxiang to work with his father’s construction company. Zhang Xin, who studied business and trade, was unable to find any work after college and so then went to study nautical engineering, finally becoming an engineer on an international freighter. Many were stymied by the lack of jobs that were both desirable and appropriate to the investment of years, money, and effort they had put into college.

But even once employment was finally found, young people could not rest assured of job security. As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, one of the dominant features of my informants’ lives was instability, and above all in their work lives. They were continually moving, from place to place and job to job. One young man, Xu Zhen, commented on his own job mobility, posting a note on his Renren page in which he counted ten separate jobs he had had since graduating from college just two years before. Several of these jobs he counted were joking exaggerations, but even so it was a remarkable amount of job mobility in such a period of time. After graduation he obtained a job as a French translator at an industrial company in Chengdu. He considered his pay decent (4,000 a month—much better than almost any of my other informants). Regrettably, this job did not last him very long: the head of his department decided to leave the company, and the new department head, Xu

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8 A social networking site, formerly called Xiaonei, similar to Facebook.
Zhen explained, would bring in his own people, displacing everyone there. He spent some time with a branch of the company in Burma, and then stayed on for a time in a rather informal arrangement with one of his superiors, but eventually had to return to Jiaxiang. Fortunately for him, he succeeded in landing a job with a company in Beijing before long.

From a tight job market that offered few desirable or suitable positions, to a basic lack of job security, there were a number of external risks that could affect young men's employment. But there were also internal risks—the matters of personal ambition and desire for the best possible job on the one hand, and apprehension over the possible inadequacy of one's current job on the other.

Beck's observation that the freedom of choice necessarily creates the obligation to choose has a surprising poignancy. For youth, the power to choose their own employment, coupled with the wide array of options and omnipresent uncertainties, leaves them continually questioning. If indeed they are responsible for their own biographies, their own work lives and employment, then they must be alert to the possible risks to their job of the moment and the opportunities that might arise elsewhere.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, in the midst of such uncertainty many sought stability. Not everyone I spoke with agreed if there was truly such a thing as an “iron rice bowl” anymore, but if it does exist, I was told, it was in government employment. Indeed, some of those I spoke to said that only a government job could genuinely be considered wending (stable); all private sector jobs were by nature unreliable. Thus a handful of young men I knew decided at different times to take the exam for entry into government service, and two actually succeeded in gaining minor functionary positions in local government. A few others found jobs
in state-run businesses or organizations, with, it usually seemed, some degree of help from family connections. Such jobs do not necessarily promise a great deal of pay or power; they are attractive chiefly because of the security they provide. Such jobs are in short supply, however, and most young men still had to contend with the vicissitudes of the job market.

In the cases I witnessed, both before and after the choice is made to leave behind one job for another there was almost always considerable reflection and hesitation. Young men vacillated between possibilities, questioning their own satisfaction with the job they had and what might be gained by changing to another. And yet they were also cognizant of risks: few job opportunities came with guarantees. Often, they were impelled by a perception of limitations. Han Jia, for instance, as a hairstylist in Jiaxiang at one of the more expensive salons, actually was paid quite well and made a better than average living given his relatively low educational background. Yet he still worried about his future prospects, noting that there were already a lot of salons and barber shops in the town competing against one another, and he was concerned that he would not be able to keep his job for the long term. Still, he knew that there were not many other possibilities open to him; better jobs were mostly out of his reach, because of his education level, while those that were open to him were mostly forms of low-paying manual labor.

Such binds were common for young men of all education levels, however. Early in my fieldwork I met Zhu Jianke, Li Kui, and Su Jinghe at a wedding. They were friends and colleagues of the groom, Yan Rong, who was marrying Bai Yong's younger sister, and though I was ostensibly supposed to be part of the bride's party, they insisted that I ride with them on the way from the bride's home to the banquet at the groom's. They, and the groom of the
wedding, Yan Rong, had all originally been in business together selling flooring material and other supplies for home customization. Li Kui and Yan Rong were from villages in Jiaxiang county, Su Jinghe and Zhu Jianke from other counties in Jining. None of them were college educated, though Su Jinghe had been through a vocational program to become a designer.

Over the time that I knew the four of them their work lives changed in an unpredictable fashion, and they drifted in and out of Jiaxiang and Jining in pursuit of various jobs. At the time that I met them, Su Jinghe had already left the group to work elsewhere with a small home design and decoration company in Qufu. By late 2011, a little more than two years later, he decided to strike out on his own and create his own design company. His case was perhaps the most stable of the four.

Zhu Jianke eventually gave up on the business as it was unprofitable, and by late 2010 he was without a job, spending his days at home in Jining while his new wife worked. He had had many ideas for businesses he would like to pursue. When I first met him he was considering switching into selling car accessories. The last time I saw him, he told me he had been thinking to open a fast food franchise, such as a Dico's (a domestic Chinese chain, comparable to McDonald's), but it would require an investment of two million yuan up front, and he could not get a loan for such an amount. He considered going to Jinan to work, where he had some friends, but he was reluctant to do so since his wife was pregnant and the baby would be coming soon. The other option he was considering was returning to his home in Sishui county and opening a Nike or Adidas clothing shop, though this too had the same difficulty of raising enough capital.
Li Kui and Yan Rong followed a somewhat different and more erratic path, though they mostly stuck together. By the end of 2009 they were both working at a coal plant on the far east side of Jiaxiang xiancheng. Later, they both went to Suzhou to work at a Nike factory, but Li Kui stayed only a few weeks before returning to Jiaxiang, finding the work not to his taste. Yan Rong stayed longer, but returned within a year. They involved themselves in odd work here and there for a while, until finally by the fall of 2011 Yan Rong went to work in the coal mines in Zoucheng on the far side of Jining. Li Kui did not go with him, citing the work as too dangerous. He remained in Jiaxiang to restart the business of selling materials for home customization, this time on his own. He attributed Yan Rong's choice to work in the coal mines to the fact that he was already married and had a young son; in other words, his decision to take up such dangerous and otherwise unpleasant work was swayed by the need to provide for his family.

For some, and from a certain point of view, job insecurity may not be insecurity at all, but is rather interpreted as an opportunity to exercise control over one's own fate (Zhang 2000; see also Chet 2004). Building on the work of Nikolas Rose, Amy Hanser has interpreted the greater tumult and churn in employment as giving rise to a Chinese version of the “enterprising self,” in which the self becomes a project for continuous development, planning, and enhancement (2002). But if this is true for some Chinese youth, it was not really the case among young people from Jiaxiang. More than anything else, their decisions to jump from one job to another were based on apprehensions about the inadequacy of the job they had, not for the purposes of personal growth or gaining experience, but for earning money. Time and again the young men I spoke with came back to this one practical concern.
Getting a job was often spoken of simply as “making money” (zhengqian). Whatever other goals they might have had, whatever other plans for the future, making money was understood as the first, and sometimes even primary, objective. To some extent nearly all their hopes—to get married, buy a house, raise a family, be able to travel, to simply live comfortably—depended upon money, which was often seemingly in short supply.

Official statistics for the county of Jiaxiang in 2009 put the “urban” per capita disposable income at 12,100 yuan (JNSTJJ 2010:578). This figure is only informative, however, if we first take into account several qualifications. Firstly, the average income is of course likely to be higher than the median; none of the data provided speaks to the distribution of income, or how even or uneven it may be, but we can reasonably expect that a majority of residents actually make less than this stated figure. Secondly, without an explanation as to how this data was gathered and calculated, it is difficult to assess its accuracy, especially as some research has suggested that substantial portions of income in China may go unreported (Wang and Woo 2010). This is a plausible, if unverifiable, factor in Jiaxiang, given that most of the local economy remains cash-based and even large transactions of thousands of yuan may occur informally, leaving them unrecorded or untraceable for tax authorities. For some individuals, their income is augmented by large gifts of money (or in some cases bribes), while others are supplemented by cash from gray or black market sales and services. (One man I knew who ran a small copyshop made much of his income through forging official IDs and other documents—ironically, sometimes for officials themselves). Anecdotal evidence, however, suggests that even though the official figure must be taken with some skepticism, it may not be too far off. Gao Li, for instance, a young woman from a solidly
middle class family that ran several small businesses in the town, estimated that 1,000 yuan per month was about average, with 1,500-2,000 being a “very good” income. For comparison, Liu Xiao, who lived in Jining, said that there an income of at least 2,000 was needed to be comfortable, while at 1,000 “you would only just be able to keep your stomach full.” If these were true averages, however, then many of my own informants fell below the line. One young man in Jiaxiang with a technical school education and already married ran a netbar with his cousin, from which he had a net income of only about 600 yuan per month. Xin Gongzhen, when he first worked in Jining, made 600 at an internship and then only 500 at his first real job. Some others did better, with incomes closer to the purported average, and there were a few who did surprisingly well. Han Jia, for instance, said that a hairstylist in the town could make as much as 3,000 a month, provided he had high-paying costumers (they worked by commission).

Fig. 3 Jining Urban Household Average Annual Consumer Expenditures, 2009 (in RMB)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Categories</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Share of total disposable income</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>4161</td>
<td>34%</td>
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<td>Clothing</td>
<td>1367</td>
<td>11%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Household goods, services</td>
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<td>8%</td>
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<td>Medicine and Health</td>
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<td>Transportation and Communications</td>
<td>1355</td>
<td>11%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Entertainment, Education, and Cultural Services</td>
<td>1299</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residence</td>
<td>1132</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous Commercial Goods and Services</td>
<td>312</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

JNSTJJ 2010:564

Note that this data is for urban households in Jining prefecture as a whole, and not for Jiaxiang county alone, since county specific data was unavailable.

Based on help wanted ads, a restaurant server in Jining city in 2011 would have been able to expect base pay of as much as 1,200, while one of the most expensive and upscale restaurants in Jiaxiang offered comparable pay, not including minor benefits and bonuses. Given this, it is easy to understand Bai Yong's discontent with his job noted above. At his hospital, Bai Yong's own salary was only 1,200 per month. That is to say, as a college graduate engaged in professional work, his pay was on the same level as some restaurant workers. At the time he felt that this was enough for himself, but several of his coworkers (whom he joined so as not to strain his relations with them) once sought a pay raise to 1,500 from the hospital administrator. But Bai Yong's case is even more illuminating, because even though he was initially willing to accept his low salary, he eventually had a change of mind.

When Bai Yong had graduated college in 2009, the majority of his classmates, he said, had planned on continuing on to graduate study, in large part because there were few decent jobs available to medical students with only an undergraduate degree. He, however, wasn't interested. Medicine was not even his passion, and had not been his first choice on the gaokao selection form, but it was what he had been stuck with. He wanted to “make money” and settle down, not put himself through years more of arduous study without an income,
and so he took the job he was offered by a hospital in Henan. But after having worked at his hospital for less than a year, he found himself growing dissatisfied. The salary he received, he knew, would not be enough to make a respectable living on, at least not over the long term. He would not be able to afford a house, or a car, and that in turn, he said, compromised his chances of finding a wife. And so he did what just half a year earlier he had been sure he did not want, and sat for the exam for graduate medical study.

During that time, in the spring of 2010, he returned to Jining, and I went to visit him for a day in the city. We had lunch and whiled away a few hours talking about his plans. He said that he was intending to apply for a neurosurgery program. Why neurosurgery? Because he judged that that was the specialty that made the most money. But far from being excited by the prospect of reentering school and extending his education, he said that he was “depressed.” “It's so boring. There's nothing I want to do, nothing that's interesting. I don't want to work, and I don't want to study.” Those were words he was to repeat several times that afternoon almost verbatim.

After a battery of tests and interviews, Bai Yong did eventually get a spot in a graduate program at a university in Ningbo and began what would be a three year course of study, all in the hope that once he came out of it he would have improved his earning potential. But as he had made clear, it wasn't what he really wanted—or at least, it was not his ideal. But he had to be pragmatic. The vagaries of his earlier schooling, his mixed successes and failures on key exams, and even the overall state of the youth labor market had all brought him to this point. He had multiple options open to him, but none of them were very desirable, and all
with their own risks and costs. And thus he found himself going back on prior major deci-
sions, leaving school to work and then returning again, all within about a year.

Concluding remarks

Individualization has made inroads into education and employment, forcing young people in
Jiaxiang, as in other parts of China and indeed most of the industrialized world, to plan, to
strategize, and to improvise their careers. What in earlier generations would have been a
given, or a matter largely decided for them by others, is now largely in their own hands.

China’s education system and workforce have transformed many times over in the
last century, converging towards (if not quite matching) conditions now common in the
West. The school system, like most modern school systems, individualizes young people
keeps them out of the labor until at least their late teenage years, if not their twenties. The
gaoxiao and testing system as a whole places responsibility for personal advancement onto
the individuals themselves, while the intensified competition of the job market has in turn
led to intensified competition in school, incentivizing individuals to pursue more and longer
education. Where assigned, secure, lifelong employment was once the norm, youth from Ji-
axiang now leap from one job to the next, pulled by hopes of winning better employment
and pay and pushed along by insecurity and instability.

There is something of a paradox in the path that young people must take to becom-
ing working adults in that over the last twenty to thirty years that path has seemingly grown
both wider and narrower. Wider in the sense that the number of options available to young people has exploded, with more numerous and more varied career possibilities, and greater social and physical mobility permitted to them. And yet it is also narrower in the sense that all youth are now compelled to pass through a highly structured, universally encompassing education system that delimits each individual's opportunities for employment. The contradiction is not hard to understand, however, because to say that a wider expanse of options now exists is not to say that they are all within easy reach. Beginning from at least the end of middle school, young people move along a repeatedly forking path, and at a series of critical junctures they must survey the possibilities ahead and make choices to pursue one set of options while forgoing others. They step out of the education system at different ages and different levels, whether voluntarily or because they cannot pass the hurdles to further advancement, with some of them to later return to school to further their career prospects.

But regardless of their education level, they all longed to obtain the best job or career that they could: something stable, secure, and well-paying at the very least. And yet that was precisely what their work lives were not. At all levels, from those like Han Jia with less than the legally mandated nine years of education, to those like Bai Yong who went on to gain graduate degrees, their work lives were in a state of normalized chaos.
Late one summer afternoon I happened to be sitting in a hotel room with Xu Zhen in Taian, the city north of Jining, watching a TV show called *Fei Cheng Wu Rao* (officially titled in English *If You are the One*, although this is not a literal translation of the Chinese). The program was set up as a kind game show. Bachelors would walk out on stage where more than a dozen young, single women stood behind podiums—their mothers at their sides—who would grill the man on his qualifications. The rather explicit objective in all of this was marriage: the men and women were not simply looking for a date, and the questions and answers were geared towards the expectation, or aspiration, of determining whether or not the man
was “marriage material.” The questions were therefore exceedingly forthright, concerning the man's job, income, family background, and whether or not he owned property. The women would vote up or down, sometimes in several rounds, until either the man was eliminated or it came time for him to choose among those women who were willing go out with him (interestingly, the women's mothers had to be in agreement in order for them to be able to go with the man, effectively giving them veto power).

There were several hosts who provided commentary, trying to soften and smooth the exchange between the women and the individual man. One of the commentators, sitting off to the side, was a woman by the name of Ma Nuo, a former contestant who, Xu Zhen explained to me, had declared that she would rather sit crying in a BMW than be laughing riding on the back of bike—meaning that, if faced with the choice, she would take a man with money who did not treat her kindly over a poor one who did. Or to put it more simply still, she preferred money over character in a relationship. At least, such was the common interpretation of her statement. Xu Zhen's opinion of her was succinct: “She's a prostitute.”

I would later see a spate of news stories about the TV show in the English press, where it was used as material for stories on current social trends in marriage in China. Needless to say, most men do not meet their partners through a televised group interview, and Fei Cheng Wu Rao is, if anything, a caricature of the processes by which young men find their partners. And yet, the mild controversy the show and its contestants provoked does reflect something a popular moral anxiety surrounding marriage and young men and women's attitudes towards it. Much has changed in the realm of romantic and marital relationships over the last half century in China, not least the fact that genuinely romantic relationships
are now seen as a prerogative even by rural youth. Arranged, pragmatic marriages have given way to individual choice and the valuation of emotional bonds. And yet it cannot be said that everything about love, sex, and marriage has changed, nor does it mean that individual choice is unlimited.

This is a topic which has already been studied to a certain extent by anthropologists and sociologists specializing in China, but this chapter is neither intended to summarize that past research nor to give a complete account of marriage, mate selection, wedding rituals and the like among current Chinese youth. The scope here is limited to a very particular problem, one that is seemingly unique to the current youth generation, and that is the question of marriage as an option. Despite the endlessly nuanced variations in local nuptial customs and the fluctuations in marriage patterns and demographics across generations, the fact of marriage itself has long been a constant in Chinese social life. It has been almost compulsory, even literally so in the case of arranged marriages that were the norm as recently as the 1940s. In the eyes of both social researchers and most Chinese themselves marriage is one of the key events in an individual's biography, counted alongside birth and death in importance, and it is one of the milestones in the passage into adulthood (Baker 1979). But the very premise of the individualized biography is that what was once obligatory becomes voluntary, and marriage is no exception. If the lives of young men in rural China truly have become more individualized, then marriage is one of the points in which individual choice may be most sought after, and, paradoxically, also the most difficult. The subject of marriage therefore serves as a kind of special test for understanding the extent of individualization in Jiaxiang.
Examining marriage in terms of the individualization thesis serves two purposes. First, scholars have previously noticed and described a shift towards greater individual freedom and choice in marriage in China, and an awareness of individualization helps us to understand this shift is neither random nor incidental. Looking at the subject of marriage through the lens of the individualization thesis allows us to better theorize the freedom of choice and its implications. Second, if we see marriage itself as having been individualized, then it becomes one more example among many of social institutions that have been “loosened” and opened up, offering us an essential case with which to study individualization itself as a process. In short, individualization allows us to better understand the transformations in marriage patterns, while the changes in marriage allow us to better understand individualization.

The notion of the individualized biography is most easily summarized as a life in which each individual has the power to choose how he or she lives. Who they are, their lifestyle, what community (if any) they identify with and participate in—such things become matters of choice. By contrast the “traditional” biography is one in which the course and events of an individual's life are predetermined (as much as that is possible) by fixed factors ranging from family background and social class to the far more subtle and abstract dictates of community and moral norms. But this summary of the distinction between the individualized and traditional biographies does neither side justice, and does not adequately convey the arguments that have been put forward by Beck and other theorists. On the level of practice, the distinction between choice and obligation is not so absolute, but is sometimes more a matter of degree. Meanwhile, what is optional and what is compulsory hinges upon sub-
jects' ideologies; there have been and still are disputes—in the state, in intellectual circles, in the media, and even within individual families—about how, when, and why one should marry and, most radically, if one should marry.

Even in the Qing dynasty when arranged marriage was the convention and imperial law codified individuals' relative social standing, or during the collectivist years in the mid-20th century when the state ruled so powerfully over private life, individual biographies were never all perfectly “identical” in any strict or literal sense. At the same time, an individualized biography does not mean that any and every conceivable possibility is within one's reach, or that all choices can be made without costs and consequences. It is in this regard that the subject of marriage in rural China proves most instructive. Marriage is a major event in the life course, common at all social levels, weighted with tremendous social importance, and most of all, an unequivocal obligation. This makes it the ideal choice for trying to understand what in the most concrete terms the “individualized biography” truly means, and just how far the individual's freedom of choice can go against the constraints of traditional ideology and social acceptance.

The remainder of this chapter addresses four points: first, the serial changes in sexual culture and marriage ideology, and how these are to be interpreted within the framework of individualization; second, the state of the marriage market in Jiaxiang and the other forces that shape men's marriage choices; third, ethnographic examples of men's goals and hopes with regards to marriage; and lastly, the case of several gay men who have opted out of marriage entirely. This chapter touches upon many facets of an intricately complex subject: the history of marriage practices in China, the contrast with the present, changing demograph-
ics, the exceptional experience of men who live outside the normative boundaries, and so forth. But in weaving a thread through this vast territory, there is a single aim: to explicate how and to what extent marriage exists as an option under individual discretion.

*The balance of tradition and modernity*

When China in the early 21st century is juxtaposed with the early 20th century, then marriage, love, and sexual culture all appear to have undergone tremendous change. Historically, marriage in China was highly “functional,” in the sense that it had definite and practical consequences for social relations, household production, property division and, perhaps, for social reproduction as a whole. Marriage was understood by Chinese themselves as a necessity for adults, and anthropologists later expounded on the fact, observing the roles that marriage played in the transfer of wealth and the provision of labor, especially for rural families (Cohen 1976, 1992; Parish & Whyte 1978:156). To some extent this is still true, but how it is true has changed, and more than once. The history of marriage in China over the last hundred years is more than a simple, linear change from “tradition” to “modernity.” Changes have come both suddenly and slowly, at the order of the state and through unanticipated social evolutions (Diamant 2000; Friedman 2005). Various aspects, such as the average age at marriage, or the level of permissiveness towards premarital sex, or the degree and kind of parental involvement in the selection of a partner, have all developed on their own time scales. Thus the current conditions under which young men from the countryside go about
finding spouses (or not) cannot be easily summed up as the culmination of a single historical trend. Instead, we must look at how several distinct factors have converged in the present.

The party state first promulgated marriage laws with the intention of first moving Chinese society away from an old order of “feudal” customs, and then later with the added intention of regulating fertility levels (Tien 1983:92). The legal marriage ages for men and women (with the former consistently being set a few years later than for the latter), were adjusted several times after 1950, when the first Marriage Law of the PRC was enacted, the last time in 1980, and now stand at 22 for men and 20 for women. How well these limits are actually observed in practice is a separate question, however. In at least one wedding I attended, the groom was under the legal age. Those I attended the wedding with assumed that this was only possible because the groom's father was a wealthy local businessman, and that some under-the-table agreement or bribe had been made to secure the marriage license. But although most men wait until they are of legal age to marry, they do not necessarily wait long, as there are multiple incentives for men to marry sooner rather than later. Incidentally, of all the weddings that I attended, in no case was the groom ever older than 26. Nevertheless, it would be impossible to give an average age of marriage among those I knew, simply because even by the end of my fieldwork not all of my informants had married. Some were of course still relatively young and could not be expected to have married quite so soon, but others were approaching thirty and still unmarried.

The system of extended education that is now common, as mentioned in the last chapter, also tends to delay marriage, just as it has elsewhere in the world (Fussell 2002). Many men who were single while in school would say that a relationship would only distract
them from pouring their energies into their studies (though that somehow didn't seem to stop any of them from pursuing relationships when the opportunity actually arose). It was also reported to me that some men, when they went through interviews to enter graduate school, faced questions about whether or not they had girlfriends. If they did, they might lie and tell the interviewers that they were not in a relationship, since the concern was that students in relationships might be somehow unable to fully commit to school. More importantly, however, young men were not inclined to marry before they had established themselves financially with steady employment, which in practice of course meant waiting until they left school. As such, those with college educations were likely to marry slightly later than men with less education, although not necessarily by much.

But as the average age at marriage has risen slowly and sporadically over decades, other changes have been sharper and more abrupt, coming only within the Reform Era. Attitudes towards sex, and sexuality in general, have been liberalized as the state has become less involved in intimate life. Loosening of the tight supervision over personal conduct that once existed in collectives and state-owned enterprises, a growing public sphere, and the reemergence of a pop culture that gratifies individualism and personal desire have all apparently contributed to a greater permissiveness in sex, romance, and personal relationships. There has evidently been an increase in sex prior to marriage, though not necessarily by as much as one might imagine, and with considerable individual variation (Liu et al 1998; Farrer 2002; Yan 2002). Among my informants, the majority had had sexual experience prior to marriage and had had multiple sexual partners. A few of those still single told me of how they sought
out women online for casual hook-ups. Most, however, pursued monogamy or at least a kind of serial monogamy with longterm girlfriends.

There have been many other substantial changes in marriage patterns, ideals, and expectations since the start of the Reform Era. For instance, young people's preferences for their romantic or marriage partners have shifted over the last several decades, with seemingly less emphasis on virginity and a greater emphasis on the personality of one's partner (Chang et al. 2010). Divorce has become more common, though it is still relatively infrequent and holds some lingering stigma (Zhang 1989; Zeng & Wu 2000). But perhaps the most important change to have occurred with regards to marriage is the rise of “free love” (Hansen & Pang 2010). Unrelated to the similarly named concept in the West pertaining to sexual liberation, the idea of free love in China rather simply meant that individuals were permitted to choose their own romantic or marriage partners. The concept therefore accords with, rather than challenges, marriage as a normal institution, but in the early 20th century it nonetheless represented a quite radical break with tradition. Free love meant the rejection of arranged marriage, and therefore parental control of marriage partners, and in its place elevating an ideal of individual choice, individual freedom, and individual desire. The result is that over roughly the last half century, even as the statistics of average marriage age and rates have

9 The converse of free choice in marriage is of course free choice in divorce; or rather, the logic that one marries for love implies that if love goes out of the relationship then the relationship can, or even should, end. Previously, divorce was exceedingly rare and highly stigmatized, and traditional living circumstances usually made divorce unrealistic for women, as they would quite literally have nowhere to turn once they left the marriage since most property unequivocally belonged to their husbands. During the Maoist years divorce was further limited by procedural hurdles and high thresholds for what counted as acceptable grounds for dissolving the marriage. But in the Reform Era that has changed, according to both evidence and conventional wisdom (Zhang 1989; Diamant 2000). Yet if divorce is more frequent than it used to be, it is still not common, at least in rural places like Jiaxiang, and, in any case, it is not to be expected among those who are still recently married like most of my informants.
fluctuated, a more complex change in the actual nature of marriage has slowly unfolded. Companionate marriage has now become a valid and even preferred model, in contrast to “functional marriage.” Under a naïve and somewhat simplified view, free love or companionate marriage is decided purely by the feelings shared by the individuals in question. That is, two individuals will marry if and only if they desire to, without reference to the feelings of third parties or to any pragmatic advantages and disadvantages that being married might yield. Companionate marriage implies the importance of individual choice, as it is ultimately decided and legitimized by individual affect, and therefore demonstrates a particular manifestation of individualization.

That at least is the principle and the ideal. In practice other factors can and do come into play, and there are many varieties and degrees between the idealized types of an arranged marriage and companionate marriage. The history of this shift from socially and economically “functional” marriage to companionate marriage is more complicated than it seems. It was axiomatic under Confucian ethics that the father-son relationship took precedence over any other in the family, including the husband-wife relationship. And with most marriages being arranged by parents, often without any input on the part of the couple, emotional investment was not even expected (Yan 2003; Hansen & Pang 2010). Still, traditional marriage was not always purely instrumental in nature, or at least, there were evidently desires on the part of many young people for love and passion. *Six Chapters of a Floating Life*, a Qing dynasty autobiographical account by a man named Shen Fu, details the author's love for his wife and their life together. In fact he gives far more attention to his relationship with his wife, and to her eventual death, than he does to his relationship with his father or to his
father's death, while the death of his only son is covered in a single paragraph. This lavish attention Shen Fu paid to his wife was noted by the famed translator and essayist Lin Yutang, who declared her “one of the loveliest women in Chinese literature” (Lin 1942:964). Meanwhile, works of fiction such as peasant operas often valorized romantic love and contested standard Confucian values, showing young protagonists rebelling against parental will to pursue their own desires (Arkush 1989). Meanwhile, the notion of companionate and romantic marriage seemed to make some headway among reformers and intellectuals in the Republican period, such that by the 1940s there were at least some urban youth who were aspiring to individual freedom in partner choice (Chin 1948). Yet none of this is to say that the common understanding of marital relationships in traditional China is incorrect. Shen Fu's relationship with his wife, for instance, was undoubtedly unusual, and the dramatized romantic plots of literature and opera are only that—works of fiction, not rigorously realistic portrayals of ordinary life, while the views of urbane Republican era intellectuals of course were by no means representative of the whole of society, and certainly not most of rural society. What these fictional and non-fictional works do tell us is that romantic, emotionally invested marriage, even if rare among earlier generations, was not an entirely unknown or outlandish concept. But for that matter, marriage in the present is not always exclusively affective, either, as many young men in Jiaxiang could attest.

All these various and equivocal changes in marriage patterns lead us back to a set of very old debates, as transformations in family organization have been a central theme of social theory for well over a century. William Goode (1963) and others put forward various arguments to the effect that marriage and family patterns in societies around the world would
eventually converge upon a single “modern” model of family structure. In this proposed model, which had seemingly already been achieved in Western societies at the time, extended family would diminish in importance, with social functions that had once been the responsibility of the kin group increasingly ceded to various other institutions, most notably the state. As a result, the nuclear family became tightly contained and well-defined against an outside public sphere, serving as a refuge for private and emotional life. Subsequent research would soon take issue with these claims, first on the grounds that they did not necessarily describe non-Western societies even after they had undergone supposed modernization, and second that they did not even fully describe the Western societies where they had been initially observed (Smelser & Halpern 1978). Extended kinship, for example, has continued to be of both instrumental and emotional importance for many in the West, especially in the working class (e.g. Young & Willmott 1957; Stack 1974; Walker 1995).

But again, not everything is so simple, and the changes in marriage norms have not progressed in lockstep or in a neatly linear fashion. Xu Xiaohe and Martin Whyte found that arranged marriages had virtually disappeared by the 1960s, and that already by that time individuals were chiefly—but not totally—responsible for their own choice of marriage partner (1990:715). Yet this would also mean that, contrary to what one might expect, individual choice of marriage partners had begun to prevail years before the Reform Era even began, and before the supposed liberalization of attitudes towards romance, love, and sex. Then again, Whyte describes this as a “stalled revolution,” as if marriage patterns in China were stuck in an intermediate stage between the “traditional” norm of arranged marriage and the “modern” norm such as was described by Goode and Parsons, a characterization that has al-
ready been critiqued elsewhere (Huang 2011). But much of the discourse and research on “liberalization” in Chinese attitudes towards love, sex, and marriage do seem to imply a movement towards or convergence with the attitudes found in Western countries, and broadly speaking China's sexual culture and marriage practices do now more resemble those in the West than they once did. It is conceivable that in the future this differential will narrow still further, but it is not a foregone conclusion.

This is not a trivial point. If we believed that Goode and Parsons were basically correct in their argument that there is such a thing as a modern model of companionate marriage, centered upon a relatively egalitarian, affectively bound couple in a nuclear family, then we might interpret the changes detailed above as having a definite and clear significance. Everything from the increasing average age at marriage to the rise in divorce could be read as signs of progress on the path towards a known endpoint, and we might then conclude that marriage in China will increasingly resemble that as practiced in Europe and North America, where the supposed modern model already dominates.

Beck makes an eloquent argument on this point in a discussion over what constitutes the “normal family.” In response to a claim by another scholar that most people (this being in Germany) still desire and aim for the prototypical nuclear family (with marriage and children), he points out that this insistence that the “normal family” is still normal only works by erasing distinctions. Changes in preferences, in how and when people marry and for how long, when they have children, how they view their obligations or responsibilities towards their partners, whether they establish a single family or divorce and form another—these and other questions are all left by the wayside. “If such questions are not asked, if instead all
forms of private life ... are bunched together under the heading of the 'normal family', then all contours go by the board. Change? The perspective does not allow for it. And so it nowhere comes into view” (2001:88). Once more we are confronted with a problem of balancing continuities and changes. Whereas the world of education and work has shown truly radical changes, as shown in the previous chapter, the matters of love, sex, and marriage can sometimes appear to have changed dramatically and, at other times and by other measures, to retain highly traditional forms. Especially in the countryside, many of the changes in the nature of romantic relationships and marriage still show vestiges of older customs and ideology.

What the above summary should show is a measure of ambiguity about precisely where the practices of marriage now stand in China. There has not been a linear and complete evolution from a coherent “traditional” system of pragmatic, arranged marriage to the sort of companionate marriage envisaged by Parsons and Goode. Nor, for that matter, can it be said to have been entirely individualized. The marriage practices that now predominate in rural China occupy a certain range of possibilities, in which “free love” coexists with harder and more pragmatic marriage choices. Depending upon how one marshalled the evidence, a credible argument could be made that by most significant measures marriage has not truly changed all that much in Jiaxiang. Marriage ages have risen, but not enormously. Arranged marriage may be gone, but parents' opinions can still be decisive in the choice of a spouse. And companionate marriage may be an ideal, but it is not, ultimately, the reality and choice for all. But those same changes, if they are less than one might have imagined, and not so extensive or radical as what has been seen in urban centers, are not meaningless. Because if
young men still listen to their parents’ advice on whom to marry, they are nonetheless now the ones responsible for their own choice of partner. And if they still take utilitarian concerns into account in marriage decisions, they may struggle and hesitate over marrying someone they do not love. If marriage in Jiaxiang is to be understood, it should not be mistaken as either wholly liberalized or steadfastly traditional.

*Structural pressures, incentives, and the marriage market*

Any discussion of choice must address the constraints on individual agency, and a discussion on the ability of young men in rural China to choose whether or not to marry must address the crucial fact that it is a choice not many will accept. Being unmarried has long been stigmatized, especially for men, and pressures and disincentives abound to push men towards marriage. Therefore, in the past (and even in the present) if a man did not marry, it was usually not a choice at all, but something he was relegated to by matters outside his control.

In contrast to Western Europe and North America, which for several hundred years displayed the pattern famously described by John Hajnal (1953) of generally late marriage with a sizable portion of both the male and female populations never marrying, marriage in China has historically been early and all but universal—or at least, that has been the ideal. As already noted, from the early 20th century up to the present, the average age at first marriage has risen, but only slowly. Previously, the majority of rural men and women were married before the age of twenty, even allowing for the fact that men's age of first marriage is usually
about two years later than women's (Barclay et al. 1976; Tien 1983). And at least through the last several decades marriage has seemingly been almost universal. As of 2000 a mere 1.3% of women and 1.4% of men aged 30-34 were unmarried, though it should be noted that those who were 30 years old in 2000 would have belonged to a distinctly different generation from those born in the 1980s; nonetheless, marriage rates in China are higher than even in other countries in the region (Zhang & Gu 2007). But the picture is not so simple as these numbers make it seem, and the reality of marriage rates in China, especially when viewed in the longterm, is confused and contradicted by other data.

In discussing marriage rates in China it is impossible to ignore the looming problem of the sex ratio imbalance. In short, from the 1980s on into the present the sex ratio among newborn children has been increasingly skewed towards males, primarily due to sex selective abortion where parents prefer to have a son rather than a daughter. Whereas a natural sex ratio is roughly in the range of 103-106 males for every 100 females born (the ratio tends to equalize by adulthood due to higher male mortality), China's sex ratio at birth (SRB) over much of the last decade has officially been at or just short of 120 (Nie 2011). There is reason for skepticism about this number, however, since many families, especially in the countryside, seek to have more children than permitted by the family planning policy, and such “extra” births are often hidden and not counted. Demographic studies have also found that individual cohorts of children, counted between two different population surveys, sometimes showed survival rates over one hundred percent, proving that some children were missed from the first count when they were 0-4 years of age and only showed up in the next count some years later (Zhang & Zhao 2006:298). Indeed, I heard from my informants of several
cases, usually relatives of theirs, of parents who hid births of out-of-quota children. I saw Taishi Jiang's older female cousin, in fact, go into hiding to evade the authorities for several months as she carried her second child. Though there was some apprehension among the family about her and her husband being found—and consternation at the fact that her parents then faced the hostility of the birth planning officials in her stead—once the baby was born everyone seemed to breathe easier. When I asked what would happen in a few years time when the child would have to attend school, I was assured that it wouldn't be much of a problem: a fine (or bribe) would be paid to smooth matters over.

With the political and legal pressures involved, therefore, fertility and SRB statistics must be viewed with some caution, as they may underestimate the true ratio. Even so, in the case of Jiaxiang the total SRB of all recorded births from 2007 to 2010 was 144, one of the higher SRBs in Jining prefecture over this time and much higher than the reported national average (JNSTJJ 2008:27; 2009:27; 2010:33; 2011:35). A look at the school enrollment data, which includes numbers for enrollment of female students, also shows sex imbalances in cohorts that had been born some years earlier. The sex ratio among high school students throughout Jining in 2009 (who would have been born in the early to mid nineties, within five to ten years of most of my informants) was 117, still extraordinarily high, if not so extreme as in the most recent birth cohort (JNSTJJ 2010:502). There is no direct or fine-grained data on the sex ratio in the 1980s cohort of Jiaxiang available, but every indication is that it is higher than the natural rate. Even as of 1986, Shandong province as a whole already had an SRB of nearly 113 (Hull 1990:65), and southern Shandong in particular, where Jining is located, seems to have had a higher sex ratio imbalance than the rest of the province (Cai
& Lavely 2003). With the other evidence available, it is not too much to assume that the sex ratio among the 80’s and early 90’s generation in Jiaxiang is elevated.

All of this gives cause for concern to policymakers and scholars, who worry about the future implications of this imbalance for the marriage market and social stability. Estimates are that by 2020 there will be an additional one million men per year who are unable to marry, eventually leading to anywhere from 23 million to 40 million men who will be unable to marry, depending on the estimate (Poston & Glover 2005; Nie 2011). Regardless of whatever changes in the birth rates and ratios that might follow, this trend has already produced a major demographic wave that will carry forward for decades (Attané 2006).

Failure to marry for any reason, even if beyond an individual’s control, has customarily consigned a man to an unhappy and marginal position. The common term for a bachelor is guanggun, or “bare branch/stick,” an expression that evokes the image of fruitlessness—i.e. being without children. But tellingly it also has another, more negative meaning of “ruffian.” A large survey study undertaken in 2009, with more than 7000 respondents, found that 79% of people assumed an unmarried man was likely to be poor; 76% felt that he should be pitied; 62% believed that he was likely to be unhappy; and 31% thought that he would be unaccepted by those around them. As the study concludes: “the lot of guanggun is regarded as very grim” (Zhou et al 2011:5). I asked several different young men what they thought would happen to someone who remained a bachelor, and all agreed that there would be undesirable consequences. The difficulty was that no one could actually say what those consequences would be. There is something of a cause and effect paradox here as to whether fail-
ure to marry results in lowered status or if low status is what keeps a man from marrying; probably the two factors could be said to be mutually reinforcing.

However, the historical evidence demonstrates that China has long had to deal with such imbalances and the consequences they have for marriage. Even in the early 20th century birth cohorts showed unusually high sex ratios, with a sex ratio of 117 for those born in the years 1936 to 1940 (Coale & Banister 1994; see also Lee & Campbell 1994). Municipal censuses in Chongqing during the Sino-Japanese War also showed heightened sex ratios in the adult population, sometimes extreme (McIsaac 2000). It was in fact only between the 1940s and 1980s that the sex ratio of birth cohorts declined to more natural and equal levels (Coale & Banister 1994). Even older evidence collected from genealogies from the 16th and 17th centuries in Anhui directly suggests that approximately a fifth of men in that area may have never married (Telford 1992). All of this evidence is admittedly partial, but coming from different sources, through different measures and in different periods, it collectively points to a longstanding problem in China of there sometimes being more men than women in the youth population, with the result that some portion of men are never able to marry. The extent of this sex ratio imbalance has varied across different eras and generations, but has been surprisingly enduring. Therefore, even though the possibility does remain that the current trend could eventually prove to be especially severe, the sex ratio imbalance itself is not unprecedented.

10 It must be acknowledged that there is contrary data. A major social survey undertaken in China from 1929-1931 found that only about “one in a thousand women and three in a thousand men never married” (Barclay et al. 1976:610). This is hard to reconcile with the other sources, however, and there are questions of uncertain biases in the sampling that may have led to underrepresentation of unmarried men in the survey.
This is an important point to note, since it again raises the question of continuity. If the sex imbalance is really just a reiteration of an old pattern (albeit driven by somewhat different means), then might its effects be the same as in the past? Historically it seems that a marriage market, in the almost literal sense of the term, did operate in China. Marriage pairings were decided at least in part on the finances of the two families, and as the payment of bridewealth could be considerable, the poorest men were perhaps the ones most likely to be placed out of the marriage market and “left over” (see, e.g., Telford 1992; Jiang & Sánchez-Barricarte 2011). This linking of poverty and bachelorhood may have compounded the stigmatization or marginalization that guanggun suffered.

In spite of all of this, the sex imbalance has not yet yielded any directly perceptible or identifiable effects on the marriage market in Jiaxiang in the present. The sex ratio in my informants' generation is probably at least slightly elevated, but it will be some years before the demographic wave hits in full force, as the men who will most be affected are now only children in elementary school or middle school. Some of those I spoke to shrugged off the problem, arguing that women often choose to marry slightly older men, implying that even if their own cohort has a sex imbalance they will just deflect the problem to the generation below them by marrying younger women.

But more precisely, the facts seen in the aggregate statistics simply do not always translate well to the level of the individual. Although it stands to reason that the sex ratio imbalance may prevent some of the young men in Jiaxiang from finding marriage partners, it is hard, if not impossible, to attribute any particular instance of a man being single to the sex ratio imbalance. Shengnan and shengnü are the common colloquial expressions, literally
meaning “leftover men” and “leftover women,” respectively. *Shengnan* are the more common phenomenon, however, by simple fact of the numbers. Yet determining who counts as “leftover” is not so easy. What should we make of a man in his late twenties who is still unmarried? By the local standards in Jiaxiang he would be a little late to marriage, but one could not rule out the possibility that he would still marry eventually. After all, there is no exact deadline, no age beyond which a man cannot marry. His chances may steadily dwindle with age, but the status of “shengnan” is never truly definitive, and those men who were already 27 or 28 years old and “still” unmarried did not generally accept the appellation of *shengnan* for themselves. And certainly, none of my informants who were single at the time attributed their lack of a partner to the fact that the population numbers did not work to their advantage, although they were at least aware of the issue, having heard of it before in the media. If they were single, then it was simply because compatible partners were hard to find, regardless of the numbers involved. But even so, the numbers dictate that some sizable number of men will not be able to marry or, at the very least, will face difficulty and delay in finding a partner. The demographics in this instance create a brutally simple constraint to which young men, women, and their families must respond and adapt, and men in particular feel the need to compete and attain certain standards if they are to have any hope of someday entering marriage. A popular phrase summarizing the virtues of the most marriageable bachelors was *gaoshuaifu* (高帅富)—literally “tall, handsome, rich.” Men who did not meet those ideals were disparagingly called (or self-deprecatingly called themselves) *diaosi* (屌丝).
The value of height and good looks may be debatable, but the trend towards companionate marriage notwithstanding, personal finances do seem to still play a quite serious part in partnership choices, as alluded to at the beginning of this chapter in the case of the game show *Fei Cheng Wu Rao*. And as Xu Zhen's sharp rebuke of the contestant Ma Nuo indicates, there is some dissatisfaction with this state of affairs on the part of young men. China's patriarchal tradition in which women were formally transferred into their husband's household upon marriage, and the house was the husband's property, has ironically created a liability for young men and their families in this regard. It is now typically seen as the man's responsibility to provide the married couple's home—not the joint responsibility of the couple. This places intense pressure on men to be able to purchase a house before they can marry. One married man, when I asked him about the costs involved in his wedding, actually counted the cost of having his and his wife's newly purchased apartment outfitted and decorated as among the wedding expenses. It is not necessarily women themselves who judge a potential husband by his finances, however. Oftentimes it seems that it is a woman's parents who make that judgement, and who will then try to influence their daughter's choice. Yan Zhen, as I learned from one of his friends, had had a girlfriend before I met him, but they broke up at the insistence of her father when he learned that Yan Zhen did not have a house and could not afford one, which he deemed inadequate. Bai Yong faced a similar problem with one short-lived relationship in which his then girlfriend's parents objected to him over reasons having to do with his expected earning potential, which eventually caused the relationship to end.
Men, women, and their respective parents all have preferences and expectations for their potential marriage partners, but the dynamics of the marriage market are much more complex than simply a sum of what each side hopes for. And, though it may be all but invisible on the level of everyday life, the marriage market is quite real. Uneven numbers between the sexes mean that, inevitably, not every man will be able to marry, and within another decade, but the imbalance is likely already having some effect, even if most people are not fully aware of it. Among my own informants, some may never be able to marry, though only time will tell for certain. But the choice to not marry, if it is ever considered, is unavoidably colored by the fact that bachelorhood is a stigmatized and lesser status, one that most men strive to avoid; under the combination of unfavorable demographics and calculations of potential spouses' finances, the shengnan and guanggun are customarily seen by others not as individuals living as they please, but as the unfortunates who lost out.

Refusal, acceptance, and choice

Over the course of my fieldwork I attended sixteen wedding ceremonies—enough that they almost began to blur together even as I became more conscious of the specific variations in the ritual and organizational details. Usually I was a guest on the groom's side, though in half of the cases I did not actually know the groom himself, but was either accompanying one of my informants or standing in for one of them who could not attend. The banquets were var-
iously held in the groom's family's village or at one of several large restaurants and banquet halls in towns around Jiaxiang.

Wedding ceremonies of course have many conservative features and ritual touches. Firecrackers were set off as the bride arrived at the groom's home or banquet hall. In weddings where the groom's family lived in a pingfang—meaning, for the most part, those in the villages rather than the towns—there was usually incense and small offerings placed on a pedestal in the courtyard. Members of the grooms' party would wear little lengths of red yarn or ribbon “for auspiciousness.” But the significance of many of these traditions is debatable. Informants could explain some of them, but others were just-so habits. Leeks would often be tied to bricks wrapped in red paper and propped up beside the doorway of the groom's home, but no one could say why. Brides' parties sometimes brought a menlian, or a rod with a beaded curtain hanging from it that could ostensibly be hung in a doorway, but one already married man wasn't even sure of the name of it when I asked him. There were also more novel features, though. Every wedding necessarily entailed a motorcade of rented cars, however modest, in which the groom's party would arrive to receive the bride from her family and take her to the groom's home or banquet, something that has only become common in recent years. A handful of weddings also included banlang, or best men, which I was told by older people was not a preexisting custom in the area.

While these ritual features are curious, they are not theoretically significant. At best they might serve as crude indicators of the level of local conservatism, but even in that they are not very reliable. And they do little to illuminate what goes before and what comes after the ceremony itself. How did the groom and bride meet, and why did they choose to marry?
What are their expectations of one another, and of marriage itself? In some ways the ritual features of the marriages are the least important, and as rituals they are as likely to be done merely reflexively and without much intentional significance. But the most interesting point to observe about all of these weddings is not anything about their ritual form or how they were conducted, it is the simple fact that they happened at all.

It may seem obvious that young men in their mid-twenties such as my informants would be marrying at a fast rate. After all, this is only “normal.” The average age at marriage might be a little higher than it was in the past, but the fact that marriages occur with high frequency in the early to mid twenties is so ordinary that it seemingly does not even deserve comment. And yet it really cannot be taken for granted. The notion that getting married by a certain age is a given or needs no explanation is precisely what is called into question by the individualized biography. If so many young men in Jiaxiang were marrying at this point in their lives, there are two questions that must be asked: why, precisely, were they marrying and at this time, and secondly, who was not then getting married, and for what reasons? In the first chapter we observed a problem in that Beck describes how the individualized biography, despite being built upon individual choice, does not necessarily mean radical diversity in how people live. It may, instead, mean conformity, given that so many elect to follow what they view as a traditional path. In such cases the individualized life itself becomes difficult to detect, as it may present no discernible difference with a life narrowly controlled by stringent norms. In other words, individualization is not about the biography per se, but how the biography is crafted—whether it is formed by default, or must be actively generated by the conscious effort and choices of the individual.
The landscape of options is not the same as it was in previous generations, so if getting married in Jiaxiang may in many respects look much like it did in the past—if it is still common, still virtually universal and a key point in young adults' lives—then the fundamental reasons for getting married must be reconsidered. Young men are no longer strictly compelled to marry, in that their marriages are not arranged for them, but for many marriage is still simply something that has to be done.

In the fall of 2008, Liang Kan got engaged to a young woman he had met via a matchmaker. Later, I asked him how he felt to be engaged. “I don't feel anything,” he said, adding that because he and his fiancee had met by way of a matchmaker that “there's no love … maybe it's a relatively traditional marriage.” He said this, though, without any apparent bitterness or apprehension. Some time later I met him in Jining for lunch, and as we sat in the nearly empty restaurant, I decided to broach the topic again. “Marriage doesn't need love,” he explained. “Sometimes it's just very pingdan (insipid, ordinary). You just need to be able to guo rizi (get along).” He seemed genuinely satisfied with the situation, and I never heard him express any regrets about it.

Liang Kan's attitude towards marriage surprised me, not because it was completely unheard of, but because I had not thought such attitudes would still exist among people of his generation. Much of the writing on sexual liberalization and changing mores among China's youth generation might lead one to think that companionate marriage has completely supplanted the older, more practical variety. Even if marriage were still seen as a necessity and obligation, I had not actually expected to find anyone who would get married
without some minimum of romantic feeling or affection for their partner, but Liang Kan’s case disabused me of that assumption.

Out of college and newly employed, Liang Kan and his parents had felt it was time for him to marry. One of his two younger sisters was already married and had had a child, and the other would be married soon as well, so there was a vague sense of pressure for him. Thus, he had agreed to xiangqin, and met a young woman his age who worked as an accountant in Jining. They had already settled on getting married even before their ostensible engagement—their parents had even bought them an apartment in the city by then.

Xiangqin is, essentially, formal matchmaking, and conceivably can take many forms. Fei Cheng Wu Rao, for instance, was sometimes referred to as a xiangqin, or matchmaking, program. In ordinary circumstances, however, xiangqin is nothing so public or elaborate. Parents are often involved in making the arrangements, though the man and woman must of course consent to go along with the process. Provided that they are willing, they will be introduced to one another, often at one or the other’s home, and given an opportunity to talk. If they then wish to proceed they may meet again periodically to get to know one another a little more and, in time, agree to marry. A number of men I knew had “gone to xiangqin,” as they called it, though in most cases it did not lead to marriage. Superficially, xiangqin is not so different from the process that other men go through in meeting women and establishing relationships. They get to know one another, go out together, perhaps even go on a few dates and, if it all works out, get engaged and then married. Yet the crucial underlying difference is that xiangqin is an inherently pragmatic arrangement, and it is begun with a clear objective of finding a marriage partner. Like Liang Kan, those who go to xiangqin do not expect
an intense emotional connection, at least not at first, and possibly not ever. Other men met their girlfriends, fiancées, or wives when they were classmates in school or through peer introductions, i.e. through their networks of friends, classmates, and coworkers. One man, a police officer, actually met his wife when he pulled her car over. But if yuanfen (or “fate,” as such meetings are characteristically called) should fail, then xiangqin was the fallback plan. What all of this suggests is that, though free love may be the preference and priority for most if not all men, it does not appear to be indispensable. The need or obligation to ultimately marry is strong enough that at least some men in Jiaxiang will still accept marriage without love.

In general, marriage in China has long been both a social and moral obligation, since without marrying a son cannot fully meet his filial duty to his parents and lineage by continuing the male line (Baker 1979). Such is the conventional explanation, at least. But among young men, their peers, parents, and others it is not usually conceived of in such starkly sociological terms. The pressure upon men to marry—which is in some ways different, if not necessarily more intense, than for women—is experienced in personal, immediate, and concrete ways. It is felt in the frequent questions and promptings of others, from parents to barely known acquaintances. Even I was not exempt; among the three most common questions I received from strangers, along with what country I was from and how old I was, was whether or not I was married. I got the question from everyone from taxi drivers to short order cooks to supermarket employees. To be sure, it was mostly curiosity in me as a foreigner that would prompt strangers to ask, but I also heard my informants ask and be asked
this same question in casual conversations with others their age. Being married (or not) can itself be a social indicator for others, even if its significance is inexact.

In all my time spent in Shandong, I only ever met one (heterosexual) man who said he would prefer not to marry. Everyone else fully expected to do so, even if they did not have any great internal desire to become married. Xu Zhen told me once that, if left to his own devices, he might never get married himself. He had had a number of girlfriends, and was always pursuing one casual relationship or another, but at least at the time he seemed rather indifferent to the idea of actually settling down and marrying. He had no objection to the idea (and would later express more of an interest), but neither did he particularly long to get married. Yet he nevertheless expected to do so eventually because that was what his parents expected of him. This itself was another unexpected response. Xu Zhen was as cosmopolitan as any of the men I knew from Jiaxiang, and with extraordinarily liberal views on almost every issue, including sex and marriage. But he was surprisingly blasé about the expectation and pressure to marry when it came to himself. Apparently, even if he lacked any particular desire to get married, satisfying his parents desires for their only son to wed was reason enough for him.

For most, marriage was not a question, but a certainty. Almost no one saw marriage itself as optional. The only doubt was about who they would marry and exactly when. This was subtly demonstrated in the way that young unmarried men talked about their future marriages. One night I went for dinner with one man in Jiaxiang who was a year older than me and, up to that point, was the best educated of all the informants I had met, with a graduate degree in Korean (this extended education meaning it was somewhat understandable that
he still had not married). I asked him when he planned on getting married, an idle question that seemed to often come up in conversation. “Maybe in two years,” he said. “But I have no money, no house. I need to save some first.” His reason for the delay, then, was a financial one. But what he did not mention was that he did not even have a girlfriend at that time; still, that did not lead him to question if, or even when, he would likely marry.11 This was hardly the first or last time that I would hear statements like this. Others made plans for marriage, saying they would get married within a certain amount of time or by a certain age, even when they were not yet in a relationship.

There is a particular sense of timing involved. As men reach their mid or late twenties, many begin to feel that marriage is increasingly urgent. Cao Jun, who grew up in a small village in the north of Jiaxiang, once told me that “if a man reaches 25 and is still unmarried, people will think there is something wrong with him.” This may apply more to young men in the villages than in the towns and cities, and time spent in school does seem to grant men some leeway, but the sense of urgency is still there. Marriage for many young men can sometimes resemble a game of musical chairs: they almost seem to marry whichever partner they happen to find themselves with when they sense it comes time for them to marry. Or to be more precise, as the pressure to marry grows they may move with increasing urgency to settle on a partner, compressing the time for courtship and getting to know one another, while perhaps also compromising their hopes for first establishing full emotional intimacy. This leads to a peculiar pattern. Through their late teens and early twenties, men might cycle through several girlfriends, but by their late twenties, when they feel the pressure to marry

11 Incidentally, he more or less kept to this goal, marrying a young woman he met a year later when he moved to Qingdao for work.
mounting, a few seem to almost rush into marriage. This was the case with Zhu Jianke, for instance. He had dated one woman for several years, and had even thrown in his savings to buy a car with her, but not long after I met him they broke up. Though he hoped for a time to get back together with her, he eventually had to move on. With the aid of some friends he was introduced to another woman whom he dated for a brief time, but he proved to be dissatisfied with the relationship.

One day he invited me to meet him in Qufu on the opposite side of Jining to visit the temple of Confucius. Upon arriving in Qufu by bus I discovered that he had come the day before and stayed at a hotel overnight with a woman who was not his current girlfriend (something he admonished me not to mention to any of his friends). After the day of sightseeing his companion went her own way, and Zhu Jianke drove us, in a car borrowed from a well-to-do friend, to Wenshang, a town on the northside of Jining. On the way there he began to talk about his concerns: he was still “heartbroken,” he said, over the loss of his previous girlfriend. His new girlfriend was “not gentle,” he complained, but, he said, she did love him; he just did not quite feel the same way about her. On the other hand, as a bank employee she had a good salary and ample savings. He summed up by saying “I love my old girlfriend, but she doesn’t love me. And my new girlfriend, I don’t love her, but she has money.” This was the dilemma for him. As much as he wanted a wife he loved, other and more practical considerations were of enough weight to give him pause. As it so happened, he ultimately did not stay with this particular girlfriend, but quickly found another and married her within a year.
Zhu Jianke's case was not terribly unusual. Other young men I knew faced similar dilemmas, cycling through different partners, debating with themselves what they should expect and what they should settle for. Most hoped for love, but did not demand it. Sometimes other pragmatic concerns took over, whether it was financial security or if the potential wife got on well with the man’s parents.

For most young men from Jiaxiang, marriage remains a veritable certainty—everyone expects it, and few question it. Still, how they adjust themselves to that seeming inevitability, and how they approach it, is very much at their discretion, and there exists a diverse range of individual responses. Some, like Liang Kan, expected little of their marriages or their potential spouses other than that they be able to get along. They acquiesced to the pressure to marry, using such practical methods as xiangqin to find their spouse and marry “on time” if need be. But others, like Zhu Jianke, struggled with conflicting expectations, extemporizing, hesitating, and questioning their choice of partners.

Stepping outside of the normative boundary

As the above shows, in the moral world of rural and small town Jiaxiang, and to a somewhat lesser extent in urban Jining, the “option” for a man to never marry is intensely subjective, which is to say that in the minds of some it is not actually an option at all. To realize it as an option may involve sacrifices, costs, and risks that put it beyond what most men could accept or even contemplate. For anyone to choose to remain unmarried (rather than be forced
into that position against their wishes by unfortunate circumstances), they must first see it as a real and feasible choice that they can take, one that by reference to their own desires, rather than merely being thrown into it by circumstances outside their control. At the same time, those around them, such as their peers and family, must be able to see it as a legitimate option. Otherwise the individual may face the censure of their friends and families. In order to truly understand how marriage has been individualized, it is useful to look at the limits of choice, and the grey area in which what is optional and what is obligatory becomes contested.

To not marry is an idea and choice that appears to be relatively new, and one that is made by very few men. But it is a logical and obvious extension of the concept of companionate marriage and free love: if some youth, at least, embrace the notion of companionate marriage, and yet love and intimacy are absent from the relationship, then why marry?

The best test of individualization in matters of marriage and sexuality is the case of gay men who have forgone marriage. By virtue of both their identity and their choice not to participate in heterosexual marriage, they stand outside of the old normative boundaries for men. What is of interest here, however, is not the transgressive nature of a non-normative sexuality, but the very fact that some men might now conceive of and be able to act out a life beyond what previously would have been possible.

There were two gay men in Jining, Liu Xiao and Tian Wen, whose cases help to illustrate the pressures, incentives, and options at play for not only for gay men, but, even more, for those who dare to live without heterosexual marriage. Liu Xiao grew up in Wenshang, one of the county towns on the north side of Jining, much like Jiaxiang. When I met him he
was 31 years old and worked for a small company that sold and installed lighting fixtures—a solidly middle-class job that paid him well enough that he was able to buy a small, used apartment in the city. I first met him online through a QQ chat link (QQ being the ubiquitous instant messaging program in China), and he generously agreed to be interviewed on his life as a gay man in a small city. Thus, one spring afternoon I took the bus from Jiaxiang to Jining, and met him on the corner of a quiet, tree-lined street. After our interview, he took me along to a dinner he had arranged at a nearby restaurant, where he introduced me to nearly a dozen other gay men, all of whom were acquainted with one another through QQ. There I also met Tian Wen, one of Liu Xiao's friends. I would not see either of them for some months after that, but in the fall of 2010, when I relocated to Jining, I got in touch with them again, and met casually with either one or the both of them periodically.

I had attempted, briefly, to find gay men in Jiaxiang to interview, but without much success. This was of course not very surprising. None of my informants apparently knew any openly gay men, and gays and lesbians throughout China generally remain closeted. But this is what made Liu Xiao and several of his gay friends in Jining so notable. Although he was not out to his coworkers, Liu Xiao's family had inadvertently learned that he was gay some years earlier and, it seemed, come to accept the fact. At 31 years of age he was still unmarried, and had no plans to change this.

Tian Wen was already 37 years old when I met him, though he was easily mistaken for being much younger, and still had not married and had no plans to do so. Like Liu Xiao he was out to his family, and still lived at home with his mother (his father having passed away some years earlier). He had the means to live on his own, but was hesitant to leave his
mother without someone to look after her. He also noted that this explanation spared him from having to answer too many questions from acquaintances about not being married or moving out, as most people could accept that a son would look after his widowed mother.

Though same-sex sexual behavior has of course always existed in China, as it has elsewhere, and there was prior recognition of (male) homosexuality by various poetic terms, the contemporary concept of homosexuality may be understood as a relatively recent cultural import (Hinsch 1992; Sommer 1997; Szonyi 1998; Wei 2007). The more clinical term in Chinese is tongxinglian (literally, “same sex love”), but the simple English “gay” has been directly adopted into the language for colloquial use, suggesting that there was no preexisting term that seems to have been able to serve. Granted, even as knowledge and tolerance of homosexuality has grown within the last decade, stigmatization persists, and many if not most gay men choose to remain closeted and to eventually marry women (Geyer 2002). But nonetheless, the popularization of the concept of homosexuality in China, and the identity it allows for, has made a real difference for the lives and biographies of many gays and lesbians that otherwise might not have been possible. Liu Xiao demonstrated this when in our initial interview he described how he had never even heard of such a thing as homosexuality growing up. He only learned of it when, troubled by his attraction to other men, he sought out a psychologist. Up to that point he had been unable to make sense of his own feelings or how to handle them, and had even considered the possibility that he was somehow supposed to be female rather than male. Just learning that there was such a thing as same-sex sexual attraction, that he could identify himself as a gay man, set him on a different trajectory than would otherwise have been possible.
Broadly speaking, gays and lesbians in China face three options with regards to marriage. The first is that they can find an unsuspecting heterosexual partner to marry and keep their sexual orientation hidden. Liu Xiao's boyfriend at the time was one such case, with a wife and young child who lived, for reasons of cost, back in his home village outside of the city. The second possibility is for a gay man and lesbian to arrange what is called a *xinghun* (形婚), or what is a marriage in form only. They marry so as to satisfy family and social demands, and may on occasion have to work to maintain a public image as husband and wife, but privately carry on with their own separate lives, and may seek out and live with their own respective partners. The final option is the most radical, and that is to forgo heterosexual marriage altogether, as Liu Xiao and Tian Wen had done.

Being unmarried had its minor annoyances and major challenges for both of them. It provoked curious and sometimes uncomfortable questions from others. Liu Xiao, when he went to sign the papers to finalize the purchase of his apartment, had to tell the seller that his wife was out of town and couldn't be with him. It was the only way to avoid embarrassment in the face of the assumption that only married couples bought homes. And though their families had ceased to pressure them to marry, both Liu Xiao and Tian Wen still got occasional questions from others about when they would find a wife. But the more serious consequences came of the fact that, being unmarried, they would not have children.

One winter evening, after a dinner of hotpot, I sat with Liu Xiao and Tian Wen at a Dico's franchise drinking coffee and chatting in a quiet corner. After a while the conversation turned, and I found them discussing what they would do in their old age. Liu Xiao laughingly suggested that he would have to end up in a home for seniors. Tian Wen said that
he had actually already discussed this matter with one of his two older sisters, and that the two of them had contemplated him moving in with her once they became older. These are not the usual arrangements for elderly people in China, much less the ideal, but Liu Xiao and Tian Wen could not help but think about their options, and the reason did not really need to be articulated. Both of them had decent incomes, so financial security in retirement was not a great concern. Rather, the object of their worry was who would be available to care for them, a particular problem springing directly from their status as unmarried men without children. Traditionally, old age support in China has meant family support, as children are responsible for the care of their parents in their old age. Though there have been discussions in some circles about how feasible it may be for this to continue in the face of changing demographics and an aging population, many people in the countryside still assume that they will need to provide some care for their parents, and will depend on the support of their own children in their old age. Aside from any emotional need for family or companionship that unmarried men might have, marriage and children do provide a certain level of practical security that is too important to casually write off. What are unmarried men to do when they retire? How are they to build up enough savings? What about old age care? These problems are not insurmountable, but they are more challenging for those who are single and/or childless. In this regard, the balance of options, pressures, and incentives is still strongly skewed towards the traditional form of marriage-plus-children. There is nothing that actively prohibits gays and lesbians from opting out of (heterosexual) marriage and establishing a household with their chosen partner (if they have one), but the risks and difficulties are considerable. Structural supports, especially for those in old age, are largely rooted in heterosexual
marriage and children. Liu Xiao and Tian Wen's questioning of how they would manage in their later years was, for them, a very real and specific concern rooted in the less than conventional circumstances of their lives.

Marriage is more than a simple legal status. It is tied up in complex ways with home ownership, with having children, with being seen as a respectable adult, with having a secure retirement and old age. And it is because of these ramifications that being unmarried is so problematic. Liu Xiao and Tian Wen risked forgoing many of the perquisites of marriage, or, if they wanted to obtain them, had to improvise and negotiate them through alternative means.

Concluding remarks

Marriage and romantic relationships in Jiaxiang seem little individualized. Marriage itself remains a powerful norm, an expectation that is so ubiquitous and so deeply rooted that for many young men the question of whether or not they want to get married does not even arise. This is in apparent contrast to the trend identified in Western Europe and North America, where marriage or the need to marry has come into question for many. But it is important to remember that individualization does not mean mere detraditionalization.

On the surface, it does appear as if young men in Jiaxiang still marry much like they did in the past. Upon reaching adulthood they find a partner, become engaged with the blessing and agreement of both families, and then marry. But as we have seen, cracks have
appeared in this neat pattern, details have become muddied, and both process and purpose have been thrown into question. External factors such as the growing sex ratio imbalance and the de facto requirement of home ownership in order to marry do impose obstacles to many men, and some of those from Jiaxiang may ultimately never be able to marry, even if they wish to. Those demographic and financial binds only add to the pressure that young men already face in finding a marriage partner. And while this is in many senses a societal problem, thus far men continue to see their (in)ability to find a partner as a purely individual issue dependent on their own personal merits, faults, or fortune.

Marriage in Jiaxiang appears to be an institution still strictly bound by tradition and powerfully enforced, inasmuch as for most men it is not a choice at all, but a rote part of adulthood. But the gathered and incremental changes of more than half a century should not be underestimated, as many concessions have already been made to individual choice (and responsibility). Young men now choose for themselves when, whom, and why they marry. And if some men default to a perfunctory and pragmatic approach to marriage and mate selection, for others it has become a profoundly introspective problem: what do they truly want out of marriage? Is it worth it to marry someone whom they do not genuinely love? Meanwhile, a small minority of men actually have reevaluated the norm of marriage against their own personal desires, and have then defied social and familial pressures and rejected heterosexual marriage altogether.

Marriage may still be a normative objective for most young people in Jiaxiang, but between numerous external challenges and internal doubts, the path towards that objective, once so clear and fixed, has become ever more uncertain and individualized.
One night while I was living in Jining I received a call from Li Cheng, a friend from Jiaxiang, telling me that he was in the city and that he wanted me to go meet him and several of his colleagues for dinner.

With his directions I took a taxi across town to a restaurant, Quan Ju De, which as I later learned was a branch of a famous restaurant in Beijing known for its Peking duck. It was a lavishly decorated building of more than seven stories, and from the lobby I took an elevator up several floors and ushered into a private dining room where Li Cheng and a half dozen of his business colleagues were already seated. Like any restaurant private dining room—and they are extremely common, even in the most modest restaurants found in any rural
township—it had a large round dining table, covered in plate glass with a lazy susan in the middle, and individual place settings. What was extraordinary was the material excess of it all. A server stood by the entire time in the corner of the room, and when one of the men would set his cellphone on the table, she would step forward to place it in a special plastic slipcover to protect it. Toothpicks were individually wrapped in paper with the restaurant’s logo on them. Over the course of the meal, more than fifteen dishes were served, and an entire case of beer; not an unusual amount, really, for such gatherings, though as I later found out, the roast duck alone was priced at almost 150 yuan. They had ordered two of them.

Following the meal, Li Cheng and another of his colleagues asked me to accompany them to a nearby bar. This was actually the first (and only) bar that I went to in Jining. Bars are not common in cities of Jining’s size, and I was told there were perhaps only four or five altogether, two of which were actually quite new. This particular bar was located underground, but it was, if anything, even more opulent than the restaurant, with expensive fixtures throughout. Guards with rifles and body armor stood at the door, and we had to pass through a metal detector to enter. Once inside, we were escorted to a table and handed a menu. Simple drinks were not on offer; one was expected to order a full bottle of liquor. As it was just the three of us, Li Cheng and his colleague ordered a bottle of Jack Daniel’s, the cheapest thing on the menu at 480 yuan (a steep markup from the retail price), with Li Cheng’s colleague covering the bill. Other options on the menu went over 1000 yuan, and one particular brand of cognac was priced at several thousand. I could not help but think that 480 was more than some people I had met in the countryside might make in an entire month. It was almost as much as Xin Gongzhen made in his second job in Jining, where he
had earned a mere 500 a month. And yet here Li Cheng's friend was spending that much just on drinks for three people in a single night.

Li Cheng, as it so happened, was involved in the lucrative coal business. One of his relatives, who was higher up in their company, had amassed enough wealth that he planned to emigrate to the U.S. or Canada under an immigrant investor visa, which at a minimum requires half a million U.S. dollars up front (or more, depending on conditions). In short, these were people of considerable wealth, far greater than that of almost anyone else I knew in Jiaxiang or Jining.

Despite being of an age with my other informants, Li Cheng's lifestyle was far out of step with most of them. He had obtained things that others I knew could only long for, and, to be brutally realistic, might never have the chance to gain. He had money that afforded him an exceptional lifestyle. But it was not the wealth of Li Cheng and his associates per se that was so remarkable, nor even the inordinate disparity between them and everyone else. What is so peculiar is that vast wealth, and envy and desire for it, have become so prominent in recent years. Young men in Jiaxiang wanted money, cars, homes, and, of course, the more intangible trappings that come with the material possessions: status, relative freedom and leisure, etc. They had concrete goals and unarticulated hopes, aspirations for a certain kind of ill-defined “good life,” and those desires had all been informed by novel options made available by a much altered, and individualized, society.

It is by now already a trite observation that the Reform Era has brought forth a set of linked social and economic changes: rising wealth, rising inequality, materialism, consumerism, a class of nouveau riches, intensified competition to get ahead or even just keep
up. Many other observers in China have had their own version of the above vignette, describing their encounters with the startling levels (and disparities) of wealth in the current era. These are the symptoms and embodiment of a new political economy, one in which market forces live alongside a powerful and sometimes forceful state bureaucracy, and they can be parsed and reanalyzed in an almost infinite number of ways. One could consider the contrasting levels of wealth between the cities and countryside have created differential citizenship and a kind of quasi-class status for migrant workers (Solinger 1999; Zhang 2001), the rise of a youth-centered pop culture and its connection to capitalistic consumption (Gold 1993; Fong 2004; Kloet 2005), the emergence of the Shanghai stock trade (Hertz 1998), or any number of other specific issues.

Granted, these are all widely separated subjects, but on some higher level they begin to bleed together, existing as particular manifestations of some more general phenomenon that is difficult to name precisely but nevertheless strikingly visible. It is more than any one topic, such as new class stratification, or the (apparent) apopoliticism of the youth generation, but also does not amount to the whole of social change that has taken place in the Reform Era. Much of the ethnographic literature from the past twenty years in China has been concerned with one aspect or another of this particular complex of changes, casting them in different theoretical terms such as “capitalist,” or “neoliberal,” or “postsocialist.” But regardless of the label or the theoretical framework applied, they are dealing with a certain set of phenomena related to particular new values, lifestyles, and possibilities, or in other words, a kind of materialism (a term that is adequate for the purposes of this chapter, if not perfect). And
it is in this dimension that the individualization thesis, as opposed to another theoretical framework, bears some relevance.

Individualization and the new materialism in China illuminate one another, revealing aspects of each phenomenon that might otherwise go overlooked. By materialism, I mean here several things. Most specifically and concretely materialism refers to a desire to make money, and then through that be able to obtain material goods and luxuries. More broadly, however, the term is used here as a shorthand for the many and sundry ambitions, values, and desires that youth like those in Jiaxiang now regularly hold. For those desires are, by and large, very much centered on the acquisition of material things and pleasures rather than on the “spiritual,” psychic, or moral; more concerned with the personal than the social; and are (somewhat deceptively) non-ideological or apolitical. The materialism of Chinese youth thus is defined as much negatively as positively. It is not merely that Chinese youth possess materialist desires, but that those desires stand as primary goals, and are deemed to be the key elements for self-fulfillment. At the margins, however, materialism touches on other phenomena: a discourse on societal decadence, a shift towards capitalist markets and consumerism, and the seeming absence of political or moral ideology. These are all separate issues from materialism per se, but they must be kept in sight as we go forward.

This chapter has a somewhat different aim than the previous two, and yet, as we shall see, is also something of a synthesis of them. Whereas the last two chapters dealt in neatly circumscribed subjects—work and education, love and marriage—in this chapter I am seeking to address a subject that is less well defined, to get at some of the other details of individualized life for young men from the countryside that cannot be put squarely underneath any
one heading. In chapter two, we saw how young men from Jiaxiang went about trying to navigate their way through school and work, with all of the attendant uncertainties, risks, and trade-offs. In chapter three, we saw how they approached the problems of marriage and partner selection, including not least the question of how utilitarian concerns of money and future financial security should be negotiated with aspirations for love and emotional fulfillment. But not all of the choices that young men in Jiaxiang must make are so momentous as those of career or marriage. Day by day they are confronted with far smaller decisions to make, and must attempt to carve out and style a life for themselves through the trivia of what they buy, where they live, how they eat, how they dress, even what cellphone they have. The facts of their everyday consumption inevitably gain significance and become deliberate—and deliberative—choices. And if young men agonize over their employment options and marriage choices, it is in no small part because these have further consequences for the style and standard of living that they will be able to attain. To put it bluntly, many young people desire a “good life,” and that life is frequently defined by material wealth and success. Many young men of course want jobs that they can genuinely enjoy and partners whom they love, but these desires can be counterweighted by their materialist aspirations, and thus we see the emergence of such calculation and indecision as was observed in the past two chapters. In other words, as the last two chapters established, career and marriage are the focus points of an extraordinary amount of uncertainty, apprehension, calculation, and striving—but they are not the only sites of improvisation in young people's lives. There are other, more prosaic concerns, smaller problems and risks and goals that young men in Jiaxiang struggle with. This chapter is therefore an attempt to gather together some of the looser,
more prosaic matters in the lives of young men in Jiaxiang and examine what they have to say about their own individualization.

There is more here than a need to simply acknowledge the extent of materialism in the Reform Era and in the lives of young people. What does such materialism have to do with individualization and the improvisation of individual biographies? What are the real material conditions that rural youth must live with, and how do they compare against the lifestyles they dream of, work towards, or finally settle for? And most subtly, why should materialism, in itself, serve as such an apt description of young people's values?

**Materialism as individualization**

At a glance, materialism and individualization would appear to have little to do with one another. One is a general set of values, the other a complicated process that (to oversimplify) pertains to the loosening of structural constraints and the investment of individuals with responsibility for their own fates. Yet there are ways in which the two may interact and feed into one another, albeit very obliquely. The expansion of material consumption creates an increasing array of lifestyle options among which individuals can and must choose. Below the surface, therefore, materialism and individualism may hold a loose knot of connections to one another.

But first, some contextualization is necessary. As mentioned above, China's wealth inequality has burgeoned over the last several decades. But perhaps just as important as the
bare fact of China’s current and profound wealth inequality is the perception of it. Although it would be a mistake to characterize the Maoist years as fully and genuinely egalitarian, they can appear so in retrospect and in contrast against the present. The Reform Era has meant a divergence in living standards between the poorest and the wealthiest (even if on average the poor may be better off than before). The Gini coefficient for China is uncertain, as the central government has not published the necessary numbers in several years, but it is believed to be at or around 0.5, though the possibility of hidden wealth could put it even higher (Wang & Woo 2011). Even more important, however, is that it has widened over the last three decades. Consequently, the Reform Era has seen the simultaneous creation of both nouveaux riches and a new form of relative poverty, and much of this gap runs along the urban-rural divide. Although the calculation of urban and rural incomes and the difference between them is complex, and can take into account regional price differences (Sicular et al. 2010) or imputed costs and benefits (like social insurance that is typically only available to urbanites; Li & Luo 2010), there is a consensus that urban incomes outstrip rural incomes by about a factor of three, and that this gap has yawned ever wider since the early 1990s. Even as those in the countryside are decidedly better off than before, they are also farther behind the economic leading edge than ever. and with increased mobility and media availability the rural poor are now more aware of the lifestyles of the urban rich. Contemporary television shows and even commercials regularly depict young people and families with living standards far beyond what any of those I knew in Jiaxiang could expect to attain.

Li Cheng’s case shows just how rapid and dramatic the emergence of the nouveaux riches has been. I rode with him in his car one day through Jiaxiang county on a country
road, having spent the morning visiting the temple of Zengzi (a Confucian disciple native to Jiaxiang). He pointed to a person on a bicycle that we sped past and said, “Five years ago I only had a bicycle, like that.” Now he owned a Cadillac, and was intent on buying a luxury apartment in Jining. He took me with him one day to the developer’s office in the city, where a walkthrough model of the spacious, 178 square meter apartment he planned to buy was done out with marble floors and hardwood features. The base price for apartments in this new development was 4800 yuan per square meter—much less, of course, than what one would have to pay in Shanghai or Beijing, but one of the most expensive developments in Jining at the time, and a far step above from his village home. He would have been unable to even remotely afford any of this just a few years earlier, and for many other young men his age buying even the cheapest housing was still far outside their means. The suddenness with which this wealth inequality has come about, and the extremes it has reached in recent years, make the fact itself all the more conspicuous, and the materialism of Chinese youth must be understood against this background.

Along with this dual reality and perception of wealth inequality there is the parallel of a dual reality and perception of materialism. That is, if materialism-as-practice has grown in the Reform Era, then there has also been a rising discourse about materialism, one that is almost as a rule condematory. A firm distinction must be drawn between these two definitions, as materialism-as-practice and materialism-as-discourse are two very different things, even if they are inextricably tied up with one another. When speaking of a discourse, “mate-

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12 This only covers the cost of the physical space of the apartment; all customization and decoration, including for flooring and fixtures, would be additional. All in all, had he bought the apartment, the cost would have run close to a million yuan.
“Materialism” may be thought of as referring to exactly those elements of current social life that are widely thought to be either detrimental or undesirable. In this sense, talk of materialism acts a means of critiquing, identifying, and explaining perceived social ills of the times. But “materialism” is also a proper description for the actions and decisions that many individuals make in the pursuit of individual success, luxury goods, and the accumulation of wealth. For all of the pessimism and disapproval expressed over degraded social values, most young men in Jiaxiang still prioritized “making money.” They saw the acquisition of wealth, and through it luxuries and material property, as an acceptable and even necessary goal for themselves. As was discussed in chapter two, young men in Jiaxiang were continually seeking out better paying jobs, or multiple jobs, to increase their incomes. I was asked countless times if I had any interest in partnering with someone in a business, or if I had any advice for exports that might sell in the U.S., or if I could help supply people with goods from the U.S. for resale in China. The ultimate point of all of this exertion, strategizing, and risk-taking was to make money to fund their families, lifestyles, and futures according to their own aspirations. There is a contrast, then, between materialism-as-discourse, which relates to a pervasive belief that social values have weakened and been displaced by naked calculations of self-interest combined with a moral condemnation of that perceived social reality, and materialism-as-practice, in which individuals set materialist objectives for themselves, believing them to be integral and necessary to the eventual attainment of moral and emotional goods. This distinction between the discourse and practice of materialism important to note, because while the former has decidedly negative overtones, the latter has an enormously more complex moral quality.
Certainly, the economic reforms of the last thirty and more years have not been incidental to this surge in materialism, both of practice and of discourse. The new materialism would have hardly been possible in the years of the planned economy when incomes were limited and many consumer goods were available only by rationing in any case; private wealth and an ever-growing number and variety of goods have facilitated materialism, or at least have served as the preconditions that make it possible. But there are more surprising and more subtle relationships between the capitalistic reforms, individualism (if not exactly individualization), and materialism. The historian Gary Cross (2000) has observed that in the United States during the mid 20th century consumer industries faced with saturated markets tried to push a shift in consumption habits. Whereas a household might have previously owned only one television, one refrigerator, or one car, the producers of such goods took up a marketing strategy of promoting individual, as opposed to household, ownership. For instance, rather than having the entire family bound to using one television and watching the same programming, multiple televisions in the home would allow family members to each watch what they pleased. This basic strategy of individualizing consumption and ownership was most clearly demonstrated in the car industry, and spearheaded by Alfred P. Sloan of General Motors, who sought to increase car sales by pushing yearly models and a greater variety of paint colors and styles. Soon, ownership of multiple cars became not only normal, but was seen to be as virtually necessary for many American households. In short, the logics of modern and Western-style capitalism, with its virtual dependency on ever expanding markets, led to a consumption culture that favored ever increasing individualism. The desire to increase sales volumes meant promoting the notion that each individual should have his or
her own goods—whatever they might be—rather than sharing them amongst a household. Simultaneously, the explosive growth in the number of companies, brands, and the personalization and customization of products have made consumption itself into a means of defining and publicizing one's individual identity. In these two linked ways, American capitalism of the mid 20th century may have unintentionally but unavoidably abetted a trend towards greater individualism.

Admittedly, this is only a historical narrative of how capitalism, individualism, and materialism became entwined in the United States, and it cannot be concluded that the same processes will necessarily unfold in China, or anywhere else, for that matter. Nevertheless, there are inklings that China may be moving in a similar direction in the Reform Era; after all, the same basic capitalist logic applies, and as disposable incomes grow and companies seek to increase sales there are perhaps incentives on the sides of both consumers and corporations to increase individual consumption. But on a more basic level, the sheer number of new goods, brands, and styles creates both more opportunities for consumption and the need for individuals to make deliberate choices in what and how they will consume.

In the 1970s there were what were known as the “four big items,” namely a bicycle, radio, sewing machine, and wristwatch. These were the most desirable possessions and goods that, if owned, would mark one out with a respectable level of status. In the following years as the overall level of wealth grew along with the economy, the value of such goods shifted and new items became the objects of envy and markers of status, so that over time such goods as refrigerators, washing machines, and televisions (black and white, and then color), have been counted among the so-called four items. With time, households' material posses-
sions have multiplied and diversified in type, style, and brand, so that by the late 2000s and among youth in Jining there was no consensus about what the current equivalent of the four items were. But there assuredly was widespread consciousness of the social prestige value of material things. Liu Xin recounts an interesting exchange in his field study of a village in Shaanxi province in the early 1990s, when his village host, an elderly man, interpreted a visitor’s expensive designer coat as *pusu* (simple, unextravagant) because the material was ordinary cotton (2000:112). Such “misreadings” would be unlikely among the current youth in Jiaxiang, if only because they have had far more exposure to the new standards and elite tastes of consumption. It is not unusual for youth to be more conversant in novel consumption options than their elders (Fadzillah 2005; Watson 1997). Most everyone was keenly aware of the relative values and even specific pricing of various brands for all manner of goods, whether cellphones or cars, and much of consumption was, perhaps, merely intended to be conspicuous: that is, to use or own a certain product was simply a means of displaying one’s own wealth or status. Many of these items could then be deployed in instrumental *guanxi*; I saw everything from expensive cigarettes to specialty honey to even iPhones being given as gifts to curry favor. But there were signs of different forms of consumption, in which young people consumed purely for their own enjoyment, and, possibly, affiliated themselves with a particular lifestyle by doing so. Young people had to choose amongst different brands and styles in all things. For clothes shopping there were the well known brands like Meters-Bonwe, Yishion, Giordano, and many others, not even to mention the countless more obscure labels. And in athletic clothing alone there was the choice of Lining, 361°, Anta, Adidas, Mizuno, and Kappa, just to name a few.
Once again, this abundance of consumption choices and the attendant distinctions that come with them shouldn't be taken for granted, however ubiquitous and ingrained this has all become in most industrialized societies. During the collectivist period, and especially through the Cultural Revolution, the structures in which consumption occurred were radically different. Many consumer goods and commodities were rationed, and manufactured goods were both often in short supply and of limited variety. But this was not always or simply due to inadequate resources. “The relative uniformity of dress and living standards … during these years was not the product simply of poverty and necessity, but of a conscious, egalitarian policy of government” (Whyte & Parish 1984:101). Under the socialist ideology of the time, material production was elevated to an almost moral virtue, while consumption became morally suspect, and the possibilities for consumption were accordingly limited. The explosion of consumerism and consumer choice that has occurred since the beginning of the Reform Era should therefore not be mistaken as (simply) the natural and inevitable result of greater wealth. It is rather the function of a new political economy, one in which consumption is a core element of the state agenda (Chao & Myers 1998; Ngai 2003).

As noted earlier in the first chapter, the diversity of jobs, wealth, and career options are all structured along geographic lines, but so too is consumption, in a way. As Beck reminds us, a self-scripted life depends in part upon flows of information: when novel ideas, subjectivities, lifestyles, and so forth are introduced, they disrupt biographical assumptions. Materialist desires and aspirations are for their part very much informed by these same flows of information. Equally, certain lifestyles, and especially those counted as most desirable, cannot be truly realized in a place like Jiaxiang. To dwell in the xiancheng as opposed to a
major city necessarily means that one's lifestyle options are in some ways restricted. Previous work has provided ample detail on the materialist desires of Chinese youth, but what is somewhat lacking is a clear picture of the actual conditions in which they live, and how these compare against what the envied living standards of the *nouveau riches*. What I wish to do here for the moment is to try to give a broad overview of the material culture in which Jiaxiang youth were embedded—the lifestyle options that were visible to them, the living standards they were able to achieve, and the gap that lies between the two.

Arjun Appadurai (1997) has proposed examining various fields or landscapes (what he calls ethnoscapes, mediascapes, ideoscapes and so on) as a means of analyzing how “imagination” moves through and across societies. Such notions have a certain usefulness for understanding transnational (sub)cultures, and they mesh well enough with Beck's concept of flows of information, and scholars have already seen something of these informational landscapes in China. In the 1980s and at the beginning of the new reforms, Taiwanese and Hong Kong pop culture gained an outsized influence among mainland youth (Gold 1993), suggesting an overlapping and extended Chinese cultural mediascape. These cultural transmissions across ethnic Chinese regions continue today with Hong Kong films and Taiwanese pop music stars like Zhou Jielun (Jay Chou), though they are now accompanied by further pop cultural imports from South Korea, Japan, and various Western countries, covering music, film, television, and more. This pop culture, most of it seemingly innocuous and void of any explicit political or ideological significance, has made inroads in rural China. Youth in Jiaxiang and Jining consumed Hollywood movies and American TV sitcoms, Korean pop music, and Japanese anime series, all mixed in alongside domestic Chinese media productions.
Much of this, of course, occurred online, as other channels were fairly restricted by both legal regulations and practicality. Most residents in Jiaxiang have little opportunity to visit a movie theater in any case, as there simply isn't one in the xiancheng. The internet, therefore, provides a major point of access for much of this media consumption, though its importance should not be overstated. Still, the adoption and consumption of outside cultural productions is certainly not indiscriminate. For instance, in late 2008 the American television show *Prison Break* had a level of popularity with young Chinese that was far beyond its position in the American television market. And KFC, McDonald's, and Pizza Hut may all be considered relatively declasse in the U.S., but hold a respectably middle-class status in most of China and are places where relatively well-off young people tend to congregate. Those I knew in Jining went to KFC only occasionally, though more for reason of cost than taste. There would be any number of ways to depict the mediascape that Jiaxiang and Jining youth now occupy, but for the sake of simplicity and brevity to consider the consumer landscape in Jining.

Even as a humble minor city, Jining had a certain mixture of shops and stores representing certain tiers of international brands. There were several KFC restaurants scattered around, and a Pizza Hut that opened to long lines inside an upscale mall in early 2011, but there was no McDonald's in the city. There were also other major chains not known in North America, such as Yonghe, a Taiwanese fast food chain. On the main thoroughfare of Taibai Road and across from the People's Park and a statue of Mao Zedong was a cluster of four shopping malls, all populated with both domestic and transnational brand stores. The Yuncheng shopping center, the largest and latest of these four, included a rooftop garden
with pools and classical Chinese architecture pavilions from which one could overlook the southern skyline of the city. An enormous gold-painted statue of a rotund, smiling God of Fortune sat at the head of the escalator that led to the top-floor movie theater. Down the street was an old state-run department store from early in the Reform Era, now relatively down-scale and much neglected. Across from it, overlooking one of the city’s canals, was a row of buildings that had been refurbished with facades meant to mimic classical architecture. One man noted this by saying “Jining is learning from Qufu;” Qufu, after all, had for years been trading on its reputation as the birthplace of Confucius and lined many of its streets with a faux traditional architecture. The contemporary landscape of a city like Jining clearly has its peculiarities. Some of these juxtapositions may be odd only from an outside perspective; no one seemed to find any great irony in a statue of Mao standing across from three different shopping malls, for instance. Others, on the other hand, like the self-consciously antique style of architecture on Taibai Road, stood out even to locals. The modern urban landscape increasingly mixes styles and iconography from disconnected places and periods, both Chinese and foreign.

All of this serves simply as a demonstration of how eclectic the mediascape in which young people from Jiaxiang now move has become. As Bourdieu and those scholars who specialize in material culture studies argue, consumption choices—which is to say, taste—inevitably communicate or affirm a certain social identification. At a minimum they signal an allegiance to a certain class, if not more (Bourdieu 1984). The language of consumption and the semiotics of consumer material culture, however, are a separate subject, and in any case this is ground that has been tread before. The point here is simple and straightforward: that
the range of goods, services, entertainment, and activities now available to Chinese youth is now so overwhelming, so diversified, that no individual can hope to consume everything, and thus choices must be made. And in doing so, they make not only choices about consumption, but about their lifestyle, and may unavoidably differentiate themselves and the spheres of their social interaction.

Near the end of my time in Jiaxiang I was introduced to three young men who all knew each other through their “recreation club,” a bicycle shop that served formally as the site for a cycling club and somewhat informally as the locus and meeting place for a loose and open network of cycling enthusiasts. There were several dozen people, mostly all young and mostly men. Some were more involved than others; a few had the time and money to go on long cross-country expeditions, bicycling to Tibet or the northeast of the country. The club also organized occasional races and other events that might involve several dozen people, after which they would usually assemble at one restaurant for a large, boisterous group meal.

One of these young men was Li Cheng (it was actually through this club that I first met him). Another was a computer teacher at a local middle school, and the third owned and ran a netbar. Li Cheng was well off, but the other two had only very modest incomes. The teacher was still unmarried and lived with his parents, but unlike the other two was college educated. In a word, all that they had in common was their age and an interest in cycling, and had it not been for the cycling club they likely would not have had any occasion to meet or interact with one another. The bikes used for this were not the ordinary sort that most people used everyday; the very cheapest sold in the shop were just under 1000 yuan, and others
sold for several times more. For races and the long-distance rides the cyclists also needed other gear: helmets, biking clothes, packs, etc. The school teacher had spent nearly 5,000 yuan altogether on equipment. To be sure, he made good use of it, and took a number of ambitious biking trips to different parts of the country, and were he not a school teacher (who could therefore use school holidays for his own leisure) and unmarried, he may not have had the time or liberty to pursue these activities. The other two still participated in the biking club’s activities when and as they could, even if it was just to show up and cheer at races.

Involvement in the cycling club or any of its usual events was open to anyone, but was also not something that could be casually taken up. Participation in these activities demanded no little expense and necessarily entailed commercial consumption. More to the point, this was a space for social interaction, a place into which individuals could embed themselves, yet it was premised upon and necessitated a certain minimum level of consumption and expenditure.
One of the tenets of the individualization theorem is that, once disembedded, individuals may seek out new communities of one kind or another in which to anchor themselves and their identities, however fragmentary and transient those communities may be. In China, however, this is problematic, as the state has generally been suspicious of any grassroots organization or social movement that grows too large, even when it is apolitical, thereby putting a limit on how large or how cohesive a formative community can become (Pye 1991). The alternative, therefore, is communities built upon innocuous subcultures and purely non-political activities, meaning, for the most part, communities defined by a common habit or aesthetics of consumption. In Jiaxiang and even Jining, groups organized
around shared recreational activities or entertainment consumption—like the cycling club, or an anime club, or a network of dog owners and enthusiasts, or a group of off-roaders—were more or less the only feasible spaces for reembedding.

Materialism, then, may serve individualization in a somewhat roundabout yet simple way, as the generation of new and more numerous consumption options requires individuals to then begin making more and more choices about their personal consumption, what they want, what they aspire to own or to buy. Those choices in turn become ever more fraught, as they differentiate social identities and shape new social spaces into which individuals may embed themselves.

Informed desires and lived realities

In discussing the materialism of the present in China, it is perhaps only natural to turn to examples like that used at the beginning of this chapter: cases of extraordinary wealth and consumption. In order to speak of and demonstrate materialism and consumerism, after all, one must look to instances where these are actually in evidence. But as has already been noted, there is considerable inequality in China, and many young people, while not abjectly poor, nonetheless lead lives that are more defined by lack than they are by excess. One of the potential criticisms of individualization theory is that the power to choose—to craft one's life, to reflect and reassess goals, to plan, and so forth—is actually a middle-class privilege, and not one that extends to working class people (Roseneil 2007:125). This would perhaps not
be a fair reading of the work that has been put forth, however. As has been noted repeatedly in earlier chapters, individuals’ ability and power to choose is not unlimited, nor is it always without cost. Meanwhile, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim have been emphatic in pointing out that an individualized life is also one of personalized risk. Individualization should therefore not be confused to mean simple and unproblematic agency; if we were to insist on phrasing it in those terms, individualization would be better explained as a set of structures that both allow for and compel agency, or to at least attempt it. But the concept of choice itself is always bound up with the problem of risk, and it is always to some degree limited. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the material life and consumption of youths. Young people in Jiaxiang and Jining, as elsewhere, did not lack materialist desires, but their financial situations rarely would allow them to live as they might have wished. The basic question therefore arises: just what were the genuine living standards for young people from Jiaxiang, and how far did the reality fall short of what they hoped for?

An example here is the very small genre of sociological and anthropological literature on Chinese housing, which is in some respects exemplary of the wider body of literature on Chinese materialism. The writing on Chinese housing has addressed the social significance of home ownership, how homes have come to embody and exemplify personal ambitions of climbing the class ladder, and how the aesthetics of homes have been elaborated upon to become symbols of “the good life” (Davis 1989; Davis 2002; Fleischer 2007; Fraser 2000). Virtually everyone desires to own their own home, and homeownership rates in China are quite high by international standards (Davis 2010). But homeownership in China, along with all of its concomitant concerns, is primarily the reserve of married people. Young people who are
still unmarried, by and large, will not have homes of their own, and may spend years living in ad hoc, liminal housing arrangements. The study of homeowners, therefore, may constitute a kind of systematic bias in which attention is centered upon already established and financially successful families, while ignoring the living arrangements of (unmarried) youth because they are assumed to be temporary. Or to put it another way: there are the homes that young men plan to purchase upon marriage, homes that are to be the centerpoint of a normal, respectable, and accomplished adult life; and then there are the actual housing conditions under which they live at any given point in time. And between the ideal and the reality there can be considerable distance. What I wish to do here, just briefly, is juxtapose some of the ideals and objectives for homes with the realities of how many young men in Jiaxiang and Jining lived.

Housing has changed substantially in the Reform Era. The legal dimensions of how it is obtained, owned, and sold, for example, have been altered by the shift to marketization, which have in turn had other and largely unanticipated repercussions (Tong & Hays 1996). But it is the materiality which is most telling, as changes in housing have gone hand in hand with changes in consumption. Throughout the Maoist years, much of daily life occurred outside of the home by necessity, as urban housing during the time was often small and cramped; some apartments might consist of only a single room, while larger ones might house multiple families. The home design and usage habits of the time presumed that apartments were mainly for sleeping, and most other activities occurred outside of the house, and there was little differentiation in room or space by function. Later, however, the advent of new appliances from TVs to refrigerators required some expansion and alteration in home
design (Lü et al. 2001:212). In many apartment homes, for instance, kitchens were traditionally quite small. The kitchen in my own rented apartment in Jiaxiang, which had been only recently built, was barely more than six feet to a side, with a small ceramic sink, one electrical outlet, and a small counter formed out of large stone tiles. Kitchens were similarly small in most homes that I saw, and this meant that appliances like refrigerators (for the families that owned them) were often placed elsewhere, such as in the living room. Though some newer apartments of more modern design made accommodation for such appliances, many apartments in Jiaxiang still were built according to somewhat older, or perhaps even “outdated,” patterns.
Fig. 5 Kitchen in rented apartment, essentially unequipped and unused
The material wealth of households has grown in tandem with housing, new appliances and furniture and other possessions to fill out the new and more specialized personal spaces. According to a survey of urban dwellers in Jining prefecture, just over the ten years from 2000 to 2010, the number of air conditioning units per hundred households increased five-fold from 33 to 165. For computers, the increase was even more dramatic, from 6 to 92. Microwaves went from 15 to 51. Other large items like refrigerators, washing machines, and color televisions also became more common, although their growth in ownership had reached high levels earlier in the 1990s (JNSTJJ 2011:567). There is, however, a stark disparity between the urban-classified households and the rural ones. To take but one example, in
the countryside the survey counted only 50 refrigerators per hundred households in 2010—a rate of ownership that urban households had already far surpassed more than a decade earlier (JNSTJJ 2011:184).

Such numbers can give a useful if crude outline of the state of material wealth in Jining, but they do not, of course, directly reflect the lives of young people in Jiaxiang, especially those who were still unmarried. At marriage a couple typically acquired their home and, along with it, a set of new appliances and furniture. It was not unusual to see appliances both in homes and even in stores with red “double happiness” characters stuck on them, emphasizing the connection and tendency to make such purchases at the time of marriage. But the everyday lives and living spaces of those who were unmarried, or living and working away from the marital home, were usually not so well appointed. The existing literature on Chinese homes, their material culture and aesthetics, is largely about family-owned homes: that is, the homes bought by or for married couples or existing families. Valuable though this is, it neglects the living situations of those who are outside of marriage, or are otherwise obliged by work or other circumstances to live away from home.

As for young people who were still unmarried, many lived still with their parents whenever it was feasible to do so, and even if their income might be stable enough to allow an independent existence. But for these others who lived outside the parental home and yet were still unmarried, housing situations were often ascetic, opportunistic, and temporary. They made do in rented apartments of unenviable conditions, or even living at their place of work. One bedroom apartments were exceedingly rare, as most buildings were designed and built for families to occupy, and so the apartments that were available to young people for
rent were usually either old family dwellings that the owners' had decided to let out or, if the
apartment had been originally bought with the intention of renting it, it had been left maopi
(“unfinished”), with bare concrete floors and concrete walls that might have a thin coating
of plaster. Decoration was usually limited to a few stickers or posters of pop stars or cartoon
characters on the walls, as often as not left there by prior tenants; furnishings were spare,
cheap, and used. Because multiroom dwellings were standard, and due to the desire to save as
much of their income as they could, rented apartments were usually shared and over-
crowded, with often more than one person to a room, and sometimes beds laid out in the liv-
ing room. Bai Yong’s girlfriend in 2011, for instance, was a surgical nurse at a local hospital
and made an exceptional salary of 6,000 yuan a month, and yet she still lived in an apartment
with three others, one of whom slept in the living room. Later, she did choose to live by her-
self (Bai Yong at this time was attending graduate school in another province, or otherwise
might have stayed with her), though the apartment she opted to rent was old and the rent
low.

The housing situations of others were comparable, and sometimes worse. Liang Kan,
for instance, lived for a time before his marriage in a small, one-room apartment in a dilapi-
dated tenement building in Jining. The building was two stories of plain brick walls (uninsu-
lated, of course) and concrete floors, with an open air walkway on each floor that led off into
single rooms of no more than twenty by ten feet. A communal latrine was set near the gate
behind another brick wall. There was no dedicated space for cooking, and the families I saw
there had set stoves out on the walkway where they also hung their laundry. Even by local
standards this was poor quality housing, and not long after I visited it was demolished, leav-
ing Liang Kan briefly homeless leading up to his wedding when he was to move into his and
his wife's new apartment. During that interim he slept on a couch at his workplace.

Zhang Kun lived in a three bedroom apartment owned by his boss, along with two of
his coworkers, each taking their own room. It was outfitted as a regular apartment for a fam-
ily—which it had been at one time—but was fairly dated, with the kitchen in such disrepair
that it was unusable, and a nonworking washing machine and shower in the bathroom. For
food Zhang Kun largely relied on cheap takeout from a local short order shop that was al-
most literally a hole in a wall, its interior blackened in soot from the cook's single wok.
There was no television in the apartment, but for entertainment Zhang Kun did have a rather
old laptop and an internet connection with which he would watch TV dramas and pirated
movies online. The living room was generally left vacant and unused. These conditions were
all too typical of unmarried men, or those who, for reasons of work, had to live away from
their home. They might be on their own, or more often were living with housemates; they
might be either in an apartment they rented themselves or in a “dormitory” furnished by
their employer; but whatever the arrangement, the quality of the housing was almost always
poor and the buildings old, and they made do with the most minimal of household and per-
sonal goods.
Fig. 7  Living quarters, rented apartment in Taian
Fig. 8 Living quarters, rented apartment in Qingdao
This point brings us back, if just tangentially, to the ant tribe. The ant tribe, as mentioned in the introduction, are a novel social category of young people defined by their being college graduates who work in low-wage jobs for which they are likely overqualified, and who live in crowded, low-rent communities in major cities. None of those I knew truly fit this definition, either because they were not college graduates or because they did not live in such a neighborhood. But getting by in low-paying jobs and living in marginal spaces with poor conditions is actually all too common among young people, regardless of whether or not they belong to the ant tribe itself.

Still, the ultimate hope for those who were living in such conditions was to own a decent home of their own. In Jiaxiang, there has of course been considerable change in hous-
ing, as was alluded to in the first chapter. Even during my time there, entire hutong areas were demolished to make way for new developments and planned green areas, and multi-story apartment buildings or loufang were added throughout and around the xiancheng. Most new apartments were as a rule around one hundred square meters in size, and were two or three shi and one ting\textsuperscript{13} with a south-facing balcony on which to air dry laundry.

There is no truly comprehensive and reliable source available on housing prices in Jining, and much less for Jiaxiang, but a small sample of real estate advertisements in Jining for 2010 and early 2011 and the input of those I spoke with suggested a rough price range of 3000 to 4500 yuan per square meter for most apartments of medium quality (there were of course examples of both older, low quality housing and luxury apartments that fell outside of this range). The interior decoration and customization would cost, at the low end, about 40,000 yuan. In Jiaxiang prices were substantially lower, if harder to pin down, but I was told in 2009 an average apartment might sell in the range of 200,000. Given that the average annual income was only about twelve thousand yuan, this put the cost of a home at around seventeen times the average individual income. Even considering that men's parents often contributed a large portion of the money for the first home purchase, home ownership was a stretch for most, and well out of reach for many.

And this is the crux of the problem. Nearly all young men longed for a certain image of material success, a vision that typically included a well-furnished home, a car, money to

\textsuperscript{13} The Chinese nomenclature recognizes shi, or simply “rooms,” which are ordinarily bedrooms but may serve other purposes, and ting, or “halls,” which ordinarily may count as living rooms, although again the meaning of the term is slightly broader. Houses are conventionally described this way, both in housing advertisements and in conversation: so many shi, so many ting. Advertisements for the largest, most expensive new apartments in Jining might offer four shi, two ting, for instance.
spend freely, luxury goods, and the means and time for costly leisure activities. It is a vision of material wealth that is larger and broader than the “four big items” of previous decades, complicated by the multiplicity of goods that the Reform Era's marketization has made available, and directed towards both prestige and personal satisfaction. The gap, however, between what was desired and what they had in the present, or could reasonably hope to obtain in the future, was considerable.

*Materialism as ideology*

One evening I sat watching a movie with several young people, a Hong Kong film from the 1990s starring the comedian Zhou Xingchi (also known as Stephen Chow), who had had a prolific film career in the late 80s and early 90s, and his comedies frequently played on one channel or another. This particular movie was a parody of spy films, with Zhou Xingchi playing a secret agent of mainland China. Near the climax of the story he happens to wind up in front of a firing squad, but he manages to escape execution by simply waving a hundred yuan note in front of the officers, who promptly release him. In the next shot Zhou's character and the officers are seen passing out cigarettes, joking together and shaking hands. And at that, one of the men sitting next to me burst out laughing: “That’s so Chinese!”

There is popular cynicism among many youth about the current state of Chinese society. The almost universal perception is that most people are only looking out for themselves and trying to get ahead. Officials are assumed to be corrupt as a matter of course.
Money or guanxi are seen to be able to override or circumvent law, regulation, and institutional barriers. And there is a seemingly endless list of complaints about novel social problems: scams, tainted food and consumer products, bystanders regularly disregarding people who fall injured on the street, child kidnapping and slavery, and more. How real or extensive these perceived problems are, and how they have come about, are separate questions, and not ones that I can hope to answer here. What is of relevance here is the perception and interpretation of these problems, which are generally understood as artifacts of the Reform Era and the turn towards materialism.

Such cynicism did not always exist. Through much of the Maoist period the party state was solicitous of the youth generation, and by conceding greater rights and influence to young people the party was able to enlist their support for its causes. And up until the Cultural Revolution the youth generation, or indeed most of the country, seemed to be sincerely invested in the idealism of the state's socialist project. Meanwhile, revolutionary ideology permeated every domain, such that by at least the 1960s even leisure itself was politicized. All forms of entertainment were suspect for their potential to convey ideological messages, while leisure time was inescapably in tension with the duty of workers to contribute via their labors to the advancement of the state's socialist project (Diamant 2000:199). In short, it was a time in which anything and everything could be viewed through a political lens, and the youth were eagerly engaged in that politics. But that was soon to change, and during the Cultural Revolution urban youth were sent down to the countryside and shocked by the conditions they encountered there; later, as they trickled back to the cities, they dealt with disadvantages in employment, leaving many of them cynical about the government's
claims and promises of progress. The party leadership, on its side, saw the role that orga-
nized youth groups had had in the violent excesses of the Cultural Revolution and began to
grow wary of the youth population as a whole (Gold 1991).

With the beginning of the Reform Era values began to shift, sometimes with surpris-
ing speed. By the mid and late 1980s, and despite decades of Maoist ideology emphasizing
the virtues of peasant and proletarian work and sacrifice on behalf of community and coun-
try, young people seemed to see white-collar work as more prestigious and desirable than
blue-collar work (Liu 1984). Interest in music, films, and television from beyond mainland
China was burgeoning even as the first tentative and sporadic movements were made to-
wards privatization of business (Gold 1993). And the state, of course, tempered and revised
much of its ideology to justify the turn towards marketization and economic reform. But
even so, the beginning of the Reform Era did not mean an immediate and full turn to materi-
alism in all senses. Up through the 1980s there was still a level of political engagement
among the youth of the country, supported on a wave of optimism and idealism that would
eventually culminate in the protests and calls for political reform of 1989. The party leader-
ship, however, decisively put an end to the protests, and in the following years worked to di-
vest the youth of whatever political influence they might once have had (Rosen 1989).

The history of modern China's ever evolving political ideology and the renegotiation
of the youth population's political power is far more involved and intricate than can be de-
scribed here. But between repeated instances of disillusionment with the ideological projects
of the state, and the party state's own efforts to hobble the political power of youth while
also endorsing the pursuit of individual wealth, a remarkable change occurred. In contrast to
previous generations, young people in the present by and large appear either apolitical or, if they do disapprove of the party and its politics, they mostly keep silent. That is to say, they keep themselves out of politics, concentrating instead on their own lives and personal affairs. They lament social problems, but do not agitate to change them.

The party state has repeatedly and vocally criticized the drift towards materialism, particularly in recent years with its denouncements of the so-called “three vulgarities” and the like. Television programming, including shows like Fei Cheng Wu Rao mentioned in the last chapter, has come under tighter scrutiny by censors for the perceived “vulgarity” of promoting crass materialism. But all of this seems to have amounted to very little. However much it may protest about the decline of societal virtue, the state itself is also widely understood as a nexus of materialism, greed, and corruption, as petty officials are seen to indulge in suspicious excesses of luxury they should not be able to afford on their nominal salaries. And yet it is also generally understood by observers that the state has a certain vested interest in promoting materialism as well, with the assumption that so long as the public is focused upon the gratification of materialist desires they will not engage in political or ideological contests with the state.

Some of the young men I met in Jiaxiang and Jining were aware of this history of violent oscillations from idealism to cynicism, from revolution to disengagement. Many more were not. Thus in a rough sense the materialism of the youth generation in the Reform Era has served the party’s interests even as it frustrates them. Materialism implies the legitimization of or, even more, the elevation of individual desire and self-interest. For better or ill, it is largely antithetical to an ideology of communal obligation, as each individual is given li-
cense to pursue his or her own material interests. This creates a paradox for the party state. Personal sacrifice or privation for the sake of community, society, and country is sometimes still lauded but only sporadically and ineffectively encouraged, and such models of self-sacrifice as Lei Feng no longer seem to have much resonance with the young (Rosen 1993). And yet this is arguably a direct result of the party state's own policies towards youth. Rather than engage in politics, young people like those in Jiaxiang and Jining withhold themselves from any form of social activism and concentrate on their own personal concerns. They may have complaints about official corruption, the abuses of authority figures, the unfairness of the law and business, but they mostly appeared resigned to the status quo.

One night while in Jining I met up with a half dozen people for dinner; one of them was getting married the next day, and this was the customary meal that the groom hosted for his close friends. Among them was Xu Zhen, who had returned from his job in Beijing for the occasion. We took a break from the meal to go outside and set off a few of the fireworks that had been purchased for the wedding, and as the others busied themselves with setting up the fireworks Xu Zhen related to me a story. Earlier that day he had attempted to return home to visit his family in the south of Jiaxiang county, having gotten a friend with a car to drive him, but a government functionary happened to be visiting in the area and the police had blockaded the roads just in front of his village. Xu Zhen was frustrated; his home was just two hundred meters away, but the police refused to let him go through. “So,” he said, “I told them I had to go to the bathroom, and I went to the side of the road and pissed in the direction of the official's car!” It was only a small show of defiance, but the most he could do in the circumstances. His anger and upset at the moment that he was telling me all of this,
though, was not with the event itself, but with how his friends had responded. Before I had arrived he had already shared this story with them, he said, but they had mostly criticized him. “They said I shouldn't have done it,” he complained, “that I should have just sat there and not done anything.” Xu Zhen was not shy about his disdain for the party and government, but that was precisely what made him unusual among his peers.

Yang Kai was another such rarity, fiercely critical of the corruption he had witnessed in Jining and the lack of rule of law, even to the point of openly posting statements on his QQ account advocating democracy and human rights. But he also judged that such feelings were exceptional in his age group. His parents' generation had been “brainwashed,” he said, while he believed the vast majority of his peers to be ignorant of important rights issues and political matters. “I estimate 99% of them don't even know who Chen Guangcheng is,” he said, referring to the self-taught lawyer and activist in neighboring Linyi prefecture who had been imprisoned after pursuing a court case against local officials for illegal enforcements of the one child policy. Granted, nearly everyone had their own complaints about officials or the privileged rich, and even Li Cheng, who had gotten far under the current system, once complained offhandedly about the lack of “democracy” in China. Yet unlike with Xu Zhen or Yang Kai, these complaints hardly ever added up to a full-throated indictment of the system that gave rise to them. I heard stories here and there of abuses and injustices, from the minor to the astonishing: cases of official theft, fraud, extortion, and of violent police abuses, but these rarely received any more comment than a weary sigh. Most seemed to feel that the inequities they were confronted with were to be suffered through rather than struggled against.
There are two points two draw from these examples. First, people like Yang Kai were able to contrast themselves against the majority of their peers, reinforcing the point that most young people were resigned, if not quite indifferent, to political matters. And second, even for those like Xu Zhen and Yang Kai, there was little they could do with their criticisms of the state. Yang Kai, for instance, despite his deep-seated malcontentment and his convictions regarding political reform, was not an activist; indeed, how could he be? Instead, his time and energy each day were spent on various business ventures—he managed car resales, opened a pharmacy, flirted with the idea of opening a Western-style restaurant, and worked as an appraising agent for a private firm that arranged business loans. Just like his peers, he too was focused on making what money he could and securing his own interests. Of course, Yang Kai knew full well that it was neither feasible nor wise for him to act on his discontent. The state permits only the most innocuous forms of social activism, and even then they are likely to be tightly controlled. But the fact that his impassioned views did not, or could not, translate into social or political activism points to how thoroughly young people have been expunged from the political sphere. In any case, Yang Kai proved himself to be the exception rather than the representative of his peers.

A rather awkward and ironic situation has thus emerged over the last two decades. The party state objects strenuously to the trend towards materialism, but it has shut the youth population out from any form of meaningful political participation while urging them to focus on “getting rich.” Young people, for their part, lament the social injustices and official corruption they are witness to, but are not motivated to challenge or directly question the system they must live in. Materialism itself has thus come to serve as a kind of quasi-ide-
ology, one that by its very nature and definition discourages young people from serious engagement with anything beyond their own immediate, individual concerns.

Concluding remarks

The rise of materialism has been one of the primary narratives of China’s Reform Era among both academics and the Chinese general public. It is a concept that has been applied to different effect and for different purposes, serving variously as a description of a shift in values and also as a condemnation of those same values. In its multiple and varied senses, “materialism” becomes a device for examining certain key elements of young people's lives: their consumerism, their quality of life, their intent focus on material success, and their apoliticism.

The new materialism of the Reform Era is often imagined to be a special province of the youth generation, and it reflects another dimension of their individualization. Chinese youth are consumers in a way that their parents and grandparents never were and could not be. By dint of their consumption choices and leisure activities, Chinese youth craft distinctive lifestyles for themselves, and, coincidentally, embed themselves into new social webs in the process. But even as the capitalistic reforms and rising wealth of the last thirty years have brought myriad new consumption options into view, they are not necessarily within reach. For many of the young people in Jiaxiang and Jining, their desires so often outdistance what the circumstances of their lives allow them to achieve. Increased inequality and costs leave many young men unable to afford the material comforts they aspire to, and their actual stan-
dards of living are in sharp contrast to what they strive for. And in the midst of so much feverish competition to get ahead and succeed, many youth have committed themselves to the pursuit of their own goals, and their own interests, to the exclusion of larger issues. They are, in a word, essentially apolitical. Though they may recognize and lament social problems going on around them, they are, either through resignation or inability, politically disen-gaged.

Whereas in the previous two chapters we saw how specific domains such as work and marriage have been individualized for young people, this chapter has sought to use the trend and popular discourse on materialism to bring to light some of the more miscellaneous aspects of young people's lives. Materialism in its various and multiple senses is almost the other half of the equation, an umbrella explanation and description of what motivates the mundane and trivial choices that young men make in everyday life, while individualization in its turn provides us another view on the preexisting discourse of materialism that has perme-ated the Reform Era.
Life in Jiaxiang has its share of imponderabilia, more than a few of which can be witnessed out on the streetsides. Nearly every day at certain hours there are the predictable throngs of students as they pour out of the schools; there are the elderly men who gather around tables to play mahjongg or one of the intricate local card games like gouji; and there are the few particular spots where sanlun drivers regularly gather and wait for fares. But one of the other more common sights is that of young men walking along together in sizable groups. The distinctiveness of this is subtle. One will see women and men of other ages most often walking or riding their bicycles singly or in twos or threes. But large groups of a half dozen or more are almost always men, and more especially young men. This is the most trivial of observa-
tions, but it is reflective of more profound matters at work below the surface. If one looks around, one will start to see a pattern. Netbars are overwhelmingly dominated by young men, who often go together to play games like World of Warcraft for a few hours. KTV or karaoke clubs are likewise patronized largely by men. And visit any given restaurant in Jiaxiang on any given night, and one will find that the male patrons on average outnumber women ten to one. In fact, when groups get together to eat, they are, as a rule, primarily composed of men. Young men dominate virtually every public and commercial venue available in Jiaxiang for socializing outside the home. Men's friendships and social ties are ubiquitous, and yet strangely, almost paradoxically, inconspicuous.

Of course, everyone has their own web of personal relationships, and young men hardly have a monopoly on sociality. One could just as easily discuss the sociality of young children or elderly women. For instance, older women can often be found congregating in the courtyards of xiaogu to chat as they watch over grandchildren, or gathering for mahjongg games in one person's home. The socializing of men, and particularly young men, is therefore not exceptional, though it may be more public. Nor can it necessarily be said that socializing with peers is more important for young men than it is for others. But it is nonetheless important by any measure, and the many scenes of young men going around town, getting together and socializing at almost any given hour, reflect just how pervasive and deeply interwoven peer relationships are in young men's everyday lives.

Here in this final chapter we have finally come to the subject with which my field research began, the friendships and personal ties of young men in Jiaxiang. As explained in the introduction, the focus of my research naturally turned away from this subject as it became
clear that my informants were preoccupied with other events and transitions in their lives. They were busy with school and job searches and starting their careers, with looking for girlfriends or getting married or settling into married life, with making money and getting by and figuring out how to get what they wanted. But this should not be mistaken to mean that friendship disappeared from these young men's lives or ceased to be of any importance to them. Friendship ties form an inconspicuous matrix in which Chinese youth move and live. Already and throughout the preceding chapters there have been references to the friendships of the people mentioned, whether it was in friends helping to set up a man with women when he was looking for a wife, or in the social ties formed in and around new fields of consumption and recreation. For these young people, even as they went about trying to make money, get married, start families, and generally establish and maintain an adult life, their friendships were always there, quietly persisting in the background and threaded through the other domains of their lives. As this chapter proceeds, it will illuminate some of the issues and data covered in past chapters, revealing and reminding how and where social ties came into play.

This is not, however, about young men's friendships in general, as that is a subject that is simply too large and too complex to receive adequate treatment here. Rather, this chapter is concerned with how the friendships of young men in Jiaxiang and Jining both complemented and counteracted individualizing forces in other domains of their lives.

The subjects of friendship and individualization together pose an odd conceptual problem. On the hand, individualization has an apparent tendency to create atomization, even if just incidentally. After all, a part of individualization entails the displacement of indi-
viduals from traditional structures, communities, and social categories, i.e. disembedding. Individualization therefore regularly involves some manner of disruption of established social ties and/or identities. Meanwhile, as a social relationship, friendship could very well be contrary to any such process of atomization by working to bring and hold individuals together. In other words, where individualization may sometimes work to dissolve social bonds, then it and friendship would seem to be mutually and naturally antagonistic. But on the other hand, there are subtle and surprising ways in which individualization and friendship cooperate with one another. Individualization may result in atomization, at least temporarily, but the disembedding process is often capped off by a reembedding in which new social ties and identifications are formed. And what individuals are reembedded into may very well be networks of friendships. Friends may influence one another in the choices that are made and the lifestyles or biographies that are pursued. A more interesting possibility, however, is that there may be a more profound connection, in which “friendship” becomes the type of social tie and institution most favored by the current wave of individualization.

The question therefore is not whether the social lives of young men in Jiaxiang are either atomized or interdependent, as they are simultaneously both and neither. The question is what interplay exists between friendship as a general variety of social bond and individualization as a process of social restructuring. What role, exactly, does friendship have to play in an improvised life? Below, after contextualizing the problem of friendship in contemporary China, I will detail two ways that friendship interacts with and relates to individualization: on the one hand working to counteract the risks and difficulties brought on by a self-scripted biography, and on the other acting as a part of individualization.
The current state of friendship

There are surprising difficulties in approaching this subject, because while there is little that has been said directly on either the matter of friendship in the Chinese context, or on the connection between friendship and individualization, there are subjects adjacent to both of these which have already been thoroughly worked over. In the case of the former, there is the ample body of literature on guanxi in China, which is close to and overlapping with the concept of friendship, but not identical with it. And in the latter case there has been a modest body of work looking at the evolution of friendship and its place in industrialized or commercialized societies. These tangential literatures are relevant to the questions dealt with here, but they do not deal directly with the problem of friendship and individualization in China, and there is a risk of generating confusion if we do not take the pains to carefully sort them all out. Some clarifications are therefore in order, first on the difference between friendship and guanxi, and second on how friendship fits with and within a certain literature on social relationships in modern societies.

Friendship is ostensibly one of the most primary social relationships, sometimes cited alongside kinship and romantic partnership (Giddens 1992; Bell & Coleman 1999). Its significance seems self-evident: whether measured by the degree of intimacy, the trust that friends place in one another, or the emotion or personal resources they commit to one another, friendship plays a role of such importance in basic sociality that it cannot be ignored.
And yet, a small spate of recent research notwithstanding (e.g. Lin 2012; Santos-Granero 2007; Desai & Killick 2010), anthropologists on the whole have never committed much study to the subject. There have only been a few infrequent and exploratory works on the topic, certainly not enough to produce a solid body of theory. In fact, much of the work that has been done has not gotten much past the fundamental questions: does friendship exist universally? How is it even to be defined (Eisenstadt 1956; Paine 1969; Wolf 1969; Pitt-Rivers 1973; Leyton 1974)? Early work struggled with parsing out distinctions: friendship was instrumental or expressive, or it was particularistic and affective instead of universalizing and neutral. Perhaps this is only to be expected. If anthropologists have difficulty agreeing even upon a precise definition of the nature of kinship (Carsten 2000; Sahlins 2011), the problem is only worse for friendship, which is often far less formalized. Without much in the way of clear-cut boundaries, friendship is a difficult subject to grapple with.

Still, there has been some progress in moving the discussion beyond simple (and often misleading) questions of the basic nature of friendship. Daniel Hruschka (2010) in his comprehensive review of anthropological knowledge on friendship as it has been documented in different societies counts no fewer than eleven potential diagnostic traits for the relationship, including mutual aid, frequent socializing, shared positive affect, a lack of strict accounting of favors, equality in social status among friends, voluntariness of the relationship, and so on. He is quick to point out, however, that no one of these traits is absolutely essential, and friendship in various societies can be defined without one or several of them. In this view, friendship therefore has no one defining quality, and no conceivable definition can neatly and unambiguously separate it from other forms of intimate relationships. Yet if
the definitional problems are vexing, the concept cannot simply be done away with. Though there is not unanimous agreement on what exactly friendship is, there is nonetheless agreement that it exists in some form in most cultures.

Given all of this, the position of friendship in China studies is fairly precarious, as the concept sits in a somewhat awkward relation to the better established literature on guanxi. Friendship is not entirely subsumed under guanxi, at least not as the term has usually been presented and understood in the sociological and anthropological literature, but neither is it truly separable. It too can be instrumental and a source of material support, while guanxi for their part are not devoid of personal sentiment. Thus there is arguably no hard and fast line to divide friendship from guanxi (Smart 1999; Zang 2004), but a divide there is nonetheless—or at the very least, a gradation between the two. To talk about the friendships of young men in Jiaxiang rather than their guanxi, therefore, is not necessarily so much to talk about a different set of phenomena as it is to address an overlapping set of phenomena with different emphasis. First and foremost, while guanxi is well known as being rooted in reciprocity, friendship is more ambiguous on this point. Friends do undertake favors for one another, but if and how they expect to reciprocate depends on just what sort of “friend” they actually are. In the ideal and most intimate version of friendship, exacting reciprocity is not only unnecessary but to be avoided (Yang 1994; see also Clark 1981; Silk 2003). Secondly, although guanxi are not without their moral elements, much of the past literature has played up their utilitarian aspects, sometimes giving the (somewhat inaccurate) impression that guanxi are sought and maintained purely out of self-interest and rational calculation. The moral world of young people in the countryside, however, is far richer than this, and when viewed from
their own vantage point their social relationships are not explained by any utilitarian function. From their own point of view, young people in Jiaxiang had and held onto their friendships for the very simple reason that they wanted to. Rooting the discussion in the terms of friendship, rather than guanxi, helps to keep the moral dimension centered and foregrounded.

Friendship has been a recognizable social relationship type in China since ancient times (Kutcher 2000), and certainly is so in the present. And to the extent that such generalizations can be made, friendship practices in China often display many of the traits noted by Hruschka: shared affect, a willingness to provide material support in need, informality, etc. But directly translating the concept of friendship that has been advanced by so many Western anthropologists into the Chinese social context is problematic. There are again several stumbling blocks, first among them the lay of the lines between pengyou (friend) and such terms as tongxue (classmate), tongshi (coworker), xiongdi (brother), gemenr or gelai (friend, brother, buddy), huoji (friend), and so forth. These are all part of an elaborate (and partly dialectical) vocabulary that men in Jiaxiang were able to apply to their social ties, the terms of which cut across and overlap in complicated ways. One man, for instance, distinguished between “ordinary friends,” “good friends,” and gemenr, in ascending order of intimacy and trust. But there are other divisions. When I first arrived in the field and was preparing a questionnaire on subjects’ friendship ties, I had an opportunity to ask a friend's father to look it over. He had a criticism about the wording of the instructions, which simply asked the survey-taker to answer the questions with regards to his or her friends. This, he insisted, left out classmates and coworkers; to his mind, these were all three exclusive categories, and
if the instructions were asking about “friends,” then they were specifically not asking about people one knew through school or work. His definition of “friend,” therefore, was not so much about the nature or quality of the relationship. Indeed, over the time that I knew him I came to see that his own closest friend—the person outside of his family he most trusted and most socialized with—he himself did not designate as a “friend,” because he was a co-worker. Close classmates or coworkers may effectively be no different from close friends, if one is measuring by the standards Western scholars have tended to employ. But friends, this man claimed, were specifically those social relations that had been acquired anywhere other than in the context of school or work. Taken at face value this is a definition of friendship which is based not (solely) on the qualities of the relationship but on the social context in which it originates—that is, pengyou does not mean “friend” in the general or etic sense, but rather more specifically refers to those friends who are gained outside of the organized and conventional contexts of work or school.

Yet it would be a mistake to take this as an ironclad definition of friendship. As I found over the course of time and many conversations, it was only one possible interpretation among several, and there are some signs that the basic understanding of friendship may be evolving. Many younger people, for instance, were not so rigorous about their usage of the word “friend,” using it at times to cover classmates and coworkers as well as others, and some young men, when presented with a list of social relationship terms like pengyou, tongxue, gemenr and so forth said that pengyou could encompass most if not all other terms.

The meaning of “friend” in the Chinese context is therefore just as frustratingly difficult to pin down as it is English. It may be strictly limited to only certain types of social ties
that originate in certain contexts, or it may refer to something much wider and far looser. Indeed, much as Hugh Baker once noted that in China kinship terms could sometimes be used strategically to exploit feelings of closeness or obligation (1979:163), the notion of friendship is similarly susceptible to abuse. In other words, the term “friend” is not always used with complete sincerity. Bai Yong had several pithy statements on the matter. He once shared with me what he said was a well-known joke: “Children make their toys their friends. Adults make their friends their toys.” When I asked him about the semantic boundaries between various relationship terms, he pointed out just how paradoxical the meaning and usage of “friend” can be: “Classmates aren’t necessarily friends. Friends aren’t even necessarily friends.”

I say all of this only to acknowledge that there are many difficulties in parsing out the meaning(s) and definition(s) of friendship, in no small part because those meanings and definitions are liable to change with time, a crucial point that I shall return to later. But for now it is enough to note that friendship in China, whether viewed etically or emically, stands apart from guanxi as a fairly distinct category.

Invisible webs of support

The individualization thesis makes much of the possibilities of choice in the self-scripted, improvised biography. But the improvised life is also one of inherent risk, as we have seen. The state has dismantled or cut back many of its socialist programs, such as job assignment
and pension systems, while traditional foundations of material support such as the family are often ill-equipped to deal with novel conditions and problems. Moreover, young people are presented with a multiplicity of life options: they can leave the xiancheng or stay, try to make their way in Jining or another city, attend college or not, stick with one job or try another, get married now or later, etc. Each choice hinges on still others, opening and closing other future possibilities. Individuals are left to endless cycles of decision-making, with all of the attendant anxiety and uncertainty that that entails.

In principle, the new conditions make young people responsible for their own life decisions and, by extension, their own success or failure. Whether or not they make it into college is seen to depend on their own ability and effort—did they study hard enough, prepare well enough for the gaokao? (Nevermind that there are only so many openings and they are competing against millions of other students). Their parents may pressure them to marry, and there may be only so many single women available, but whether or not they find someone to be their spouse is, ultimately, dependent upon them.

But the fact that risk and responsibility increasingly reside with individuals does not mean that the people in question accept this passively. As they face any number of challenges, young people from Jiaxiang cobbled together their own means of support from among those they knew. In this regard, friendship becomes a countervailing force against the processes of individualization, one that provides an often overlooked web of support that allows young people to contend with the various challenges they face as they transition into adulthood. This is not necessarily to suppose that kinship ties have weakened or diminished in value; kinship is rightly understood as one of the primary vehicles of social support, and
for the most part this remains true in Jiaxiang. Most of my informants did still actively maintain relationships with grandparents, aunts, uncles, and assorted cousins. But those kinship relations have become crowded by other accumulated ties.

This is something of a brief final note on what has already been discussed earlier chapters. It is a look back over the substantive issues that young men from Jiaxiang dealt with and highlighting what was there but not necessarily obvious: the material and emotional support of friends. When, for example, Zhu Jianke was looking for a woman he could marry, it was his friends who helped set him up with first one girlfriend and then another. Or when Li Kui was looking for work, he and his friend Yan Rong frequently tried to get jobs together. So much of what happened in the lives of the young men that I met happened because of, or with the help of, their friends.

The biographical risks that young men from Jiaxiang dealt with were always partially buffered by their friendships. Friends provide advice and sympathy, tips about available jobs, introductions to prospective girlfriends, gifts and favors, loans of money in times of need, and more. An axiom that was cited to me several times was “When your friends are many, the road is easy” (朋友多了路好走). The first person to mention this to me was a man who worked as a manager in one of Jiaxiang’s many stonecutting businesses on the outside of town, to which he added: “You need friends to get things done. If you don't, then your life is just not going to be very happy.”

Another saying that was sometimes used: “At home you rely on family. Away, you rely on friends.” (An alternate version, perhaps somewhat cynical, substituted “money” in place of “friends.”) This was quite literally the case for many young men, given that they
might live for a time in places far from home, whether that was while attending college or when they were at work. Even those who lived in the xiancheng or in Jining could not turn to family for assistance on a day-to-day basis if their families were located out in one of the surrounding townships or villages. Reliable friends were therefore indispensable.

The argument here is a practical one. Individuals must have some means of handling certain needs and eventualities that are beyond their own capacities to resolve. During the Maoist years, as we have seen, there were many institutions that provided for individuals' welfare, and housing, employment, and education were all to some extent managed or provided by the state, at least for urbanites. In the Reform Era, however, many of those institutions have been stripped down or pared back. Individuals must usually find ways to secure their own employment, as there is no more job assignment system. Some state-owned enterprises or work units might build and sell new apartments to their workers at discounted rates, but for most people, obtaining housing means pulling together their own money, parents' savings, and loans. Colleges have introduced fees for which young people must also often borrow money. On the other hand, as the state has largely pulled back the safety net, the last few decades have seen the arrival of a host of other institutional mechanisms familiar to modern capitalist states, such as bank loans, mortgages, insurance schemes, pension plans, credit systems, and more. Individuals can conceivably draw on these mechanisms to piece together a safety net of their own, but such options are mostly the province of the middle class, and in any case were not widely available to young people from Jiaxiang. And all of this does not even begin to address the myriad trivial matters that cropped up in everyday life where someone might need assistance.
Thus, without the aid of such institutional mechanisms, young people in Jiaxiang and Jining regularly had to turn to people they knew for material support. Material support, of course, could take any number of forms; friends called on one another to arrange train tickets, borrow transportation, pick up and deliver a relative from the xiancheng to their home village out in the countryside, to pick up goods in the city that they could not get in Jiaxiang, give them places to stay when they travelled, handle the processing of government forms like having their hukou status changed, to hide their absences from teachers when they skipped out of school or internships, and so on. But the simplest and clearest demonstration of material support were loans of money between friends, which provided a major safety net. Exchanges of sums of several thousand yuan were not uncommon, though amounts in the range of several hundred were more frequent. Even these smaller loans, though, were equal to several weeks pay for most people. Interestingly, young men did not always bother to ask why a friend needed a loan. Cao Jun came from a quite poor village family, but in school once loaned a friend 800 yuan—a very substantial amount for him—without asking what his friend did with it. Yan Zhen loaned a friend 2,000 yuan without knowing anything more than that “he said he urgently needed some money.” Others could not even precisely recall the most they had ever loaned to a friend, let alone the reasons for a particular loan.

This is only a small example, and most of the support that friends lent one another, of course, is not so easy to define or measure, but took the form of small gestures and favors. Ultimately, though, it is a simple point. Where individualization produced uncertainty and difficulty, young men drew on the support of their friends to try to create opportunity and security for themselves. In this way they were able to counteract some of the loss of
structural support that individualization had brought about, improvising and supplementing with the informal aid of personal relationships where formal institutions once operated.

*Individualized friendship*

It is clear enough then how friendship may act to buffer young people against some of the less desirable effects of individualization, even if it cannot counteract the drift towards individualization itself. But however opposed they may seem, friendship is not inherently inimical to individualization, or vice versa. In fact, in certain ways they have a strange affinity for one another.

As noted above, there has been a long-running debate in the anthropological literature over the exact nature of friendship, with the disagreement centered on whether friendship is a genuinely universal type of social relationship or one somehow peculiar to Western societies. In the first case, some theorists have leaned towards a sense of friendship that is broadly and flexibly defined, a general type of relationship that encompasses or bleeds into many variant forms, including such phenomena as ritual friends, *compadrazgo*, sworn brotherhood, and so on (Firth 1932; Eisenstadt 1956; Marshall 1977). It is this conception of friendship that Hruschka hits upon when he details multiple traits for friendship but finds none of them to be indispensable. Under this definition, friendship may be voluntary or not; it might entail a level of formality and observance of ritual or be entirely unstructured; it might enclose people of different social statuses. However exactly one might articulate the
concept, it is something flexible enough and generalizable enough to be found in virtually every society at every period of history.

The other concept of friendship is much narrower, and limits the definition to those relationships that are emotionally expressive, voluntary, egalitarian, informal, and unstructured. This definition would largely exclude many of the variant forms just noted. Ritualized friendships would be suspect, those social ties anchored primarily in material aid would be in doubt, and those which were involuntary would surely be disqualified. It is this form of friendship that is purportedly the norm in most of the contemporary West, and that many theorists have taken as their baseline for the study of friendship and whether or not it is truly a universal phenomenon (see, e.g., Pitt-Rivers 1973; Carrier 1999; Paine 1999; Pahl 2000). Key to this concept of friendship is its supposed elective and uninstitutionalized nature. In this perspective, friendship is quite specifically that social relationship which is purely voluntary and unstructured. It cannot be compelled or preordained, but must be freely chosen by the individuals involved and for their own reasons.

It is not my purpose here to endorse one of these concepts of friendship over the other, as they are both equally valid when properly applied. Acknowledging the difference between them, however, has its uses. What I am proposing here is that the latter type of friendship—that which is emphatically voluntary and expressive—is not just a random or arbitrary variation on friendship in general. Rather, it is a specific version of friendship that has a special affinity for the sociological conditions of individualization. For the sake of simplifying further discussion, I will call the latter form, i.e. the “modern” or “Western” one, individualized friendship.
Individualized friendship earns its label in two ways: by being highly reflexive, and by acting as a default for social relations when individuals have undergone disembeddedness. The reflexive nature of (individualized) friendship has been observed and expounded upon for some time:

“Since sociability in its pure form has no ulterior end, no content, and no result outside itself, it is oriented completely about personalities. Since nothing but the satisfaction of the impulse to sociability—although with a resonance left over—is to be gained, the process remains, in its conditions as in its results, strictly limited to its personal bearers.” (Simmel 1949:255).

Though Simmel was writing well before the emergence of work on individualization, and though he couches his discussion in terms of general sociability rather than friendship in the specific, his description of “pure sociability” depicts a type of social relationship that is highly reflexive. Sociality such as he describes, divorced from outside constraints or demands, founded and sustained in the choice of the participant individuals, is best understood as a kind of individualized sociality.

Later theorists like Anthony Giddens would take this further, and explicitly frame the problems of friendship and sociality in terms of individualization. Giddens has elaborated on what he calls the “pure relationship,” which he defines a relationship “in which external criteria have become dissolved” (1991:6), i.e. it “is not anchored in external conditions of social or economic life—it is, as it were, free-floating” (89). Pure relationships can take a number of forms—romantic or marital ties, for instance, can also operate as pure relationships—but friendship appears to be the best exemplar:
“A friend is defined specifically as someone with whom one has a relationship unprompted by anything other than the rewards that that relationship provides ... in practice as well as in principle one normally stays a friend of another only in so far as sentiments of closeness are reciprocated for their own sake” (90).

What both Simmel and Giddens have identified here as the essential nature of friendship may sound uncontroversial, even intuitive, but as Hruschka and others have reminded us, not all friendship works in this way. Reconceiving what they describe as a particularly individualized friendship may help to reconcile some of the confusion and disagreement that has occurred over the essence of friendship. What Simmel and Giddens describe is a kind of relationship that is intensely reflexive; it is not imposed upon by any “external criteria,” and, as is Giddens' point, such heightened reflexivity is a hallmark and consequence of individualization. But again, this is not an intrinsic feature of friendship in general, as friendships can be braced by external requirements and structures that do not allow the participants to leave the relationship at will. This is true of ritualized friendships and sworn brotherhood, certainly, but rites are not necessary for friendship to be constrained by community norms. A number of ethnographic accounts have detailed forms of friendship that are entangled with other social ties, responsibilities, or institutions, and so cannot be either freely entered into or casually severed (see, e.g., Firth 1932; Brain 1976; Lindholm 1982). They are friendships that are grounded rather than “free-floating,” as Giddens puts it. The reflexivity remarked upon by Simmel, Giddens, and so many others is therefore not a feature of friendship in general, but is the mark of a specifically individualized form of friendship.

Moreover, a look back into the history of social relations shows that this view of friendship cannot be counted as an essential and timeless part of “Western” culture (what-
ever one might take that to mean). It is, rather, in part if not in whole a product of what Beck refers to as the first modernity—that is, the assorted social transformations of capitalism, industrialization, and urbanization experienced by Europe up into the early 20th century. Beginning with the period of early capitalism in Europe there was, in the judgement of some social historians at least, a turn away from social relationships that conflated affect and instrumentalism towards a clearer division of the two, separating expressive relationships from instrumental ones (Silver 1990; Allan 2001). But even more than this, a number of scholars have perceived friendship as gaining greater prominence and frequency under certain social conditions linked to individualization:

“Friendships are especially valued in a population where social contacts have outgrown the bounds of kinship, neighborhood, age grades, work groups, ethnicity, and social classes ... Friendship, then, fills in where the more mechanical and exclusionary institutions fail to define interpersonal affiliations” (Suttles 1970:96).

The relevance of this for individualization is plain to see. To become disembedded means to be pulled out of a given order of social relations and either left adrift and, eventually perhaps, reembedded into a new order of social relations. Being new, however, those social relations may not be well defined or institutionalized, and this is where friendship becomes relevant. Friendship has a tendency to function as something like a miscellaneous category for social relationships—that is, when a significant social relationship cannot be made to fit within some other classification, it frequently defaults to being called a friendship. This, in fact, is what can be seen in the discussion above, where my friend’s father insisted that the terms pengyou, tongshi, and tongxue were all separate and exclusive of one another.
“Friend” in this sense marks out those “excess” relations that do not originate in a well recognized and clearly delimited social context, namely one's kinship network, work environment, or school class. In some sense, then, friendship is what a relationship is when it cannot be defined any other way.

Interestingly, there is some sign of a movement towards this having taken place in China in the 1980s and early 1990s, exactly as individuals were being disembedded from their work units and collectives and exposed to a wider and growing range of spaces for social connection. In one large-scale social survey in urban Tianjin based on the U.S. General Social Survey, for instance, administered once in 1986 and then again in 1993, there was a rather dramatic increase in the number of friends that people reported, as opposed to “coworkers” and “classmates.” In 1986, a mere 5.1% of Chinese respondents' social networks consisted of friends, compared with 17.3% in the American GSS. Just a few years later, however, in the 1993 survey, the number of friends claimed by Chinese respondents had grown, especially among those in their twenties (Ruan et al. 1997). Ruan explains this in part by direct reference to the breaking open of individuals' social worlds in the 1980s. Work units were ceasing to be all-encompassing, and thus coworkers came to count for less of people's social networks.

The prominence of friendship in sociality seems then to have been growing in the Reform Era, even to the point of unsettling the underlying definitions of the terms. Despite what my friend's father had said, most of the young people I met were more lax about the usage of the word *pengyou*. It was not merely an auxiliary to the relationship types of *tongxue* and *tongsbi*, but was frequently used as an encompassing, generic term that some-
times subsumed coworkers, classmates, and others. In other words, the usage of the word among young people seems to have drifted somewhat nearer to contemporary English usage.

This drift and diffusion of social relationships is readily visible among Jiaxiang youth. To take a single, arbitrary and unextraordinary example: Zhou Jie was a man from Zhifang, a township at the southern end of of Jiaxiang county. The township itself is, naturally, quite small, consisting of about two streets of shops and various small businesses, with a sprawling cluster of *pingfang* around these. The length of it can be crossed in ten minutes at a leisurely pace. This was where Zhou Jie spent the first half of his life, and where many of his childhood friends still lived as of 2010. When he tested into Jiaxiang’s No. 1 High School, however, that meant he had to move to the *xiancheng*. The distance from the township to the *xiancheng* is not much, if one could drive, but that was of course out of the question since his family, like most, did not have a car. Even now, most young people in the county who attend high school in the *xiancheng* become boarding students and live in on-campus dorms (or, on occasion, rent apartments in town if their parents are willing and able to pay for it). Though home was technically only a few kilometers away, he and the other boarding students were therefore only able to see their families about once a month. But he soon made friends with other boys in his *ban*, or homeroom class, whom he stayed in close contact with as the years passed. When he took the *gaokao* in his senior year he placed into a college in Jinan, where he of course met new friends. After he graduated from college he returned to Jining for work, but two years later was transferred to Jinan once again. By the time he was twenty-five he had accumulated several discrete circles of friends and other social ties in a number of far-flung places. In the technical language of social networks his relationships would be de-
scribed as being of low-density, since he had various clusters of social ties that were disconnected from one another—e.g. his childhood friends in Zhifang, whom he still knew and kept in touch with as well as he could, did not know his classmates from high school, who in turn did not know his coworkers in Jining.

This is only the most ordinary example of how the social networks of young people have been restructured in the Reform Era. It is now so normal it hardly seems to deserve comment, but it would have been decidedly unusual just a few decades ago. By and large those in Zhou Jie's father's generation could expect to carry out their lives in one place. Most middle-aged adults in Jiaxiang, after all, had lived in the county since they were born. Their social relationships were of long duration, well-established, and, crucially, mostly confined to the community, to the point where it was difficult for them to even walk down the street without running into multiple acquaintances. But for rural youths', by force of their schooling, patterns of employment, and overall greater mobility, their networks are now strewn across wide geographic areas and branch into disconnected subsets.

As prosaic as the idea of having multiple, distributed, low-density social circles may now seem, it nonetheless represents a fundamental change in the way young people's social lives in rural China are formed, and it is the precondition for the emergence of individualized friendship. What can be seen among the youth generation in Jiaxiang is a transition towards the conditions described by Suttles above, i.e. a kind of disembedding. The very organization of the school system and current work opportunities force young people into a pattern of serial embedment and disembedding as they migrate from one social context to the next. Simultaneously, they have become sufficiently free and individualized that, once they have
developed several independent social circles, they can move amongst them at will; they are not limited to building relationships in a single, confined social field, such as their home village, or neighborhood, or work unit. Although most young men still seem to find most of their friends among their classmates or coworkers, they have access to multiple groups of classmates from different ban and school levels, and often different groups of coworkers from different jobs from among which to choose their most favored ties. And if this does not suffice, they are free and able to seek out friends in other venues, such as through interest clubs and online chat groups. In this way, they are trending towards more elective rather than prescriptive friendships, coming nearer to Giddens' notion of a “pure relationship” in which their friendships are not grounded in any prior established relationship or institutional obligation.

If a “pure” friendship denotes an elective or voluntary relationship, and one that tends to operate outside or apart from formal institutions, then it is easy to understand how it would have an affinity for the disruptive conditions of individualization. Individualized friendship is almost entirely freeform, an amorphous category that does not depend on any specific conditions. Quite simply, anyone can become friends. Belonging to a single group—a school class or work team, for instance—may facilitate and predispose individuals to becoming friends, or at least it provides the opportunity, but such a preexisting connection is not essential. Friends can be met and gained through any social context.

The social contexts through which Jiaxiang youth can now attain new social relationships are therefore more numerous and more diversified than they have ever been before, though they are still limited in certain respects. The Chinese state has long been extraordi-
narily domineering, permitting few other institutions or collectivities that could rival its moral claims over individuals, and thus individuals formerly had few options for voluntary associations in which they could embed themselves, with most ties defined either on the basis of kinship or geographic association (Pye 1991). A few scholars have even noted how fluctuations in state control and permissiveness towards sociality have affected friendship in particular. During the Maoist years the political climate was especially restrictive, not just because the regulation of individual mobility, as we have seen previously, confined much of social life to either one's village or work unit, but because the universalist ethics promoted by the state were actively hostile to particularism inherent in friendship (Vogel 1965). Students' social relationships in school were closely monitored and documented, and could later factor into evaluations of their political virtue. Consequently, students were careful to consider personal backgrounds in their choice of friends—for instance, seeking out those whose official class label was not too different from their own, so as to minimize the possibility of being called out for criticism (Shirk 1982:126-153). Subsequently, the state relented, and a measure of particularism was revived (Gold 1985).

The situation has eased further throughout the Reform Era, for reasons already recounted in prior chapters: the loosening of the state's hold over various institutions, the weakening of the social hold of work units, the increased physical and social mobility of people and the growth of cities. All of this has allowed social relationships beyond the standard contexts of family, school, and workplace to grow and multiply. To be sure, though, the state is still fiercely restrictive of many independent groups and organizations, especially those that it interprets to be potentially challenging to its authority, meaning that any group
with an air of the political about it is suspect. What is available instead are the kinds of essentially *apolitical* groups based around shared hobby interests and recreational activities that have been mentioned previously.

Such groups do not readily fit with the familiar schema of social relations (kin, work, school, etc.), and so the relationships formed in and through them tend to fall over into the indefinite category of friendship. There are several points worth mentioning about this trend. First, the burgeoning of such groups in the Reform Era points to the growing instability of social relations—rapid and serial disembedding and reembedding. Second and more notably, these relationships are also voluntary. Individuals gravitate towards different groups (and thus insinuate themselves into different social circles) according to their own desires and interests, and can then extricate themselves if they so choose. There is a looseness about such social connections that is not there with either coworker or classmate ties, and certainly not with kin. And, lastly, such voluntary social groupings allow for individuals to find those like-minded people who will support them in the biographical choices they make.

The group of gay men mentioned in the latter part of chapter three is one example. This was a very loose and unbounded group of men who knew one another through online QQ chat groups. QQ allows users to launch their own groups, which may be organized on whatever basis the creator chooses. There were, for instance, groups based on a given college or high school *ban*, allowing old friends to communicate with one another as a group, but many others were established on the basis of a given topic or interest; in this case, it happened to be a group organized for gay men in Jining. Anyone so inclined could search for a
group relevant to their criteria on QQ and, upon finding one that suits them, request to join, and then through this channel they could meet others, chat, and get to know one another. Naturally, the forums that QQ and other online services allow for are an important innovation, but the key point here is not the technology, but the effects. Liu Xiao and Tian Wen, along with most of their other gay friends, had met through one such QQ forum, and Liu Xiao at various times served as moderator for one such forum. It was the friendships they developed offline, however, that are of interest. These men, in groups of varying size and composition, would at times meet up for dinner, go shopping, go for karaoke singing at KTV clubs, play badminton, or just visit one or another’s home to eat and talk and watch TV for an evening. There was nothing extraordinary in any of this, of course; these are exactly the same sorts of activities that other groups of friends (and coworkers, classmates, and so forth) regularly engaged in. But such a social network gave a place for these men to embed themselves, providing a sphere in which they were safe from stigma and could express themselves openly—they could talk about boyfriends and partners, and commiserate over the difficulties of remaining unmarried and evading social pressures. As others have already found from the study of gay men and lesbians in the West, such sociality can be vital, as many gays and lesbians in the U.S. have relied heavily on their networks of friends to fulfill needs both material and psychological that otherwise would have been met by kin (Weston 1991; Nardi 1999). Other theorists, however, have more recently taken such observations further and linked them specifically to individualization theory, arguing that such friendship networks constitute sites of reembedding that offer new meaning and structural support for gays and lesbians to live as they desire to (Allan 2001; Roseneil 2007). Gay men like Liu Xiao and
Tian Wen were thus able to create through their circle of friends a kind of support and validation of their unconventional lives.

The experience of a marginalized group like gay men shows how important individualized social relations can be, allowing for the emergence and crystallization of particular social spheres or networks that otherwise would not, and probably could not, have existed in earlier times. But this is in some ways an exceptional example; gay men in Jining remain mostly closeted, and their social sphere (what in conversation they often simply refer to as their *quanzi* (圈子) or “circle”) is for that reason largely invisible.

But not all of the newly emergent social spheres are created in this way. Many others are formed around everyday interests or hobby clubs. The cycling club described in the last chapter is one such example (it too, incidentally, had its own QQ group to help members keep in touch). This allowed for young people who otherwise would have had no occasion to meet one another to become friends. There was, for instance, a network of young people I met in Jining who had originally come together through an anime and manga club, but they had many of them become friends beyond the scope of the club itself, socializing in many different settings. A few of them had even joined together to open a drinks bar, principally not even so much a business with the intention of making money as a to provide a venue for their friends to socialize in. On several occasions they had organized paintball matches or a trip to the movies. Other times they simply got together to eat or play card games or while away the time.

Other examples could be supplied, and there is certainly far more to be said about such groups, how they are organized and maintained, the reciprocity and nature of their con-
stituent ties and so forth. But what is important to observe here is that such social spheres, and the friendship ties formed within them, are a relatively new phenomenon, one that reflects and represents the loosening and breaking open of old social spheres. The social lives of young people in Jiaxiang and (perhaps even more so) in Jining are no longer circumscribed by family, school, work, or neighborhood. And unlike such more traditional sites of embedment and social interaction, these new social spheres are entirely voluntary. Those who participate in them are not passively placed into them; individuals must actively seek them out on their own initiative.

These are subtle trends, and all the more difficult to perceive because they are already so familiar in the United States and other Western countries as to appear almost natural, but they do mark a definite departure from the past. The social relationships of young people in Jiaxiang are not so confined and constrained as they once were, nor are they all automatically conferred by one's membership to a formal social group.

Concluding remarks

As youth in Jiaxiang slipped from one unstable job to the next, as they scrambled to save money for their futures, or lost out in unfortunate business ventures, and migrated back and forth across the province and the country, they were always linked into a web of personal relationships. Those relationships were often unobtrusive, working almost imperceptibly in the background, but the lives of young people in Jiaxiang could not be fully understood
without them. These relationships formed, in part if not in whole, the matrix in which so much activity took place. If youth in Jiaxiang were scripting their own biographies, their friendships were often a part of that, aiding one another in finding employment and spouses, offering loans of money and joining in business ventures, and generally facilitating the business of everyday life.

But in addition to mitigating risks and providing support in the face of both age-old and novel problems of work, love lives, and making their way in the world, friends were also something a bit more. It is easy to forget that friendship is fundamentally no different from other types of personal and social relationships, in that it too is subject to the vagaries of social change. Between growing urbanization, greater mobility, and disruption to established social environments like school, workplace, and neighborhood, friendships themselves have been altered. Young people from Jiaxiang are apt to find themselves repeatedly thrust into new social environments, accumulating more and more diverse personal connections in more contexts. But beyond this increased dynamism in sociality, young people's social worlds are also no longer so circumscribed as they might have been had they been born even just a generation earlier. As state control over personal life has receded, new spaces and channels for sociality have opened up—still limited in scope, it is true, but there nonetheless. Whether through online chat groups or recreational clubs based around shared interests, young men from Jiaxiang had the option of entering novel types of social spheres. And, crucially, that optionality marks such friendships apart from many more traditional ties. Such new social spheres can create an environment in which individuals may reembed themselves, seeking out for themselves precisely the forms of intimacy and social meaning they desire.
Near the end of my time in China, while I was living in Jining, a friend put me in touch with a young man in his mid-twenties by the name of Tang Biao. Tang Biao was from Jinxiang, the neighboring county and xiancheng immediately to the south of Jiaxiang. Planning on soon going to Canada for graduate study, Tang Biao wanted to meet me and get a chance to practice his English skills before a final, critical interview. And so one afternoon we met up and he led me to a coffeehouse which, as is typical in cities like Jining, was both spacious and nearly deserted. We sat down at a table flanked on either side by oversized couches and started to talk.

It turned out that he had gone to college in Beijing and then spent some time working at a small university publishing unit in the city. But like so many of his peers he was not yet satisfied, and hoped to achieve more with his life. With his family’s encouragement he had applied to a graduate program in Toronto, Canada, and had been accepted. It would be
some weeks yet before he left the country, but already he was thinking about the long term and was planning on working towards getting Canadian citizenship. His father, he explained, was keen on the idea—largely, he said, because he would be able to have more than one child in Canada.

But the course of the conversation wandered, touching on subjects that by then had become terribly familiar. With hardly any prompting he began to speak about his generation, the 80’ers, and their common lot. He volunteered his views about the Tiananmen massacre of 1989, and told how when he was at college the professors and administrators had actively prohibited students from anything that might be construed as a form of political protest. He talked about the ant tribe, noting that many of his college classmates now belonged to it. “When I was in Beijing I thought it was very unequal,” he said, an observation that was reinforced for him when he returned to his rural home, where he recognized he fell into the relative upper class, even though in Beijing he was at best average. Above all, he was exquisitely aware of the trials that his generation faced. Without guanxi or money, he said, it was impossible to get ahead—and thus many of his peers fell into undesirable, underpaid jobs.

“So many young people feel adrift, they’re depressed, and they have no direction.”

Over the course of the preceding chapters I have attempted to build a portrait of the lives of young men from Jiaxiang as they were at the beginning of the 21st century. They are a very particular group and distinctive in many ways, with experiences that are peculiar to their own locality and moment in time. But what unites them with the rest of Chinese youth, and perhaps also, to a degree, with contemporary youth in many other parts of the world, is the basic uncertainty that has been woven into their lives. Many of them are con-
tented, successful, and settled down, but many more are not. And the instability of their lives is not explained away by their being in the midst of a transition to adulthood, because the nature of that transition itself is not a given and has changed with time. Thus many youth are, as Tang Biao put it, adrift and without direction. To put it another way, they know what is expected of them, but not how to achieve it—or even if they truly want it.

In China today the conjoined systems of education and employment are broadly similar to those found in most other developed, industrialized, capitalist countries. That similarity is neither accidental nor is it to be taken for granted. Between the influence of Western school models in the early 20th century and the economic transformations of the Reform Era, China’s school system and job market have together largely converged with those elsewhere, not necessarily in their particular features, but in the essential relationship between education and work. Schooling has become compulsory, but also necessary, inasmuch as some modest level of educational credentials has been made a prerequisite for all but the least desirable of jobs. Meanwhile, youth are kept out of the labor market for years longer than was once the norm, and the required credentials for the most coveted jobs continually escalate, driving many young people to pursue still more schooling. But within this political economy of education new structures have arisen that compel young people to make serial and strategic choices about their own educations and employment. They may oscillate in and out of school, often running into deadend employment options, and what jobs do they find often may collapse under their feet. There is an unceasing churn of activity, uncertainty, and questioning.

In their private lives young men are caught between clashing forces. They have the
freedom to seek out and choose their own marriage partners, but the individual, familial, and societal assumption that they will marry remains almost too powerful to even question. And yet the simple facts of imbalanced sex ratios and the high expectations of women and their families place men under inordinate pressure; ultimately, perhaps, a minority of young men will be unable to find marriage partners, no matter how much they may wish to. Still, as “conservative” as marriage in rural China is or appears to be, seemingly allowing only a narrow space in which men have freedom of choice, there is freedom nonetheless, and that freedom creates scattered and differentiated responses. There are those who are content with marriages of pragmatism and expect little, while others agonize over the question of what they truly want in and from their marriages and how to compromise among their desires. And, finally, there are a very few who have determined that (heterosexual) marriage cannot satisfy their desires and so have taken the most radical choice of opting out of marriage altogether.

Between the major events and turning points such as graduation, employment, and marriage, young people carry on with their lives and pursue leisure in one form or another, whether it is gathering together for lavish banquet dinners or whiling away hours playing cards and watching television. New patterns of and opportunities for consumption have arisen, and compared to prior generations young people are preeminent consumers. They spend freely on personal needs and wants—oftentimes subsidized by their more frugal parents. They buy, or long to buy, a raft of luxury goods (everything from clothes to cars to homes), while also availing themselves of new forms of consumption, including nights out at the movies or travelling abroad for holidays. But this newfound materialism feeds into the
continually evolving individualization of the youth generation, creating and imposing choices of lifestyles and personal goals. At the same time, this materialism virtually constitutes or defines the youth generation's general apoliticism—their almost exclusive focus on the cultivation of their personal interests is, almost definitionally, a form of social and political disengagement, a development that the state has abetted even as it has criticized it.

Finally, a quiet and almost unnoticed evolution has occurred in the social landscape. Whereas the social lives and networks of young people born in the countryside were once relatively dense and well contained, they have now grown more dispersed and open, a consequence of increased geographic mobility, more frequent jumps between institutional social contexts such as school and workplace, and the birth of new venues and sites for creating intimate social bonds centered around shared interests or consumption habits. But it is not merely that the social ties of young people are more numerous or scattered than they once were; an element of choice has entered into sociality, and in several ways. As young people shift in and out of particular school classes and workplaces, the maintenance of older ties becomes an active, rather than passive, task. More crucially, the appearance of new channels for sociality requires that individuals voluntarily and deliberately take part; one is assigned to a school class, but one does not likely join a recreational or hobby club by default.

It was with this last topic that my fieldwork began, with an intention to study intimate and affective social relationships among youth, but it evolved naturally, and perhaps almost inevitably, into something else. Beginning from the everyday experience, dilemmas, frustrations, habits, and choices of the young people I came into contact with it soon encompassed the other topics covered here. It developed, ultimately, into something like a col-
lective biography of Chinese youth, and an account of how they were making a transition into adulthood that, in a way, had not been done before. More than being merely a series of vignettes on separate subjects, the preceding chapters each tell something of that collective story of a particular generation, a story that is about their confrontation with a novel and still evolving set of social conditions. Each of these chapters has therefore had to serve dual purposes. On the more superficial level they have each explored selected dimensions of young people's experience in China at the start of the 21st century, attesting to the dramatic alterations that have taken place in the last twenty to thirty years across multiple domains of Chinese society. They document key facets of youth experience, along the way accounting for how they have achieved their current state of affairs. On the other level, however, these several episodic chapters work in combination to point to something larger than the specific issues they treat with, a higher-level pattern of social change. Between these otherwise disconnected problems of employment, sociality, marriage, and so on, there is an underlying commonality, namely the process and results of individualization.

And thus throughout this dissertation I have drawn heavily on the individualization thesis, principally as outlined by Ulrich Beck, in order to try to bring to light certain dimensions of the lives of Chinese youth. This was a considered choice, although, it must said, not the only possible one. Other theoretical perspectives could be applied. One could just as well rewrite their story as one of being caught up in a long, slow transition away from traditional peasant life to a more “modern” urban society, or of dealing with the progressively unfolding aftereffects of a hard shift from Maoist socialism to Reform Era capitalism. Certainly, I do not mean to suggest that the individualization thesis explains everything and in full; the facts
of my informants' lives were too complex and too varied to be neatly explicated by any one theory. And even though the various chapters of this dissertation have each dealt with a distinctly different facet of my informants' lives, they have not exhausted all there is to say, or even addressed every subject that arose in the course of my fieldwork. The subjects covered here have each acted as concrete demonstrations of how individualization has quietly crept into—or else emerged from—China's ongoing societal transformation. The changes of the past thirty-odd years in China of course have no one explanation, and various theories can (and have been) mapped onto the observed realities. But a focus on individualization draws together otherwise separate factors, connecting structural transformation to individual agency, and in several ways.

Here at the close, a few final words are due on the implications of this work, both for the study of China and its youth generation at large, and for the application of individualization theory at wider or even global scale.

Though it should perhaps go without saying, this is very much a case of generational disjuncture such as was postulated by Margaret Mead, in which many if not all of traditional models for living are no longer so reliable and relevant for the youth generation, and new models are sought after. But to observe that there has been such a dramatic social change in the youth generation is not enough; that change must be accounted for, described, and understood, and for that end I have turned to individualization theory. In this process I have of course cycled across a number of subjects, touching on matters of recent history and localized geography, of demography, political economy, marketization, neoliberalism, globalization, and more. The conditions under which the 80's and early 90's generation in Jiaxiang
have grown up cannot be understood apart from this sprawling context. Individualization theory, however, may be unique in its ability to weave together both the structural elements of change on the one hand, and the actual, lived experience of Chinese youth caught in the midst of that very change on the other. What we have seen throughout, regardless of the topic in question, is a structural change whereby state, family, and other institutional supports are withdrawn and individuals are made more responsible for their own fates. Simultaneously, this is reflected in the actual experience of young people: their doubt and vacillation over what they truly want, their apprehensions and aspirations for the future. They are, as Tang Biao said, adrift—or, if that word is too pessimistic, then at least unbound. I must emphasize that this dissertation has not been a polemic on individualization or its consequences. As troubling and disruptive as individualization can be for some, it has also been liberating for others, making it possible for them to pursue desires that, had they been born in another time, might have been beyond reach if they were even conceivable. Perhaps one of the most useful insights that Ulrich Beck has provided through his work is that these two polar experiences of the “modern world”—existential uncertainty and personal liberation—are often linked at the root, in the problem of choice being both a freedom and an obligation.

The result, in any case, is that a kind of “normalized chaos” has displaced the relatively constraining customs and parental dictates that once would have shaped young Chinese people’s lives into a more or less fixed form. And it would be easy to mistake such “normalized chaos” as an intrinsic feature youth and the transition to adulthood itself, but that, ironically, is only because it has become so widespread in the contemporary Western world
that it can now appear natural. China's own recent history of the Maoist period has shown that freedom and instability are not the assured destiny of youth, but that rather they have emerged out of a social restructuring: the dismantled collectivist system, the changed relationship between state and individual, the end of arranged marriage and the weakening of the hold of family over personal life decisions, the expansion of lifestyle and career options. This possibly is one of the greatest offerings of an individualization framework for studying contemporary China—more than merely acknowledging the country's disorienting social change, it presents a way to explain it systematically.

But as argued in the first chapter, the individualization of Chinese youth cannot be understood apart from the basics of geography. Even as peripatetic as Chinese youth have become, geography still matters: where they are born, where they grow up, where they go to school, where they live and work all have the simplest yet most profound effects on their life chances. Even more, the possibilities open to them are defined in large part by the differentials of geography—between village and xiancheng, and between xiancheng and city. The degree of freedom young people experience to make choices, and indeed the very breadth of possibilities open to them, cannot be assessed without the simple knowledge of where they are. And as quaint as the idea may seem, life and lifestyle in the xiancheng and its satellite villages are genuinely more circumscribed than in the cities. Both disembedding and the compulsion of choice—two of the key processes and features of individualization—are therefore to an extent structured along geographical lines. No few young people from Jiaxiang have and will continue to trade upwards on the geographical hierarchy, relocating to the xiancheng, or the city center of Jining, or some place farther and more cosmopolitan still.
And that progressive movement is as much a story of individuals seeking out lives of their own choice and design as it is a matter of grand scale economics and urbanization. Meanwhile, there will be those who hold back; ones who do not go as far afield as they could, or who leave only to return.

For those from the countryside, and more so perhaps than for urban youth, there remains a greater sense or semblance of continuity with tradition. Most young people in Jiaxiang did not have radical notions of themselves, nor did many of them aim outside the scope of traditional permissibility for their life choices. All the various communal pressures, from when to marry to how to dress, are perceptibly stronger in the countryside. If one were forced to generalize, then it would have to be said that the countryside is (or at least appears) more conservative in many ways. Conformity to tradition, however, is not necessarily the antithesis to individualization that it might seem. On the contrary, it may be only one more face of individualization. After all, if individualization is defined by disembedding and the chaos and confusion of individual choice that results, then it is a highly generalized process, and one that can take on many forms and can exist in varying degrees. What requires more research, therefore, is the divergence between the countryside and the cities, or the divide between those who choose traditional conformity and those who choose radical nonconformity in their self-crafted biographies. Why do traditional norms, weakened though they may be, persist a little more strongly, or give way a little more slowly, in the countryside than in the cities? It cannot be assumed that this is unproblematic, or an innate difference between rural and urban. Dynamic processes are involved, out-migration to the cities not least among them. I have attempted to give a few preliminary answers as to how in-
Individualization may operate and manifest differently between rural and urban communities, but far more comprehensive study is needed to address such questions. Equally, the rural-urban disparity recommends that future work give more consideration to how the limits and possibilities of choice may differ for rural youth than for urban.

And yet if the evidence is clear that individualization is now unfolding within China (albeit in variegated ways across communities and regions), it is also a demonstration of how that individualization is historically and geographically particular. Whereas the path of individualization traced in Western Europe by scholars like Beck, Beck-Gernsheim, Giddens and others has a certain localized and historicized specificity, founded in such sociocultural legacies as Enlightenment philosophy and the European welfare states (Yan 2010), the individualization that is now underway in China has clearly different origins and different manifestations. Whether it is in how the state relates to individuals, or in the level of control family institutions exert over individual choice, individualization in China has come about through distinctly alternative routes and mechanisms. And though the same general effect is achieved in the end, the forces driving and sustaining individualization in both regions are not static, and further work and close attention will be needed to chart the separate courses of European and Chinese individualization.

Certainly, more remains. Inasmuch as this is a biography of a generation of youth, it is as yet unfinished, and hopefully there will be future work that will continue to follow this cohort as they complete their transition to social adulthood, and perhaps beyond. As noted in the introduction, I have not dealt here with questions of homebuying or childrearing, though these are both among the nominal criteria for men to achieve full adulthood. Not
enough of the young men I met had yet reached those mileposts, though they were perhaps
on their way. Some later work will be needed to address these issues as well, and in the same
light.

But more profoundly, the story of this cohort will hardly end even once they have
settled into their adult lives, as many of the issues raised here will potentially continue to af-
fect them for years to come. In the 1980s, many adults who had thought that they had se-
cure, life-long employment under the socialist system suddenly found themselves, in midlife,
having to xiahai, or take the plunge into the private sector of the economy. And while this
did bring positive outcomes for many, it also brought about an inordinate level of disrup-
tion. Likewise, the current youth generation may very well face further instability in their
lives, not least because there are even fewer guarantees for them than were for their parents'
generation. For the foreseeable future at least, the pace and vicissitudes of economic, politi-
cal, and social change show no sign of abating. Individualization is, once again, not an ab-
sence of structure, but a certain configuration of structures, and social structures are always
susceptible to change.

* * *

Young men from such a rural area as Jiaxiang, born and raised in villages and small towns, are
in a precarious place—they are in the midst of a transition into adulthood, their lives rapidly
changing, and yet they also have fallen into a peculiar moment in history when the common
biography itself is also changing. Most young men in Jiaxiang still try to make the traditional
life course fit with the realities of their modern lives: they try to become working adults, husbands, home-owners, and fathers, all according to a certain timeline and to certain definitions and standards. But structures in the present are not what they were even a generation ago. There is no longer any guaranteed job placement, no arranged marriage, no fixed community to belong to, no single model to live by. As much as the traditional, normative life is still possible, it is only by choice, deliberate effort, and improvised means.

The individualization framework, however, lends a coherence to these young men's otherwise diverse and idiosyncratic experiences. There were a very few like Tang Biao, who was well-educated, a soon-to-be emigrant with a family that was at least well enough off that they could cover most of the basic expenses of his study abroad, and who was more attuned to and aware of various political matters. Then again there were those like Li Kui, or Han Jia, or any number of others who had not even attended high school, and were unlikely to ever leave the xiancheng, let alone the country. But as much as there was any constant among them, it was that despite their disparate backgrounds and present circumstances they were all confronted with much the same problems, the same questions, doubts, risks, obligations and choices. Regardless of their personal circumstances, they all were compelled to make decisions about career, money, marriage, and the future. Viewing all of this through the lens of individualization is productive, as it helps to make sense of the amalgam of choice of necessity, freedom and obligation, purpose and aimlessness.

Young men who grew up in Jiaxiang were not like their more urban peers in major cities, who have been so much better studied; nor, for the most part, did they fit neatly into any one of the prototypical social categories that researchers have been most concerned
with, like migrant workers or urban white collar workers or members of the so-called ant
tribe. There were those with little formal education and humble backgrounds who, rather
than head off into the flood or rural migrants looking for work in the cities, stayed in the xi-
ancheng and made an adequate if unremarkable living as shopkeepers, small business owners,
or working in minor trades. There were those with college degrees, albeit usually from not
very high-ranking schools, who simply got by in low-paying office work. So many of the
youth from Jiaxiang occupied an indeterminate and ambiguous middleground; they did not
belong to the most destitute or disenfranchised, but they were also remote from the bur-
geoning urban middle class.

And so while they felt the same effects of the same societal changes that other ethno-
graphers have charted in the urban centers and among select populations, they also lived in
contact with lingering traditional norms. Young men from Jiaxiang might go off to college,
travel, jump between jobs in rapid succession, have a series of romantic relationships before
marriage, question what they wanted to achieve and what lifestyle they should aspire to, but
they and nearly everyone around them nonetheless expected that they would meet certain
traditional standards for adulthood. They still expected to marry, to have children, to buy a
home and settle down. Some things were still beyond questioning, except for a daring few.

What I have tried to convey here is a total picture of the lives of young men in Jiaxi-
ang as they were in the little time that I had to observe. Inevitably, that picture is incomplete
and imperfect, but it is enough to see that there has been an overarching pattern of change to
how young people in rural China grow up in the early 21st century. They face longer school-
ing, a more fluid labor market, more liberty in romantic relationships and marriage, greater
choices of consumption and yet greater disparities of wealth and standards of living, wider and more open social worlds. It is a life which contains many of the same elements as in past generations, but with more instability and confusion, more freedom to choose, but also more risk, because they are more on their own than ever before. For some, like Liang Kan, the path was relatively straightforward as they accepted and conformed to traditional patterns of maturity; for others it was far more difficult, with this period of their lives being marked not necessarily so much by resistance as hesitation and uncertainty. The way in which they went about sorting out their lives and futures could not be explained simply by a new set of norms, because they were no norms, or at least none strong enough to completely rule their decisions. And in the void left by withdrawn institutions and dismantled structures, they are forced to improvise their way through new conditions.


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