

## Introduction

### *The Chinese Family and the Study of Private Life*

On a summer day in 1990, Mr. Hu Yanjun, a 46-year-old man in Xiajia village, wrote the following eulogy to the ideal family:

The family is a harmonious whole  
that is created by the universe;  
containing the personal happiness of family life,  
it is the origin of well-being  
and the symbol of warmth.<sup>1</sup>

Later that year Mr. Hu renovated his house and landscaped the courtyard, constructing a billboard-like decorative wall (about two by two-and-a-half meters) on the right side of a formal entrance arch, facing the street. He then had a local artist inscribe his family eulogy onto the wall. Underneath the huge Chinese character *jia* (family) that occupied half of the wall, the main text was inscribed in a classical style of calligraphy in red against a yellow background with sky-blue and white borders. Mr. Hu's original purpose

was to use his family ideal to educate his children and grandchildren about the beauty and significance of the family in one's life, something he had been trying to do for years. Once the project was completed, the inscription on the wall and his new courtyard became a landmark in Xiajia and the neighboring villages.

Having worked as a main cadre in Xiajia for many years before his retirement in 1988, Mr. Hu is a very capable man and probably the most powerful father in the village, living in a rich and close-knit extended family of ten people in three generations, including two daughters-in-law and three grandchildren.<sup>2</sup> Although he did not even complete his secondary school education because of family difficulties in the early 1960s, Hu likes to read and write. He has written several dozen poems and short essays expressing his feelings and his understanding of life, people, and the world, which he shares with his children and other relatives. Mr. Hu has always been concerned with the emotional and spiritual quality of family life. He told me that, in addition to frequent family meetings on important issues, he spent his leisure time with his two married sons, watching TV, listening to popular music, or playing mahjong. He considers his best and most successful effort to be a special family party for family members and relatives visiting from other villages and cities during the 1991 Chinese Spring Festival.

With more than forty people in attendance, the family party began at 7:30 P.M. and ended at 2:00 A.M. the next day. It was full of fun, laughter, and emotional communication. Most of the younger guests—Mr. Hu's children, nephews, and nieces—contributed entertainment, including speeches, songs, and jokes, which they worked on for weeks before the party. Mr. Hu had assigned a special task to his only daughter (who then at the age of 19 was studying at an occupational school): to comment on the strengths and weaknesses of each family member. To everyone's surprise, when commenting on her father, she criticized him for not treating her mother well. She said, as quoted by Mr. Hu: "In my memory you rarely talked with my mother unless you had to; you always went out after dinner, spending time with your colleagues instead of with my mother. Now you have retired from the office and have begun to spend more time with us, but you still do not spend much time with my mother." The daughter's open criticism, as Hu recalled, shocked him and moved his wife to tears. For a while, everyone at the party was speechless. After that encounter Mr. Hu indeed tried to improve his own conjugal

relationship, something he had neglected for many years. His efforts were admired by his fellow villagers, who agreed that people should do more to improve family harmony and build a happier family life.

Here, the intriguing point is that Mr. Hu and his fellow villagers regarded the family as a warm place for personal happiness where emotionality and affectionate ties hold a central place. Moreover, they also believed that the ideal of family happiness could be achieved through efforts to increase understanding and affection among family members. In other words, the family became, in both the villagers' life aspirations and lived experiences, a new haven for individuals that was actualized in a somewhat dramatized form during the Spring Festival party at Mr. Hu's house. The importance of personal happiness in family life and the centrality of the individual—the two most important implications of Mr. Hu's story—however, are rarely studied in existing scholarly accounts of the Chinese family.

### The Corporate Family and the Missing Individual

Because my goal in this book is to study how individual villagers in one community live their private lives, I do not attempt to provide a comprehensive review of the literature of the Chinese family, which is too rich to be covered in only a few pages. Suffice it to say that, given the primacy of the family in Chinese society, family change has long been a central concern among China scholars. In addition to early and general surveys of the Chinese family (see, e.g., Lang 1946; Levy 1949), we find an abundance of ethnographic accounts of the family institution and family life, many of which, however, are embedded in accounts of the Chinese kinship system.<sup>3</sup>

The dominant approach in the study of the Chinese family is the “corporate model,” which sees the family primarily as an economic entity composed of rational, self-interested members. According to this approach, the Chinese family is an organization characterized by a common budget, shared property, and a household economy that relies on a strict pooling of income. Family-owned property serves as the most important mechanism to shape the actions of maximizing persons. A key feature of the Chinese family is its flexibility and entrepreneurial ability to make the best of both family resources (capital and labor) and outside opportunities in larger social settings. Variations in family

structure, and by implication, family change, therefore, are ultimately determined by the economic self-interest of the domestic group as a corporate enterprise (see, e.g., Baker 1979; Cohen 1970, 1976; Fei [1947] 1992; Freedman [1961] 1979; Gallin and Gallin 1982; Harrell 1982; A. Wolf 1985).

To date, Myron Cohen's 1976 book remains the most comprehensive and influential work on the subject, in which he proposes a powerful analytic framework of the Chinese family, showing the countless variations in corporateness over the family cycle. According to Cohen (1976), the Chinese family consists of three organizational elements: the estate, the economy, and the group. Responding to different social conditions, the actual structural composition of these three elements may vary greatly, and the key element that determines whether married brothers stay together or live separately is the individual act of self-management. This is an important contribution that simultaneously deconstructs and perfects the corporate family model. Emphasizing the rationality and management skills of the villagers, Cohen also critiques the "dumb Chinese peasant" rhetoric common both to the Chinese elite and to some Western scholars at that time, a theme that he elaborates in detail later (see Cohen 1993).

Equally important is Margery Wolf's (1972) groundbreaking ethnography on women in rural Taiwan families, which alters earlier conceptions of the Chinese family as a harmonious group. Wolf reveals the complex nature of the domestic sphere in which women actively mobilize resources and attempt to advance their own interests and construct another family of their own—the "uterine family." Defined as a women's unit built on sentiments and personal loyalties that die with its members, the concept of the uterine family constitutes the first attempt to challenge and deconstruct the corporate model of the Chinese family.

Since the 1980s, feminist scholars have unpacked the family from a gender perspective and shed new light on family change and women's liberation in China. They argue that although the socialist revolution made some changes in marriage customs and intergenerational relations, it failed to realize the party-state's promise of gender equality and family reforms because of the deep-rooted ideology and structure of the patriarchal family (K. A. Johnson 1983; Stacey 1983; and M. Wolf 1985). Ellen Judd reexamines the issue of the state and family change in the contemporary context of rural reforms, focusing on the interplay between power and gender (Judd 1994). Although

the feminist studies focus on the life experiences of women, none of them questions the corporate nature of the Chinese family, which most scholars accept as a given.

Many studies of family change in the postcollective era emphasize the increasingly important role that family labor has played in the rural economy. These studies reveal complicated patterns of family behavior that reflect distinctive regional economies, ethnic cultures, overseas connections, and local histories, as well as the influence of state policies (see esp. Croll 1987; G. Johnson 1993; Harrell 1993; S. Huang 1992; Lively and Ren 1992; and Selden 1993). Nevertheless, influenced by the corporate model, most analyses continue to focus on changes in family size and household composition. Although the younger generation's demands for conjugal independence have been recognized in some of these studies (see, e.g., Cohen 1992, 1999; Selden 1993), the nuclearization of the family, together with a few important customs such as marriage patterns, postmarital residence, and family division, remains the ultimate standard by which family change is measured in rural China (see essays in Davis and Harrell 1993; a notable exception is Whyte 1995).

On another front of scholarly inquiry, the corporate model has been employed to explain the record-breaking economic performance of Chinese populations (which began in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore and has continued more recently in mainland China). Some scholars challenged the dominant view that the Chinese family is an obstacle to economic development by pointing out the corporate features of the Chinese family (see Berger and Hsiao 1988). The predatory and irrational policies of former Chinese governments are now regarded as the primary reasons that China did not develop more rapidly earlier. Once these governments got "out of the way," the positive contributions of the Chinese family to development became apparent (Harrell 1985; Wong 1985).<sup>4</sup> A more balanced view holds that the Chinese family contains a mixture of tendencies, some favorable and others unfavorable to development. It is the outside forces and institutions that determine whether positive or negative tendencies predominate in household farming and family business (Whyte 1996).<sup>5</sup>

In this connection, Susan Greenhalgh's work on the family firm is particularly noteworthy; she begins to take the corporate model apart by revealing the neglected political dimension of the Chinese family. She points out that

the corporatism of the contemporary family is actually the reinvention of a tradition found in a particular national and global political economy that gave aspiring entrepreneurs few choices but to build their firms with their families. The notion of the unified, cohesive, mutually supportive family, far from being a reality, is a political construction that conceals broad inequalities between genders and generations (Greenhalgh 1994b).

In short, despite a few attempts to modify or challenge the corporate model, most existing studies place a heavy emphasis on the corporate nature of the Chinese family, particularly its “collective action” in responding to social change in larger settings. Accordingly, it is the public domain—economic, political, and jural—of domestic life that attracts the most scholarly attention, while the private and personal domain is by and large overlooked. None of the above-mentioned critiques of the corporate model has gone far enough to bring out the individual experiences in family life. When commenting on Judith Stacey’s 1983 book, Rubie Watson correctly points out: “For a book about the family, there is not much here about the internal dynamics of domestic life” (1985: 62). This comment can be applied to many other works that either explicitly or implicitly employ the corporate model, in which the structural principles, behavioral norms, and state policies weigh much more than individual agency and interpersonal dynamics. As a result, the individual has long been missing from scholarly discourse on rural family life in China. Thus far, we know more about the family as an institution than about the individuals who live within the institution, more about changes in family structure than we know about changes in actual family life, and more about family life in cities than that in the countryside.<sup>6</sup>

Here I must note that the corporate model is indeed a powerful framework for characterizing the traditional family in China, that many of its generalizations may remain valid for current family life, and that my own research was inspired and initially guided by the same theoretical framework. It was only during my fieldwork for this book over the eleven years from 1989 to 2000 that I gradually realized that the corporate model, while shedding light on many issues, cannot explain some other equally important areas of family life. As far as contemporary family life is concerned, it is at least inaccurate to assume that individuals always put family interest above personal interest. Emotionality, desires, and personal freedom have become so

important in everyday negotiation and contestation among family members that an individual would be unlikely to sacrifice his or her interests simply for the sake of reproducing the family.

Moreover, the family is also a cultural construct, “a ‘socially necessary illusion’ about why the social division of obligations and rights is natural or just” (Coontz 1988: 14). A new perception about what a family ought to be may shape individual behavior within the family and transform the family institution. Thus the pursuit of family economic interests is insufficient to explain all the changes in family life, such as individual demands for intimacy and privacy. This is particularly true in contemporary China, where the standard of living has significantly improved since the 1980s and people can make choices in accordance with necessity and with personal life aspirations. For instance, the emotional family that Hu Yanjun of Xiajia village wrote about and tried to realize is fundamentally different from the Chinese family in our received wisdom, which is highly disciplined, hierarchical, and corporate in nature. Therefore, major revisions of the corporate model and a search for a new approach to studying the private lives of individuals are now in order.

### Toward a Private Life Approach

While Mr. Hu and other villagers in Xiajia taught me the limitations of the corporate model through their positioned views and lived experiences, I was also inspired by Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby’s *A History of Private Life* to search for a new approach to studying the Chinese family. Calling the history of private life untouched ground, Duby states: “We started from the obvious fact that at all times and in all places a clear, commonsensical distinction has been made between the public—that which is open to the community and subject to the authority of its magistrates—and the private” (Ariès and Duby 1987: viii). However, this five-volume work is all about Western Europe, mostly French society. As the editors and authors comb through historical records, it becomes clear that the family in Western Europe, which was previously subsumed by communal forms of sociability, emerged as the focus of private life by the eighteenth century and separated itself more sharply from the public in the nineteenth century: “It became something it has never

been: a refuge, to which people fled in order to escape the scrutiny of the outsiders; an emotional center; and a place where, for better or for worse, children were the focus of attention" (Ariès 1989: 8).<sup>7</sup>

The greatest benefit to me from reading the book was acquiring a basic understanding of the dual transformation of private life. First, the family, which in many societies previously served only as a social institution of production and reproduction, gradually evolved to be a center of private life and a refuge for individuals. Second, as the family became a private haven, individual family members began to have personal lives within the domestic sphere, hence the double meaning of private life—that of the family and that of the individual. This proposition is elaborated elegantly by Antoine Prost in his analysis of the spread of the notion of privacy from the upper class to all walks of social life in France. Writing on the changing nature of the modern family, Prost maintains:

In fact, the family has ceased to be a powerful institution; its privatization has amounted to a deinstitutionalization. Society is moving in the direction of what might be called 'informal families.' At the same time, however, it is within the family that individuals have won the right to an autonomous private life. Private life has assumed two interconnected forms: within the private life of the family the private life of the individual unfolds. (Prost 1991: 51)

Now a question arises: is the family also a private haven in contemporary rural China? Alternatively, do Chinese villagers also have individual personal lives within the family? It may be true that the family in rural China before the 1949 revolution was primarily a social institution and that villagers had little private life within the family (this remains questionable, however). But when talking about contemporary rural families, my answer to this question is strongly affirmative. The family eulogy by Mr. Hu and his New Year party provide clear proof.

After years of fieldwork on family change in Xiajia village, I was convinced that although the practice of radical socialism in rural China did not, as leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) intended it to, construct a new type of socialist family, it indeed produced significant changes in family relations and family ideology, such as an increase in youth autonomy, a decline of parental power, and a rise of young women as active agents in family politics.



Moreover, notions of romantic love, free choice in spouse selection, conjugal independence, and individual property that emerged during the collective era (1956–80) have become increasingly important in the domestic sphere since the 1980s. Rural collectivization and other socialist practices during the first three decades of the People's Republic of China brought an end to many of the public functions previously performed by the family; the family was privatized and ceased to be the overarching mode of social activities in rural China. This trend has continued in the postcollective era (1980 to the present) because decollectivization restored only family farming, not the entire familial mode of social organization. As a result, a similar dual transformation of private life has occurred: the family has become a private haven where the private lives of individuals thrive, and individual identity and subjectivity have emerged as well.<sup>8</sup>

Here, following the French historians, the private is defined broadly as a zone of immunity for individuals, a realm that is, ideally, not open to the scrutiny of the community and not subject to the intrusion of public authority. The core of this private realm is the family, the sphere of domesticity, secrecy, and privacy in the sense of rights protecting the individual against public authority (see also Moore 1984). One of the central questions in this book is whether, when collectivization broke up the previous system of social hierarchy based on kinship, it also created the antithesis of collectivity—namely, individuality. Similarly, when the state reconstructed the public in rural communities, how were the boundaries of the private also redefined?

To document and examine these changes, a new private life approach needs to be developed. Unlike the corporate model, the new approach will enable the researcher to examine family change from the perspective of individual agents and to explore areas that have been overlooked, such as emotionality, desire, intimacy, privacy, conjugality, individuality, and new forms of sociality. The first step toward such a private life approach, therefore, is to have an individual perspective that prioritizes the moral experience of individuals in a local world (to follow Arthur Kleinman's theory), rather than a perspective that prioritizes ethical discourse.

According to Kleinman, "Moral experience is always about practical engagements in a particular local world, a social space that carries cultural, political, and economic specificity" (1999: 365). In contrast, ethical discourses are principle-based abstract articulation and debate over codified values, and they

aim to be normative (1999: 363–64).<sup>9</sup> While acknowledging the importance of both, Arthur and Joan Kleinman have been advocating a new ethnography of moral experience since the early 1990s. Experience is defined as the felt flow of interpersonal communication, negotiation, contestation, and other sorts of engagements; it is “the intersubjective medium of social transactions in local moral worlds” (Kleinman and Kleinman 1991: 277; see also Kleinman 1999: 358–59).

In light of this theory of moral experience, it becomes clear to me that private life, viewed as a moral process, exists in the felt flow of interpersonal, intersubjective engagements and transactions in a local moral world. The family cannot always take precedence over its individual members, and a new focus in studying family life should be the lived experience of individuals. This is precisely what the corporate model of the Chinese family has missed, and it should be the departure point of the private life approach.

Methodologically, one of the best ways of studying the private lives of individual villagers is to do a fine-grained participatory ethnography, because it is “an engagement with others that brings the ethnographer into the ordinary, everyday space of moral processes in a local world” (Kleinman 1999: 413). The renewed interest in experience-near, individual-centered ethnography in medical-psychological anthropology has begun to influence biomedicine, cultural studies, and related fields (Hollan 1997; Hollan 2001; Kleinman 1999). According to Douglas Hollan, a strong advocate of individual (person)-centered ethnography, Robert LeVine first used the term *person-centered ethnography* in 1982 to refer to the experience-near ways of describing and analyzing human behavior, subjective experience, and psychological processes. The core of this research method or approach is an emphasis on the individual: “A primary focus of person-centered ethnography is on the individual and on how the individual’s psychological and subjective experience both shape, and are shaped by, social and cultural processes” (Hollan 1997: 219). It is therefore better termed an *individual-centered ethnography*.

In a sense, the call for experience-near, individual-centered ethnography is a return to tradition—the tradition of a detailed narrative of everyday life based on long-term and thorough fieldwork in a local community. But its new focus is on individual experience and agency rather than social structure or cultural norms. This is what I try to accomplish in this book, a major lesson of which is that individual-centered ethnography relies heavily on re-

peated fieldwork in one field site and longitudinal studies of the same local world. This is the method I used to gather the material for this book.

As indicated in the Preface, I lived in Xiajia village, Heilongjiang province, for seven years during the 1970s and conducted fieldwork there seven times between 1989 and 1999. Except for the first two trips, during which I focused on gift exchange and social networks, individual experiences in the private sphere were the focus of my research agenda from 1993 to 1999. More often than not, however, I ended up talking with villagers about anything but their private lives *per se*. For a variety of reasons, such as concerns with social face (*nianzi*), shame, and modesty, Xiajia villagers, like people elsewhere, were reluctant to reveal information about their intimate engagements with loved ones, their positive and negative feelings toward family members and other people, secrets regarding their achievements or failures in life, and so on.<sup>10</sup> It took tremendous time and effort on the part of both the villagers and the ethnographer to establish a solid ground of mutual trust and understanding. Only thereafter was I able to observe real life dramas and to collect accounts of moral experiences from my informants. It is well known that sometimes informants provide false information purposely,<sup>11</sup> and this is particularly true when they are asked to talk about their private lives simply because they have something more directly at stake in the private sphere. In this respect, repeated fieldwork can come to the rescue: the same informant who lies in the first interview may reveal his or her actual experience in the third or the seventh interview.

In 1991, for example, a woman who fell in love with and eventually married a man against strong parental objections in the early 1970s denied all the local stories about her romance. She even invented a narrative in which her parents played a leading role to arrange the happy union. She firmly told me that she never had any special feelings toward her husband before their wedding, despite the fact that he and I had worked together in the same collective during the 1970s and I was thus a “witness” to their romance. It was not until 1998 that she admitted her active role in their courtship and emotionally recalled some of the details of their love affair. This occurred during my fifth long chat with her and after many short conversations between 1991 and 1998. The trigger for her openness was what she considered the outrageously improper behavior of the younger generation in courtship, including her daughter’s involvement in premarital sex, which I learned about

through another channel—the family of the girl’s boyfriend. And it seemed rather accidental on that particular day for us to talk about the sex-related behavior of the young generation, because I had gone to her home to look at her newly remodeled house, which included newly separate bedrooms and a bathroom, and we had intended to discuss interior decoration.

Admittedly, had the woman told me the story of her romance in 1991 instead of 1998, the recollection would have been slightly or significantly different (but she would not have told me of it in 1991, for the reasons mentioned above). Interestingly, her account was still different in several important details from the story that I had heard from other sources at different times (including the 1970s). Yet, we cannot fully understand this woman’s moral experience without also knowing most (though not all) of the positioned views—hers and others’—regarding it. For this reason alone, the advantages of repeated fieldwork in the same site are obvious.

Moreover, fieldwork is also a process of moral engagement for the ethnographer (see Kleinman 1999). Ethnographers participate, from time to time, in the lives of the people they study and put their own decency and morality on the line. The more frequently an ethnographer visits the same field site and the longer her or his relationship with the informants lasts, the more responsibility he or she feels to accurately represent the moral experiences of the informants, which in turn leads to more fieldwork and self-discipline on the part of the ethnographer. This is because moral experience can only be understood through moral experience, just as a true gift can only be reciprocated with another gift.

Hollan identifies three approaches in doing individual-centered ethnography, which, respectively, emphasize personal accounts of subjective experience, participant observation of behavior and of what is at stake for informants, and embodiment of subjectivity on the tacit, visceral, unspeakable aspects of life experience (Hollan 1997; Hollan 2001). Each has its own limits, because life as lived is not life as experienced: “No matter how much we know about the concrete details of a person’s life, we can never really know how this person experiences a particular event without asking him or her about it” (Hollan 1997: 227). An ideal way of studying the felt flow of individual experiences, in my opinion, is to combine all three approaches in a longitudinal study of a local world. I believe that, had I not asked about the

enclosure of a separate bedroom in the woman's new house, we would not have talked about her daughter's sexual behavior, and she definitely would not have opened herself to recall her love affair of more than twenty years earlier. And the whole episode would not have been possible had I not chatted with her so many times since my first fieldwork in 1989.

With the individual perspective and the method of person-centered ethnography, this study represents my first attempt to apply a private life approach to studying the family and private life. Strictly speaking, this is only a partial attempt. As stated at the outset, I examine the rural family both as a social institution and as a private haven, which means that I draw upon the corporate model of the Chinese family as much as I critique it. One of the themes that I address throughout this book is the shifting role of the family from a social institution to a private haven for individuals—in other words, the rise of the private family. However, while the importance of the corporate family has declined, the private family is still in the process of developing. The weight of the private family in one's personal life also varies greatly across the boundaries of age, generation, gender, and personality, a factor that limits the depth of my inquiry. As James Watson notes: "In fieldwork you live where people live, you do what people do, and you go where people go" (1997: viii). In both real and symbolic terms, I can only go as far as my informants have been; hence the vacillation of my ethnographic descriptions between the corporate and private family in the following chapters.<sup>12</sup>

## The Organization of the Book

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the changing local moral world in Xiajia village in northeastern China. I first examine the political economy in the community, with a focus on village leadership and the reach of the socialist state into local society. Then I take a closer look at the major aspects of public life, such as sociability, morality, political participation, and the provision of public goods, and review the local kinship organization and social networks. Social changes in these three dimensions over the past five decades have contributed in major ways to the dual transformation of private life in this rural community.

In Chapter 2, I start the narrative of the rise of the private family with its emotional pretext—romantic love and spouse selection. Through a careful examination of nearly 500 marriages, I document the development of romantic love in courtship between 1949 and 1999. By the end of the 1990s, the focus of change in spouse selection had shifted from the rise of youth autonomy against parental control over their marriage to the saliency of the individual experience of romance and intimacy, a significant change that is explored in detail in Chapter 3. By tracing the origin of a local custom in the 1970s that allowed an engaged couple to spend time alone in an institutionalized time and space, I examine the emerging popularity of premarital sex and argue that sexual intimacy contributes to the development of affectionate love. A close look at the local forms of love expression and the changing discourse about the ideal spouse shows that a romantic revolution in spouse selection has occurred in both practice and ideology. Together these two chapters dispel the prevailing myth that Chinese villagers are not interested in or capable of romantic love. I call for more scholarly attention to the emotional world in rural society.

Chapter 4 is concerned with the structural change of family relations—the newly emerged centrality of the husband-wife relationship in the domestic sphere or, as I call it, the triumph of conjugality. Three important aspects of conjugality are examined: intimacy and conjugal love, division of labor and decision-making, and the redefinition of the gender role in the spousal relationship. While the horizontal conjugal tie replaced the vertical parent-son relationship as the central axis of family relations in both nuclear and stem households, parental authority and power further declined and the previously unprivileged members of the family—women and youth—began to acquire their own space and independence. The triumph of conjugality over patriarchy signals a turning point in the evolutionary history of the Chinese family.

In Chapter 5, I turn to the spatial transformation of private life as reflected in a wave of house remodeling in Xiajia village, focusing on how villagers defined, and were defined by, spatial relations in their house plans. Two kinds of privacy emerged: the privacy of the family and the privacy of individuals within the family. These in turn altered the previous pattern of intrafamilial relations. It becomes clear at the end of my inquiry that the vil-

lagers' pursuit of family privacy and personal space represents a logical development of love, intimacy, and conjugality.

Property rights are discussed in the context of family division and marriage transactions in Chapter 6. By examining three interrelated changes in the custom of family division and one radical development in the practice of bridewealth, I demonstrate the increasing importance of individual property rights in the politics of family property, tracing its origins to the collective period. Changes in this aspect of family life also reveal the disarray of the corporate structure of rural family organization.

The transformation of private life has not always been easy; it is a process full of confusion, anger, despair, and suffering in both emotional and material terms. Generally speaking, several generations of parents have gradually lost their power, privilege, prestige, and secure position at home. In Chapter 7, I examine the living conditions of elders and the sense of crisis regarding old-age security among aging parents 45 and older. Taking into account the views of both the senior and junior generations, I argue that the traditional mechanism of intergenerational reciprocity has broken down and that it has been replaced with a new logic of balanced exchange. To cope with the change, parents employ a variety of strategies to invest in old-age security, thus redefining the notion of filial piety.

The crisis of filial piety is one of the causes that led to the making of a new fertility culture, an important change that is discussed in Chapter 8. Birth control is an area where the Chinese state has significantly reshaped the family and family life in urban and rural areas alike. Ethnographic evidence shows, however, that villagers are not merely victims of the state policies of strict population control; instead, from the inception of the birth control regulations, different individuals have adopted different strategies, ranging from confrontation, passive resistance, and cooperation to adaptation to the new fertility values. By analyzing individual responses to the state-sponsored program, particularly those of young parents who chose to have only one child—an only daughter in some cases—I analyze the sociocultural reasons for the emergence of a new fertility culture.

In the concluding chapter I argue that what has occurred over the past five decades represents the transformation of private life in a dual sense: the rise of the private family and of the private lives of the individuals within

the family. The essence of this transformation lies in the development of individuality, rather than in household size or family structure, though the latter have changed significantly as well.

Then I address the rise of the individual and the role of the socialist state in transforming family life. Rural youth, particularly young women, have played a major role in transforming the family institution through their expression of the three major components of their subjective world: autonomy, emotionality, and desires. The development of individual identity and subjectivity, however, is unbalanced and incomplete because the newly emerged individualism tends to emphasize individual rights and personal interests while downplaying a person's obligations to the community and other individuals. In other words, many individuals have lost a basic sense of civility and have thus become uncivil.

The socialist state has played a key role in the transformation of private life and in the formation of the uncivil individual. The state was a major force in initiating or causing profound changes in both the family and the local moral world between 1949 and 1999. From the 1950s to the 1970s, several generations of youths were sometimes encouraged and sometimes led by the state to challenge patriarchal and communal power; they gradually gained more autonomy and independence in their private lives yet became dependents of the collectives and the state in public life. While opening up new horizons for individual development in certain aspects, the retreat of the state that started in the early 1980s also created a social vacuum of moral values and behavioral norms that was soon to be filled by sweeping consumerism and other values of utilitarian individualism of late capitalist society. Contextualizing the changes in the private sphere in the larger social setting shows that the decline of public life, the near-absence of community power, the increasingly predatory local government, and the accelerating pressure of competition in a market-oriented economy all contributed to the rapid spread of egotism and the rise of the uncivil individual.

The transformation of the private sphere, after all, is inevitably linked to, and often a response to, the larger transformations in the public sphere and society as a whole. Thus this study begins with a careful survey of the changing local moral world in which villagers live their public and their private lives.