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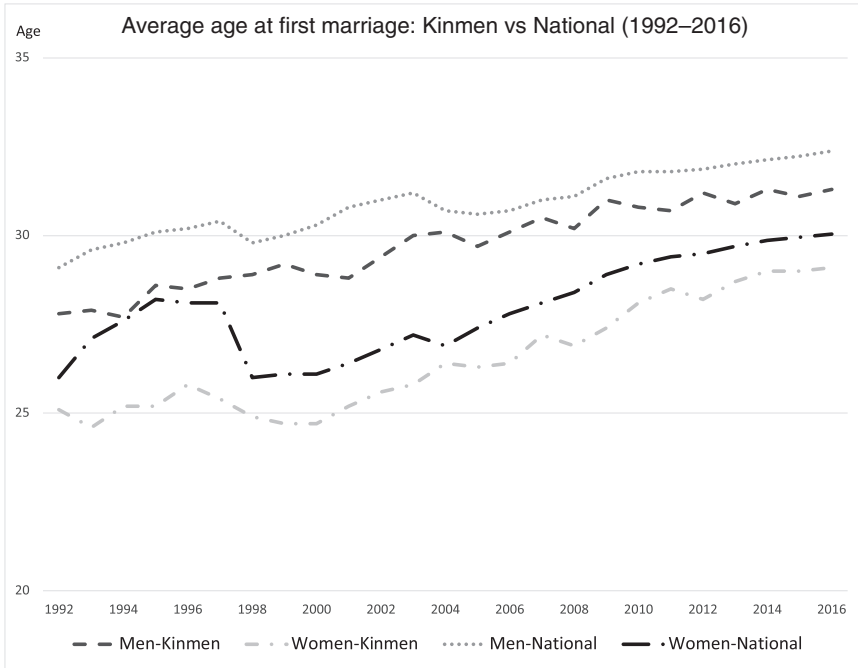
## TRIALS OF MARRYING

In the preceding chapter, we have seen examples of marital change in Kinmen following Taiwan's political and economic liberalization. The official statistics indicate that Kinmen is in line with the national trends towards later and less marriage (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2). The shifting demography of declining marriage rates, extremely low fertility rates and a rapidly aging population in present-day Taiwan, and across East Asia, resembles earlier trends occurring in Euro-American societies. But researchers have noted a significant difference between East Asian societies and Euro-American ones: rates of childbirth out of wedlock are much lower in the former than in the latter (Ochiai 2011; Ochiai and Hosoya 2014; Raymo et al. 2015). The Taiwanese government has viewed these demographic changes as threatening the nation's survival, and has begun to propose policies aiming to boost marriage and fertility rates (Chen 2012). For example, in the government White Paper for Population Policy of 2013, one of the reasons given for the declining marriage rates is the decreasing chance of young people meeting potential partners. A policy was put forward to encourage governmental departments and private companies to organize *weihun lianyi huodong* (matchmaking activities for single people) (The Executive Yuan of the Republic of China 2013: 89). This policy continued in 2020 but its effects appear to be limited because of the small number of participants in these matchmaking activities and other factors discouraging marriage.

Recent studies based on large-scale surveys have pointed out that one key factor discouraging Taiwanese citizens, especially women, from marriage is the persistence of patriarchal norms demanding that women take on the main responsibilities of housework, child-rearing and possibly elderly care (Cheng and Yang 2021; Raymo et al. 2015). Intriguingly, while recent survey results show the general trend towards more liberal arrangements of marital lives (e.g. marriage

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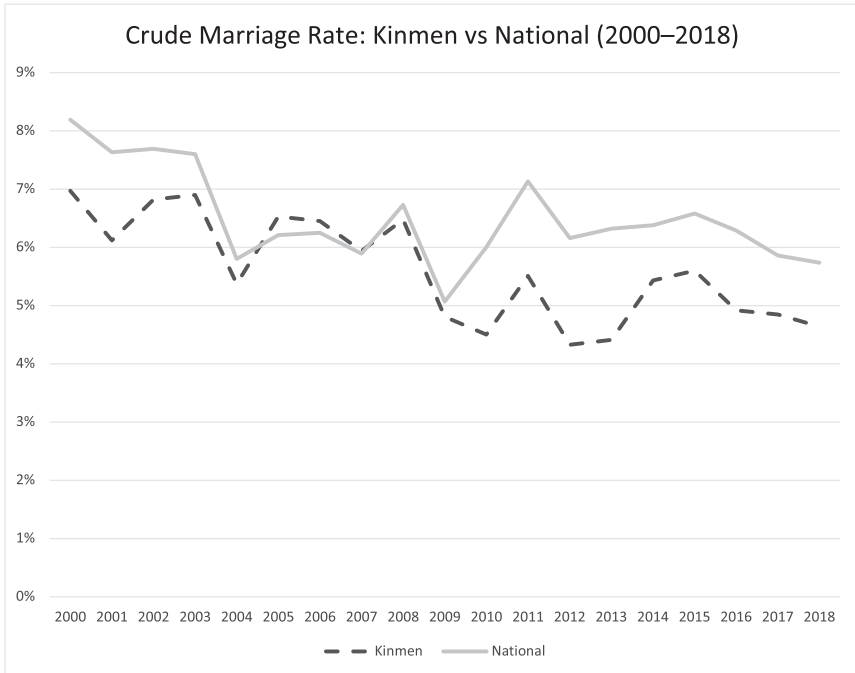
Endnotes for this chapter begin on page 105.



**Figure 4.1.** Steady rise in age at first marriage for both sexes. Source: Department of Household Registration, Ministry of the Interior, Taiwan (<https://www.ris.gov.tw/app/portal/674>).

without children), the idea of having at least one son to continue the family line has grown in strength between 1994 and 2011 (men outnumbered women in supporting this idea) (Cheng and Yang 2021). This persistent expectation of preserving the patriline is not surprising in relation to my research experiences in Kinmen, where islanders keep performing various rituals manifesting patrilineal values and maintaining kinship-based social networks. Local parents' enthusiasm for arranging their children's weddings is closely connected to these socio-moral values, but growing expressions of emotional ties with children through new commodity forms are also noteworthy. Nevertheless, marriage is not today the universal experience it used to be for young people above the age of thirty.

During my two periods of fieldwork, I heard many older people articulate their worries about the single status of their adult children or younger relatives who worked in Kinmen, on the Taiwanese mainland or elsewhere. I myself, as a woman of marriageable age from Taiwan, frequently encountered queries about my marital status and my interest in marrying in Kinmen from older people – an experience I seldom had in urban Taiwan. While some elderly female villagers wanted to introduce me to their sons or junior relatives, they expressed concerns about my doctoral degree, which was far beyond the level of education that



**Figure 4.2.** Declining marriage rates in Kinmen and throughout Taiwan. Source: Department of Household Registration, Ministry of the Interior, Taiwan (<https://www.ris.gov.tw/app/portal/674>).

most local men attained (see Inhorn and Smith-Hefner 2020 on highly educated women’s constrained marital options across the world). My experiences suggest that finding a marital partner in Kinmen can be very difficult, but staying single is not easy either. These experiences are shared by my local informants who were between their late twenties and early forties and still single when I interviewed them in 2017–2018. Rather than probing what factors discourage people from marrying, as most survey-based research has done, this chapter foregrounds young people’s experiences of deferring marriage in the close-knit society of Kinmen. With a focus on the future-making and relational aspects of marriage, my ethnography demonstrates how young single people reflected on their current lives and futures through questions related to marriage and how they interact with their families while staying unmarried.

Informed by my interviews and interactions with young single people, supplemented by data derived from other groups of research participants, I analyse young people’s experiences of deferring marriage not simply as an expression of personal autonomy and freedom but as ‘trials’ they have to go through on a daily basis. I discuss these experiences of ‘trials’ in three senses: (1) they are constantly subjected to the judgement of others about their social status and marriageability

(and they themselves often judge potential marriage partners); (2) they struggle with vexatious people and circumstances pertaining to their private lives; (3) they go through a trial or ‘testing process’, during which their past experiences, present conditions and imaginings about the future have intertwined with each other and moulded their actions and ideas concerning marriage. In my discussion, I highlight temporality as a productive lens onto the imaginative work that marriage involves (Carsten et al. 2021). In these young people’s stories, we can see how whether to marry or not is not simply a decision originating from individual choice or familial obligation but is enfolded in a transforming process during which an individual constantly reshapes his or her ideas of marriage and his or her relations with family. Amidst this process, the imaginative work that marriage involves opens up opportunities for, and encompasses, ethical judgements about ways of making relatedness and pursuing personal desired lives and futures.

My ethnography of young people’s experiences of postponing marriage in Kinmen echoes a collection of studies exploring the emerging worldwide trends of later marriage and childbearing through the notion of ‘waithood’ (Inhorn and Smith-Hefner 2020). In this collection, waithood denotes ‘an extended period of young adulthood in which young men and women are waiting to marry and have children, sometimes delaying indefinitely, and sometimes opting out altogether’, and this state may be intentional, unintentional or a mix of both (Smith-Hefner and Inhorn 2020: 2).<sup>1</sup> The studies in this collection, mostly based on anthropological fieldwork across different cultural settings, elaborate and expand upon the notion of waithood to better reflect the varying conditions that their informants faced. They point out that waithood is not just a state of passively waiting; instead, it usually involves young people’s innovation and action to redraw their life prospects beyond familial and social expectations. This volume therefore presents an expansive view of waithood that involves both agency and constraint. Similarly, my use of ‘trials’ not only reflects my informants’ daily challenges of marrying but also underlies a testing and transforming process in which, rather than ‘waiting’ to be married, they constantly reshape their visions of their futures with or without marriage.

In what follows I elaborate these three senses of trial, demonstrating how the intersection and interaction between personal trajectories, wider socioeconomic changes and a resilient cultural repertoire make marrying difficult, unattractive or only one possible life option for young people in various social positions. Lastly, I move to everyday scenes of young single people’s interaction with their families. Following my argument in the preceding chapter, my ethnography shows how young people try to create their own life while valuing familial ties and obligations. Deferring marriage is not straightforwardly an expression of an individual’s autonomy and freedom but a mixed outcome of striving for a desired life against social constraints (see also Lamb 2018 on being single in India). Moreover, I

argue, this emerging phenomenon of deferring marriage encompasses changes generated from the intimate sphere of kinship that have encouraged the creation of new visions of marriage and the family beyond conservative patriarchal vision.

### Judgements about a Person's Marriageability

Through the Cold War era, the economy of Kinmen was remarkably transformed but also restricted by military concerns. The only new kind of industry developed locally since the 1990s has been tourism and tax-free shopping, targeting in particular tourists from China, together with the expansion of the sorghum distillery and the public facilities of the airport and ferry port. These have provided more job opportunities for local people but have had limited effects on attracting young natives with higher education and professional skills to return home. My first sense of trial depicts, in Kinmen's post-militarized economic circumstances, young people's experiences of being stratified into a hierarchy of social status according to the combination of their level of education, occupation and economic capacity and, following this hierarchy, how their marriageability is judged by potential partners and society more generally.

A large proportion of young people, who have university degrees or further training and live in Kinmen now, work as civil servants or schoolteachers. These two careers are highly valued in local society not only because of the educational investment involved but also because of their stability and comparatively good salaries and welfare in the context of Taiwan's lingering economic recession. Local men and women who have passed the very competitive examinations to become civil servants or teachers are therefore part of a new middle class enjoying high credit in the marriage market. For example, a village woman told me that her nephew's family had given a large amount of bridewealth (*pinjin*) as requested by the bride's grandmother, who considered her granddaughter, a teacher in a local public school, to have a higher social status than the groom, who was employed in a managerial position in a local private company. This case instantiates a constant tension between conservative and progressive visions of marriage in Kinmen since the early twentieth century. While this young couple might view their marriage as a union of two persons of equal standing, the bride's grandmother emphasized their status difference and marriage's function of exchange in the interest of the bride's natal family.

Young people working in the sorghum distillery or at manual jobs, such as labourers in construction and parcel delivery, were judged by locals to be in an inferior position on the local marriage market. When I had an unexpected talk with several elderly men about my research on marriage in 2018, one mentioned how a female schoolteacher in her early forties whom he knew remained single. He said that this woman had not been able to meet a suitable man in Kinmen

and, as a teacher, it was not easy for her to accept a man with an inferior career. Another man added, 'It's impossible for a teacher to marry a *gongren* [labourer or workman]'. Based on my understanding that people now compete for jobs in the sorghum distillery for their good salaries and generous company welfare, I asked, 'How about an employee in the distillery? Isn't that a well-paid job?' A third man replied that 'An employee in the distillery is still a *gongren*'.

These men did not comment on the female teacher's single status by using any pejorative terms, such as 'leftover women' (*shengnü*), used by the state media and general public in China to ridicule young women who have higher education and professional careers but remain single beyond their late twenties (Hong Fincher 2014; To 2015).<sup>2</sup> They appeared to find it reasonable that a female teacher would not marry a *gongren* because of the higher social status associated with her career in local standards. This example also shows that a well-paid job in the distillery alone is not enough to elevate a person's social status and marriageability. Marriageability is evaluated by comparing the status of the potential groom and bride, which echoes a Chinese idiom, *mendang hudui* (marriage between spouses of equal standing), though a woman's hypergamy is very often expected objectively and subjectively. This phenomenon is also observed in contemporary China (Gaetano 2014; Obendiek 2016) and India (Lamb 2018), where marriage is still viewed by many as a highly gendered means of pursuing upward mobility or reproducing status and class. To a certain extent, the popularity of cross-border marriage between the men of Kinmen and women from other less wealthy countries, especially rural China, around the turn of this century, was driven by the lower credit of male *gongren* on the local marriage market (see next chapter).

### **Intrusions on Personal Privacy**

In an era of globalization and an expanding neoliberal economy, young people from Kinmen appear to enjoy higher mobility and broader channels for developing romantic relationships than earlier generations. Several of my male and female acquaintances married Chinese citizens whom they met during a tourist visit or during their study or work in China. It was not their lack of marriageability on the local marriage market but their mobility and autonomy that led them to a cross-border marriage. I also heard some cases of marriage established through online dating. But for people who avoid using virtual platforms for matchmaking, mobility can be very restricted in day-to-day life. My younger interlocutors who are single and work in different sectors all said that 'Kinmen is too small' (*Kinmen taixiaole*) so they barely get to know new people during their everyday life on the island. Living in Kinmen, where there is only a small proportion of younger residents of marriageable age, means limited opportunities to meet a suitable partner face to face. A female friend told me that she was a bit

anxious about the possibility that she would never be able to get married when she decided to come back for a long-term stay at the age of nearly thirty, and she emphasized, ‘I’m not joking’.

Research participants also remarked that ‘Kinmen is too small’ when describing how the local kinship-based social networks have disrupted their daily work and private life – the second sense of trial that I refer to. For example, a friend of mine working in local government said that she would judge the situation in order to decide whether she would admit her identity as a Kinmen native or pretend to be a person from Taiwan. This was because when she met local people in her workplace, most of them asked about her identity so as to see whether they had any connections with her, and whether they could gain any benefit by using this connection. The tight-knit social circles also leave little, if any, room for young people to protect their personal privacy, including intimate life, as my informant Wade described below:

Wade: A problem that local young people face in developing a romantic relationship is that Kinmen is too small. I heard a very ridiculous remark, that a boy and a girl who went hiking on Mount Taiwu [the highest mountain in Kinmen] by themselves means that they are going to marry [laughed loudly]. Ridiculous.

Hsiao-Chiao: I heard similar remarks from many of my older interlocutors ...

Wade: But I heard this from a person of my generation.

Hsiao-Chiao: Yeah, gossip [*xianyan xianyu*] ... If your acquaintances spotted us having a meal here, they might gossip about our relationship.

Wade: That’s it. The social relationships in Kinmen are too close-knit. One time, I and my ex-girlfriend strolled in the high street in Taiwan; the next day, in my workplace, I found that gossip about my date was circulating among my colleagues. I thought: ‘Didn’t I have the date in Taiwan? How come you got to know about it?’. Frankly speaking, gossip won’t do much harm to a man but this environment is stressful or unfair to women of marriageable age or who long for a romantic relationship. It is impossible for a woman to have a try [*shishikan*] with a man she feels okay with, and then break up with him if things don’t go well. She will soon be judged badly in local social circles by doing so.

Wade’s words reveal that local tight-knit social circles not only make it hard to safeguard personal privacy but also put pressure on the development of intimate relations. Some gossip, like that of Wade’s colleagues who talked about his date, is annoying to the person(s) involved but not harmful as long as it is based on what really happened. However, some gossip, which is simply made up from

partial understandings about an event – for example, a man and a woman who are not in a relationship are spotted meeting each other outside – potentially causes problems for those involved, whose integrity may be unfairly judged by others. Wade’s comments about a woman’s avoidance of *shishikan* arose because it is almost impossible for her to hide her romantic history from locally narrow social circles, and a woman who has several romantic relationships before marriage – even if they were serious – may be judged as reckless and a bad marital partner. I myself was also cautious about this kind of moral judgement, so I avoided meeting any young married men alone during fieldwork. When I had an interview in a coffee shop with a man who was about to be married, I asked him if it was OK for him to meet me alone. He quickly grasped what I meant and said that he had already reported to his fiancée about our meeting and obtained her permission to share their stories with me.

Like my own experiences of encountering older villagers’ recommendations of local men to me, my informants face these proposals and pressing questions about when they are going to marry all the time, in their kin communities and workplaces. In the stories of my three informants in the next section, we will see how they tackled this kind of trial.

### **Deferring Marriage as A Testing Process**

In the preceding two sections I have discussed two kinds of trial faced by young people in their everyday lives, which pressure them to get married but also reinforce the stratification of social status that reduces some people’s marital prospects. This section focuses on young single people’s personal experiences that have placed them in a ‘testing process’ – my third sense of trial – of figuring out the meaning and place of marriage in their life. The testimonies of my three informants below illuminate that they were not simply justifying why they remained single past the age of thirty – the new threshold for when young Taiwanese people schedule their marriage plans today (Huang 2013). Instead, they were articulating what marriage means to them regarding their personal circumstances, and they do not foreclose the possibility of getting married in the future.

#### *‘Marriage Is Just A Possible Outcome of A Relationship’*

Wade (born in the early 1980s) gave up his plan of finding a job in Taiwan after completing his tertiary education there because he could not leave his divorced mother alone in Kinmen. He secured a contract-based job suited to his profession in local government, and he has been working there for several years. Though he dislikes many things about his workplace, his desire to change his career has been suppressed by his filial and financial duties. To fulfil his mother’s dream of



having a house of their own, Wade took out a mortgage which, together with other expenditure, has prevented him from finding different work outside Kinmen. When speaking of the house, Wade asserted, 'I am not like most men in Kinmen. I don't treat buying a house as a definite goal in one's life, nor a marriage'. Rather than excluding marriage from his life, he emphasized that he still wants to have a partner but that 'marriage is just a possible outcome of a relationship'. I responded that many people of his generation have similar thoughts, but Wade countered, 'Not really. Many of my colleagues have made remarks like, "It seems the time to get married", which sounds like "It's lunchtime so let's eat something". This is how marriage is considered in Kinmen'.

Wade's remarks suggest deviation from his male coevals, who appeared to view marriage as a task that a man must complete in his life course, in line with the conventional understanding of marriage as a passage to socially recognized adulthood. Wade has therefore faced pressing questions about his marriage not only from his mother but also from people at his workplace, as shown in our conversation below.

Wade: My mother tried to pressure me to get married, but as several years passed, she realized it's useless because I simply ignored her interrogation. My relatives also always asked about my marriage during the family reunion in the Chinese New Year holidays but I dismissed their questions.

Hsiao-Chiao: How about your colleagues?

Wade: The same, but they tended to ask about my marriage just as they had a gossip – 'You are not young any more. You should get married as early as possible' or 'You are one of the only two people in our office who are still unmarried'. They used these words to hurry me into marriage. Some colleagues said they wanted to introduce someone to me but they were seldom serious. If they did find someone interested in meeting me, what we usually do in Kinmen is have a meal together and see if we both feel alright about exchanging our contact details. Even though we made the exchange, most of the time we didn't try to contact each other because we didn't find a reason to do so. What matters is whether or not we can *liaodelai* [have things to talk about with each other].

Hsiao-Chiao: Haven't you met anyone you feel *liaodelai*?

Wade: There was a woman with whom I hung out two or three times following our first meeting. She is a nice person, very good at studying, and we could talk about various things. It's enjoyable to talk with her. But perhaps I was not in the right mindset ... I was very busy with my work after a date with that woman, and I didn't send her any message for one or two weeks. When I had time, I thought in my mind: 'It's tiring, do I have any reason to ask her out?'

As Wade seemed to run out of words, I changed the direction of my questions by asking him whether he had had any romance. He recalled how his relationship with a woman ended several years ago; this was not because he had lost his passion for the woman (as might have happened in the foregoing case) but because his ex-girlfriend thought that they ‘did not share the same plan for the future’. Wade could not accept this explanation initially and had a very hard time getting over her. Because of this tough experience, Wade said that his mentality became stronger and he could now maintain a positive attitude towards developing a new romance, without trying to erase his memories of his ex-girlfriend and the women with whom a romance was impossible to establish.

### *Hovering between Different Prospects of Life*

Like Wade, Heidy (born in the mid-1980s) initially did not plan to return to Kinmen when studying at a university in Taiwan. But because of her lack of interest in working in the field in which she had studied, she decided to become a civil servant, which her parents fully supported. After graduation, Heidy returned to Kinmen to prepare for the civil service examination. As she gradually became impatient and bored with studying for the examination, she found a job in a local university, where she has been working for some years on projects that she finds very interesting. In answering my question of whether she still wanted to become a civil servant, Heidy admitted that this was a tough question for her.

I like my current job very much but, you know, this is a contract job and unstable. We don’t have the various welfare benefits that civil servants have and this is a big difference. I am therefore caught in a dilemma at the moment. To be honest, I paid money to take the civil service exam every year, but I never attended it. I am in a dilemma: one voice in my head says that I will enjoy a better salary, welfare and stability if I pass the exam; and the other voice says that I may not like what is involved in working as a civil servant. So, I don’t really know ... Moreover, if I plan to establish a family in the future, if I have children, public employment would be a better option. But for now, I tend to avoid making a decision because I am satisfied with my current job, including its flexibility, content and pay. Given that I am single at present, I am fine with my current state, but considering the long-term future, this job may not be good.

As Heidy’s parents expected her to become a civil servant, I asked how they responded to her current conditions and single status. Heidy said that her parents are fine with her work but had started asking about her marriage after she passed the age of thirty. ‘But they are not like many other parents in Kinmen,

who constantly pressure their children to get married', Heidi added. Heidi also dismissed her relatives' enquiries and suggestions of marital candidates because she preferred to find a partner herself. But as illustrated by our conversation below, she did not make strong links between her ideal partner, marriage and childbirth.

Heidi: I don't have concrete criteria for an ideal partner. What is important is the people-to-people interaction; what matters is whether we can *chudelai* [have good interaction with each other].

Hsiao-Chiao: How about a man's economic capacity, house ownership, etc.?<sup>3</sup>

Heidi: I think I will see whether a man has a stable job, whether he is a diligent and reliable person. As for the house, if he has none, we can work together to buy one.

Hsiao-Chiao: Do you think that marriage is something you must have in your life?

Heidi: I think I should give birth to a child but marriage is not that necessary [laughs]. Do I sound too radical? [laughs] I don't dare to tell my mother about this.

Hsiao-Chiao: It sounds ok to me.

Heidi: I am saying so at this moment [as I haven't prepared for having a child]. If I really become a mother, from the child's perspective, it may be better to have a complete [*wanzhengde*] family.

Hsiao-Chiao: Why do you want a child?

Heidi: Because kids are so cute.

Hsiao-Chiao: Would you mind adopting a child?

Heidi: I think that is different ... my thoughts are that only if a girl [*nühaizi*] becomes a mother [*muqin*] will her life become complete [*wanzheng*].

Hsiao-Chiao: How about marriage?

Heidi: As far as I have observed the people around me, I think that marriage and having a happy life are two different things ... Though marriage is an element that constitutes a woman's complete life, it cannot guarantee a happy life. My life will still be complete if I have my own child without a marriage, though I may have some regrets about the absence of a marriage.

Towards the end of our interview, Heidi said that she might get married to fulfil her desire to give birth to a child, but she has not made any plans to do so. Building a family is not something that she can think through for the time being for various reasons: she has not yet met a suitable partner; she is hesitating about changing her career; and she has witnessed several unhappy marriages and divorces.

### *Expecting A Partner for Mutual Care in Old Age*

Unlike Heidy, Tina does not include childbirth in her considerations about marriage. Tina was born in Kinmen in the late 1970s, but grew up in Taipei. When she was about thirty years old, she came to Kinmen to recover her health after breaking up with a man. Her paternal uncle in Kinmen helped her to find a short-term job in a government department. Tina originally thought that she would return to Taipei after one or two years of good rest, but her job contract was extended and soon she had been in Kinmen for several years. She bought a house as her own residence, which was also an investment because she can let it out if she decides to leave Kinmen some day. In reply to my question about her thoughts of marriage, Tina noted the difficulties of meeting a marital partner on the island:

Tina: Frankly speaking, it became difficult for me to find a boyfriend when I came here. Many men around my age were either preparing to get married or were already married with two children. Moreover, everything was new to me here. I didn't have friends but relatives; I barely knew any local people at that time. Also, most of my colleagues are women...

Hsiao-Chiao: Haven't your relatives tried to introduce any men to you?

Tina: They did indeed, but I rejected them. Not because I didn't want to meet new people, but because they always pushed a man at me without trying to know what kind of a person that man is.

Hsiao-Chiao: But as far as I know, local elderly people always judge whether a man is a good match by looking at his education, work, economic capacity, etc.

Tina: Yes, they only looked at those things ... but they never considered whether or not that man and I could *hedelai* [get along well or feel compatible with each other]. My aunt once phoned me about this kind of thing and I responded angrily [laughs]. I said, 'Never do this again! Don't create this kind of trouble for me. I will find a boyfriend myself'.

Though Tina has not been able to meet a suitable person in Kinmen, she prefers to stay on the island because it is hard to find a new job in Taipei and easier to save money in Kinmen. She has used her savings to travel around the world and she developed romantic relationships with some Taiwanese men she met during her trips, though none of these relationships lasted.

Tina: One uncle of mine is a fortune-teller, who told me that all my ex-boyfriends treated me well and loved me; the problem was one Chinese character in my name, which was not good for my relationship to last, however

good the relationship was. ‘That’s alright’, I thought. I decided to buy into my uncle’s words and changed my first name. I also thought that I will still be picky [*tiao*] even though I am getting old. Some people said that I should not be picky now because I am getting old. I objected and said, ‘Of course I should be picky, because I want to have a partner who will look after me in my old age and I will look after him too’.

Hsiao-Chiao: Do you think that marriage is something that you must have in your life?

Tina: Not really ... what I think now is it would be good if I can find a man with whom I can get along well [*hedelai*].

Hsiao-Chiao: How about having a child?

Tina: Because I don’t like children, I don’t consider it at all. But I feel a bit sorry for my dad. [Tina is an only child.]

Hsiao-Chiao: Have you always thought like that?

Tina: This thought emerged in recent years because I found ... perhaps I have been enjoying the freedom of being single; I can go anywhere whenever I feel like it. Having a child would occupy so much of my time ... [She described the case of her female cousin.]

Hsiao-Chiao: But if your partner wants a child...

Tina: It’s almost impossible because of my age. It will be very difficult for me to bear a child. I will therefore let a potential partner know this before going further. I am also fine with a divorced man and even a divorced man who has a child with him. What matters is whether I and that man can *hedelai* or not. It’s OK for me to take care of his child ... I think, in retrospect, my low expectations about marriage and establishing a family are linked to my family background. My parents did not get along well with each other and therefore, since my childhood, I have never had experiences of a harmonious family, such as parents playing happily with their children. Though this did not affect my developing a romantic relationship, sometimes, perhaps my temper and ideas about many things were influenced by my family background...

Despite her several unsuccessful romantic relationships, Tina appears to remain positive about finding a lifelong partner for mutual care in old age while excluding childbirth. Her freedom and financial ability to travel around the world have provided her with opportunities to meet a partner, instead of marking her rejection of marriage. She has been undergoing a testing process of identifying what factors (e.g. her previous first name and her parents’ unhappy relationship) might have led to her failed romantic relationships, and in the meantime, making her single life enjoyable while waiting for the appearance of a suitable partner.

### *Individual Configurations of Marriage and Temporality*

In reply to my questions, my three informants moved between different stages of their lives, reflecting on how their past experiences, present conditions and imaginings about the future have affected their actions and ideas about marriage. Their testimonies show that marriage for them is not about socially recognized adulthood and filial duty to parents and ancestors, nor simply an expression of love and freedom. Their responses were reflective and, as they admitted, they had considered most of my questions for a while because they encountered questions of marrying on a daily basis. The notion of temporality helps to illuminate the imaginative work that marriage incites about the ways of life and futures that these young people desired and sought to create in relation to their past experiences and current conditions. This imaginative work, therefore, involved a constant process of self-transformation in which the actors reflected, changed their ideas and made adjustments with time in order to pursue their desired futures. For Wade, a long recovery from a failed romance probably influenced his perceptions of marriage as just one possible outcome of a relationship. For Heidi, her current job and uncertainties about the future prevented her from any serious consideration of establishing a marriage and family despite her desire to give birth to a child. For Tina, thoughts of excluding procreation from her future marital life emerged after she reached a certain age and observed the effort involved in childrearing.

These three informants, as well as my other young interlocutors who have university degrees and experiences of the outside world, did not directly draw on the criteria of education, occupation and economic capacity to describe the image of their ideal partner. Though their descriptions of those whom they had affection for previously or whom they might find attractive suggest that their ideal partner would tend to have similar levels of cultural and economic capital as they did, they emphasized the actual interaction with a potential partner. An ideal partner is a person with whom they feel compatible and have something in common – *liaodelai*, *chudelai* or *hedelai*. My interlocutors' portraits of an ideal partner echo many other scholars' findings across different contemporary Chinese societies in which a transnational ideal of companionate marriage that is based on a couple's mutual affection and commonalities has been widely espoused by younger generations (e.g. Cheng 2014; Nakano 2016; Zavoretti 2017).

Childbirth is traditionally closely connected to marriage not only through the idea of continuing the family line (*chuanzong jiedai*) but also relating to a couple's concern about their own life in old age. Notably, most of my younger interlocutors reject the conventional idea of raising children to provide for one's old age (*yanger fanglao*), and many are considering how to support themselves in later life (for example, by buying a long-term care insurance programme). Among my younger interlocutors, women were more likely to mention childbirth

in relation to marriage than their male counterparts because of the biologically restricted reproductive timing that has posed challenges to women globally (see Inhorn 2020; San Román 2020; Vialle 2020 for discussions of women's reproductive temporality in Euro-American societies). The case of Heidi suggests a paradoxical feeling that many other women may also have: while viewing childbirth as essential for fully realizing womanhood, she was unsure about whether she wanted to have a child out of wedlock because she cared about her parents' feelings and thought that a complete family was better for a child (see Papadaki 2021 for a similar paradox in Athens). Heidi's concerns were arguably related to the social prejudices against single-parent families (and the connection between low marriage rates and low fertility rates as noted at the beginning of this chapter). Her hesitation was present in the absence of any action towards marriage and childbirth, and she may change her ideas as time passes and as her conditions change.

By seeing young people's prolonged delay in marrying as an ongoing process of reflection and trial, I want to highlight a significant generational difference. Most of my older respondents, whether their marriages were arranged by parents or their own choice, tended to view marriage as an indispensable part of a person's life, and therefore a mingling of individual and social (and conservative) visions of life and the future. This view is also shared by many younger people, like Wade's colleagues, as noted earlier. But the growing trends of later and less marriage in Kinmen (including Kinmen natives residing elsewhere in Taiwan) imply that young people increasingly have different visions of life and the future inconsistent with normative or conservative visions. For these young people, marriage is not an approach to create the life a person desires, but an option enfolded into the way a person works out the kind of life they want now and for the future.

### **Balancing Personal Desires and Familial Duties**

Studies of family change in Taiwan and across East Asia usually underscore young adults', especially women's, ability to be economically independent as the key to their autonomy in their marital decisions, including the options of postponing marriage and non-marriage (e.g. Chen and Chen 2014; Jones and Gubhaju 2009; Raymo et al. 2015; Yang and Yen 2011). But what has happened to these young people's relations with their families and intimate social circles regarding their deviation from the normative track of life has been underexplored. Following the above analysis of young people's experiences of postponing marriage as a testing and transforming process, this section considers how these young people dealt with the potential clash or conflicts between personal desires and familial expectations, and how their relations with their family members were reconfigured.

As we have seen, young single people dismissed or expressed resistance to any enquiries about their marriages and suggestions of marital candidates from their

parents and wider social networks. Their responses were arguably related to their ability to be economically self-reliant, but notably, they do not detach themselves from their familial circles. Like most of their single or married coevals in Kinmen, Wade and Heidy live with their parent(s) partly to save money and partly out of filial sentiment. While Tina moved from her grandparents' house (where her uncle's family also resides) to her own house a few years ago, she keeps in touch with her relatives, from whom she had received considerable support in finding a job and settling down in Kinmen. In many other respects, my single interlocutors are also on the track of family-based morality. Wade, especially, suppressed his ambition to pursue a different career in another place out of concern for his divorced mother, who had worked hard to bring up her son by herself. He was also responsible for a mortgage and other regular expenditure of his family, including his mother's insurance. By being emotionally and financially supportive of his mother, Wade proved his maturity and was able to be assertive in dismissing his mother's and other relatives' questions about marriage.

For several of my unmarried informants who have two or more siblings and live with their parents and their married siblings' families in the parental home, their single status may in certain respects be beneficial to family members. They themselves may also receive emotional and other support from such co-residence. Cherry, whom we met in Chapter 3, lives with her parents, a married brother and his family in her natal home since returning to Kinmen in 2016. Though she preferred city life and liked her former job in Taipei, which she found interesting but also stressful, she decided to quit because she did not want to sacrifice her health and quality of life for work. Despite the clash between her lack of interest in marriage and social and family expectations for her to marry, Cherry said that she still wants to live in Kinmen, where her 'home' – the place providing her with a sense of belonging – is. She developed close ties with her two co-resident nephews and shared the parenting roles of her brother and sister-in-law by teaching her nephews English and supervising their schoolwork. She also followed her mother's and sister-in-law's advice to manage her money efficiently so as to ensure her financial security in old age. By being economically independent and nurturing emotional ties with her family members, Cherry made her life in Kinmen enjoyable and her single status acceptable to her parents for the time being.

In the story of Ya-Fen described in Chapter 3, we saw that she came back to Kinmen because of her parents' reliance on her, as their eldest child, to assist with various family matters, including her younger siblings' weddings. After an unfortunate accident leading to her ex-boyfriend's lifelong injury, Ya-Fen has stayed single because of her complicated relations with him and her devotion to her work and to her natal family. She enjoys good relations with her married siblings and their children; she has especially close ties with her youngest, unmarried brother who once offered to take care of his sister in her old age. But, as noted previously,



Ya-Fen was trying to secure her own mental and material well-being by rejecting her parents' overt demands. She made up her mind to try different possibilities for her career and life by moving to Taipei for a new job a few months after our interview. While the case of Cherry shows challenges to the conservative vision of marriage and gendered futures co-produced through individual autonomy and familial support, the case of Ya-Fen shows strong individual volition to make changes to her own life and relations with her family.

The stories of Cherry and Ya-Fen also call for a reconsideration of the association between singlehood and being alone, which has been compellingly unpacked by Allerton (2007) in her discussion about single women in Indonesia. Allerton argues that the single women in her fieldsite are not really 'alone' despite their singlehood, because they lived with their natal families and keep close ties with their family members. But she noted that being alone is a complexly gendered notion and understood differently in different sociocultural contexts. For the group of people that she studied, women who remain unmarried are not the subject of ridicule within the village and can inherit land from their fathers to sustain themselves financially. In contemporary Kinmen, Taiwan and China, though women are not necessarily excluded from inheritance of family property as they were previously, they tend to attain economic independence through paid employment outside the family (thanks to their parents' investment in their education). Nevertheless, single women with higher education and well-paid jobs are pejoratively labelled 'leftover women' in China. In Kinmen, though my single female informants enjoy their current lives, their parents are still worried about their daughters' potential 'loneliness' in old age if they remain unmarried. Notably, these parents' articulation of worries shows growing attention to, and care for, daughters compared to the early twentieth century when parents usually sacrificed their daughters' well-being in order to focus resources on raising their sons.

While I know some middle-aged never-married women who were commended by their families and neighbours for their thoughtful care of elderly parents, none of my younger interlocutors, female or male, mentioned such caring responsibilities as a factor contributing to their deferral of marriage. My older research participants who are pleased to have their single children's company still expect their children to get married in the near future. Though patrilocal co-residence remains a dominant pattern in Kinmen, I observed that many married women have greater freedom and mobility to visit their natal home and provide care for their parents, whether or not the latter have support from married sons. I also heard of several cases of married sons who resigned from their jobs in Taiwan and returned to Kinmen to look after their ill parents. In other words, a person's marital status does not affect his or her care of parents as much as in the past because elderly support is not only a conventional filial duty but is also linked to children's emotional ties with parents.

Respect for parents and for seniors in wider social circles is widely regarded by my younger interlocutors as part of one's moral personhood. But respect does not mean total obedience and the repression of one's own emotions and desires. Young single people express respect and care for their parents while rejecting unwelcome advice and intervention from parents regarding their life and future, including marriage. Despite worries about their single children's long-term well-being, parents try to accommodate their children's non-normative behaviour following numerous failed interventions and efforts at persuasion.

## Conclusion

Drawing on material about young single people's everyday living experiences in Kinmen, this chapter has unravelled a paradox that they confront: it is difficult both to find a partner and to stay single. Their deferral of marriage is entangled with wider social changes and a resilient cultural repertoire, which have generated different and gendered impacts on their marital prospects. A woman's higher education and reputable career may be emphasized in order to ask for a higher bridewealth from the groom, but may also reduce her chances to meet men who do not have similar levels of cultural and social capital. Men in manual jobs and factory work are disadvantaged in the local marriage market even though they may have a stable and decent income. The persistent association of marriage with the reproduction of the patrilineal family in this close-knit society also intrudes on young people's private lives through incessant questioning about their prospective marriages and suggestions of marital candidates. Though young people tend to refuse these suggestions of marital partners, their restricted mobility in day-to-day experiences prevents them from getting to know new people.

These young single people are aware of the social constraints on their marital options, but they also challenge the conventional understanding of marriage in their ongoing 'testing' processes of figuring out the meaning and place of marriage in their lives. In these testing and transforming processes, their past experiences, present conditions and imaginings about the future have intertwined with each other and shaped their thoughts about marriage, childbearing and the family. Unlike the senior generations and married cohorts who view marriage as an indispensable part of a person's life, these single women and men constantly reconfigure their views in relation to their shifting, individual circumstances and visions of life and the future. As they usually have experiences of living in urban Taiwan from several years of advanced studies and work there, they tend to be more open to new discourses of gender and marriage equality that have rapidly proliferated following Taiwan's democratization. Most of them openly supported the legalization of same-sex marriage in the debates and national referendum in 2018 in stark contrast to other opposing opinions within local society (see this

book's Conclusion). None of these young informants mentioned new options of legalized intimate relations and family constitution, such as civil partnerships – whose legalization is currently being promoted by an NGO in Taiwan – as something they wanted. But their own experiences of deferring marriage have already challenged the conservative patriarchal vision of marriage and the family, signalling increasingly diversifying imaginings of intimate futures, such as childbearing out of wedlock or marrying a divorced man while excluding childbirth.

The stories of my single informants also illustrate their efforts to balance personal desires and familial duties. They safeguard their autonomy in making their own decisions about their lives and marriages not only through their economic independence but also through realizing family-based morality. They keep amicable ties with their families and intimate social circles while firmly rejecting any unwelcome intervention in their private lives. Despite worries about their single children's long-term well-being, parents have gradually learned to accept their children's visions of life and the future that are inconsistent with the normative visions that they themselves uphold. The growing trends of later and less marriage are thus not merely reflections of wider socioeconomic changes but enfold possibilities of reconfiguring intergenerational relations as well as exploring new forms of intimate relations. In the next two chapters, examining cross-border marriage and marital lives in patrilocal households, we will see how the generational hierarchy intrinsic to traditional patriarchy is also questioned or unsettled by young couples', especially women's, attempts to assert their autonomy and authority about their own lives.

## Notes

This chapter is a revised version of my article in an edited volume, *Marriage in Past, Present and Future Tense* (Carsten et al. 2021).

1. The notion of waithood was first proposed by the political scientist and ethnographer Diane Singerman (2007, 2013) to describe young men's difficulties in attaining adulthood through marriage due to frustrating political and economic situations across the Middle East and North Africa region (Smith-Hefner and Inhorn 2020: 2–3). Smith-Hefner and Inhorn consider this kind of waithood engendered by wider politico-economic constraints as unintentional, while expanding the application of waithood to other situations involving actors' intentional deferral of their marriage in order to pursue other personal desires.
2. Howlett (2020) presents an interesting angle into women's education and marriage. His ethnography shows how, rather than an obstacle to a woman's marriage, higher education is perceived as a means for her to escape parental pressure to marry while improving her own situation and searching for a suitable partner (see also Zavoretti 2017 on how young women in urban China seek to prepare themselves for the appearance of 'Mr Right').
3. I asked whether or not a man's house ownership was one of the criteria that my female respondents considered in their choice of mate because several studies in post-reform China have shown that house ownership matters greatly to a man's success in finding a

spouse, and this was also emphasized by my interlocutors in China. However, most of my younger female informants in Kinmen did not emphasize their (potential) marital partner's house ownership as a key reason for their agreement to marriage, though their partners might inherit housing from their parents in the future.