This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy of Asian Studies (Chinese) at the Australian National University

November 2007
Saltmarsh in the Everglades Delta

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DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis is entirely my own work, and that it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person where due reference is not in the text.

[Signature]

[Name]
To Diana and Bryant, my family
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In this thesis I will discuss the lives and life-choices of a group of women called zishu nü in the Guangdong Delta region of southern China, from the beginning of the nineteenth century until the 1950s. These women were different from others in that they vowed to remain unmarried throughout their lives. They were called ‘zishu nü’ or self-combing women because they declared their status as permanently unmarried through a rite which involved combing their hair into a bun similar to that of a married woman. In Janice Stockard’s book Daughters of the Canton Delta: Marriage Patterns and Economic Strategies in South China, 1860–1930, zishu nü are called ‘sworn spinsters’. Stockard writes, ‘Sworn spinsterhood was not simply a status ascribed to women who remained unmarried, but one achieved through a special ritual. Central to this ritual was a hairdressing ceremony, and sworn spinsters were known as those who had combed up their own hair.’ Following the publication of Stockard’s book, zishu nü became a major topic of scholarly debate, involving important questions about Chinese notions of kinship and gender. Anthropologists and others, both western and Chinese, sought answers to the following questions: Why did these women choose never to marry? How could they choose to be single while Chinese women elsewhere faced enormous pressure to marry? What were their daily lives and life stories like? What was the symbolism of the rites involved in the zishu nü custom? Most scholars have emphasised the negative perspectives of this custom. ‘Marriage resistance’ and ‘economic strategy’ are two of the most frequently used terms found in research to date. Zishu nü women, scholars argue, were supposed to be ‘forced’, by an oppressive marriage system or for economic reasons, to remain unmarried. However, my fieldwork in the Guangdong Delta suggests a different

1 This is a simplified explanation of the term zishu nü. The meaning of the word and the rite associated with zishu nü will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.
3 There was some research done on this topic before Stockard’s book. However, the publications are not as comprehensive as Stockard’s research. In addition, most scholarly essays on this topic have been produced after the publication of her book. See Chapter 1.
explanation for the zishu nü custom and indicates the need for a rethinking of the cultural significance of the custom. I argue that the positive aspects of the zishu nü custom should be highlighted. These women, in my opinion, chose to be zishu nü as a way of fulfilling their obligation to their natal family as daughters, rather than in rejection of or resistance to marriage. They decided to become zishu nü because they had strong links with their natural families, emotionally and economically, and they hoped to maintain this link and retain their identities as daughters. This choice was made out of ‘love’ for their natal families, not ‘hatred’ of marriage or men.

As I indicated above, zishu nü were referred to as ‘sworn spinsters’ in previous English-language research. In this thesis, I will retain the Chinese term ‘zishu nü’, rather than use the phrase ‘sworn spinsters’ for two reasons. First, zishu nü is the name these women used themselves. It reflected their self-identification both within their families and in the local community. Moreover, zishu nü is based on Han cultural understandings about the concepts of ‘hair’, adulthood, marriage, and the relationship between these terms, which are not replicated in the English term ‘sworn spinster’. Second, there are three meanings of ‘spinster’ in English: (1) an unmarried woman regarded as being beyond the age of marriage; (2) Law. (in legal documents) a woman who has never married; (3) (formerly) a woman who spins thread for her living, whose occupation is spinning. The third definition is most obviously inappropriate for zishu nü, as these women did not spin thread for a living. But neither do the first two definitions apply to zishu nü. A woman who identified herself as zishu nü was not an ‘unmarried woman regarded as being beyond the age of marriage’. Indeed, most zishu nü undertook the ceremony to become zishu nü within the customary marriage period of between fifteen and twenty-nine years of age. In addition, zishu nü identified themselves as being unmarried in a cultural rather than a legal sense. The word ‘sworn’ in English tries to capture the distinction between a legal and a cultural identification. However, without further clarification, this might make the reader even more confused about the difference between a western ‘spinster’ and a Chinese ‘zishu nü’.

In the discussion that follows, I will discuss zishu nü custom and the lives of zishu nü in a broader framework than has been achieved in previous research. In addition to discussing questions relating to zishu nü motives, practice and symbolism,

\[\text{\small\[4\] I will introduce these ritual terms in Chapter 4.}\]

I will raise further questions: What were these women’s true thoughts about marriage and family? What were the relationships amongst zishu nü themselves and between them and their families, friends and their local community? As women, what did they think about womanhood in traditional China? In other words, I will try to develop an understanding of these women’s identities and experiences, the cultural meaning of their life-choices as well as the function of their life-choices for their family or clan.

Methodologically, I place this research at the intersection of women’s studies, social history and anthropology. I focus on the womanhood represented by zishu nü in the Guangdong Delta. Separate chapters analyze the motives of women who have become zishu nü, these women’s daily lives and the relationship between them and others. The emotions and feelings associated with being zishu nü as well as their individual experiences receive detailed treatment in separate chapters. The source materials I draw on are extensive, mainly consisting of interviews with elderly zishu nü living in Guangdong, as well as their family members, friends and local people. I also draw on official documents, local histories and other printed material.

My discussion is divided into two parts. Part One consists of two introductory chapters. The aim of my introduction is to give a general idea about zishu nü and the existing research on it. I will talk about my findings and the implications this has for cultural studies. Chapter one, entitled ‘Location, History and Intellectual Views of the Zishu Nü’, will answer three questions: Where are the zishu nü from? When did the custom begin, become popular and disappear? How have the zishu nü been interpreted and conceptualised in previous research findings? Focusing on these questions, I will explore the regional and cultural background of this custom, discuss the history and frame my analysis according to the timeframe of this custom, paying particular attention to the period of transition from traditional to modern China. At the end of Chapter One, I will provide a literature review.

In Chapter Two, ‘Cultural and Historical Significance of the Zishu Nü,’ I will outline my contribution to our understanding of the zishu nü custom. In this chapter, I will critique the existing literature, outline my research methodology, and explain the cultural and historical significance of my study and theoretical background. I will attempt to re-examine the zishu nü custom from a positive perspective, rather than the negative view that permeates previous research. I will argue that women’s practice of the zishu nü custom in Guangdong Delta is entirely
consistent with the dominant Han cultural values and meshes precisely with the women’s cultural environment and personal circumstances.

In Part Two, I develop a picture of the lives of zishu nü. These women were not legendary; their stories are part of history—the history of women in China, the history of Chinese cultural development. This discussion is divided into three chapters, each of which will focus on a specific aspect of the life of a zishu nü; together these threads will give a more complete picture of the lives of these women.

Chapter Three, entitled ‘Motivations,’ will analyze the various motivations for some Chinese women in the Guangdong Delta to become zishu nü. These motivations can be roughly classified as either economic or cultural. Economic reasons include a poor family economic situation and demands of the labor market. There are many cultural reasons why a woman might choose to become a zishu nü, though the primary motivation will vary between individuals; these reasons include the fear of marriage, the cult of chastity, the influence of role models in the family or local community, the custom that demands that an elder sister has to have a rite of passage before her younger brother’s wedding, and, last but by no means least, the ‘free’ life-style associated with the zishu nü custom. These different motivations interplay with one another and vary between individuals, according to the situation of their natal families and their personalities. For some reason these women chose to be zishu nü, and from then on their life-stories represent a different way for Chinese women to practice womanhood in traditional Chinese society, besides becoming a wife and mother.

Chapter Four, entitled ‘Practical Reality,’ details the practical realities of being a zishu nü, in three sections. The first section, titled ‘The most important day in their lives’, describes the day that these women have their ceremony to become zishu nü. As a rite of passage, this ceremony is most notable in these women’s lives as a declaration and confirmation of their permanent role and status as an adult daughter to their natal family. The ceremony marks the rite of passage of the women involved from being unmarried daughters in their family to being official members of the families as adult daughters who are not expected to marry. I will discuss both the ritual itself and the emotion that is involved in this ceremony. The second section, ‘Religion’, discusses Buddhism, but also more crucially the local religious system,
which played an important role in the local people’s normal life. Religion was one of the key factors which enabled these women to adhere to the life of a zishu nü. Moreover, it was an effective way for these women to join in the local social life in a role distinct to that of nuns and other adjuncts of the religious system. The third section, ‘Working and Entertainment’, is especially important since zishu nü worked long hours with few holidays, and sent most of their income to their natal families. This practice is one of the strongest ways in which a woman identifies herself as being a zishu nü in her daily life. After giving a picture of the practical reality of being zishu nü, I investigate the relationship these women had with the world around them.

Finally, in Chapter Five, ‘Relationships’, we reach the key point of Part Two, which is the focus on the relationships and identities of zishu nü women. With respect to their families, they did their best to be good daughters, with the expectation that the next generation of the family would take care of them in old age, just as their natural children would do if they had married. These women practiced their virtue as brilliant daughters to their clans, and they built effective networks with their friends and zishu nü sisters to support each other both emotionally and materially. Through their example, they demonstrated to everybody what righteousness (yi) is, while at the same time holding themselves to a strict code of chastity throughout their entire lives. To the local society or community, they were respected as role models of Han culture, and especially of Confucian moral principles; they were the best examples of ‘xiao’, ‘di’, ‘yi’ and ‘zhen’, and were guides for finding the balance between personal interests and social moral demands. All of these moral principles lie entirely within the Han cultural system, which is a major piece of evidence for one of my main arguments, which states that the zishu nü custom is definitely Han.

Three main themes run through this thesis. The first reflects my attempt to understand the emotional and practical consequences of becoming a zishu nü. The second theme is to develop an appreciation of the role of dominant discourses in shaping the way zishu nü women conceive of their identity in both their family and in broader society, and in their relationships with other people. Thirdly, I consider the link between Han cultural theory, which includes elements of Daoism and Buddhism as well as Confucianism, and folk culture, especially as practised by the lower classes and poor rural people.
Chapter 1
Location, History and Intellectual Views of the Zisha Nü

Part 1
Chapter 1
Location, History and Intellectual Views of the Zishu Nü

Figure 1.1. Zishu nü as silk worker. Source: Shunde Women's Federation, *Shunde zishu nü*, n.p., 2006. p. 31.
Locating zishu nü

So far, zishu nü have only been found in the Guangdong Delta, one of the two great deltas of China. Over the years, zishu nü have been reported in parts of Nanhai, Panyu, Dongguan, Zhongshan, Sanshui and the entire Shunde district—most of these locations being on the Pearl River Delta. On the basis of my fieldwork, I have established the existence of zishu nü in five urban regions, including parts of Guangzhou, Zhaoqing, Zhongshan, Dongguan and Foshan. These regions comprise a much larger area where the custom has been practised than that reported in previous research (see Map 1.1). Nanhai, Shunde and Sanshui now all belong to the Foshan urban region, and I found zishu nü in Foshan city which had not been previously reported. Panyu now belongs to the Guangzhou urban region. Zishu nü spread to all of the Zhongshan and Dongguan urban regions, though the proportion of the women who chose not to marry there was not as high as in Foshan. I have found no previous academic reports of zishu nü in Zhaoqing and this provides an opportunity for an important supplement to our knowledge of this custom. In summary, evidence of the existence of the zishu nü custom is found mainly in the area around and to the south of Guangzhou city, which covers the central and southern part of the Guangdong Delta and most of the lower Pearl River Delta (see map 1.1). That the custom was more widespread than reported in previous research is an important component of my findings.

There are different economic patterns in the different districts that encompass the zishu nü area. One of the most important components of the economies of Shunde, Zhongshan and Panyu was the contribution of local people working overseas, who sent money back home to help both other family members and the whole clan. In other words, the remittances from local people living overseas made a big contribution.

1 There were several reports from both journalists and scholars about the existence of zishu nü in these areas. Except Zhaoqing, all other districts have been analyzed by scholars. The first report as social news about Zhaoqing zishu nü was 'Where is last zishu nü?' on Yangcheng Evening News, Jan. 13, 2001.
2 These regions are according to the 2005 redefinition of local government boundaries in Guangdong Province.
to local development. These people included the zishu nü for a long period of time. In addition, Nanhai and the surrounding area were famous for sericulture development. Dongguan was a normal farming area during the period in my research, while straw manufacture in Zhaoqing was well-known. So the zishu nü in different districts were involved in different occupations: most of the Shunde, Zhongshan and Panyu zishu nü worked in domestic service industries in big cities in Southeast Asia, such as Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia (see Figures 1.2 and 1.3); most Nanhai zishu nü were workers in sericulture (see Figures 1.1 and 1.4); most Dongguan zishu nü were farmers; while Zhaoqing zishu nü made their living by making straw-mats (see Figure 1.5).

There are two important points that should be raised regarding the zishu nü area. Firstly, the people living in this area who practice this custom identify themselves as 'pure' Han people. They maintain traditional Han customs and ways of life. Secondly, while this custom of zishu nü needs to be understood in the context of the region, at the same time we should not underestimate the extent to which it expresses core values of mainstream culture. Each of these points is important to my research and is explained in a later Chapter.

**Map 1.1.** The Zishu nü area. Drawn by Cartographic Services, RSPAS, Australian National University.
Chapter One: Location, History and Intellectual Views

Figure 1.2. Zishu nü as domestic servants. The two women in white top and black pants are Hu Daidi (my interviewee) and her zishu nü friend. Photograph supplied by Hu Daidi.

Figure 1.3. A zishu nü who worked in Malaysia. Photograph in Shunde Zishu nü, p. 10.

Figure 1.4. Sericulture workers in Guangdong delta at the end of the 19th century. Photo in Shunde Women's Federation Shunde zishu nü, n.p., 2006, p.6.

Figure 1.5. The Zishu nü making straw mats. Zishu nü in this picture is my interviewee Ming Gu from Zhaoqing. Photographed by Ziling Ye, January, 2007.
The history of zishu nü to the middle of the twentieth century

It is difficult to date the precise beginning of the custom as, so far, no exact evidence has been found to prove who was the earliest zishu nü. Helen Siu also remark on this fact in her research, observing that ‘it is difficult to determine where this custom originated.’ However, it is possible to establish a lower boundary for the age of this custom. Some of the existing research makes reference to the fact that, according to the ‘Life of Qu Dajun’ (Qu Dajun Nianpu), the first wife of Qu Dajun was a zishu nü. Qu Dajun was born in 1630 and died in 1696. His first wedding was when he was twenty years old, around 1650. So this shows, it is argued that zishu nü existed before 1650. However, if Liu was Qu’s wife, this means that she had a compensation marriage, and she was a bu luo jia, which is a related but different custom to that of zishu nü. In my analysis I will distinguish these two customs. Therefore, this evidence for the beginning of the practice of zishu nü is not convincing. Some other Chinese scholars believe that the custom has a long history, dating from as far back as the Song Dynasty and being derived at that time from certain minority customs. I cannot agree with this supposition either. On one hand, I understand that zishu nü is a custom that embodies the Han cultural value. On the other hand, these minority customs, from which zishu nü is supposed to be derived, are different from zishu nü in terms of local ideology and discourse. There is no evidence, therefore, that proves the zishu nü appeared before the early part of the Qing Dynasty.

Goddess of Mercy Hall (Guanyin tang) in Zhaoqing is one of the earliest places where zishu nü were found. In this location zishu nü still gather, work and live together. According to the women who are still living there, there is a story about the

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3 Helen F. Siu, ‘Where were the women?: Rethinking marriage resistance and regional culture in South China’, Late Imperial China, Vol. 11, No. 2. 1990, p. 41.
5 Compensation marriage is another marriage custom practice that existed in this local area. Regarding definition and features of this custom, please see the ‘Literature Review’ part of this chapter.

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Goddess of Mercy Hall. This hall was built in 1848 by an old couple whose surname was He—there is a board hanging up at the front of the building, with the name of the hall and the date it was built, Daoguang, Wushen. Mr. and Mrs He were famous for their kindness in the local community (see Figures 1.6 and 1.7). They did not have any children, and when they got old they adopted four daughters who were all zishu nü. They taught them how to make straw mats in order to earn a living. After this, more and more girls came to the Guanyin Hall. Most of them became residents of the hall, and most of these residents were zishu nü. If this story is true—the tablets in the hall provide good evidence—then in the Zhaoqing area, the history of zishu nü already spans at least one hundred and sixty years. This is the only clear material evidence about the early practice of zishu nü. In a word, it is clear that the zishu nü custom began no later than in the beginning of the nineteenth century.

There are three stages in the history of zishu nü. The first stage brings us to the end of the nineteenth century. There are two basic characteristics of the zishu nü in this first stage. Firstly, according to Zhang Xintai, most of the zishu nü were from rich families. Ming Gu, in Goddess of Mercy Hall, told me that her adopted grandmother "Daoguan is the Emperor’s reign period at that time."

However, according to the oral history collection and history resources which I mentioned earlier, most of the zishu nü were from rich families. In this regard see Xintai Zhang, 'Essays about a trip in the Guangdong Delta' (Yueyou xiao ji), in Zhang Shunhui, Edited Essays in Qing (Qingren biji Tiaobian), Changchun:
was the only girl from a rich family in Gaoyao County Jindu area. Her parents were afraid that she would suffer too much as a new daughter-in-law to an in-law family, so they sent her to the Goddess of Mercy Hall, to stay with her aunt, her father’s sister. ‘She had a charmed life’, Zhao Huiming said, ‘she was born in a rich family. Her parents sent her here because of their love for her. She chose to be a zishu nü herself to stay with her friends rather than suffer living with an in-law family. She did not need to work hard because her parents gave her a huge amount of money.’ In previous research, it is argued that most of the women who chose to be zishu nü did not have any external pressures exerted upon them. Furthermore, these zishu nü did not have to worry about their finances, which gave them the freedom to choose not to marry. The motivations for becoming a zishu nü were mainly that it was a way of resisting marriage and the fact they were sentimentally attached to a sisterhood. Their families did not oppose their decisions, and, in fact, some of the families supported their decision to remain unwed. One reason for this could be that the rich and famous families did not have to rely on their daughter’s marriage for prosperity and status. Thirdly, in some essays the zishu nü are seen as a fashionable phenomenon (fengqi), but compared to the number of people who followed this custom in later years, it was, in the early stage, still practised among only a small group of women. The second generation in Goddess

9 Most zishu nü in Zhaoqing were from Gaoyao County according to my fieldwork. Figure 1.8 is the picture from Ming Gu. From the picture we can see at the end of nineteenth century, there were still lots of zishu nü from rich family.
10 Interview with Zhao Huiming in her house, Zhaoqing, December, 27th, 2006.
11 It was because one of the most basic and important functions of marriage was a combination of two surnames in order to ensure the two clans’ survival and development. In a wealthy family this requirement would not have been emphasized by the head of the clan.
12 For a discussion on all these conclusions see Xintai Zhang, ‘Essays on a trip in Guangdong Delta’. This is not the sphere of my research for this thesis so that I will not analyze it here. However, I hold the opinion that it is difficult to determine these women’s true motives and situation in that period from the written material.
of Mercy Hall comprised less than twenty women in total, from two generations, while of the fourth generation, those born around 1920, there were more than one hundred women. Considering these two characteristics, their family situation and their motives to be a zishu nü, this stage ended at around the end of the nineteenth century. Increasingly, more girls from poor peasants’ families began to practise this custom, which notably increased the total population of zishu nü.

The second stage was from the end of nineteenth century to the early 1940s. At this stage, a huge number of women became zishu nü. Their socio-economic background changed to predominantly lower class and poor families. Consequently, the reasons for becoming a zishu nü changed.

In Chapter 3, I will argue that the reasons became even more complex and varied as economic and social conditions changed. However, before moving on I want to pose and answer one question about this period: How widespread was this custom? I have some statistics to make an estimate. First, Wu Qingshi wrote in *Panyu Gazetteer*: ‘During the Guangxu and Xuantong period (1875–1911), there were thousands of people who lived in the South Village in Panyu County. During the whole year, less than ten girls got married. During the year 1905, not one girl got married.’

Second, according to a survey by the Guangdong Women’s Federation in 1953, there were still 245 zishu nü in a female population of 2028—about 12 per cent.

Third, more than ten of my informants (from Shunde and Nanhai) told me that in each of their villages, in every family at least one girl became zishu nü. In one family in Shunde, Jun’an, Shatou village (whose surname is Huang) there were four girls who became zishu nü. Fourth, in Foshan, in the 1940s, there was a silk factory called Gongjilong. According to my available today. I think it is better to acknowledge it as a problem until more evidence is found to resolve this issue.

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*Qingshi Wu, Panyu County Gazetteer (Panyu xianzhi), Guangzhou: Guangdong People’s Press, 1995.
Juzeng Chen, Sifu Li & Qingshi Wu, “Zishu nü and compensation marriage” (Zishunü yu Buluojia), in Cultural and Historical Resource in Guangdong (Guangdong wenshi ziliao), No 12, pp. 41-6.*
informants and some historical records, there were more than one thousand female workers at that factory, all of whom were zishu nü.

The last stage was the 1940s to the 1950s, which marked the disappearance of this custom. Stockard says in her book, *Daughters of the Canton Delta*, that during the 1920s, this custom declined because of the decline of sericulture. Some previous research written in Chinese argued that no girls became zishu nü after 1949. But that was really just an assumption—the research did not provide any evidence to support this point which was based on the assumption that because the new marriage law protected women’s right to look for a husband themselves, there was no reason for women to continue to choose to be a zishu nü. Obviously, this conclusion is based on the argument that zishu nü is a marriage resistance pattern. However, this is not correct. The fact is, there were women who became zishu nü after 1949. For example, in 1951 Huang Kaiqun came back to her home village, Shatou, from Singapore when she was 29 years old for zishu nü rites led by her mother. Ming Gu in Zhaoqing had her ceremony in 1956 when she was 20 years old. According to my interviewees, they were not the only girls in the local community to choose to be zishu nü. This was during the 1950s when the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) had already consolidated its rule in the local area. Therefore, the decline in this custom was not solely a result of factors that have been cited in previous research. It is not convincing to simply conclude that its decline was due only to the decline in the sericulture industry or the new marriage law protecting women published and implemented by CCP. In my view, the main reason for the decline of zishu nü was neither economic nor political. The former reason over-emphasizes the role which sericulture played in the existence of this custom—I will explain this point in detail in Chapter 3—while the latter is too positive and naïve in its assumption regarding the influence of law on the custom. Rather, new ideas about marriage undermined traditional practices, which made zishu nü redundant as a practice. In other words, the part of the new marriage law which was the primary cause of the decline of this custom was not the woman’s right to choose her own husband, but the part that legally confirmed a daughter’s duty

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16 Some interviewees who are Guangdong locals told me that the most of the generation that was born during the 1930s and got married during the 1950s, were introduced to their partner by their older generations, and got married after only two or three meetings, which usually were not private but included some other friends or their parents in order to prevent something ‘shameful’ from happening. While this kind of marriage seemed to involve the free-choosing of a marriage partner, it is, in essence, only another kind of traditional marriage under the name of ‘freedom’.
and rights in her natal family, so that her in-law family could not forbid her to fulfill her obligations, enjoy her rights and keep her connection with her natal family. Because of this law, if a woman wished to continue supporting her natal family then she now had an alternative to becoming zishu nü. I think this is the main reason for the demise of the custom.

As we have seen, the zishu nü custom spanned three historical periods: Qing Dynasty, Republican China and P.R. China. Therefore, another question naturally follows. Did the zishu nü custom exist in a traditional society or a modern one? The answer is in relation to my methodology and fieldwork. My research is based on an oral history collection, which I recorded during 2006 and 2007. Most of my interviewees decided to become zishu nü during the 1940s or 1950s, which was the final period of the custom. Some of them belong to the end of the second stage, around the early 1940s. I divided the history of the custom into three stages according to its popularity. However, the last stage should be seen as an extension of the second one: they are similar to each other in terms of zishu nu’s motives, work and living conditions, and their relationship with the world outside, especially in terms of the individual’s experience. In fact, my interviewees’ life stories also bear similarities to the life stories of the previous generation—I will investigate some historical resources and also my interviewees’ representations about their their predecessors’ experiences to support this point. In summary, the period of the zishu nü custom which I examine begins at the end of the nineteenth century and extends into the second half of the twentieth century. In other words, I am not going to examine practice during the purely traditional period in China, but China is transition from traditional to modernity.

My answer to the question about the temporal span of my research on the zishu nü custom is that it existed within a traditional society. At the end of the nineteenth century and the throughout first half of the twentieth century, the society in rural Guangdong delta was governed by traditional Chinese culture, while, at the same time, it was influenced by modern industry and social change. However, these changes did not really penetrate the traditional beliefs and practices of the local area within this period.

The first half of the twentieth century was China’s transition from a traditional economy to a modern industrial model, and from traditional culture to a
modern lifestyle. This change occurred over an extended period of time. The power of traditional ideology and discourse still controlled people’s lives during that period. This was particularly true in rural areas where social changes, which were a result of western and modern industry, were not as noticeable and rapidly spread as in urban areas. At the beginning of the twentieth century there were profound changes to society. However, the rural area of the Guangdong Delta was largely resistant to the developing social, economic and political environment. Society maintained its traditional cultural and social norms that were typical to traditional Chinese society.

We can find clues to this in local area history. In the chapter entitled ‘Honoured Women’ in Ling Heshu’s *Panyu County Gazetteer During Republican China (Panyu Xianzhi)*, the most respected women in the local area were chaste widows and daughters who served their parents for their entire lives.

It was suggested above that in the zishu nu area in Guangdong Delta people’s cultural identity was maintained in a traditional sense. The zishu nu provide a good example of this. All of the moral principles they insist on are entirely in accord with traditional Han cultural values. For their family the zishu nu was a loyal and loving daughter or sister, while at the same time zishu nu demanded ‘filial piety’ from their nephews or nieces. In fulfilling her duty as a daughter, the zishu nu in turn, gained respect from other family members. She even enjoyed higher status than their sisters-in-law in their natal families. ‘Filial piety’ (xiao) and ‘love and respect for siblings’ (di) are two key words that characterized traditional Chinese family relations. With their friends and zishu nu ‘sisters’, women who remained unmarried built an effective network. They helped each other when they met difficulties; they shared their happiness together; they did not feel lonely when they were far away from their home because zishu nu had encouragement and a social life with each other. They were not born in the same house, of course, but they died in the same room. Their names were on the same memorial tablet and worshiped by their successors, and together they taught ‘righteousness’ (yi) to everyone by their example. In the local society or community, they were respected for what they had done. Besides the good relationships with their families or friends, they held themselves to a strict code of

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18 Although Ling Heshu did not say these daughters were zishu nu, their lifestyles did coincide with the zishu nu custom. The whole style and framework of this local history which was written in Republican China, is the same as in Imperial China. See Ling Heshu, *Panyu County Gazetteer during Republican China (Panyu Minguo Xianzhi)*. Some other local histories in Guangdong Delta recorded similar situations.
‘chastity’ (zhen) for their entire lives. They provide the best examples of Confucian moral principles relating to local moral education and reform (jiaohua).

The sisterhood that I will describe was part of traditional Chinese society. However, modernity still pushed them and their families to rethink the meaning of womanhood and female moral intervention. This made them both question the traditional moral order, and threaten the conservative notions of social order. Modern social and economic forces had far reaching influence in rural China, creating opportunities for women to earn their own living. Gender relations were reshaped both in opposition to and in support of a transitional system, which was represented by the profound alterational transformation of work opportunities. Moreover, in the web of the tradition-defined ideology of interpersonal relationships, tradition presented women with a dilemma which in fact brought with it an opportunity to choose their own life path. Although zishu nü still complied with the traditional Confucian gender discourses, they were nonetheless able to move outside these boundaries it set. I will examine this point carefully in Chapter 5 when I summarize the relationships zishu nü women build with other family members and the local community, and the network they create with other zishu nü.

**Literature review**

Both western and Chinese scholars have studied the phenomenon of zishu nü, coming to a somewhat different conclusion. Here, in this introduction I simply separate them into two groups: one English, the other Chinese. As far as material written in English goes, this custom has been described in books from the late nineteenth century, such as Robert Fortune’s book *A Residence Among The Chinese,* and Mr. and Mrs. Gray’s travelling diaries in the Guangdong Delta in the late nineteenth century.

Similar to English works, most of the early descriptions of this custom by Chinese intellectuals also occur in fiction or travel essays. Zhang Xintai’s essay in *Critical Edition of Essays by Qing Weites* (*Qingren biji Tiaobian*) is a good example. It has to be noted that some of these descriptions are not written in a serious scholarly way, but in a more exaggerated way for novelty value. However, we cannot ignore the fact

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that images of zishu nü did receive attention from some academics that stimulated scholarly research on this topic.

Since the late nineteenth century, western scholars adopted the new methodology and discipline of anthropology. The anthropological approach emphasizes the study and analysis of culture from a theoretical perspective, and compliments theoretical studies with ethnographic field work. This approach had important implications for the study of zishu nü and resulted in some valuable English works on the topic. In China, this kind of theoretically focussed research began relatively late. During the 1930s, Gai Shi finished his study ‘Guangdong’s buluojia and zishu’ (Guangdong de buluojia he zishu), but most anthropological work was not done until the 1980s.

Despite the common explanation of women motives to become zishu nü—the prospect of sericulture work and marriage resistance—different interpretations of their daily life and explanations of the symbolism of the rites involved in this custom are clearly at work in different scholars’ research. Generally speaking, both western scholars and Chinese scholars interpret and analyse the rise of the custom from the following four perspectives: the motives of women to become zishu nü, the relationship between zishu nü and bu luo jia (compensation marriage), the social and historical significance of the custom, and/or the symbolism of the associated rites. Of course, they consider other aspects too, but the summaries that I will present in the following chapter focus on these four aspects, which are central both to scholarly debates and my analysis in this thesis.

The Motives of Women to Become Zishu nü

It has been widely argued that economic strategies, marriage resistance and the network of local women influenced the rise of the zishu nü custom. Most scholars in whether Chinese or western, who argue from an economic perspective, argue that sericulture was the main factor behind the custom’s rise in popularity. Therefore, according to this perspective, the decline of zishu nü coincided with the decline of the silk industry. However, most Chinese scholars agree that while the sericulture boom was one important reason for the popularity of zishu nü, it was not the reason for its

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21 Shi Gai, ‘Buluojia and zishu nü in Guangdong’ (Guangdong de buluojia he zishu), in New Woman (Xin Nüxing), vol. 1, no. 12, (1926): pp. 937-42.
origin. But these scholars do not explain how economic factors contributed to the growth of this custom. I will review this point in Chapter 3 where I examine the motives of women to become zishu nü. I will argue that economic motivations varied from individual to individual, as there were many different economic patterns in the zishu nü area, not only the silk industry. Nor does it appear that the rise or fall of the custom coincided with the rise or fall of the silk industry. There is no reason, therefore, to conclude that the state of the silk industry was the main reason first behind zishu nü’s popularity and later its decline.

Marriage resistance is a most motive commonly cited by researchers of this custom. According to Stockard:

> Although the motivations for choosing spinsterhood over marriage varied, two basic sentiments can be discerned: a rejection of the claims and obligations of marriage and an affirmation of the spinster life-style. Informants explained their choice of spinsterhood by saying they were afraid of marriage or mothers-in-law, they wanted to be independent and earn their own living, they did not want a husband or were afraid a husband would take more than one wife, they were afraid of childbirth or did not know how to care for children, they desired to be their own person and do as they pleased, or they wanted to avoid the ‘bother’ of marriage.

However, Stockard and other researchers ignore some important cultural elements that existed in the society. Traditional Chinese society was made up of a tight network of individuals, family, local community, and the state, which refer to the classic Confucian formula of ‘family’, state and the world (jia guo tianxia). Everyone’s identity and behaviour was shaped in accordance with this network. Marriage resistance could not have been used as the main reason for women becoming zishu nü, since it involved giving up reproduction—a woman’s most important function in this society—for their own freedom. Had this been common, this custom would have been rejected and discarded by local people, as it would have destroyed the balance of the whole society.

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The second dominant motive identified in previous research for the zishu nü custom was escaping from social norms. This argument emphasized the fear factor rather than the cares and concerns of women who chose to be zushi nü. Yet these women were respected by their families for what they did for the family. My research showed, however, that they did not seek the ‘freedom’ of an independent woman that early feminists sought. The earliest feminists I refer to here are the women who led the early feminism movement in China, especially in urban areas, such as Zhang Fuzhen. The main difference between zishu nü and these feminists are that the feminists represented their cause through slogans such as ‘independence’ and ‘gender equality’. Chinese feminists advocated that women should enjoy the same rights and power as men in society and should have an independent livelihood. In contrast, the zishu nü believe that they are an integral component of the family unit and that they cannot live without their family. If they did not contribute to their natal family they would feel shame. The zishu nü never severed the connection with their natal family, and they had more freedom partly because they did not have to worry about a strange family-in-law that would potentially abuse them. Rather, each zishi nü chose to fulfil her obligation as a daughter to her natal family, who loved her and gave her respect and high status. The fact of the matters that the various factors that influenced women in their decision to become zishu nü. These reasons are much more complicated than those identified by Stockard. I will argue that the most basic reason was the women’s link to their natal families. This will be explored in the following chapters.

In addition to sericulture and marriage resistance, some scholars suggest that accommodation in the local area contributed to the popularity of the zishu nü custom. In rural areas in the Guangdong delta, some families were too poor to supply a room for their unmarried daughters. In this situation, at night these girls would sleep and sometimes do some work in a house which was the common property of the village or clan. During the day time, they would go to their own family’s house to help with the normal day to day work. The kind of house which provided separate accommodation for unmarried women and girls was called a ‘girl’s house’. Stockard describes it as follows:

25 Another reason for this freedom is that most of them lived far away from home in order to work. In this case, each could make her own personal decisions without her parents’ influence and control. I will explain this ‘freedom’ more in Chapter 3.
Girls' houses provided a gathering place and separate sleeping accommodation for girls, beginning in early adolescence....According to informants, typically eight to ten girls belonged to one girl’s house....Three basic organizational configurations of girls’ houses can be distinguished. In the first variation, girls worked at home during the day, took meals with their family, and spent each night in the girls’ house...in the second configuration, girls worked at home during the day and spent only occasional nights in the girls’ house, perhaps a few nights a month....In the last configuration, an older woman or widow, living alone and desiring companionship, invited a few girls to stay with her.

Another function of girls’ houses, according to Stockard, is that it provided a venue for girls to exchange stories and ballads. ‘The chatting and gossiping in the evenings in the girls’ houses were not only entertainment, but served important communication purposes as well.’

Girls became good friends and consolidated networks through living together in the girls’ house. Married women in the house would also tell their friends how scary their marriage was.

However, the degree to which the girls’ houses influenced a girl’s decision to become a zishu nü is questionable. The girls’ houses were not the only place in which women could discuss their experiences. First, women in the zishu nü area had plenty of chances to exchange their experiences in other places. In the Guangdong rural area, for economic and cultural reasons, restrictions on girls were not as strict as among the elite. In order to earn money, girls became one of the main sources of labour to their families from the age of around ten.

This meant that women and girls had other opportunities to swap stories outside of the girls’ houses. Some relatively rich villages, such as those inhabited by big clans such as the Huang clan in Shatou, established schools in which their daughters studied literature together. There was no girl’s house in Shatou, but it was one of the villages in which zishu nü became a big tradition. On the other hand, most of the girls’ houses were provided by the village or clan for girls from poorer families to stay overnight. Because they were from poor families, they had to do lots of work during the night too. Chen Gu, from Dongguan, told me that in her girls’ house, every girl had to work from five to six hours every night, with very poor light, making hemp rope for their families to sell. If they did not

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26 Stockard, Daughters of the Canton Delta, p. 38.
27 Among my nineteen interviewees, sixteen of them began to work for their family when they were less than ten years old; three of them began to work from the age of four; all of them became main income provider for their family when they were under fifteen years old. See more statistics and examples in Chapter 3s
28 Stockard mentioned the economic function of girls’ houses. However, she argues that ‘girls’ houses did not have a primarily economic function. Although in the evenings girls sometimes engaged in such tasks as embroidering, sewing, and weaving to earn extra income, these were neither regular nor organized endeavors’ (see Stockard, Daughters of the Canton Delta: p. 37). What Stockard described in her book about the economic function of girls’ houses is different from what I observed in my fieldwork, which is clear in the example from Gu in Dongguan.
concentrate enough on the work in hand, it would easily destroy their whole night’s work. Most of them slept for only five hours per night. This combined with their workload, meant that they had little time or incentive to chat.\textsuperscript{29} For these reasons, I doubt that the girls’ houses really had a big influence on girls’ decisions to become zishu nü. In Dongguan, I found old girls’ houses spread everywhere in the fields, which were really popular at the beginning of the twentieth century. But Dongguan was not regarded as a place where the zishu nü custom was widespread. In contrast, there were not so many girls’ houses in Shunde, yet Shunde was supposed to be the core area for zishu nü. While I agree that girl’s houses would have had some influence on girls’ decisions, their influence would not necessarily have been uniform or strong.

\textbf{The Relationship Between Zishu nü and Buluojia}

Buluojia or ‘compensation’ marriage is another important term that has been used in previous research. It refers to a customary form of delayed marriage in south and south-east China. Zishu nü and buluojia are two customs similar in many respects. A woman who is a buluojia would get married when she got close to marrying age. However, she would not go to her husband’s family immediately after the wedding but stay in her natal family for a while, usually three to six years, until she became pregnant with her first baby. Some of them would never have sexual relations with their husbands, and some would never go to live with their in-law families. Instead, they would pay for their husband to keep a concubine to continue the patrilineal lineage. In Stockard’s words, these women renegotiated the terms of marriage with their husband’s family. The often-lengthy negotiations were successfully concluded when the husband’s family agreed to accept compensation from the brideldughter and both parties settled on the amount to be paid. For the brideldughter, payment of compensation radically extended the interval of spousal separation.\textsuperscript{30}

A buloujia woman was still considered a daughter-in-law, but she usually lived with her natal family until immediately before her death. She could not die in her natal family home, but had to be with her in-law family at this time. Her inheritance belonged to her in-law family. Her in-law family’s duty in return was to give her a

\textsuperscript{29} Interview with Chen Gu, Dongguan, January, 12\textsuperscript{th}, 2007.
place on the tablet in their worship hall. She would still be an ancestor to her in-law family.

The debate in previous research about zishu nü and buluoqia mainly centres on which came first and which was the derivative, what I want to emphasize is that a compensation marriage is indeed a marriage. The woman had a wedding and enjoyed certain rights as the daughter-in-law, but can decline her duties as the daughter-in-law. She had the option to pay ‘compensation’ if she did not want to carry out her reproductive duties. The relationship between women in compensation marriages and their in-law family was like this:

Women in ‘buluoqia’ (compensation marriages) would not live day-to-day with their husbands’ families. However, they were still supposed to be the main daughters-in-law to their husbands’ families. If there were weddings or funerals there, their husbands’ family had to ask them back to be present. And, especially at their husbands’ or their parents-in-law’s funeral, these women were still supposed to wear the funeral clothes of a wife or daughter-in-law. When these women themselves were dying, they could be taken to their husband’s house at the last minute for their final moments. During this period, since a woman in a compensation marriage stayed in her husband’s family till she died, all of the fees, including food, medicine and so on, would be paid by this woman herself, as well as all the expenses for the funeral. The husband’s family would not pay even one penny for this. After she died, her inheritance belonged to her husband’s family instead of her natal one. On the other hand, her husband’s family had to host her funeral in the style of that of a true wife.31

A zishu nü, on the other hand, did not have a family in law, either in name or in reality. The women’s only relationship was to their natal family. This constitutes a significant difference from compensation marriage. Of course, there were still some similarities between zishu nü and buluoqia. In some cases a zishu nü chose to have a compensation marriage in order to have a tablet in her in-law family’s ancestral hall. Nonetheless, they belong to different groups. In fact, in my fieldwork, some of my informants emphasized the differences themselves. It serves not purpose, therefore, to try to determine which custom more strongly influenced the other, as they are quite distinct, even though similarities can be identified. The main task of my thesis then is to discuss the zishu nü in their own right, rather than talking about them as buluoqia. Previous scholars usually talk about these two customs in reference to one another and they emphasize their similarities rather than their differences. As a result, the two customs have often been confused.

31 Juzeng Chen, Sifu Li and Qingshi Wu, ‘Zishu nü and Compensation Marriage’ (Zishunü yu Buluoqia).
The Social and Historical Significance of the Custom

As for the third aspect in this debate, scholars hold different opinions about the social and historical significance of this custom. Generally speaking, there are two points to this discussion. The first concerns the relationship between the zishu nü custom and the dominant Chinese culture system. There are two different views about this. Some scholars relate the origin of this custom to the influence of non-Han culture in this region,

Over two-and-a-half years—as the contours of the delayed transfer marriage system became apparent—it seemed increasingly clear to me that the origins of that system lay in some early fusion of local non-Chinese or ‘non-Han’ cultures with Han Chinese culture. This cultural fusion produced the distinctive version of Chinese society found in the Canton Delta.

Other scholars, such as Hong Kong scholar Ye Hanming, think that this group of women developed their own subculture (ci wenhua ziyuan) subordinate to the dominant cultural system (zhu wenhua tixi) of China. However, in this thesis, I will argue that this custom lies totally within the Han cultural system. I will discuss this as one of my main findings in Chapter Two.

Second, there is the question of the influence of this custom on other social movements, namely the influence of feminism and social movements more broadly. Some Chinese scholars think zishu nü should be seen as an early manifestation of feminism, while others believe the custom was a reaction against the pressures marriage placed on women. I disagree with both of these two ideas. As discussed earlier, there are significant differences between zishu nü and early feminists. Furthermore, the idea that this custom rose to oppose the feudal marriage system firmly locates this custom as a marriage resistance practice.

The Symbolism of the Rites Associated with the Zishu nü Custom

Regarding the symbolism associated with the rite to declare a woman a zishu nü, derived from the analysis of motivation, all previous scholars interpret the rite as a kind of wedding without a groom. However, from the ritual perspective, I found that it actually is a rite of passage to womanhood rather than a wedding ceremony, which supports my argument that the zihshu nü reaffirm their identity as a daughter to their

33 Ye Hanming, ‘Power of Culture Sub-system: Zishu nü and Sisterhood’.
natal family, without any other family. I will analyse the actual rites and symbolism, in Chapter 4, when I outline clearly the activities involved in this ceremony.

In summary, there has been scholarly debate over many aspects of the custom of zishu nü. The debate itself, in any case, is not simply one within the sphere of local custom research, but impacts on the much broader way womanhood, marriage and gender agency is analysed are Chinese culture. My primary aim in writing this thesis has been to understand and rethink womanhood, marriage and gender in Chinese culture by analysing to the experiences of zishu nü. My second aim has been to illustrate the oral history approach through which these experiences are constructed in narrative form.

In this thesis I make some of the marginalized figures in traditional Chinese society—that is, zishu nü, women who vowed to remain unmarried throughout their lives— the centre of attention. I do this, first, because most of these women were from the lower levels of society and made up the bulk of the female population in both modern and Imperial China. Their life stories offer valuable insights into how ordinary women practice the subordinate roles thrust upon them by the whole cultural system. Second, as I will show in the chapters that follow, this phenomenon, which seems different from dominant discourses in traditional China, will enrich our understanding of daughterhood, which is an essential aspect of womanhood in traditional China, though it has been ignored by scholars for long time.
Chapter 2

Cultural and Historical Significance of the Zishu Nü

Figure 2.1: A zishu nü in her twenties. Photo in Shunde Women’s Federation, *Shunde zishu nü*, n.p., 2006, p. 30.
In the previous chapter, I introduced the zishu nü custom, its history and general background, and also examined and critiqued previous studies. From my analysis in the previous chapter it is clear that previous research, which has a largely negative perspective on this custom, should be re-examined. This custom of zishu nü, I will argue, is derived from the dominant Han culture and it can be understood as a part of the Han cultural system. There is no conflict between the lifestyle of this group of women and the paternal world of traditional Chinese society: a zishu nü identifies herself within her family as a daughter to the clan, and she earns respect from the local community by virtue of being a good daughter. In other words, a zishu nü can be seen as an extreme but positive example of the practice of daughterhood in traditional China, which is an important part of womanhood that has largely been ignored by scholars.

In this chapter, I will explain this new perspective on the zishu nü custom, which is based on my fieldwork in Guangdong Delta during 2006 and 2007. In order to make my argument clear, there are four sections in this chapter. In the first section I will report on my fieldwork and introduce the methodology of my research, especially as regards the collection of oral history which is the basis of my analysis. In the second section I will point out the significance of zishu nü by answering two questions about China raised by the custom: (1) How does the zishu nü custom, which was practiced by a definite group of people in a specific place, during a definite period, represent Han culture, without regional and periodical limitations? (2) What do the oral histories of individual zishu nü women tell us about Han culture? In the third section I give the main argument, which consists of two parts. Firstly, zishu nü is a custom that lies completely within the Han cultural system; it is not resistance or deviation. Secondly, daughterhood is an important part of womanhood in traditional China. The last section of this chapter is a short preamble to the latter chapters in the second part of this thesis, which concerns my case study.

Methodology and Fieldwork

When designing my fieldwork, I emphasized two main points in order to maximize the information obtained about the zishu nü custom. Firstly, I conducted my fieldwork over a larger area than that covered by previous research. Almost every scholar, western or Chinese, is referring to the Shunde area when they mention zishu nü. I wanted to understand the situation in the other parts of the Guangdong Delta.
where zishu nü were reported. My long trip around the Guangdong Delta, mostly the middle part and the Pearl River Delta, led me to some new findings about this custom, especially in relation to the variance of its practical pattern (see Map 2.2). Secondly, I wanted to talk with the women in depth, to try and understand the emotional part of their lives, their tears, their smiles, and their true feelings about family, friends, and the course of their lives. I did not only want answers to factual questions like ‘what did you do when you were young’. In this section, I will mainly communicate my approach to this second point, the work involved in the collection of oral history.

**Map 2.1.** The zishu nü area in my research compared with that in previous research.

To begin, I will review two concepts of anthropological methodology study—‘etic’ and ‘emic’—which are the key words in my methodology.

Emic and etic refer in a different way to the issue of insiders and outsiders. An emic statement is one made from the point of view of a social actor giving either their worldview or their opinion about a particular feature of their world. It is an insider’s, or ‘native’s’ point of view. An etic statement observes the behavior of individuals or groups, and in a sense compares what actors say they do or believe with what they actually do. It has often been found that people say one thing and do another. The etic is an outsider’s point of view.¹

Actually, the distinction and connection between these two concepts reflect the problem of studying social history. Even if we assume that direct observation is ‘objective’, or more objective than subjects’ reports, we cannot observe history. The best we can do is to ask the people directly involved, and analyze their accounts in the context of our other knowledge.

Superficially, these two approaches seem very different, or even totally opposite, to each other. In the relationship between the viewpoints of the interviewee and researcher, the former is ‘emic’, while the latter is ‘etic’. Emically, what a group people such as the zishu nü think is ‘Han’ about their way of life, may only be tangentially related to what others (such as Chinese people living in another part of China) emically believe to be Han, but this fact can only be constructed from an etic perspective by ‘others’ (i.e. scholars who are studying China). This opens a possibility for researchers to distinguish, for example, what is etically Chinese from what is emically Chinese for these zishu nü, which relates to the question of how a periodical and regional phenomenon can reflect the whole culture. I will give my answer to this question later, in the section entitled ‘Significance of this topic’.

In practice, these two approaches, ‘emic’ and ‘etic’, lead to two different strategies for actually conducting and reporting on research. In the first, ‘emic’ case, the researcher identifies with their subjects and records their experiences and views, attempting to see as they see and think as they think. In the second, ‘etic’ case, the researcher is a dispassionate observer, adhering as closely as possible to strict objectivity.2 Examined separately, there are inherent risks in both methods. A totally ‘emic’ approach is dangerous as the anthropologist is prone to focus on the expectations and wishes of the interviewee rather than on the deeper logic of their actions or behavior, so that the anthropologist might not ‘do their job with accuracy and objectivity’.3 In contrast, if a researcher focuses only on the logic behind the phenomenon without concern for the subject’s feelings, emotions and motivations, there is a danger that the analysis will develop according to researcher’s own theory and logic, but not the ‘true’, or objective, symbolization or cultural meaning behind the phenomenon.

However, in practice, there is often substantial interpenetration of emic and etic perspectives. In other words, ‘emic’ and ‘etic’, are two sides of the same coin.\textsuperscript{4} Thus, combining these two ways seems a good strategy when doing fieldwork. The difficulty is to answer how and to what extent ‘the fellow-feeling of participation [is] consistent with the objectivity of observation’.\textsuperscript{5} Moreover, why is it assumed that observation is objective? It involves not just ‘seeing’ but also ‘interpreting’.

When a social or cultural phenomenon is analyzed, there are always some questions that need to be answered. What is the issue? Who practiced or is related to this issue? What is their narrative or representation about this issue? What can we see behind the phenomenon? All of these questions are affected by our choice of methodology. Taking the topic of this thesis as an example, the phenomenon is that a special group of women from the Guangdong Delta in southern China, known as zishu nü, vowed to remain unmarried throughout their lives, taking part in neither a ‘normal’ nor a ‘compensation’ marriage ceremony. The status of such a woman as an adult but unmarried daughter to her family is declared to everybody in the local area by the rite of combing her hair into a bun, which is a rite of passage. This complex phenomenon cries out for better understanding, and this prompted my research. In the existing literature there are several different methodologies used to study this aspect of Chinese culture.

In the first type of methodology, one restricts attention to the historical material made up by statistics and other writers’ accounts of the phenomenon as they observe it; these statistics and historical records become the ‘narrative’ and representation on which the research is based. In some sense, this is a completely ‘etic’ or objective way to do the research, and some anthropologists have followed this method in their research on zishu nü.\textsuperscript{6} However, statistics are a coarse measure


\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{6} This tendency is evident especially among Chinese scholars. For example, Chunsheng Ye researched the zishu nü custom by examining only historical statistics, and he was strongly influenced by scholarly discourse in the Culture Revolution. As a consequence, in his analysis, the zishu nü custom is always connected to the definition ‘undesirable custom’ (lousu), which connected the reason for the appearance of the zishu nü custom to only the ‘evil’ (wan’e de) imperial marriage system. Wanyao Ouyang, Juzeng Chen, Sifu Li, Qingshi Wu adopted similar methodology to that of Ye’s, and came to a similar conclusion. See Chunsheng Ye, *Records of Folk Custom in Southern China (Lingnan fengsu lu)*, Guangzhou: Guangdong Tourism Press, 1988; *Folk Custom in Guangfu Area (Guangfu minsu)*, Guangzhou: Guangdong People’s Press, 2000; and *Southern China: Folk Culture*, Guangzhou: Guangdong High Education Press, 2000; Wanyao Ouyang, ‘Exploration on the Zishu nü Custom in Pearl River Delta’ (*Zhujiangsanjiaozhou zishu nü fengsu chu tan*), in *Guangxi Ethnic Group Research Journal (Guangxi minzu yanjiu)*, vol. 2, 1999, pp. 92–96; Juzeng Chen, Sifu Li and Qingshi Wu, ‘Zishu nü and Compensation Marriage’ (*Zishu nü yu Buluojia*), in *Cultural and Historical Resource in
that can never capture every detail of a living culture, and a historian’s description is often subjective and incomplete. In particular, statistics and the historical record often miss subtle links between cultural practices. Both of these objections apply particularly strongly in the case of the zishu nu custom, as there is little hard data recorded, and most of the historians who studied it and provided the first descriptions were male and/or westerners, who, consciously or unconsciously, used patriarchal and/or western terms. This lack of representative detail in the underlying record becomes a serious shortcoming in the methodology, which results in an incorrect analysis.\(^7\)

In order to avoid this situation some scholars, such as Qu Ning, Gao Li and Feng Huitang, have chosen to emphasize oral histories, rather than simply gathering information, as their primary research method.\(^8\) This involves a shift from information gathering, ‘where the focus is on process, on the dynamic unfolding of the subject’s viewpoint.’\(^9\) A shift of focus from data gathering to an interactive process affects what the researcher regards as valuable information. However, in their fieldwork, these authors fell into the ‘people say one thing and do another’ trap, which is the main problem that an ‘emic’ methodology may cause. Two main shortcomings of isolating oral history collection were showed in the report of Qu, Gao and Feng: (1) while the report of the interviewee of their emotions, motives and feelings may not be entirely connected, there are things of which only he/she has direct knowledge, and (2) individuals understand their own emotions not merely through introspection, but by comparing their experiences with those of others, and talking to them. So even ‘emic’ accounts are based partly on the experiences of others. Nevertheless, the ‘others’ in this exercise are part of the social group of the interviewee, rather than outsiders. Oral history researchers confirm the connections of individual accounts by comparing a number of them. However, Qu, Gao and Feng interviewed only five

\(^7\) This is a problem in the methodology of present Chinese historical research. Historians try to determine what really happened from analyzing official data or statistics, and they have tended to transfer modern perspectives to historical figures. There are two disadvantages of this method of historical research. Which have split Chinese historical research split in two. The first focuses on the ruling class and the history of royal clans. The second is so-called ‘social history’ informed by serial data, barren and sterile. These two parts were never really combined as a whole. Regarding the debate see Ged Martin, ‘Definition and subjectivity in the writing of Imperial History’, in The History Journal, vol. 38, no.3. (Sep., 1995): pp. 769-779.


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zishu nú in Shatou village in Shunde, and just repeated what they had been told by their interviewees—which makes their research closer to a journalistic rather than an academic exercise.

In contrast to other researchers, Stockard introduced her own methodology for anthropological research on this topic. She tried to observe the zishu nú custom by combining both subjective and objective perspectives in her research; that is, she looked at both the statistics and the work of earlier historians, and also recorded oral histories in order to learn what these women have to say about themselves. Indeed, her research benefits from this new approach and her conclusions about this phenomenon provide a new perspective on the custom and its practitioners. However, at the same time, she did not manage to avoid all the pitfalls of the two methodologies, which leaves her interpretations at best incomplete. Despite her call for an examination of the identity of zishu nú women, Stockard’s own analysis turns away from a deep analysis of the phenomenon, to focus again and again solely on the narrative of her informers. This emphasis reduces her analysis to little more than the representation itself, which creates several analytical problems. First of all, she considered only the narratives of interviewees from the same group, and she simplified their various motivations, work and living situations, and family relations. More importantly, she did not notice that there is a conceptual gap between what these women said and what they actually did.

For example, Stockard tells a story from one of her interviewees in Zhongshan in which she describes the history of her decision to become a zishu nú:

She explained that since marriage was a lot of trouble, ‘capable’ girls ran away to Hong Kong to work as domestic servants and become spinsters. She said that she was afraid of marriage, but her parents would not allow her to become a spinster. According to the informant, parents in Xiaolan did not want their daughters to become spinsters. Therefore, girls never told their parents of their desire to become spinsters, but went ahead and performed the hairdressing ritual. In her own case, she combed back her bangs and then ran away to Hong Kong to work. When she was 24, she returned to Xiaolan, where her mother said that she must fix her hair either one way or the other, but not just half-way with only the bangs combed back. Her family then held a spinster banquet for her.10

From this story, Stockard concludes that ‘some villages forbade the practice of spinsterhood outright, and would-be spinsters had to run away.’11 However, she did not ask why this informant’s parents forbade her to become a zishu nú, how she

11 Ibid., p. 75.
arranged her income in Hong Kong, or why only ‘capable’ girls could run away, which are all questions that could shed light on her ‘real’ motivation apart from any resistance to marriage. On the other hand, her mother’s advice to her 24-year-old daughter and the subsequent spinster banquet held for her indicate that it was in fact a custom that was accepted by the local community, and that her parents did not really persist in their opposition to her decision to be a zishu nü.12

Finally, after comparing the methodologies of previous researchers, I chose to follow Stockard and use oral history supported by information gathering as the basis of my analysis. I entirely agree with the sentiment that ‘oral history interviews provide an invaluable means of generating new insights about women’s experiences of themselves in their worlds.’13 On the other hand, I tried to avoid the limitations evident in previous research. I join with others in calling for a reintroduction of emotion into the study of anthropology and history. At the same time, I think it is necessary to probe for the deeper logic and cultural meaning that can all too easily remain hidden behind the original data, if the researcher accepts too readily the interviewee’s recollection of events, motivation and behaviour. Memory is not perfect.14

What are the reasons for engaging in this strategy? First of all, it provides a more profound and realistic perspective on the zishu nü custom. In every cultural phenomenon, the key component is the people who practice it; the collective is made up of individuals. In order to investigate the thinking and activity of people, which is driven by their emotions and expectations, we are naturally led to a study of their stories and history. As Deborah Gould explains:

Investigations of such stories, and analytical attention to the power of emotions evident in them, can provide us with important insights, illuminating, for example, participants’ subjectivities and motivations, and helping us to build compelling accounts of a

12 Although the relationship between parents and their children and the real power held by parents varied from family to family, it is still a common knowledge that if her parents really to stop their daughter from doing something, the girl could not really acheive her purpose; if she persisted she would be rejected by the family.
13 As Anderson and Jack comment in their essay, ‘the spontaneous exchange within an interview offers possibilities of freedom and flexibility for researchers and narrators alike. For the narrators, the interview provides the opportunity to tell her own story in her own terms. For researchers, taped interviews preserve a living interchange for present and future use; we can rummage through interviews as we do through an old attic – probing, comparing, checking insights, finding new treasures the third time through, then arranging and carefully documenting out results.’ See Kathryn Anderson & Dana C. Jack, ‘Learning to listen: interview techniques and analyses’, p. 11.
14 Helen Siu adopted a similar methodology for her research on the topic of the zishu nü custom. However, I highlight different aspects of this custom. Please see the following section on the significance of this topic.
movement’s trajectory, strategic choices, internal culture, conflicts, and other movement processes and characteristics. 

Although emotions are central to such stories, it can be difficult for a researcher to fit such data into a theoretical framework. But what do we lose when such stories are absent from our analyses? The motivating role of strongly felt emotion—called ‘the force or power of emotions’ by Gould—is obvious in the details of women’s accounts of practicing the zishu nü custom; these emotions invite our attention and interest, and burn into our minds any number of images.

Additionally, such a focus encourages an investigation of human behaviour that is not bound by rational actor assumptions, and such an investigation can give greater insight into people’s motivations for participating in a custom. When commenting on the need to bring emotion back into the study of social movements, Gould says:

While an investigation of the strategic uses of emotions illuminates one important role that emotions play in social movement processes, this instrumentalist view of emotions is only partial, and in fact quite unsatisfying, leaving crucial questions unasked and unanswered.... Limiting our analyses to such an instrumentalist rendering reduces the power of emotions to just another tool in the social movement entrepreneur’s framing toolkit, and much of what is rich and significant about the above stories would remain unexplored.

Joy, pride, love sorrow, anger and other emotions are of import not simply, or even primarily, because of their strategic utility; analytical attention to people’s experiences of such emotions can help us to make sense of the motivation of individual zishu nü and their other actions, and by extrapolation, of the actions of other customs or social issues or movements.

The assumption of rationality produces a flat caricature of participants which paints them as unrealistically dispassionate, and raises the question of why such dispassionate people would ever be motivated to disrupt their routines and engage in collective action. Economic arguments cannot explain all such puzzles. However, among those researchers that have given consideration to the power of emotion in their analysis, particularly with respect to zishu nü, there is a tendency to simply use it as an instrument to critique the old understanding of this cultural system, rather

16 Ibid., p. 156.
17 Ibid., pp. 159–60.
than incorporate it as part of a complete picture. In fact, in deciding whether and how to engage in a lifestyle, people have to make sense of themselves and their world and the relationship between the two. They must evaluate their situation, consider their sometimes ambiguous or contradictory desires, confront their fears, assess their own values as well as those of mainstream society and navigate possible conflicts therein, conjure up the unknowable future, and so on. The significance of these feelings and emotions underlines the importance of bringing our attention on bear on them.

It seems clear that a focus on emotions, in interaction with other factors, can only strengthen our analyses. At the same time, we must not forget that 'culture... powerfully affects what we think we should feel, what we try to feel, and sometimes what we feel,' especially when custom is a derivation from cultural development. To understand the phenomenon of zishu nü or other customs, we have to move beyond a strategic view of emotions and recognize the forces at work behind the formulation and practice of the custom. Insights derived from an exploration of the role of emotion could advance broader theoretical inquiries about power, agency, subjectivity, historical change and so on, which are the answers we need and are trying to figure out through an analysis of this phenomenon or custom.

In addition to bringing emotion back into our account of interviews and our search for cultural meaning, there is another aspect of reading and translating the primary narrative that I want to point out. Despite my confidence in the validity of my reading as a culture study scholar, personally I continue to be concerned about the potential emotional effect an alternative reading of their narratives may have on our living subjects. When analyzing and representing these narratives, I hope for the sake of my subjects that I bring my own knowledge, experience, and concerns to the material and that the result reflects a good understanding which is as close as possible to the truth.

The way I solve this problem in my fieldwork is that I respect these women’s attitude to their lives, which is largely a positive one. There are a number of items of research and reports expressing the opinion that these women’s lives were a tragedy and that they were the victims of an oppressive marriage system. This is the main argument that I critique in this thesis. In my interviews, there were some interviewees who said to me:

Do not follow what they wrote about us. They said we were lonely, that we were crying everyday, and that we hated men. They are all wrong. We are happy. I am happy; most of my friends are happy. We did have a difficult life. However, whose life is not difficult? It is all about choice. You will always lose something when you get something, isn’t that true?19

It is interesting to think about the position of ‘we’—the zishu nü women who expressed this opinion to me—and ‘they’—feminist scholars—in this statement. The main difference between the two parties’ interpretation is their attitude towards the stories of the zishu nü themselves. As a person who experienced the story herself, as a narrator, the woman is positive. We can see clearly in her words. However, in the interpretation of previous scholars she becomes a victim or a fighter, an interpretation that makes her unhappy. In my analysis, I take these women’s positive attitude as the emotional base of my work. Stated in another way, I bring a positive perspective to the organization of my investigation, an approach that I believe can bring us closer to ‘the truth’.

Before ending this introduction of my methodology, I will allow Hu Daidi, one of my interviewees, to tell her story about the decision she made to be a zishu nü without telling her parents. This story is quite similar to the one I quoted from Stockard’s book, but it reveals the advantage of my methodology.

I was seventeen years old,20 one of my aunties came back Guangzhou from Hongkong. She asked me to follow her to be a maid in Hong Kong. That means that I had to become a zishu nü.21 I decided to go and wrote a letter to tell my parents. My parents felt very upset about it. They went to Guangzhou immediately when they learned this news. They cried and ask me to stay being with them (shebude). I was too young to go to Hong Kong alone to work for the family, they thought, it was too dangerous and difficult for a girl. But I had made this decision already. The family was so poor that I could not just stay at home and do nothing except wait for marriage. I was going to provide for my family by working. Anyway, my family was too busy and too poor to arrange a marriage for me then. The whole nation was in a mess. My family was in a mess with by lots of kids. My parents did not have time to arrange it. And I always decided everything for myself.22

Like the informants in Stockard’s example, Hu’s parents did not want their daughter to become a zishu nü, because they loved her. They thought it would be too much for a girl to work in Hong Kong away from her family. What drove her to make this decision was that ‘the family was so poor that I could not just stay at home and do nothing except wait for marriage.’ Everything depended on the economic situation.

19 Interview with Xia Huitian in her house, Zhaqing District, 27 December, 2006.
20 Her brother said she may have been younger, because of local custom, people like to add one or two years to their real age, which means that she may have been fifteen or sixteen years old then.
21 It was for employment reasons, which I will discuss in Chapter 3.
22 Interview with Hu Daidi in her house, Zhaipu Village, Shunde District, 14 December, 2006.
of the family; everybody had to look after one other as best they could. Considering the emotion expressed in this narrative, it is clear that tears form the core of the story: the parents' tears because they did not want their daughter to sacrifice herself for the family; the daughter's tears and subsequent decision for the survival and well-being of the other family members. There was no resistance, no regret, no anger. Perhaps there was a feeling of helplessness, but the more positive emotions and a sense of responsibility to the family are essential to this story. This requires us to rethink the family members' responsibilities and the emotional basis for them.

Adopting the methodology outlined above—enlarging the fieldwork area and enriching the oral history content—I began my fieldwork in 2006. The first step of
my research was a pilot study, which was undertaken six months before I officially began my interviews, and I maintained contact with my interviewees by phone during that half-year. The purpose of the initial contact was not just to conduct preliminary interviews; the meeting was an opportunity to promote informality and engage in mutual self-disclosure. From the analysis of women’s narratives above, we know, as Kristina Minister reminds us, that ‘for feminist researchers, questions flow both ways.’ In this case, narrators should have the opportunity to question the interviewer about the research project and about herself. During my formal fieldwork, I interviewed nineteen zishu nü women about their life-stories, as well as some of their relatives, neighbours and other local people, in order to hear the opinions of ‘outsiders’ about this historical phenomenon. As a result of this approach I have been able to gather information that throws a new light on this important custom.

Cultural and Historical Significance

In her paper ‘Where were the women? rethinking marriage resistance and regional culture in South China’, Helen Siu approaches the question of the cultural and historical significance of the zishu nü custom from the direction of what she regards as the wider traditional practice of delayed transfer marriage:

It is nonetheless pertinent to examine how and by whom the cultural practice was maintained and changed in the course of the late imperial and modern periods corresponding to a developing regional political economy. What do the various appearances of delayed transfer marriage tell us about major processes of socio-cultural transformation in South China? In these processes, what was the part played by men and women in their intimate world of marriage and family, and how was this relatively ‘private’ realm of interaction linked to the larger concerns of cultural identity and social exclusion among the upwardly mobile groups as the Pearl River Delta came to be a conscious regional construct for its inhabitants?

In my thesis, in addition to reexamining the answers to these questions given by Helen Siu, I pose and answer the following questions: (1) How does the zishu nü custom, which was practiced by a definite group of people in a specific place, during a definite period, represent wider Han cultural values and practices? (2) What do the

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24 Regarding the detail of my fieldwork, see Appendix.
oral histories of individual zishu nü women tell us about Han culture? These questions focus on the relationship between the custom and its cultural meaning and logic.

To answer the first question, we have to first define 'culture'. Anthropologists most commonly use the term 'culture' to refer to the universal human capacity to classify, codify and communicate their experiences symbolically. Recently, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) described culture as follows:

"Culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs."  

Thus, culture is not merely a sum total of all the traits, rather it is 'a complex web of shifting patterns that link people in different locales and that link social formations of different scales'. In the context of socio-cultural anthropology, group norms and values are focuses of culture study. According to this view, any group can construct its own cultural identity.

In the case of Han culture, there is substantial genetic, linguistic, cultural and social diversity among its various subgroups, mainly due to thousands of years of regionalized assimilation of various ethnic groups and tribes in China. On the one hand, the definition of Han identity has varied in time, and there have also been regional differences in culture among Han Chinese. On the other hand, ethnic unity and persisted between different regional groups and from one historical period to another, because of common cultural, behavioral, linguistic, and religious practices. Many scholars have studied the factors that contribute to the Han cultural identity. For example, Patricia Buckley Ebrey 'examines the connection between Chinese surnames and Han Chinese identity':

I contend that Chinese understandings of ethnic identity have differed in important ways from ones found elsewhere—ones based on language, race, or place—and that their distinctive features help account for the huge size of the Han ethnic group.
We cannot deny the fact that in China, within its own boundaries, there are substantial differences between regions and between different historical periods. However, the strong continuity and links between these regions and historical periods should not be ignored. I understand the reason for these differences to be environmental, while the possibility of ethnic unity arises primarily from the imperial orthodoxy. That is to say, people’s practice of the cultural orthodoxy varied, because of the cultural environment and personal circumstances.

Taking the practice of the concept of ‘chastity’ (zhên) in dominant Han culture as an example, we can observe the relationship between the imperial orthodoxy and village practice. Members of the solid elite class tried to show that they were practicing the ideal in Confucian classic words, but it was difficult for lower class people to practice this philosophy in the same way, primarily for economic reasons. It was difficult for a poor family to forbid their daughter to go out to work if there was a good opportunity, which could save the entire family from falling into poverty. For these reasons, it seems that it was difficult for lower class people to adhere to some neo-Confucian ideas, such as chastity of women, if the women could not be kept at home. However, on balance, people of the lower classes still practised most Confucian ideals to the same extent as that of the elite classes, but the common people used their own methods to measure and restrict social members’ behavior. For example, the power of social pressure acted to control individuals’ manners. If there was a woman who does not carefully follow the principle of chastity, her behavior would be reported on and everyone in the local community would have the power to criticize her and her family; she thus becomes a ‘shame’ on her family or clan. The traditional ideal is that everyone in Chinese society learns when they are very young to protect their honor, and the honor of their family: in some sense, honor is as important as life itself. It is possible that the family would sacrifice an infringing woman’s honor or even her life to safeguard the family’s honor. This result is a disaster for any woman in traditional Chinese society, both psychologically and practically. Supervision and education are the two main ways in which Confucian ideals was perpetuated in the lower classes, which formed the main part of the population. When the social enforcement of women’s chastity became

more and more strict, it led to the cult of virginity. This happened in the Guangdong Delta in the Qing Dynasty, and in this area it was influential in folk culture.\(^{31}\)

There were many phenomena which demonstrated the popularity of the cult of women’s chastity and virginity, and its strong influence on the psychology and behavior of ordinary people. For example, one legend about the origin of zishu nü which was popular in the Guangdong Delta could reflect ordinary people’s feeling about virginity. It was said that only virgins could be clean and holy enough to finish some procedures in sericulture. The silkworm seed had to be put close to a virgin’s breast, in order to be hatched by her warmth; when the silkworm cocoon formed, only virgins were supposed to look after them in order to ensure the purity of the silk.\(^{32}\) Another example of the cult of virginity in the local area is a custom during the wedding ceremony. The third day after the wedding day is the date for the bride to return, with her husband, to her natal family to visit her parents. The groom’s family was supposed to send a whole roasted pig as a present to the bride’s family, in order to show their friendship and respect. This gift was displayed publicly on its way from the groom’s house to the bride’s. However, if the groom’s family discovered that the bride was not a virgin, they would refuse to send a pig to the bride’s family. In this case, the bride’s family would see it as a serious source of shame for their clan.\(^{33}\) This custom is actually a way to publish the bride’s chastity and virginity to the public, which places intense pressure on a girl’s family to control and educate their daughter with the aim of keeping her virginity.

From this analysis of the village practice of ‘chastity’, it is clear that lower class people without much education take norms and values of the dominant cultural value seriously, and practise it in their own way due to their individual cultural environment and personal circumstances. This represents an opportunity for researchers to observe the Han cultural orthodoxy via an analysis of the lives and thinking of ordinary people, which answers the second question posed at the beginning of this section: ‘What do the oral histories of individual zishu nü women tell us about Han culture?’

\(^{31}\) Actually, during the Qing Dynasty, the ruler attempted to promoting public opinion regarding to the values on women’s virginity all over the country. According to local history about women, statistically, Guangdong Delta was the strictest in relation to virginity, followed by the Lower Yangzi Rival Delta. I will analyze virginity in more detail in Chapter 5.


\(^{33}\) See Chunsheng Ye, A Record of Customs in Lingnan Delta (Lingnan fengshu lu), Guangzhou: Guangdong Tourism Press, 1988, p. 151.
There are two points worth noting about the relationship between individual experience, especially individual women’s life narratives, and the history fact and cultural meaning. Firstly, the interviewees, whether consciously or not, were trying to justify their behavior and reconcile it with Confucian moral principles. In the interviews, I found that there was a tendency for elderly zishu nü to overemphasize the influence of moral principles on their behavior—perhaps to the exclusion of more personal motives—and to recollect their conduct as they would have liked it to be, not how it actually was. They talked in terms of the ideal rather than the reality. In order to overcome this problem, I tried to interview not only these women but also their family and local people, including my interviewee’s siblings and some other local people who witnessed this custom. As it turns out, these ‘outsiders’ told similar stories and held the same opinions as the zishu nü women themselves. It is worth asking the question: Are zishu nü actually articulating the values that they hold? If so, if they attempted to figure themselves as ‘heroine’ to their families is not that important. What is important is that they held the value of being a good daughter to contribute their clans and they did practice it, gained respect from their practice. It is a good example about how normal people set the Han cultural value in their thinking and behavior, which is one of the main aims of this thesis.

Secondly, the narrative of ordinary women is important in the study of Han history and culture. The life experience of ordinary people is important in the study of social history, because the best way to understand how Han culture organized people’s lives is by knowing intimately the feelings and aspirations of ordinary Han people, as I explained in last section in the context of the methodology of my research. At the same time, women’s narrative is particularly important to current history research for three reasons: firstly, it is well-known that previous historians were from patriarchal societies, and mostly male, which has as a consequence the fact that women’s lives are largely invisible in the historical record: ‘The expression of women’s unique experience as women is often muted, particularly in any situation where women’s interests and experiences are at variance with those of men.’ Furthermore, the narrative of women differs from that of men.

For girls, communication is the opportunity for establishing equality and intimacy in relatively small and private groups; for boys, communication is the site for contesting dominance in hierarchically structured group that are public and relatively large. In other words, women traditionally refer to personal and family matters, and to relationships with others. My fieldwork confirms the view that ‘women traditionally talk with each other about personal and affiliative issues that reflect who they are.’

In this case, recording what female interviewees said in the interviews loyally and honestly is a good way to explore social and cultural history.

Thirdly, the features of women’s narrative provide another perspective from which to observe Han culture. As Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack explain:

A woman’s discussion of her life may combine two separate, often conflicting perspectives: one framed in concepts and values that reflect men’s dominant position in the culture, and one informed by the more immediate realities of a woman’s personal experience. Where experience does not ‘fit’ dominant meanings, alternative concepts may not readily be available.

For these reasons, scholars should pay more attention to women’s oral history collections, and women’s oral history should have a more prominent place in the cultural study of China. This thesis is an attempt to work toward that goal.

In summary, Han mainstream culture contains within it a number of core ideals of personal conduct. These ideals can be satisfied by a variety of different actions which may vary for district to district. Being a dutiful daughter is something that can be done in many ways. In the Guangdong Delta, becoming a zishu nü is one of them. By observing the details of this custom and considering people’s thoughts when they practiced it, we can reach a deeper understanding of the content of Han cultural identity. For example, the life-stories of these zishu nü women, the central part of which is their relationship with their family, provides a new perspective on women’s roles and status, both in their family and in the local community. Their practice of womanhood as a daughter in traditional Chinese society challenges us to rethink our understanding of womanhood, gender and kinship in Han culture.

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36 Ibid, p. 31.
Han Culture and Daughterhood

As mentioned in the Précis, the two main arguments that I develop in this thesis are that the zishu nü custom is derived from the dominant Han culture, and that a zishu nü identifies herself as a daughter to her clan, elevating daughterhood to her primary role in family and society. The first point is crucial because the zishu nü custom is not an aberration; it can be understood as part of the Han cultural system, and there is no conflict between the lifestyle of this group of women and the paternal world of traditional Chinese society. I believe that the second point is the correct way to understand this custom: a woman who is a zishu nü identifies herself as an adult daughter of her natal family, which differs from a normal woman, who would identify herself as the daughter-in-law of the family that she marries into. In other words, becoming zishu nü does not necessarily entail an attempt to escape the normal obligations of traditional family morality; it is just that these women choose to emphasize another aspect of womanhood—namely, daughterhood. Instead of viewing this choice as ‘a rejection of the claims and obligations of marriage’, 38 I believe it is more accurate to interpret it as a conscious choice by a zishu nü woman to maintain the bond with her natal family or clan, and to fulfil her obligations as a daughter of the family. Before investigating the zishu nü custom as part of the Han cultural system, I will first distinguish between zishu nü and another similar, but distinct, custom which belongs to non-Han culture; this is done in order to emphasise that zishu nü is not derived from non-Han culture, as some scholars have suggested. First I

Figure 2.4: Two zishu nü in Shunde. Source: Shunde Women’s Federation, Shunde zishu nü, n.p., 2006, p. 15.

will compare the zishu nü custom with a Li\textsuperscript{39} custom called ‘buluojia’.\textsuperscript{40} Scholars who view zishu nü as a derivative of buluojia have not really examined what it entails. In this latter custom, on the wedding day, the groom’s family sends the bride a wedding dress. The pattern on the dress is the totem of bride’s own community, which means that after the wedding and during the marriage, the bride remains a member of her own family or community. After the bride puts on the dress, there is lamentation and singing, and then she proceeds to the groom’s house in the company of her bridesmaid. During the wedding night, the bride and groom stay in separate rooms, with the bride accompanied by her bridesmaid, and there is no sexual contact between the newlyweds. The following morning the groom introduces his family, most importantly his parents, to the bride. Afterwards, the bride goes back to her natal family with the bridesmaid, and does not return to the groom’s family for a long time. She belongs to her natal family, and only during the busy part of the farming season does the bride go to her in-law family to help. This may last for several days, after which she returns to her natal family. 

Like his wife, the groom may help his in-law family with farm work for several days, and then return to his own house. This arrangement continues until the wife becomes pregnant or gives birth to her baby. Some Li wives stay with their natal family until they have two or three babies. During this period, both the wife and husband are free to continue relationships with others just as they were before the marriage. Any baby the bride has with another man is accepted as a member of the groom’s family.

Clearly, this free marriage pattern is widely divergent from the zishu nü custom practiced by the Han people. Three critical differences can be observed. Firstly, there is a wedding in the Li custom which ties two families together, whereas

\textsuperscript{39} There are ten or eleven other minorities, such as Zhuang and Buyi, which are suggested to be the origin of zishu nü or buluojia. The major features of their customs are same as Li.

\textsuperscript{40} However, it could not be called compensation marriage while the bride has no freedom to pay the groom’s family to escape her obligations as a wife.
a zishu nü links herself to only one family, her natal family. Secondly, a zishu nü’s labor belongs only to her natal family whereas a Li woman’s labor belongs to two families. Thirdly, a zishu nü has to remain a virgin and chastity is one of their most important virtues and moral principles, whereas a Li woman is free to sleep with men other than her husband without being criticized. Another point has been raised that does not relate to the custom itself. Some researchers argue that buluojia among the Han people of the Guangdong Delta was derived from the practice of minorities close to it in terms of geography and social customs—though this link remains tenuous—and that the zishu nü custom was derived from this adaptation of buluojia. However, there are more than ten minorities in different provinces with a custom similar to buluojia, that are spread throughout the western and southern parts of China, whereas buluojia as practiced by Han people is found only in the southern or southeastern part of China. The area in which we find the zishu nü custom is even smaller, as it is limited to the central Guangdong Delta and Pearl River Delta. There is no evidence that would explain why the minority practice influenced only Han people in southeastern China but nowhere else, and neither is there evidence to explain why buluojia evolved into zishu nü in only the much smaller and definite area that we can see in Map 2.2. In short, there is no clear and convincing argument in the literature which proves that zishu nü is derived from non-Han culture.

Why, then, does this cultural practice occur in the Han cultural system? Historically, the group of women who became zishu nü identified themselves as Han people. Historically, there were four large waves of immigrations from central China, which is the center of Han culture. In 2 A.D. there were only 94,253 people living in the Guangdong Delta. The first wave of immigration occurred at the end of the West Han Dynasty, because of war in central China and by 140 A.D. the population had risen to 250,262. During the Jin Dynasty many Han people, including some noble clans, moved to Guangdong Delta, and they spread their cultural traditions to the local people, including several minority groups. Han people controlled the economic and cultural development in the local area, as observed by Huang Zuoxiu in *Guangdong Province Gazetteer (Guangfu Tongzhi)*.

41 This difference does not suit buluojia. A Li woman does not have the freedom to pay the groom’s family to escape her obligation as wife totally. However, as I mentioned in last chapter, buluojia is not the object in this thesis, and I disagree with the idea that zishu nü is derived from buluojia, compensation marriage (see Chapter 1).

42 Regarding the four migrant trends from central China to Guangdong Delta see Ye Chunsheng, *Folk Custom in Guangfu Area (Guangfu minzu)*, Guangzhou: Guangdong People Press, 2000, p. 15.
From the end of the Han Dynasty to the East Jin Dynasty, people who lived in central China moved to the Guangdong Delta with their whole clan. Their tradition and lifestyle, costume and personality were influential among the local people and nations, and this had the effect of shifting the customs of the area towards those of central China.  

Map 2.2. Map of minorities buluojia area, zishu nü area and areas in which the buluojia custom has been reported. Drawn by Carlomarhi Services RSPAS Australian National University

The second wave of immigration occurred at the end of the North Song Dynasty, when a huge number of refugees migrated to the southern part of China with Prince Zhao Gou. The third wave happened at the end of the southern Song Dynasty, and fourth at the end of the Ming Dynasty. These four trends grew out of the same underlying condition, which was prolonged war in northern and central China, and they led to the same result, which was an increase in the dominance of the Han cultural system in the Guangdong Delta. The Han people in this southern region are descendents of these migrants, and they identify themselves as Han people by maintaining orthodox Han cultural traditions.

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43 Guangdong Province Gazetteer (guangfu tongzhi),
44 Regarding the Han people’s identity in Guangdong area and Han cultural influence on local minority communities, see Ye Chunsheng, Folk Custom in Guangfu Area (Guangfu minsu), Guangzhou: Guangdong
To this day, in the area where the zishu nü custom occurs, it is easy to find material evidence to demonstrate that the people who call themselves Han really do practice Han customs, and that these customs form the core elements of their identity. Most villages in this area are single surname villages, with all the people living in it regarded as descendants of the same ancestor. The Shatou village in the Jun’an township in Shunde is one such village, where the surname of 90 percent of the villagers is Huang. Four of my interviewees are from this village, which is famous for the degree of popularity of the zishu nü custom. Villages like this are believed to be derived from communities which have been widespread since the Song Dynasty. There is at least one ancestral hall in most villages where people maintain the tradition of recording the change of population of their clans in their genealogies. In the Shatou village, for example, there is a large ancestral hall where the villagers worship the tablet of their first ancestor, who is believed to have led his clan in the migration from central China (Henan area) to Jun’an in the Ming Dynasty. This ancestral hall has been preserved and protected by villagers for more than five hundred years, and even during the Cultural Revolution nobody in the village thought of destroying it (See Figures 2.6, 2.7, 2.8 and 2.9). They have kept this tradition to the extent that they worship their ancestor every Chinese New Year and, in 1995, the villagers (including those who had travelled overseas) together funded a reprinting of their genealogy which was distributed to every family in the village.

In addition to observing that the Han people in the Guangdong Delta have maintained their material heritage, such as ancestral halls and genealogies, and their ritual traditions such as ancestor worship, it is equally important to note that they kept their moral principles as Confucian morality demanded. For instance, when I went to a Zhaipu village to do an interview, I found that no single house was locked. I was later told that the idealist safe situation is that ‘no one has to close the door during the night; no body will pick up an item another has lost on the way’ (ye bu bi hu, lu bu shi yi), which is typical of a Confucian ideal moral society. My interviewee Hu Daidi’s had a nephew and niece who were requested to write to senior members in the family who were working overseas, in order to report on their living and studying.

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situation, since they were just beginning to learn how to write. If someone did not serve their parents well, they would be criticized and avoided by everyone else in the village. However, if someone had a good relationship with family, friends and the local community, he/she would be respected and could expect to receive help from others whenever they needed it. A negative aspect of the focus on Confucian moral values is that perhaps traditional ideas about gender roles remained strong too. Both men and women held the opinion that men are superior to women, and that in a family, where economic realities permit it, the rule ‘men outer, women inner’ should be followed. If parents have enough money to support a continued education for only one child in the family, then the male child would receive priority. It is not because the parents do not love their daughter, but because they think it is useless for girls to have ‘much’ higher
education. No family would want a female Ph.D. as their daughter-in-law. She would be considered too scholarly to be a good wife.

Therefore, it is clear that the ethic group to which the zishu nü belong is Han, historically, ritually and culturally. It is in the context of this mainstream culture that the collective identity of the zishu nü is formed, and we can see this reflected in the choice that they make to follow a path of duty to the well-being of their family, as an adult daughter. This is another key concept in my findings, the crucial role of daughterhood.

I argue for the importance of focusing on women’s identification as daughters to their natal family as a form of womanhood. This makes it necessary to consider the question of the place of daughterhood in the structuring of the agency within the family. Recently there has been more research on women’s connection with their natal family and it has been realized that a woman’s relationship with her natal family in China is more close and complex than previously thought. Nonetheless, to date scholarship on the role of the daughter in traditional Chinese families has reminded overly simplistic. Most of the work on this topic presents a picture of a daughter’s miserable subordination to her parents and exaggerates her powerlessness and uselessness within the family. At the same time, there is some work which shows how the daughter’s networking with her natal family contributes to her life and her relationship to her in-law family. However, these studies have not examined the cultural link between a daughter and her natal family, especially the daughter’s duty to the natal family. The role and status of the daughter within traditional Chinese families was far more complex than has been appreciated by scholars to date. Daughters performed multiple functions and roles within the family that enabled them to exert considerable influence within the household and, sometimes, even provide the hope of well-being to other family-members. Western scholarship, in particular, has prioritized an unmarried woman’s role as a daughter to individual parents, sister to individual siblings, and aunt to individual nephews or nieces, and so on. This thesis shows that the key role for an unmarried woman in a traditional Chinese family was that of daughter to a family or clan as a whole. She practiced her womanhood in the framework of the traditional Chinese moral system by fulfilling her duty as a daughter to the whole natal family or clan. In other words, an unmarried woman’s primary identity emerged from the network in the clan or family system by the structure of a traditional Chinese family, and the ritual and moral principles based on
this structure. The most important role—in some sense, the only role—she played in her natal family is that of a daughter to the whole clan, which supersedes the multiple identities tied to specific family members. This status and the duty bound to it were decided by the structure and organization of the clan or family, the hierarchical system according to the ritual, and the emotional links between family members.

In order to explore more fully a woman’s life as a daughter in the traditional Chinese society, there are three theoretical problems that require clarification. The first is related to the project of identity formation. A central question to this thesis is ‘What is the key factor informing an individual’s identity formation?’ Judith Roof argues that, ‘What seemed to function as something like an identity was more dependent on a posture of outsideness, of other-than-ness, of self-differentiation where position in relation to was more important than any group identity category.’  

In other words, identity is a set of positions within relational structures.

The second theoretical problem relates to the way an individual identifies him or herself within a net of relationships. From Roof’s perspective, relationships of ‘desire’ are central. An individual seeks to understand what another person desires of them, and vice versa. As Roof outlines, ‘identifications were with the position of the desirer in relation to an unfulfillable desire and with the position of object of desire in relation to other desires.’ Consequently, identity formation is a constant process of seeking to determine the various mutual desires of those forming relationships in any kinship grouping.

The third theoretical problem requiring elucidation revolves more specifically around the nature of kinship. What is kinship in essence? Kinship is a net of relationships, including both biological and cultural aspects. Importantly, these two aspects are in constant interaction. As Marilyn Strathern declares in *Reproducing the Future*:

> By kinship I understand not just the ways in which relatives interact with another, but how relationships as such are held to be constituted. Having sex, transmitting genes, giving birth: these facts of life were once taken as the basis for those relations between spouses, siblings, parents and children which were, in turn, taken as the basis of kin relations. Incorporated into such a reproductive model were suppositions about the connection between natural facts and social constructions. These ideas about kinship offered a theory, if you like, about the relationship of human society to the natural world.

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They also incorporated certain ideas about the passage of time, relations between generations and, above all, about the future.\(^{48}\)

The future is embedded in the processes and practices of the present. The way in which we organize our kinship networks and forge our individual role and identity within these networks will determine the future of the whole kinship system. Thus, for everyone in the kinship network in Chinese families, forming an identity is at least as important as being given an identity. The agency of the individual is crucial within this conception of kinship. If individual agency in identity formation is ignored, individuals with relatively lower status in the lineage will erroneously be depicted as mere ‘victims’ of oppression.

Drawing on these issues of the importance of relational, individual agency and identity formation, I will examine the relationship between daughters and their natal family in a general sense in traditional China before analyzing specifically the lives of zishu nü; this latter analysis will take place in later chapters.

In order to understand a daughter’s role and status in her natal family, it is necessary to examine the aim and structure of a traditional Chinese family or clan. The objectives of a clan, the main reasons a clan to exist, may be summarized as follows:

The first objective is education to raise the family’s social standing through the official careers of its members. The second objective is thrift so that the family can accumulate more wealth through saving. The third objective is harmony for the purpose of maintaining a well-ordered domestic life. The last objective is to follow ethical teaching, which keeps the family from declining.\(^{49}\)

‘Family’ here is equivalent to a ‘clan’ since both have the same functions in relations the objectives. In order to realize these objectives, a good family structure had to be chosen. In traditional China there were four main family structures, or forms, which were characterized by the connection between family and residence.\(^{50}\)

As Maurice Freedman describes,


\(^{50}\) There are a variety of methods for classifying families in China across the period in question. For example, Ellen R. Judd sorts them into three kinds according to their different sizes, see Ellen R Judd, Gender and Power in Rural North China. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 1994. p. 1. Erkang Feng sorts them into five kinds according to the generational structure. see Erkang Feng ‘The structure and relationship of family in Qing Dynasty’ (Qingdai de jiating jiegou ji qi renji guanxi), in Knowledge of Chinese literary and history (Wenshi zhishi), 1987, No. 11. pp.14-20. Here I use Freedman’s classified means because of its great influence.
The first of these forms is the unit of spouses and their children, commonly termed an elementary or nuclear family. If we follow out the potential development of such a small family, we can see how the other three forms may emerge from it. Assume that the parents marry out their daughters and bring in wives for their sons. Those sons have children; a third generation has appeared. If all the people so far mentioned, less the married-out daughters in the middle generation, live in one unit, we have what is conventionally called a joint family. If, on the other hand, there is only one married son (other sons, if any, having left the house), we have what is usually referred to as a stem family....Finally, if a joint family is denuded of its senior generation, so that the family unit consists of two or more married brothers with their wives and children, we have what some would call a fraternal joint family.\(^1\)

In Freedman's opinion, the 'joint' family described in older literature only existed among the elite or was an ideal exception, a luxury that only the well-to-do could afford.\(^2\) In fact, this kind of large and complex family was not just an ideal for ordinary people, but it also existed in reality. Arthur P. Wolf demonstrated that this kind of family existed in rural areas of China as well.\(^3\) On the other hand, the daughters should not be abandoned from our understanding of family structure. On the contrary, because of the structure of a big joint family, daughters, especially unmarried ones, could find their position in the clan as the daughter to their parents, siblings to their brothers and aunties to the younger generation. Considering the aim and network of the clan, daughters are not only their parents' daughters, but also the daughters to the whole clan, who have to fulfil their duty as a member of the clan.

There are three important points about large, joint families that should be noted. First, the advantages of this structure that made this kind of family the ideal type. Liu Hui-chen described it as follows:

The large-sized joint family, maintained by many wealthy Chinese with pride, contains not only the conjugal units of the head of the family, but that of his brothers, of his sons, of his grandsons, and even of his great-grandsons...In celebrated, though rare, cases, a joint family spanned five or more generations along the paternal line of descent. To live together as a joint family had several advantages: to increase the total capital accumulation; to pool the social prestige earned by all its prominent members; to carry on the best family vocation and at the

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\(^{3}\) Wolf argued that 'it took to make a family rich as regards size and structure was 'sufficient food to eat and sufficient clothes to wear.' The difference between the rich cycle and the poor cycle was not the difference between the gentry and the peasantry; it was just a matter of an adequate as against an inadequate standard of living.' (p49). See Arthur P. Wolf 'Chinese Family Size: A myth Revitalized'. In Hsien Jih-chang & Chuang Ying-chang (Ed.) *The Chinese Family and Its Ritual Behaviour*, Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, 1985. pp. 30-49.
same time to have other members take care of the diversified family interests; and to attain social distinction as a large, prosperous family.\textsuperscript{54}

According to Hu Hsien Chin, the large, joint family is best for realizing the interests of the whole clan, which he states:

\begin{figure}[h]
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\end{figure}

[Clan] is interested in promoting the social standing of its members, as their prestige raises the reputation and influence of the group, and it is much concerned with straightening out differences between members and with keeping up the sense of moral values within the family and the \textit{tsu} (clan).\textsuperscript{55}

This became one of the key reasons for people to insist on the unity of the whole family, or the whole clan. In this case, working for the clan is the best way for family members to balance personal interest and Confucian ideals.


\textsuperscript{55} Hu, Hsien Chin, \textit{The Common Descent Group in China and Its Functions}, Copyright 1948 by the Viking fund, Inc. N.Y. p. 10.
By examining its advantages and objectives, we know that the large, joint family was an important and essential kind of family organization, so that a daughter’s role and status in this kind of family could be seen as a typical example of a woman’s life in traditional China. Furthermore, the advantages and objectives were also the essential reason for every one, including daughters, in this family to consider the unity and future of the clan and to make every effort to make it more prosperous.

The contribution of a daughter to the family could not be replaced by other members of the family. For example, one of the basic functions of marriage in traditional China is to ‘combine two surnames’ to connect their interests and maintain both families’ prosperity. In this case, the woman became the bridge between these two families, which is an important duty for the woman as daughter to her natal family and as daughter-in-law to her in-law family. For a woman who was not yet married, her duty was to serve her parents and work for the family’s well-being, just like her brothers, with the distinction being that in a patriarchal society her efforts went largely unrecognized, or were attributed to her brothers: this duty within the family continues until she gets married. However, if there was a strong need within her family, she was supposed to continue in this role, and as a consequence there emerged a group of women known as ‘chastity women’ (zhen nü) who served their parents for their entire lives and never married. Zishu nü is one variety of these ‘chastity women’ in the local historical record.

Understanding a zishu nü’s identity as an adult daughter to her natal clan as a whole, it is imperative to answer the question—How did a woman practice her duty as a daughter to her natal family?—by examining the life-course of zishu nü women. I will give the answer to this question in the following chapters by unfolding the picture of a zishu nü’s life from three aspects: the various motivations in becoming a zishu nü, the practical reality of being a zishu nü and the relationship among zishu nü, between zishu nü and their natal families and the local community.
Part 2
Chapter 3

Motive

Figure 3.1. Three zishu nü from Shunde. Photo in Shunde Women’s Federation, Shunde Zishu nü, n.p., 2006, p. 8.
Individual women had their own reasons to commit to the zishu nü custom. However, some motives were shared. Generally speaking, these shared motives can be divided into two groups: economic and cultural. In this chapter, I will look at how these motives with each other, and the relationship between different personalities of individuals and these motives.

**Economic motives**

In this section, I am going to examine the major economic features of these women's lives and their families which motivated them to become zishu nü. Two main aspects will be considered: the economic situation of the family and the demands of the labor market. Economic patterns differed between regions, and as a consequence the economic reasons for women to become zishu nü differed by region, but these differences relatively minor. In other words, the economic reality of their families and their employment are similar, even though the regional economic patterns are different. This section is organized into two parts, one for each of these economic aspects; in the individual parts the variance due to individual circumstance and economic factors will be considered.

**The family economic situation**

From the beginning of the twentieth century most zishu nü were from poor or lower class families. For example, according to my interviewees in Shatou village, there was at least one zishu nü in every family from the 1920s to the 1940s. Huang Aiqun said that when she was ten years old, there was not one girl in her village married in the whole year.¹ There were more than two thousand people living in this village in 1951. During the 1950s, when every family had to be identified according to their social class (*dingchenfen*), there were only five families identified as landlords, while around 85 percent of the people were still farmers. This means that most zishu nü were from farming families rather than rich ones. Of course, there were different

¹ Interview with Huang Aiqun, in *Bingyu* Hall, Shatou Village, Shunde District, 16 December, 2006.
levels of poverty; generally speaking, the Shunde and Zhongshan districts were richer than others in the area where zishu nü was practised. Most of the villages in these districts were single surname villages, which meant there was only one big clan in the whole village, and they could offer their daughters some chance at basic education. In these districts most families had their own farm fields or pond and, although everyone in the family had to work, until age ten the daughters did not have to worry about contributing to the survival of the family. People in the Nanhai and Dongguan districts were poorer than in Shunde and Zhongshan. The majority of the girls in these two areas began to work when they were four or even younger, and never had a chance at any kind of education. One day without work meant that they might not be able to eat for the whole day. According to my field research, Zhaqing district was the poorest in the whole area. No matter how hard they worked the natal families of some zishu nü women could not support them as children, and had to sell them or place them with other families or institutions. In this case, arranging for a zishu nü to adopt their daughter was one way to ensure her survival.

There are different levels of poverty among these women and their families, but there are similarities in their life experiences. Firstly, most of their natal families were joint families, in which three generations or even more lived in the same house. Meanwhile, these girls had many siblings or cousins. For instance, there were thirteen people in Huang Shunkai’s family in Shatou village.

When I went out [to Singapore] to work, my grandfather was still alive. There was my aunt [father’s sister], my father, two mothers, younger brothers and sisters. I have seven siblings. I am the third one, having two older sisters, both of whom went abroad to Singapore to work. The eldest sister was the first one to be a maid (zhu jia gong) in a rich family there. My second elder sister died early, and her tablet was set in Bingyu Tang. When I was in Singapore, I lived with my eldest sister. I also have one younger brother and four younger sisters. All of my younger sisters got married. That’s why I have lots of nephews and grand-nephews. They all welcomed me and my eldest sister to live with them.3

2 One of them was her father’s concubine.
3 Interview with Huang Shunkai, in Bingyu Hall, Shatou Village, Shunde District, 17 December, 2006.
Here is Huang Yanpei’s family:

Before the occupation by the Japanese army, my family and my uncle’s (dabo) family did not divide. We ate and lived together. My grandmother was alive then. My father had two brothers and one sister. My elder uncle’s (dabo) family, my family, my younger uncle’s (shushu) family and my father’s elder sister—my aunt, who was a zishu nü—were a big clan of about twenty people who lived together. After the zishu nü rites, my aunt lived with our family, never leaving this village, until she died here when she was about eighty years old. My mother died when I was nine years old. My mother gave birth to us three siblings. I am the eldest, having one younger brother and one younger sister. Many years later, my father remarried. My step-mother gave birth to three children, so I had two new younger brothers and one younger sister. I am much older than my step-brothers and sisters, almost the same age as their mother.

In Ying Gu’s family in Nanhai for three generations eighteen or nineteen people lived in the same house where she was born. They did not divide their property; instead they lived together and ate together. Dong Gu’s family in Dongguan was in a similar situation. Her parents lived with her father’s three siblings in the same house so that there were more than twelve children in her generation. Moreover, if there was only one zishu nü in the young generation in a family, it was highly likely that she was the eldest child or eldest daughter. Stockard’s states that ‘In other places, parents would permit only one daughter in the family to become a spinster.’ It was usually the eldest daughter according to my fieldwork. Eleven of my interviewees told me that this was true in their village. Ten of them were themselves the eldest daughter, and in fact the eldest child. Hu Daidi told me that all of the eldest daughters, including herself, in her village (zhaipu) became zishu nü in her generation.

4 Uncle here means her father’s elder brother.
5 Interview with Huang Yanpei, in Bingyu Hall, Shatou Village, Shunde District, 16 December, 2006.
7 Interview with Hu Daidi in her house, Zhaipu Village, Shunde District, December 15th, 2006.
These stories enable us to make a number of generalizations about the position in the family of the girl who chose to be a zishu nü. Firstly, most of them lived in a large joint household, which was typical in traditional Chinese clans. The first generation, who were these girls’ grandparents, were still alive when the girl was in her childhood. However, the first generation did not really control the management of the daily running of the whole family. The main source of labor in the family was the second generation, which consisted of the girls’ parents, uncles and aunts. However, as more and more children were born into the third generation of the family, the whole structure became a big burden on the second generation, as they had to serve the previous generation and feed the next. For most of the poor families, this economic burden became impossible for the second generation to take on alone, so some of the third generation were brought in to be providers rather than consumers. Consequently, the eldest daughter often had to take on responsibility for family business and household chores, because she was the first person in her generation.
whose labor could be used by the family. That is why most of the girls who became zishu nü were the oldest child in their generation.

![Image of women farming](http://history.qihoo.com/comic/24468_200705.425699.9d9f35b_r321916.1.html?id=50)


The women of one family, both the daughters and daughters-in-law, were, according to local Guangdong custom, supposed to join in ‘outside’ work to support the family in the same way as men, instead of only dealing with the inner aspects of family life. In the *Encyclopaedia of the Qing Dynasty (Qingbai leichao)* women of the Guangdong Delta, especially from lower class or poor families, were described as models of industriousness. They participated in agricultural work, including sericulture, as much as the men of the family, as well as being responsible for the household matters. Lazy women lived under intense social pressure and were seen

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9 Women’s work is not only important for the family, but it is also important for the whole social economic well being. Ma Gengun says: ‘Women were the main breadwinner in the handicraft industry work within a family, which is important for the economic development to the traditional agricultural society as a whole.’ See Ma Gengun, *Modern Chinese Women History*, Qingdao: Qingdao Press, 1995, p. 81. Regarding the relationship between women and technology within the context of Chinese history, see Francesca Bray,
as shameful by their family and local community. This fact made female labor as important as male labor in the public opinion of the local community, which led to the demand that poor women begin their working life as early as possible. In this case, daughters, especially the eldest daughters, were placed in the position of being one of the main laborers of the family, as part of their duty to help the natal family's development.

At first, when less than ten years old, daughters helped their parents with some work. For example, Hu Daidi helped her father during his trip to Hong Kong to sell cloth fibre; Ying Gu in Nanhai went to Hong Kong and tried to sell vegetables with her father when she was eight. Ming Gu began to work in sericulture when she was four. Her job was to keep her mother's machine clean by sweeping away extra fibres that dropped to the ground. Of course, the contribution of their labor increased their parents' work productivity. It was helpful, but not sufficient to support the whole family. However, when these daughters grew up, they became one of the main sources of economic income for the whole family—especially when they were between the ages of fifteen and twenty.

Fifteen was the age for a girl to begin her role as an individual maid in a rich family in the big cities, such as Guangzhou, Hong Kong and Singapore. After several years in a factory as a cleaner, a girl could manage a machine individually when she was twelve. Being an individual laborer in society usually meant higher wages, especially for those girls who became maids in rich families; their income in one month could support three people in their home village. Meanwhile, fifteen to twenty years was the marriage age in the local area, but the

Figure 3.5. Huang Qundi’s passport photo when she went to Singapore with her mother for work. Photo applied by Huang Qundi in December, 2006.
parents of these girls did not want to lose such a good source of income, especially given that they could expect her income to continue to increase. If their daughter got married, her labor and income would belong to her in-law family. This represented a large and perhaps fatal loss for her natal family. In addition to this, most families were not rich enough to prepare their daughter’s dowry. Without an adequate dowry, their daughters’ life in their in-law family could be tragic. The daughter herself, after a long time working for her family, knew how important her income was to the other family members, and was proud of it. A good relationship with others in the house could make leaving difficult. In this situation, for both emotional and moral reasons, the option of the daughter becoming a zishu nü was given priority by the daughter and her parents. Hu Daidi’s story in Chapter 2 is a good example.

The economic relations between a zishu nü and her natal family after her ceremony suggest that a woman’s primary motive for becoming a zishu nü was because of the economic links with her natal family. The families of these zishu nü expected their daughter’s money to support their daily life, and some of them were totally dependent on it. In Shatou village, I was told that zishu nü who worked in Singapore became the main economic resource for almost the entire village. Huang Hekui described it as follows:

During the period when the Japanese Army occupied the Malay Peninsula, they blockaded the ocean route. In that case, we lost contact with our family. Later, I heard that some people, who depended on the money coming from a zishu nü family member in Singapore, died from starvation at that time.11

However, not every zishu nü could earn enough to support the whole family. When this happened, she would still do her best to help other family members. For example, Gao Ming, who worked in a silk factory in Foshan, could only get about seven to nine

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10 This ‘moral reason’ mainly refers to reciprocity between parents and children. If parents did not find a good marriage to their daughter, usually they were supposed to be bad and selfish parents who ignored their daughters’ happiness and would be criticized by local people. An emotional reason was as I mentioned in Chapter 2, is that as parents who loved their daughter, they hoped she could find her happiness as being a normal woman, not only in sacrificing for the family.

11 Interview with Huang Hekui, in Bingyu Hall, Shatou Village, Shunde District, 16 December, 2006.
yuan per month for no less than one hundred hours per week. She would only keep enough money for basic living expenses and food, and send the rest home. It is worth emphasising how little she kept for herself: she paid no rent by living beside her machine in the factory, and her daily diet was rice porridge with vegetables, and no meat. Gao Ying, who worked in the same factory, had the same arrangement. According to them, most female workers arranged for their income to be sent to their families. At the same time, these zishu nü were very proud of their concern for their family and their contribution for them. Huang Hekui said,

We zishu nü all cared about our families. As soon as we earned some money, we would send it home. Some of my friends sent lots of money and things home. For example, during the famine period [1959-1961], one of my friends sent eighteen wooden boxes of things home, including food, dresses and daily goods. It became a famous story, which was respected by local people.

Gao Ying’s thought on the issue was similar to that of Huang Hekui:

Yes, of course it was difficult to me. However, why did we leave home and come here to work? Of course, it was for our family. First, I supported myself. My family did not have to worry about me. Second, I could send some money home for my parents and siblings, giving them more of a chance to live. Can I just spend money myself and see them die? That would be terrible and immoral (mei liangxin).

In a word, the family’s poor economic situation was one of the main objective features that forced daughters, especially the eldest daughter, to make the decision to become a zishu nü, in order to support the whole family. During this process, modern industry, especially sericulture, opened more opportunities for these women and their families, but these did not change their underlying motive.

This economic explanation partly answers the question of what a woman’s motives were for becoming a zihshu nü. However, a woman who wanted to make a

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12 It means at least fourteen hours working every day, without a single day off. Interview with Gao Ming, in the nursing home of Gongjilong Silk Factory, Foshan District, 21, December, 2006.
13 I will describe more about their working and income situation in Chapter 4. Interview with Gaoying.
14 These friends were zishu nü too, and the word she used is ‘sisters’ [jiemei].
15 Interview with Huang Hekui.
16 Interview with Gao Ying.
living for herself and her family could decide to delay her marriage until her brothers grew up, or she could keep single all of her life as a spinster. Why, then, did she have a ceremony to declare her identity as a zishu nü when she was eighteen or twenty years old? The answer is very complex, and involves the demands of the labor market, to which I will now turn, as well as other cultural factors to be considered in the following section.

**Demands of the Labor Market**

In some occupations, zishu nü were given priority in recruitment by employers. Taking the silk industry as an example, most silk-making companies would arrange some easier and less technical work for women who had just started in this occupation. After three or four years, after the woman had become familiar with these easy jobs and the environment of the factory, they could begin to work for the company as skilled workers. For the company, this process entailed training a worker for three or four years and then benefiting from the increased productivity of these trained workers. Of course they preferred to retain these skilful workers for as long as possible. However, when a woman got married at around the age of fifteen she would have many household matters to deal with. Pregnancy was one of the main reasons for a female worker to be distracted from her work, or for her to decision to leave altogether. A woman’s married life had a great impact on her work and to the management of the entire factory.

This situation happened in other areas in China, especially the Yangzi River Delta. According to the research on the lives of silk workers in the Nantong silk factory, there were three main problems caused by female workers’ married life that the employer had to deal with. First, it was a big risk for a pregnant woman to work for more than eight hours per day; it was difficult for them to concentrate on

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17 The difference between spinster and zishu nü has been explained in Chapter 1.
18 Yangzi Delta was traditionally another main sericulture area in China.
19 This factory is the first Chinese silk factory in the whole China opened by Zhang Qian in Nantong. See Zhang Yue, *Oral History of Nantong First Sericulture Company (Nantong shafang yi chang koushushi)*, Nanjing: Jiangsu People’s Press, 1983.
their work physically, which resulted in many accidents. As a consequence, most pregnant women would choose to leave the factory for a while, at least one month before and after the birth. For the factory, this meant having to hire another woman to fill this vacant position, which was a significant burden in a large factory. Second, when the woman had a baby, she would have to look after it and work at the same time. The baby would be put in a basket and hung up at a corner of the machine, and safety was once again a problem. The mother could not concentrate on the machine, either physically or mentally; this was dangerous for both mother and child. More than half of the female workers reported that they experienced an infant's death during their working time in the Nantong silk factory. Because of the number of complaints, the factory was forced to set up a nanny's room for child care in the factory and pay for this service. Third, the factory faced a high turnover of its work force, because married female workers had to quit their job and go back home if their parents-in-law and husband asked them to. In the eyes of the parents-in-law, while their daughter-in-law may be forced to go to work in the factory because of economic pressure, her main task as daughter-in-law was still managing the household. If there was any need in the family, she should come home rather than stay at work. These needs included serving sick parents-in-law, arranging her brother-in-law's wedding, and taking care of young children. Female workers sometimes had to quit the job and then return to paid work after their 'inside' commitments had been met. Naturally, it was inconvenient for employers when their workers moved back and forth in this way. Last but not least, these workers could not stay in the factory but lived instead in their own houses, because they were married women. In order to prevent workers from taking material home illegally, the factory had to employ security guards to stand at the gate to check workers' pockets every morning and afternoon. This cost time and caused many grievances. Alternatively, the employer could hire women who were not
familiar with the work but lived close to the factory, rather than skilful workers whose families were far away.  

Compared with the sericulture employers in the Yangzi River Delta, those in Guangdong Delta had a much better choice of female worker: the zishu nü. A woman who was a zishu nü made a living for her natal family; this was the only aim and purpose of her life, which gave her enough freedom to leave behind the trouble of household management. In any case, this role should belong to her sister-in-law, so a zishu nü leaving could reduce conflict in the household. From the day they entered the factory as a worker, they did not have to leave work at all until their physical condition stopped them, which usually happened in their mid-fifties. Except for illness, there was little potential risk involved for their employees. They could always concentrate on their work which was, of course, good for the quality and quantity of production. Additionally, because they were all unmarried women, they could simply live in the factory and there was no need to set up security at the gate in order to keep company’s property safe. No husband, no baby, and no household: a zishu nü was just another kind of machine in the industry of modern sericulture. Certainly, these advantages make it clear why employers preferred to have zishu nü as workers rather than married women. Although there was no explicit recruitment policy saying that they only wanted zishu nü, this special group of women had priority over married women of a similar age in recruitment in sericulture. Moreover, the management strategies in the factory also gave preferential treatment to zishu nü female workers.  

Gao Chun’s story portrays this situation very well:

In my family, I am the third daughter. At first, it was my second older sister who worked in this factory. When I was nine years old, she introduced me to the factory as another worker. There was no age limitation to the recruitment of female workers. Lots of female workers began to work at the same age as me. When I first came here, I was just a cleaning girl in charge of keeping the extra material from the machine. Three years later, I began to operate the machine. My sister was going to get married then. Her in-law family

20 Ibid.
21 Interview with Gao Ming, Gao Ying and Gao Chun.
22 It was Gongjilong Silk Factory in Foshan.
Chapter Three: Motive

asked her to go back to give birth to babies, so she was forced to quit the job. I was afraid this would happen to me and that I would not be able to make a living for myself. My happiness would depend on my parents-in-law and my husband’s feelings. I think my parents did not want me to follow my sister either because they needed my money to prepare for my brother’s wedding. Anyway, nobody mentioned my marriage to me then. At that time, most women in factory were zishu nü. You were not allowed to have holidays as a female worker, not for any reason. Unless they were sick enough to die, nobody left their machine. Leaving meant that you could not have this job any more, and there were too many girls who wanted a job. If you asked to leave, then the next minute, there was a new girl to replace you. If there was more than two hours in which the machine stopped running and nobody was standing beside it, the boss would think that you had left and would ask a new person to replace you. For these reasons, we cooked besides the machine and slept on it. Look, how could a married woman do this job, when she had her in-law family? You leave your husband to work here. Who can give birth to heirs for them? Who wants a daughter-in-law who could not have babies? On the other hand, our boss did not like married woman. As soon as he found that a worker had a husband or child, he would ask her to leave immediately. I had some friends working with me who were married and had children already. They would forbid their children to come to the factory to meet them. Once I saw the only son of one of my friends waiting for his mother at the gate, saying that he missed her too much, and calling out to his mother. It had been almost half a year that they had not seen each other. My friend scolded him, called him ‘a crazy boy without mother’ (mei niang yang de xiao feng hai), and said to him: ‘Bullshit. I am not your mum.’ I saw her crying afterwards. About two months later, another worker told the boss that my friend had actually got married. The boss fired my friend and the other worker’s sister took her position. Look, who would do such a silly thing to take such a big risk and live through pain like this? Lots of girls became zishu nü in order to keep their job, because our boss knew that zishu nü would not get married. I was one of them.23

Gao Chun’s boss preferred his female workers to be zishu nü because they were more easily managed and had no family burden. This is a vicious circle: on the one hand, in Guangdong Delta, there were zishu nü before modern sericulture, offering an ideal labor force; on the other hand, employers benefited from this customary labor resource, and their treatment of employees was such that married women found employment very difficult. This encouraged more and more women who wanted to make a living from sericulture to become zishu nü in order to keep a job.

23 Interview with Gao Chun, nursing home of Gongjilong Silk Factory, Foshan City, 19, December, 2006.
There was a similar situation in the domestic service field. According to Stockard’s book, people in Shunde made their living mainly from sericulture. However, there were a number of women from Shunde who went to Southeast Asia to work as domestic servants. This overseas work could offer much more income and more comfortable working conditions than sericulture, and it became the first choice for Shunde women who were job hunting. There was an important similarity between sericulture and domestic service: the employers in both cases preferred zishu nü as employees rather than other women. For a family who needed a maid, the zishu nü’s lifestyle was ideal. First, employers needed a maid who could stay in their house twenty-four hours a day, almost every day of the year, which was called a ‘maid living with masters’ (zhu jia gong). This kind of domestic servant was supposed to live with her master’s family for a long time so that she would become familiar with every detail of the household’s running. This included knowing her master’s favourite foods, the taste in clothing of each member of the family, the style and manners during dinner, and so on. A young girl who had not yet married could leave any day, while a married woman had to consider her family, especially her children, and she could not ensure that she would be there whether her employers needed her. Compared to other women, zishu nü who could stay in their positions without any worries about their own families were certainly preferable for this type of work.

Besides their suitability for these positions, their consistently good work earned the zishu nü a reputation as the best domestic servants in Southeast Asia, especially in Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia; they were renowned for being clean, organized, trustworthy, having proper manners and being skilful at cooking.

24 For information on the work situation in the field of domestic service, see Chapter 4.
25 There were married women as maids in Shanghai, who were called niangyi. Their working conditions were similar to the zhujia gong. The main difference was that they could keep in frequent touch with their families, and sometimes they were allowed to take their own children with them to the work situation. Niangyi were usually hired by very rich families, while ‘zhujia gong’ could be hired by middle class families who needed only one maid to deal with everything in the household. In a rich family, the Shunde women’s status and roles were often as a butler rather than a normal maid. I will introduce this topic in Chapter 4.
Together these features became an important reason for the family to hire a zishu nü as their maid or butler.²⁶

For these reasons families preferred to employ zishu nü in these positions rather than other women. As Hu Daidi said: ‘A zishu nü was perfect as a maid. After our natal family, our master’s family is our second home. Sometimes even closer than the real one to us. Good name and good work, of course every boss would be satisfied.’²⁷

There were two reasons which helped a woman who wanted such a job to decide to become a zishu nü. First, the master would request a zishu nü, or at least a girl who was about to be a zishu nü, as his maid. As Hu Daidi’s aunty told her before she went to Hong Kong: ‘If you want to be a maid, you have to be prepared to become a zishu nü. Otherwise, it will be very difficult for you to find a maid’s job.’²⁸ Second, compared to other occupations, being a maid was an ideal way for a woman to make a living. The fact that although they enjoyed their career and their family enjoyed the income, When it became practically impossible for them to marry, meant that in effect they had made a de facto decision to remain singly for rest of their lives. Huang Qundi said:

Working working working, then, I turned twenty-eight years. Both my family and I did not see the necessity for me to get married. My master said if I got married, they would not hire me any more. I could understand them. Who wants their maid to always have to

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²⁶ For information on the networking and collective personality of zishu nü, see Chapter 5.
²⁷ Interview with Hu Daidi in her house, Zhaipu Village, Shunde District, 14, December, 2006.
²⁸ Interview with Hu Daidi. For further information on Hu Daidi’s decision to go to Hong Kong, see Chapter 2.
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go home to look after her own family? Especially when there were other zishu nü who were waiting for this job.29

All of these reasons interplayed with one other, and influenced women’s decisions in their choice of career and whether to become zishu nü.

In summary, there were two things in common between the occupations in sericulture and domestic service, which predisposed employers to prefer zishu nü as employees. One reason was that a worker needed to be trained before she could manage her work; in a modern silk factory this was the operation of a machine, while in a master’s family it was the day-to-day running of a rich family in the style of the elite. The training in both cases usually took several years so that a zishu nü, who could work her entire life in the one job, was an ideal employee, whose lifetime of work would more than repay the investment in her training. Another reason was that these jobs required long working hours and a flexible timetable to suit their employer’s needs. Of course, without the burden of running her own household a zishu nü could satisfy this requirement. As indicated earlier, a woman who wanted to get a job in either of these two fields, even temporarily, had to think about the competition in the job market and make a decision to suit her employer’s requirements; often, this meant becoming a zishu nü. Thus, employment was a significant motive for a woman to reject married life.

Cultural motives

There were many different factors that influenced a woman’s decision to be a zishu nü, and these interacted with each other. Economic imperatives, as discussed above, were one of the primary reasons why many women chose to practice the zishu nü custom. However, it was definitely not the only one, especially for women whose family was not so poor as to be forced to rely on their daughter’s financial

29 Interview with Huang Qundi, in Bingyu Hall, Shatou Village, Shunde District, 16, December, 2006.
contribution. For instance, Huang Hekui’s family was identified as a ‘landlord’ family in the 1950s. Her father opened a silk factory himself, her elder uncle (bofu) managed some shops selling silk and her younger uncle (shushu) loved to stay at home and play music. Hekui herself had six years of education in an old-style private school opened by her own clan. For women like Hekui, making a living for her family was not the main reason for becoming a zishu nü. This situation encourages us to pay attention to another factor: the power of culture and custom in the local area. Moreover, it was not only the rich who were influenced by cultural features. In this section, I will look at five main cultural phenomena: the fear of marriage, the cult of chastity, role model and social networking, the Kuazutou custom, and the ‘free’ life-style associated with the zishu nü custom.

The Fear of Marriage

Marriage resistance is the motive most emphasized by previous research. Many Chinese researchers use this ‘example’ to prove how evil and irrational the feudal marriage system was. English researchers share this perspective, and identify marriage resistance as the main motive for women becoming zishu nü. I agree with the idea that resisting marriage could be one motive for a woman to commit to remaining single all her life. Lots of my interviewees mentioned a bride’s suffering in their in-law family, which made them afraid of marriage. For instance, Huang Hekui talked about her mother’s status at home:

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When my mother worked in my father’s family, she had to follow my aunts’ instruction and their preferences (kan guma men de lianse zuo ren). She liked to smoke, but never did it in front of my aunts. Every time, she just hid herself in a room, rushed to smoke a little, and then went outside to work….I did not want to get married myself. I saw my mother’s low status in the family. She was controlled by my aunts, gave birth to babies all the time, but these babies died one by one. She suffered lots as a daughter-in-law.31

Undoubtedly, Huang Hekui’s mother’s experience influenced her daughter’s decision regarding her own her life. Some other interviewees mentioned their siblings or friends’ suffering too. Huang Shunxing expressed her idea of marriage as follows:

In traditional Chinese society, the daughter-in-law had no status and power in her home. If you are unlucky, your husband would beat you and your mother-in-law would abuse you mentally; if you married into a family which emphasized good manners (si dian liu qi), you would not know how to behave to avoid being scolded. None the girls in my village did not wanted to get married.32

In another district, women expressed similar opinions. Gao Ming in Nanhai described her idea of marriage like this:

You could not choose a husband yourself. How could our parents know if he is good or not? It all depended on the tongue of the match-maker. The bride was totally blind before the wedding.

If you married a weak husband, he could not protect you from your in-law parents; if he was strong, it is possible that you would often be beaten by him; if he was rich, he would have concubines; if he was poor, how could he feed you if he could not feed himself? The worst situation was marrying a gambler, he would lose his money, lose his family, sometimes lose his wife. A woman getting married could end up with any of these types of men, with no idea beforehand what suffering she would have to endure. Compared to dedicating myself to a husband, I preferred to contribute to my biological relatives.33

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31 Interview with Huang Hekui.
32 Interview with Huang Shunxing.
33 Interview with Gao Ming, in the nursing home of Gongjiilong Silk Factory, Foshan District, 21, December, 2006.
Some other interviewees explained their thinking in ways similar to that of Gao Ming. So, marriage resistance was indeed one of the motives for becoming zishu nü. But instead of saying that they 'hate' the feudal marriage system and 'resist' it, I think it is more accurate to describe their emotions in this way: they chose to contribute their labor and love to their natal family rather than an uncertain future with an unknown husband and his family.

There are several aspects of their attitude towards marriage which deserve mention. Despite their own reluctance to marry, they did not try to discourage or prevent other people from marrying. On the contrary, some of them even helped their brothers to find their brides, and at the same time pressed the bride in the traditional way, just as Huang Hekui’s aunts did. In other words, these zishu nü never showed in their behavior that they hated this marriage system. For example, the Zhaoqing zishu nü residence is the one closest to what some previous research described 'a group of women who hate the marriage system'. However, in my interviews there, not one of them said that ‘marriage is an evil thing for a woman’. Er Gu who lived there for more than seventy years said:

Getting married is like buying a lottery ticket. If you are lucky, you have a charmed destiny; if you have bad luck, you will suffer all your life. To me, there was no need to envy others who got a good husband; it was not nice to gloat when I heard a married woman’s terrible fate. Everyone has her own destiny. I am satisfied with mine.

Huang Kaiqun in Shunde had similar ideas about marriage:

I became a zishu nü. All my life I spent my own money. I did not depend on anybody; rather, my family depended on me. I could do what I want. How many girls could do that? I am old now. My nephew serves me as his own parent. I did not lose anything. However, Li’e got married. She had her husband to love her, her children to serve her. She could see her own descendants and enjoy their success. I think that is not bad either.

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35 Interview with Feng Er Gu, in her house, Zhaoqing, 23, December, 2006.
Choice, it is all about choice. You gain something, you lose something. Everybody’s life is like this.\(^{36}\)

I find it difficult to connect the image of women who hate and are afraid of marriage with those who makes this type of comment. Of course, this philosophical attitude is partly because of age and experience gained over so many years. It is possible that they were largely unconscious of such considerations when they themselves made the decision, in their youth, to become zishu nü. However, now that they have the wisdom and hindsight of age, they better understand the moral significance of their actions. Not one of the Zhaoqing zishu nü was taught by her adopted mother, who was a zishu nü herself, that marriage was scary, and not one of them ever taught their own adopted daughter to hate marriage and to become a zishu nü for that reason. When a girl was getting close to marriagable age, if she chose to get married, her adopted mother would invite a match-maker to their house and arrange her marriage as a normal mother. On the day of her wedding her friends in the Goddess of Mercy Hall, who included zishu nü and unmarried girls, would go to her wedding to congratulate her and send their best wishes to the new couple. Lan Gu in Dongguan joined in four of her friends’ weddings before she went to Singapore, and they remained in contact with each other during the fifty years that she was there. When one of her friends told her about an argument with her husband, Lan Gu wrote a long letter to this friend to ask her to go back to her husband. Moreover, these zishu nü’s attitudes to their friends who swore to be zishu nü, but broke their vow and got married, highlights the fact that they did not resist marriage in the way described in previous research. Some researchers claimed that if a zishu nü betrayed her promise and got married, she would be punished by other zishu nü until she sank to her death.\(^{37}\)

\(^{36}\) Interview with Huang Kaiqun. Li’e is Huang Kaiqun’s good friend who also went to Singapore for work. She got married when she was twenty-four years old. Now she comes back Shatou village sometimes for holidays.

\(^{37}\) See Ye Chunsheng, *Records of Folk Custom in Southern China* (*Lingnan fengsu lu*), and *Folk Custom in Guangfu Area* (*Guangfu minsu*).
In my fieldwork, there was no evidence of this type of harsh criticism at all. Rather, there were many examples of zishu nü getting married without strong censure from their zishu nü friends. Juying’s thirty-year-old aunt got married in Hong Kong to a westerner, despite having performed the ceremony to be a zishu nü when she was twenty-eight. Juying does not think that this was such a shameful act. However, she thinks that her aunt did not keep her promise; this moral problem was more serious than the particular fact that she chose a married life.38

Their resistance was, in some sense, not only to marriage system, but also partly to its reproduction function.39 As a married woman, a woman’s first job was to give birth to an heir for the lineage. In traditional China, without developed medical knowledge, in addition to the pain of experiencing her own child’s death, as happened to Hekui’s mother, it was very dangerous for a woman to give birth.40 There was a saying in Chinese: ‘a woman in childbirth has one of her feet in hell’ (nüren sheng hai zi, jiuru yijiao tajin guimenguan). The fear of the possibility of death in child birth was certainly one aspect of some women’s resistance to marriage. When Zhao Huiming described her motives for becoming to be a zishu nü, the first reason she mentioned related to child birth: ‘Giving birth to babies and bringing them up is too difficult and dangerous.’41

The Cult of Chastity

In addition to the fear of child birth there was a second, indirect, influence of a woman’s reproductive obligations in her in-law family, which involved the local cult of chastity or virginity; these customs, and the associated social pressure on women, was analyzed in Chapter 2.42 In terms of sexual morality, girls in the zishu nü area

38 Interview with Huang Juying, Bingyu Hall, Shatou Village, Shunde District, 17, December, 2006.
39 No previous research has pointed this out.
40 Interview with Hekui, place, date.
41 Interview with Zhao Huiming, Zhaoqing, 29, December, 2006. It was not only Zhao Huiming, but another five interviewees who mentioned this motive initially in the interview.
were carefully taught to keep their virginity, not only for their future husband, but also, more importantly, for their natal family’s honor. At the same time, both public opinion and the government awarded women who served their parents for their entire lives and kept their virginity. Such women were considered to be models of both ‘filial piety’ and ‘chastity’, and were called ‘chastity women’ (zhen nü).\textsuperscript{43} They would have the chance to be praised in local history, and commended as ‘honorable women’. On the contrary, if a woman lost her virginity before marriage, she would be isolated and treated as a source of ‘shame’ not only to her family, but also to the whole local community; her life would become tragic. Virginity was a major source of female status and influence and a significant part of their education and obligation to maintain the good name of their family and clan. In public opinion, only virgins were regarded as clean and honorable women. ‘Sex’ and ‘male’ were dirty and ‘shameful’. Married women were not as clean and precious as unmarried women. In other words, keeping her virginity became one way, or, in the case of to some women from poor families, the important way, a woman could value herself, and be valued by other people in the local community. The prospect of marriage held fear for a woman partly because she would have to fulfil her obligation to have sex with her husband, which would mean she lost her virginity, which was an important source of pride and prestige.

My fieldwork produced the observation that terms of the zishu nü see chastity in difference between ‘dirty’ and ‘clean’, and they are very sensitive on this point. A zishu nü’s room, even one that is very small, must be clean. For a zishu nü, no matter how hard she was working, keeping her room and her dress clean was always one of the most important parts of her daily routine. Feng Er Gu, who lives in the Zhaoqing Goddess of Mercy Hall, has kept the habit of getting up at five o’clock in the morning.

\textsuperscript{43} There are two different opinions regarding the definition of ‘chaste woman’ (zhen nü). One is that the term referred only to a woman, whose fiancé died before their wedding, who was never engaged again and who kept her chastity all her life. Another definition refers to a woman who never has had an engagement or marriage so that she could serve her natal family, and of course keep her virginity all her life. These women should also be identified as ‘chastity women’ (zhen nü). In this thesis, I have adopted the second concept; some of the examples recorded in Guangdong local history were similar to the second situation explained above.
for more than seventy years—since she was nine years old. The first thing she did every morning was to clean the room and have a bath, and then began to work as a straw-mat maker.\textsuperscript{44} Most zishu nü she knows keep that same habit as an important characteristic of their life-style. When replying to the question ‘What do you think are the most obvious features of a zishu nü’s daily life?’ the first thing mentioned by Mr. Hong in Dongguan, Mr. Huang in Shunde, and Ms Zhao in Zhaoqing was ‘ganjing’.\textsuperscript{45} Other answers also included this word. There are two levels of understanding of ‘Ganjing’ in Chinese: one means ‘clean’ materially; while another means ‘pure’, or ‘uncontaminated’ mind, indicating their chastity and virginity. For example, the zishu nü house in Shatou village is called Bingyu Hall, named after the expression ‘bingqingyujie’, which means ‘as unsullied as the snow, as pure as the jade’. At the same time, zishu nü were famous among local people for their clean houses, clean clothing and general cleanliness.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{bingyu_hall_gate}
\caption{The gate of Bingyu Hall. Photographed by Ziling Ye, Shatou Village in Shunde, December, 2006.}
\end{figure}

Role Models and Social Networking

The third cultural reason for women to decide to become zishu nü is the influence of role models and networking among women, both within the family and in the local area. Within the family, a strong influence was the tradition that in a clan at least one girl in each generation became a zishu nü. This tradition was passed from an aunt

\textsuperscript{44} Interview with Feng Er Gu.

\textsuperscript{45} Interviews with, Mr Hong, Dongguan, 14, January, 2007; Mr Huang, Shunde, 17, December, 2006; and Ms Zhao, Zhaoqing, 3, January, 2007.
Ziling Ye

(gugu), who was the father's sister or same-surname cousin, to her niece (zhinü). Huang Shunxing's family was one family of this kind.

There are few girls in my clan. There is only one girl in each family for three generations continually. My great-grandfather had one daughter, my great-grand-aunt, who married into the village next to us and died early. My grandfather only had one daughter too. My aunt was a zishu nü, went to Singapore when she was fifteen years old and stayed there until she died, when she was ninety-four years old. As for my father's generation, he had me as his only daughter too, and my uncle (father's younger brother/shushu) also had only one daughter. When I was still a child, my father declared to everybody: 'my daughter will never marry all her life.' My uncle's daughter, who is my cousin, did not get married either. My aunt, myself and my cousin were all zishu nü. My cousin died last month when she was eighty-eight years old.\(^{46}\)

Like Huang Shunxing, ten of my nineteen interviewees had at least one aunt who was a zishu nü. By coming into contact with these zishu nü in the older generation, younger girls saw what it was like to be zishu nü, and this made it possible for them to make an informed choice about becoming a zishu nü themselves. Moreover, the attitude of the family and community towards zishu nü in the older generation proved that they were respected and desirable role models. A young girl considering whether or not to become a zishu nü could be more convinced by this fact than by some abstract ideas about female virtue and womanhood in Confucian morality. Ying Gu's family was a big joint family in which her grandparents, her parents, her father's siblings, and the third generation as grandchildren stayed in the same house. Ying Gu's three aunts were all zishu nü, two of whom worked in Singapore.\(^{47}\) Ying Gu had a very close relationship with all of her aunts. She said:

When I was young, I always thought that my aunts' lives were wonderful. They earned money themselves; they enjoyed high status in my family. The best husband could not treat you as well as your brother. My aunts were never forced to do anything, unlike my mother who suffered in the family. They loved us as their own children. My cousins and I

\(^{46}\) Interview with Huang Shunxing.

\(^{47}\) All of these aunts were her father's sisters, who were called 'gugu' in Chinese. When these interviewees mention 'my family', they always mean their father's lineage. If they mean their mother's lineage, they would say 'my mother's natal family' (wo muqin de niangjia) or 'my uncle's (mother's brother) family' (wo niangjiu jia).
were educated by our fathers that we had to serve these aunts as our own mothers when they were getting old. Look, comparing my aunts' lives with my mother's is to compare a zishu nü's life with a married woman's. Both of them worked hard for my family, but nobody in the family felt grateful to my mother except us as her children, while everybody thanked my aunts a lot for what they did. My mother had to be very careful when she served my grandparents, while my grandparents spoiled my aunts and took care of them. When my mother was getting old, she had her children to take care of her. So did my aunts. I and my cousins took care of my aunts when they were sick, just as we served my mother. Zishu nü did not lose anything but enjoyed their freedom and others' respect. Of course I was keen to choose to be a zishu nü myself.48

Obviously, Ying Gu learnt the advantages of living the zishu nü lifestyle from her aunts, which helped her to make the decision to become a zishu nü.

In addition to role models within the family, networking between girls in the local community was another important factor that influenced women to become zishu nü. The girls' house described in previous research was one example of this influence. However, the communication between women alerted the unmarried girls to the unpleasant aspects of married life. At the same time, there was another more powerful, unconscious, form of social pressure among girls in the local area that encouraged women to commit to the zishu nü life-style, which has not been mentioned in previous research. In Chinese, this pressure is called a 'mainstream trend' (daliu), which refers to a fashion that everybody follows unconsciously. The zishu nü custom used to be a 'fashion' of this type in the local area. Some girls chose to be zishu nü partly because everybody else chose the life style. In interviews, when answering the question: 'Was there any particular reason why you made the decision to become a zishu nü?' nine out of twenty-two interviewees answered immediately: 'Because every girl in the village wanted to be a zishu nü. Why not me?' Moreover, Ying Gu and Chen Gu in Dongguan, and Zhao Huiming in Zhaoqing gave only this reason to explain their reasons for becoming zishu nü. As they gave this explanation, their expressions showed that they were half joking. Then, after thinking about the

48 Interview with Ying Gu, Dongguan, 11, January, 2007. In this interview Ying Gu referred to the issue that her mother was forced by her mother-in-law to work hard in the farm even though she had just given birth to her daughter.
question for a short while, they gave me different answers based on their own experiences. Still, this ‘half joking’ answer was ‘half serious’ at the same time. It reminds us that the reasons individuals do what they do are not always fully conscious; rather, as in this example, a girl may choose to follow her friends or other girls in local area, with her choice made largely unconsciously or ‘blindly’. This implores us to explore the cultural psychology behind this behavior.

The Kuazutou Custom

The fourth cultural and customary motive for women to become zishu nü is called ‘kuazutou’ in the local area, which refers to the custom that within one family or clan, people of one generation have to have a rite of passage or get married one by one according birth order. As Huang Yanpei explained,

When I was around twenty years old, my aunt (gugu) made the decision for me to become a zishu nü, as my brother was getting close to the marrying age. If I had not done the rites to be a zishu nü, my whole family would be laughed at by other people in the village.

In other words, if an elder sister decided to become a zishu nü, her ceremony to declare her status as zishu nü had to be held before her younger brother’s wedding. If the younger brother had the rite before his older sister, it indicated that bad luck would fall on the family. Moreover, all of the family members would be ridiculed by local people, especially the elder sister and younger brother. Some women were forced to decide their life-courses in a rush in order to enable their younger brother to get married on time, so that their father’s lineage could continue to grow. Gao Ying’s story is a good example.

49 Interviews with Ying Gu; with Chen Gu in Dongguan, 12, January, 2007; and interview with Zhao Huiming.
50 Interview with Huang Yanpei. Aunt here means her father’s sister.
51 This is one of the reasons that zishu nü ceremony was understood as a wedding ceremony. Actually, the zishu nü ceremony was a rite of passage. Forf historical reasons, the rite of passage and wedding were combined and always accompanied each other. Some people ignored the rite of passage aspect and understood it to part of the wedding ceremony. This is why when Stockard analysed the zishu nü’s status in her family, she interpreted it as a mixture of that of a married daughters and unmarried daughters. I will analyse it in detail in Chapter 4.
I went to Vietnam when I was fourteen years old, in order to make a living for my family. One of my aunts living there, who was a zishu nü, helped me to find a job as worker in sericulture there. This aunt was my father’s same-surname cousin (tang jie). My same-surname cousin (tangdi) [her father’s brother’s son], who was only three months younger than me, went there with me. Three years later, my cousin found a girl who he liked and wanted to marry her. My aunt talked to me: ‘Look, he is getting married. It is a good thing for our family. But you know the custom. If you have not married, he can not. Now you have two choices. One is to get married immediately; another is to be a zishu nü. You think about that, and give me your answer tomorrow.’ What could I choose? Getting married? I could not just grab a man on the street and ask him to marry me. I was away from home; my parents could not help me to find a good in-law family either. Moreover, my own family was still in a difficult situation. My father broke his legs when I was four, and could not do heavy work as a farmer. My mother died when I was ten, leaving my disabled father, my younger brother who was only two years old, and me. I worked for my family as the main laborer. In that year, my younger brother was only nine years old. If I got married, who would take care of my father and brother? In this case, I actually had no choice, I had to become a zishu nü. I told my aunt about my choice the next day and she held the rite for me one week later. Then I wrote a letter to my father, telling him about the rite. He did not say anything because it was the custom.\(^{52}\)

Gao Ying said she was forced to become a zishu nü by her family. The ‘kuazutou’ custom was one important reason that women like her had to make a decision to become a zishu nü or get married when they were still young. It pushed them to choose a path that took them away from marriage. In other words, these women chose, or were forced to choose, to become zishu nü in order to ensure the continued development of their father’s lineage.

The Free Life-style

Last but not least, the freedom accompanying the zishu nü life-style was another attraction for girls in the Guangdong Delta. As Ying Gu said about her aunts’ lives, this freedom was a reason for her to make the decision to be a zishu nü. Huang Hekui said it more directly:

\(^{52}\) Interview with Gao Ying, in the nursing home of Gongjilong Silk Factory, Foshan District, 21 December, 2006.
I love freedom, and hate to be controlled by other people. When I was a daughter at home, I would go to the village or town next door whenever I heard there was something interesting going on there. Considering this, I decided not to marry anyone but become zishu nü instead.\(^53\)

This point was so well-described by zishu nü themselves that it became one of the most important motives mentioned by Stockard in her book. However, this ‘freedom’ does not mean that these women were independent as individuals, as in modern feminism. Economically, their labor still belonged to their natal family. When they earned enough money, they had to think about their natal family’s needs before their own, otherwise, they would be criticized by other family members or the local community.\(^54\) Mentally, they relied on support from their natal family during their working lives, and considered the sacrifice of becoming zishu nü as a way to provided for the well-being and development of their natal families.\(^55\) The ‘freedom’ means, as Ying Gu said, that they are willing to be a zishu nü for their natal family but were not forced to. Moreover, because they were working for their natal family, they enjoyed more respect from other family members. In a practical sense, as Huang Hekui described, in their daily lives, zishu nü could still enjoy the freedom to do what they liked and not restricted by an in-law family.

**The Varied Motives of Individual Zishu nü**

By analyzing women’s economic and cultural motives to become a zishu nü, we can see that there were varied reasons for these women to choose this lifestyle. For any individual zishu nü, there were likely to be a number of reasons for the choice. The motives always interacted with each other. For instance, Gao Ming mentioned five different considerations involved in her decision-making:

1. The family’s poor economic situation:

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\(^53\) Interview with Huang Hekui.

\(^54\) I will examine this point in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5.

\(^55\) I will examine this point in more detail in Chapter 5.
My family was so poor that I had to work in my neighbor's silk-making house as an assistant to my mother when I was six, and follow my father to Hong Kong to try to find some way to make a living when I was nine. My father took me back after one year of unsuccessful job hunting. On my way back home, I saw lots of dead bodies lying beside the road, people who had died of starvation. As soon as I went back home, I went to the silk factory to work. I knew it was too heavy a job for a ten year old girl, but I could not stand there and watch my family die like those people I saw. I kept working. When I was seventeen years old, I decided to become a zishu nü, as I found that I had become the main source of labor in my family and my young siblings had to rely on my income for a while.  

2. Employment:
As Gao Chun said, in this factory, every female worker was zishu nü. If you were not, the boss would try to fire you for any reason. In order to keep this job, I was afraid to go back home even during the New Year. Getting married? In my imagination, maybe.

3. Marriage resistance
You could not choose a husband yourself. How could our parents know if he is good or not? It all depended on the tongue of the match-maker. The bride was totally blind before the wedding. If you married a weak husband, he could not protect you from your in-law parents; if he was strong, it is possible that you would often be beaten by him; if he was rich, he would have concubines; if he was poor, how could he feed you if he could not feed himself? The worst situation was marrying a gambler, he would lose his money, lose his family, sometimes lose his wife. A woman getting married could end up with any of these types of men, with no idea beforehand what suffering she would have to endure. Compared to dedicating myself to a husband, I preferred to contribute to my biological relatives.

4. Influence of network
There were lots of women who became zishu nü in my village. My grandaunt did, my aunt did, and two of my cousins were zishu nü too. When I joined in this factory, all of my friends and colleagues were zishu nü. Being a zishu nü was not too bad, I thought before I decided to be one of them. Now I still think so.

5. Freedom and high status as daughter
In my village, zishu nü were treated like sons! Our tablets could be put in the ancestral hall just like our brothers. Furthermore, in my family, nobody could control me. I am the

56 Interview with Gao Ming.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
aunt. My brothers and parents tried their best to spoil me. As a daughter-in-law in the in-law family, who would treat you as your own brother did?\textsuperscript{60}

Most of my interviewees offered answers similar to Gao Ming: all mentioned a range of motives. However, depending on the different individuals' personalities, some motives were emphasized while others were ignored. For example, Gao Ming and Gao Ying were very close friends with different personalities. Gao Ming is a loud old lady with a strong mind, while Gao Ying was quiet and more obedient. When they came into the meeting room together, Gao Ming entered first, followed by Gao Ying. Gao Ming sat down herself before my invitation and pointed out a seat for Gao Ying. During the interview, Gao Ming was always the person who answered first, while Gao Ying would tell her own story only when I asked her specifically. This pattern was also evident in the representations of their life-experiences, Gao Ming emphasized her own decisions in her life, as in (1) above. In contrast, Gao Ying emphasized her lack of real choice,

What could I choose? Getting married? I could not just grab a man on the street and ask him to marry me. I was away from home, my parents could not help me to find a good in-law family either.... In this case, I actually had no choice, I had to become a zishu nü.\textsuperscript{61}

Unlike both Gao Ming and Gao Ying, Huang Shunxing's decision to be a zishu nü was made by her father, who loved his daughter so much that he did not want to lose her to an in-law family. When she heard this news from her father, Shunxing said,

My parents allowed me to stay at home without marrying. You have no idea how happy I was! Other girls could not find a way to avoid marriage. In contrast, my parents asked me to stay at home! How lucky I was!\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{61} Interview with Gao Ying.
\textsuperscript{62} Interview with Huang Shunxing.
Obviously, Shunxing’s motives were quite different from those of Gao Ming and Gao Ying. Growing up in a rich family, under the protection and care of her father, she did not have to worry about the family economic situation and the well-being of others. She was, and still is, a happy woman. In this case, it is easy to understand that her main motive was to have a free life, as indicated above.

My interviewees’ different representations of their reasons for becoming zishu nü indicate that although zishu nü may have been a custom in the local area, women chose to engage in the practice due for varied economic and cultural reasons. These different motivating factors tended to interact with each other, and varied from individual to individual according to the different situations of their natal families and their own personalities. At the same time, we can see the link between these motives and their natal family very clearly. Those women made their decision to be zishu nü in light of the link between them and their natal families: with few exceptions, zishu nü worked for their natal family’s economic well-being, assisted in the continuance of the family lineage, and preferred the life-style in their natal family rather than an unknown life in an in-law family.
Chapter 4

Practical Reality

Figure 4.1 Hu Daidi in her mid-twenties. Photographed in Hong Kong. Source: Shunde Women’s Federation, Shunde zishu nü, n.p., 2006. p. 14.
In this chapter, I am going to portray the zishu nü’s practice of the zishu nü customs in their practical reality. Three sections enrich this picture. In the first section, entitled ‘the most important day’, I describe the ritual process for a zishu nü to declare her identity as a daughter. In the second section, which focuses on ‘religion’, I will argue that for zishu nü, religion, especially Buddhism, was only part of their life-style rather than a motive for committing to the zishu nü custom, as suggested in previous research. In the third section, on ‘work and holidays’, my aim is to present an authentic picture of zishu nü’s daily working and rest lives.

**The Most Important Day**

The most important day for a zishu nü is the day she undertakes the ceremony to become a zishu nü. The symbols associated with the ceremony have been discussed in previous research, as they provide a good chance to observe a zishu nü’s role and status within her natal family. Most researchers agree that this ceremony is like a ‘wedding’. As Stockard says:

> Traditionally, women achieved adulthood only upon marriage. Informants described the spinster ritual as resembling marriage in that it initiated a woman into adulthood.⁠¹

In this section I argue that the zishu nü ritual is not a wedding ceremony; the distinction becomes clear once we separate what, for ordinary women, are two ceremonies—the rite of passage ceremony and the wedding ceremony. It is true that in late Imperial China these two ceremonies typically occurred on the same day, but historically and theoretically they are separate. In the case of a zishu nü, who never marries, the rite of passage ceremony increases in importance and has a significance for such women akin to that of a wedding ceremony. However, it is not a wedding, and a zishu nü’s status and role in her natal family is that of an adult daughter rather

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than a ‘married daughter’. In the following pages, I introduce and examine the ritual symbols associated with the zishu nü ceremony and how this represents and embodies her role, status and self-identity as an adult daughter in her natal family.

First I will discuss the significance of the ceremony. The first story is that of Huang Qundi, in Shatou village, Jun’an County in Shunde suburb.²

When I was twenty-eight years old, my mother sent me a letter: ‘my dear daughter, you are almost twenty-nine years old now. I do not think it is a good idea to still think about marriage—you are too old to this. If you thought about being a zishu nü—as you are already—it would be timely to complete the ritual in one year. Will you come back? I will lead you in fulfilling this rite.’ Replying to this letter, I came back to my home village. My mother prepared everything for me—a new dress detailed with printed flowers, a mirror, a new set of combing tools such as red hair tie rope, a wooden comb, and some red envelopes which contained money.³ My uncle (father’s cousin), who is in my clan, usually carried out the predictions (hui qia suan) and chose a fortuitous day (huang dao jir) for me. In the early morning before sunrise, my mother woke me up. I got up and changed into the new dress. My mother combed my hair and put it into a bun for me using the new combing tools. It was a beautiful and fashionable bun. I am the only daughter in my family so this made the day even more significant. However, my mum still finished combing my hair before the sun rose. She did it very carefully. (Can you remember what your feeling was then?) Me? I can not really remember now. I was probably still half in a dream (laughing). Then, she took a basket with some temple food in it; maybe there was a dish of meat, a dish of rice and a dish of mushroom. I followed her to all of the temples and the ancestor hall in the village. I had to kneel and tow to all of the gods and ancestors. I had to tell them of the day of becoming zishu nü, and I prayed that the whole family and I could be protected by them. You know how many temples there were in this village then? Almost twenty! Even the niche of the local god has to be worshiped. It took me almost a whole day to finish my prayers. On our way to each temple, I gave one envelop to every one that we met on the road who was younger than me. I was really happy, especially when I sent envelopes. Why? It symbolized my transition to adulthood. Before that day, it was me that other people give envelopes to. It is my turn now. Of course I was happy. Afterwards, we went back home for dinner, which was specially prepared for my day. However, it was not a banquet for everyone in the village, just for my family, which included my parents, brothers and sisters-in-law. I sent

² Among all of the stories I heard from my interviewees, the detail of rites of being a zishu nü were varied from individuals. Huang Qundi’s day is relatively complete and typical, a good example for me to do the analysis. I will point out the similarities and differences between different interviewees’ rites so that the points and symbols of the rites could be emphasized. Interview with Huang Qundi, Bingyu Hall, Shatou Village, Shunde District, 16 December 2006.

³ According to local custom, the red envelopes would be sent to people in the local community and her family after the ceremony, indicating that the woman has completed the ceremony and became an adult. I will analyze this custom later in this section.
envelopes to my nieces and nephews and my youngest brother who had not yet married. After that day, I still combed my hair into a tail as I did when I was a girl, until I cut it into short hair style when I was sixty years old.⁴

Before I analyze the significance of the zishu nü ceremony, it is necessary to compare a wedding to a rite of passage in Confucian theory in order to understand the symbols that are associated with the zishu nü ceremony. In one of the Confucian Classic books, the Book of Ritual (Liji), the rite of the ceremony of marriage was recorded. Six steps had to be undertaken during the whole process: the proposal with its accompanying gift; the inquiries about the (lady’s) name; the intimation of the approving divination; the receiving of special offerings; the request to fix the day; and the wedding day ceremony. Because all this was too complex to practice, people reduced the rite into three or even two steps: the proposal with its accompany gift and the wedding day ceremony.⁵ The wedding ceremony mentioned is actually the last step of the whole process.

No matter which steps are undertaken during this ceremony, it is clear that the whole process occurs between the two families—the groom’s and bride’s. Some research suggested that a married woman’s network with her natal family was an important way to maintain the connection and cooperation between her natal and in-law families. To summarize: both theoretically and practically, marriage at that time was a process whose purpose was to combine the two ‘surnames’ or clans (he liangxing zhi hao),⁶ and without the involvement of the two families this process could not be called a wedding.

I will briefly explain the rite of passage ‘jiji.’ In Chinese—the first ji means ‘get’ and second ji refers to the pin used to tie a woman’s hair (see Figure 4.2); jiji means ‘(the girl) reaches the age to pin her hair’. In the Spring and Autumn Period the Book of Ritual says:

Even when a daughter has not got married or engaged, when she turns twenty years old,

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⁴ Interview with Huang Qundi.
⁶ Ibid., p. 228.
she has to perform the rite of passage. During the ceremony, a woman would pin her hair into a bun with a hairpin. After the ceremony, she takes out the pin and reverts to her normal hair style.\(^7\)

Later on, a wedding ceremony and the rite of passage were combined and celebrated on one day, or the ritual passage was performed one to three days before the wedding ceremony. This was a practical move, because people when they married were, in practice, much younger than suggested in the *Book of Ritual*. In the book, a man is supposed to turn into adult when he is twenty years old, while the age for a woman is fifteen. Most men, however, were married at seventeen or eighteen years of age, while a woman was fourteen to sixteen—and sometimes even younger. In this case, people combined the two ceremonies (the rite of passage and the wedding), although the rite of passage was still performed before the wedding ceremony. In the Guangdong area, the rite of passage is called ‘[put hair] on her head’ (*shangtou*). Although the rite of passage was simplified, it was different and separated from the wedding ceremony as it was always finished in the bride’s own house, witnessed by her own relatives.\(^8\) It was not part of the wedding ceremony, rather, it was an independent ritual.

If we compare the zishu nü’s ceremony with the rite of passage detailed in the *Book of Ritual*, it is clear that the zishu nü ceremony is solely a transition to adulthood. During this process, there are three stages and components which illustrate the symbolism of the zishu nü ceremony. The first stage is combing the hair into a bun. This could be done by the zishu nü’s mother, another older or senior female relative in the family, or an older female friend if the zishu nü did not live at home.

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8 Males also had a rite of passage ceremony, but that is not the topic under discussion here.
For example, Hu Daidi participated in her rite in Hong Kong, and her older cousin combed her hair.\(^9\) If there were no senior female family members or relatives with her, she would ask help from her friend who was also zishu nü. There were cases where families forbade their daughters to be zishu nü, however, based on my field work this was very rare and none of my interviewees was in this situation. Indeed, only one woman did not ask her parents’ permission to be a zishu nü before the ceremony, but this was due to external factors and not fear of her parents’ response.\(^10\)

In the article written by Qu Ning, Gao Li and Feng Huitang, a zishu nü called Huang Hekui went to a secret place where a senior female zishu nü performed the combing rite for her.\(^11\) The ceremony was carried out in front of other people, and the bun was formal and beautiful. Ming Gu and Er Gu in Zhaoqing told me that there was a good hairdresser living around Guanyin Hall who was also a zishu nü. Every lucky day on the Chinese calendar, the women who were going to perform the rite to become a zishu nü had to book an appointment with her—especially if there were several girls going through the ritual on the same day. The lady knew more than twenty variations of bun styles, which were very popular amongst all the women in the local area. It can be seen that, while combing was the first stage of the ritual process it was also the most important part of the rite of passage according to the *Book of Ritual*. In the description of the wedding ceremony, however, combing the hair is not significant.\(^12\)

The second part of this ceremony is to pray in the temples and/or worship in the ancestral hall. The way these ceremonies were held is similar to modern day weddings in which the family’s economic situation and tradition dictates the style of ceremony. For instance, as in the story retold earlier, Huang Qundi went to all of the

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\(^9\) Interview with Hu Daidi in her house, Zhaipu Village, Shunde District, 14 December 2006. Certainly, the woman who helps the girl to do the combing does not have to be a zishu nü.

\(^10\) Interview with Lan Gu, her house, Dongguan, 15 January 2007. She did not ask her parents’ permission before the ceremony, because when she decided to have the ceremony in Kuala Lumpur where she was working, the Japanese army had cut communications between mainland China and the Malaysian Peninsula.


\(^12\) Regarding the rite of passage in ancient China, see also Ye Dabing & Ye Liya, *Custom of Hair and Hair Decoration: Culture of Hair in China*, Changchun: Liaoning People Press, 2000, pp. 159–75.
temples and ancestral halls in her village; Hu Daidi went to the Tianfei temple in Hongkong; Gu went to the Ancestor Hall in Foshan; Zishu nü in Guangyin Hall in Zhaoqing gave prayers to the Goddess of Mercy. Although the concrete venues varied from individual to individual, the aims in visiting are similar: one is to tell their deity or ancestor that they have sworn not to get married throughout their lives, that they would continue to serve their parents and the senior members of their clan, help their siblings and cousins, and raise their nieces and nephews (zhongsheng xiaojing zhangbei, fuxiedimei, guan’ai wanbei). The second reason for prayer was for the zushu nü to pray for the health, happiness and prosperity of her kin and herself.

Figure 4.3. Ancestral Hall in Shatou village, where Huang Qundi worshiped in her rite of passage. Photographed by Ziling Ye, January, 2007.
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Figure 4.4: Ancestral Hall in Foshan. A zishu nǚ in Foshan would choose to complete her ceremony to become a zishu nǚ here. Photographed by Ziling Ye, January, 2007.

Figure 4.5: King Kang Temple in Dongguan. Dongguan zishu nǚ would come here to complete her ceremony to become a zishu nǚ. Photographed by Ziling Ye, January, 2007.

One of the important ways in which the zishu nǚ status shaped a woman’s identity was that she was no longer classified as either ‘married’ or ‘unmarried’. An unmarried
daughter was seen as a child, while a married daughter belonged to another clan, and was now a ‘guest’ or ‘person of another surname’ to her natal family. In contrast, the identity of the zishu nü is similar to that of a ‘chaste woman’ (zhen nü) in the Chinese historical records. According to the chapter ‘Honored Women’ in the history of each dynasty, an adult daughter who had undergone the rite of passage could go out to work if it was an economical necessity for her family, and could manage inner affairs in the family as a daughter. To the family, her status was theoretically lower (as a woman) than her brothers, but she was respected by them because she had sacrificed her marriage for the family. She was valued more than the family’s daughters-in-law because of her blood relation to the family. She was also different to ordinary women who did get married as she could inherit her parents’ inheritance. One of my interviewees from Nanhai told me about a tradition in her village regarding zishu nü which provides additional evidence in support of the argument relating to their identity as adult daughters.

In the village, when a woman gave birth to a boy, her husband would go to the ancestral hall to light a red lantern to show that there was a new member born for the clan—my village is a ‘one-surname’ village too—but this would not be done if the baby was a girl.

13 For example, Ma in the text Draft of Qing History, is a ‘chastity woman’ (zhen nü) who served her own parents and brought up her younger brother throughout her life without marriage. See ‘Honoured women’, in Zhao Erzuan (ed.), Draft of Qing History, Beijing: Zhonghua Press, vol. 530, 1977, p. 14531. After her parents died, she became the manager of the inner sphere at home succeeding her mother and superseding her sister-in-law.
According to the ritual, when a girl in my village became a zishu nü her family could
light a lantern in the hall on that day, which meant that our tablets could be placed in our
ancestor hall when we died. However, we still belonged to the group of ‘women’ (yinren).
We are not allowed to worship our ancestors with sons during the Chinese New Year;
rather, we could join in with our mother and sisters-in-law.\textsuperscript{14}

When Gao Ming told me about this custom, she had a proud smile on her face.
From this interpretation, we learn two things: on one hand, zishu nü became formal
members of their natal clan, with authorization to put their tablet
in the ancestor hall after their death. On the other hand, they did
not have the same status as sons (even though a red lantern was
lit). In terms of the principle ‘division between male and female’
(nan nü you bie), they still belonged to the female group in the
clan. Although there was only one interviewee who reported this
custom of lantern lighting, other districts had their own way to
confirm a zishu nü’s role and status. For example, Zhaipu
Village allowed zishu nü to put their tablets into their Ancestral
Hall; Xintan Village allowed zishu nü to have their funeral at
home. In Figure 5.7, the tablet of Huo Hao, who was a zishu nü,
was worshiped by members of the Huo family. The title of Huo
Hao on the tablet is ‘Ancestor of Huo Clan’. The point of all
these customs was the same: to establish a zishu nü’s identity as
an adult daughter, and an official member of her natal family.\textsuperscript{15}

The third important stage of this ceremony is sending
the red envelopes (lishi). When my interviewees mentioned their
ceremony, they all brought up the time when they sent the red envelopes to other
people, and in each case they smiled as they recalled it. The giving of red envelopes
was one of the happiest moments during that day and indeed their entire lives.

\textsuperscript{14} Interview with Gao Ming, in the nursing house of Gongjilong Silk Factory, Foshan District, 21 December
2006.
\textsuperscript{15} The Zishu nü’s identity as an adult daughter to her natal family is also indicated in the relationship among
zishu nü, and between zishu nü and other members in their natal family and local community. I will detail
these relationships in Chapter 5.
According to the custom in Guangdong, only people who had undergone the rite of passage could give envelopes, during Chinese New Year or other big celebrations, to younger people or those who had not had their rite of passage. This custom continues to this day, and the wedding day is usually the boundary between the role of receiving and giving these red envelopes. Besides the Guangdong Delta, other areas or deltas in China have also maintained this custom. The rule about who can give red envelopes and who can receive them varies depending on the situation. For example, in the Yangzi Delta, which is my home region, people can change their role depending on their age: the fifteenth, sixteenth or eighteenth birthday is the boundary—fifteen is the traditional age to have the rite of passage: sixteen is the age a Chinese citizen can obtain their Chinese ID, and eighteen years old is the age when female can get married legally—and each of these ages can also serve as the age for the rite of passage. So what does the wedding mean in the Guangdong Delta? After their wedding, people change their role from a receiver to a giver of envelopes because they have become an adult. In this sense, the giving of red envelopes symbolizes the transition from childhood to adulthood. The re can be no doubt then, that, this rite, by which a woman declares she has become a zishu nü, was a rite of passage.

In addition to these three stages, another two points about this ceremony are worth mentioning: first, the age at which this ceremony is performed; and second, the woman’s hair-style after the ceremony. Most zishu nü participated in their ceremonies when they were in their twenties; no-one was younger than fifteen years old and no-one was older than twenty-nine years old. As Huang Qundi’s mother told her in the letter, twenty-nine years old was regarded as the last opportunity to have this ceremony performed. Indeed, the time to celebrate this ceremony coincides with Confucian ritual. Equally importantly, after the ceremony, the zishu nü would change their bun back into a pony-tail to symbolize that they did not get married. This affirmed the demand in the Book of Ritual, which states that women must have their
hair tied in this certain way if they are not getting married after their rite of passage. The three stages described above—the hair combing, the praying and the sending out of red envelopes—were the most important parts of the whole ceremony. Almost all of the zishu nü experienced these stages no matter how simple or grand her ceremony was. Huang Daidi’s ceremony was quite simple because her parents were against the idea of her becoming a zishu nü. She got up extremely early that morning, swam across the river and found her friends who were zishu nü waiting for her already. She did her ceremony in a small rest house beside a field with her friends as her witnesses. One of the older zishu nü combed her hair for her, when she kneeled in front of the local god of the land. Her friends congratulated her. When she got home, her family had not woken up. She told her parents about the ceremony later that day; her parents did not say anything, but sighed. Then her mother found a red envelope and asked her to give it to her younger brother. We can see that even in the case of Huang Daidi’s simple ceremony, these three parts were still carried through.

As we can see in the above analysis, this ceremony illustrates a number of perspectives. The most important information about the ceremony is that it is a rite of passage. In (Chunqiu Gongyang zhuan), it is explained that ‘If the woman did her rite of passage, no matter if she had a marriage or not, when she died, she would be treated as an adult.' From that day on, these zishu nü became formal adult members of their natal families. They could join in the decision-making of the family and had the identity and status of adult daughters.

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16 In the Book of Ritual, it is demanded that when a woman failed to become engaged after the rite of passage, she should keep her hair styled into a pony tail rather than a bun. See ‘The rite of passage’, in Book of Ritual, Changsha: Yuelu Press, 1989, p. 156.

**Religion**

During my fieldwork most of my interviewees talked about the role of religion in their lives, especially Buddhism, although some emphasized it more than others. Religion occupied such an important part of a zishu nü’s life that some scholars have asked whether or not zishu nü was a type of Buddhist practice. My answer is ‘no’. Religion, including Buddhism,\(^{18}\) has never been one of the motives for zishu nü to practice their custom; rather, it was only part of their life-style. The status of religion in a zishu nü’s life distinguishes her from religious devotees, like Buddhist nuns. In this section, I will look at how zishu nü practiced their religion to see how and to what extent religion influenced and formulated these women’s view of the world and of themselves; I will then examine the differences between nuns and zishu nü, in order to make clear the actual position of religion in the practical reality of a zishu nü’s life.

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**Figure 4.8.** The cast of Goddess Mercy in Bingyu Hall in Shatou Village, Shunde District. Photographed by Ziling Ye, December, 2006.

**Figure 4.9.** Buddhist worshipping room in Goddess Mercy Hall in Zhaoqing. Photographed by Ziling Ye, December, 2006.

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\(^{18}\) ‘Buddhism’ here I refer to varieties of Mahayana Buddhism as practices in China.
Among all the God and Goddess images in Buddhism, the Goddess of Mercy is the most popular one among zishu nü (See Figure 4.8 and Figure 4.9). Cao Xuansi argued that the reason for this popularity is that as a female Goddess, the Goddess of Mercy was recreated and refigured by zishu nü as a model of purity—an independent Goddess who was against marriage. Consequently, she became an example of marriage resistance. However, this explanation is not altogether correct. The Goddess of Mercy is the most popular Buddhist Goddess among women almost everywhere in China, not just in Guangdong, and her popularity among zishu nü is largely a reflection of this popularity among Han women generally. The Goddess of Mercy, called ‘Guanyin’ in Chinese, is a Goddess who can ‘make everyone in the world happy, save everyone from sorry and lead them to a bright future’ (jiuku jiunan, daci dabei). Her popularity is not only because of her mercy towards everyone, regardless of their gender or status, but also because she can intervene when there is an emergency. Because the Goddess of Mercy is the only deity in Buddhism who is explicitly female, it is easier for women to accept her.

There are four holy days of the Goddess of Mercy in every Chinese year. These are significant days for Chinese women, and of course, for zishu nü as well. For instance, the zishu nü in the Zhaoqing Goddess of Mercy Hall would go to the hall specifically for the Goddess. They would light incense, display food for worship, read some Buddhist scriptures (if they could read), or otherwise repeat the Goddess’ name eighty-one times, and pray for peace for themselves and their family. Bingyu Hall has been the location for worshipping the Goddess of Mercy in Shatou since it was built. On the Goddess’ day, many women in the village, not only zishu nü, would go to the Hall, to pray and light incense. It is true that zishu nü came to be in charge of the order and process of worship, and many women, including zishu nü, have an image of this goddess in their room. The meaning of the zishu nü’s worship of the

Goddess of Mercy was not, as in Cao’s description, ‘in the mind of informants (zishu nü), taking Goddess of Mercy as their example is a way to get closer to this Goddess and the truth behind her’,\(^{20}\) rather, it was just the usual activities associated with lay women’s practice of popular religion in the local area.\(^{21}\)

Generally speaking, there are three ways in which zishu nü reflected their lives directly to the Goddess. First, they made their promise to remain a zishu nü in the presence of the Goddess, and her role in the ceremony helped them to stay true to this promise. Hu Daidi, one of my interviewees, chose to do the ceremony to declare she was a zishu nü in a temple of the Goddess of Mercy in Hong Kong. She said:

> There were some handsome and good boys who chased me when I was young, but after my ceremony. I did not accept any of them. Of course I could not; my promise was made before the Goddess of Mercy. How can I break it? She is looking at me! I would be punished if I betrayed her.\(^{22}\)

Some other zishu nü in Zhaoqing mentioned similar ideas:

> Why not change my mind? The decision not to get married was made by me; the promise not to get married was said by me. The Goddess of Mercy listened to me at that time. How could I change my mind and betray my promise that casually?\(^{23}\)

It is clear that keeping this promise is an important moral consideration in a zishu nü’s mind. The Goddess of Mercy is a figure from the Heavens who supervises these zishu nü and their adherence to their decision.

Second, worship and prayer to the Goddess of Mercy became one of the most frequent and important activities in these women’s lives. It made their small amount of free time become more ‘significant’ and ‘meaningful’ to them, and also gave them a way to speak out about their complaints and the difficulties in their lives. Zishu nü in Zhaoqing all lived around the Goddess of Mercy Hall. When they encountered

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\(^{20}\) Cao Xuansi ‘Zishu nü in Xiantian Dao’, p. 131.


\(^{22}\) Interview with Hu Daidi in her house, Zhaipu Village, Shunde District, 14 December 2006.

\(^{23}\) Interview with He Liugu in her house, Zhaoqing District, 4 January 2007.
difficulties, they loved to tell it to the Goddess. Xia Huitian said,

The Goddess listens. When I was too tired or hungry, and felt that life was too difficult, I loved to go to the Goddess of Mercy and look at her, tell her that something bad had happened. Afterwards, I would feel much better. It had become a habit already. Something may change for the better, or there may be no change at all. It is your own destiny. The Goddess could be too busy to look after you sometimes (laughing). 24

Although she could not always rely on the Goddess' help, Xia Huitian still lit incense every day, and worshipped the Goddess four times a year. Attending to these matters was the most important thing in her life, besides her job.

It is only right to show your respect. Respect in your heart is the most important thing when you worship and kneel in the front of Goddess. However, cooking and preparing offering could be interesting too. 25

These women had to work every day for around fifteen hours. Worshipping the Goddess of Mercy was a way for them to relax, physically and mentally.

Figure 4.10. Zishu nü Zhao Huiming, in Zhaoqing is worshipping the Goddess of Mercy at the Winter Solstice. Photographed by Ziling Ye, January, 2007.

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24 Interview with Xia Huitian in her house, Zhaoqing District, 27 December 2006.
25 Ibid.
Third, worshipping the Goddess offered zishu nü another way to strengthen the link with their families. In some Buddhist stories, the Goddess of Mercy sacrificed herself in order to save people, which offered a good example for zishu nü women and encouraged them to continue their sacrifice on behalf of their family or clan. Huang Juying said that:

The Goddess of Mercy was a good daughter to her family. Her father got sick. She prayed to Buddha for her father, and was willing to sacrifice her own happiness for her father’s life. Then, in order to test her resolve, Buddha asked her to sacrifice her eyes and arms. She did it without any hesitation. Buddha was moved by her devotion, cured her father and changed her from a normal woman into a Goddess.

The Goddess of Mercy not only moved the Buddha, but also her believers. Zishu nü such as Huang Aiqun followed her example to fulfill their duty as a daughter to their natal family. As a daughter working in a city far away from home, a zishu nü would also pray to the Goddess to bring happiness, peace and safety to her family. Chen Gu in Dongguan left her family when she was twelve years old, and went to Malaysia by herself.

During those days, especially during the war, without knowing what happened at home, what could I do? Worrying could not achieve anything. The only thing I could do was pray to the Goddess of Mercy. She could do what we could not do. She would keep my family safe. You know what? She did it! No one died in my family during the war, while there were hundreds of people missing or dead in my village and a couple of villages nearby.

At the same time, religion, especially Buddhism, helped the zishi nü women to form a cohesive set of collective personality characteristics. For example, worshippers of the Goddess of Mercy should be clean and tidy, which coincided with the concept of purity and the ideals of the cult of virginity. The name of the spinster’s house Bingyu Hall demonstrates their preference for a clean and tidy lifestyle. Bingyu comes from a Chinese expression bingqing yujie which means ‘clean as ice, pure as

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26 Interview with Huang Juying, Bingyu Hall in Shatou Village, Shunde District, 17 December 2006.
27 Interview with Chen Gu, in Dongguan, 12 January 2006.
jade.’ Both ice and jade are transparent, representing the ideals of the zishu nü lifestyle and the moral principles of zishu nü themselves. The poem on each side of the Bingyu Hall entrance building reads: ‘Worship Buddha with loyalty and honesty for three lives, be quiet and clean in this life in order to have a position in the western paradise’. The way that the rules of Buddhism interacted with the emphasis on the purity of virginity in the lives of zishu nü distinguished them from other women in the local community.

As Buddhisms, the zishu nü were expected to be peaceful at heart, which could be seen in their quiet, easy-going and hard-working nature, and in their inner strength, which both represent aspects of female virtue. For Buddhists, the first rule is to respect and feel compassion for every creature in the world. In front of local people and their family, the zishu nü did their best to demonstrate that they were kind women who hurt no-one, which is the most significant quality of a follower of the Goddess of Mercy in the minds of ordinary people. This made zishu nü more acceptable as adult daughters to the local people and their families, especially to their sisters-in-law. Further, the conscious effort on the part of the zishu nü to make themselves kind, warm-hearted and selfless created a positive collective image of zishu nü in the eyes of local people, which helped them to earn respect and to have a good name.

I have argued that Buddhism supported these women in their promise to be zishu nü, to remain pure all their lives, and it also helped to form some aspects of their collective personality. However, it is important to note that the zishu nü custom is not a kind of Buddhist practice, though most zishu nü practiced some rituals or beliefs from Buddhism; in fact, some of them have very close relationships or friendships with real nuns. Nonetheless, zishu nü are not nuns.

The difference between zishu nü and nuns has four main aspects: the purpose or the motive for practicing the religion, the different qualifications required to be a nun or a zishu nü, the practices associated with Buddhism, the rules and laws nuns
have to obey and the punishment for disobedience.\textsuperscript{28} Patterns of motivation are the most essential difference between a nun and a zishu nü. In pre-modern China, women tended to become nuns for the following three reasons. One was a poor family economic situation. This motive echoes that of zishu nü, as analyzed in Chapter 3. However, when a woman chose to be a nun to escape starvation, she could only ensure her own survival, whereas a zishu nü could support her entire family by her hard work; another was that the difficulties renunciation women encountered early in life could make lose confidence in their ability to cope in a normal life situation. For example, some nuns’ families died in the war. Being the sole survivor made it difficult to live alone. Some young widows chose to be nuns because they could not remarry for various reasons; some prostitutes chose to be nuns once they became too old to support themselves in the sex trade. These women have one feature in common: they essentially lost confidence in their ability to remain in normal society and practice womanhood as required by society. The choice to be a nun could be a way to escape the pressures of the outside world, which is called \textit{bishi} in Chinese. They either abandoned the world, or were abandoned by the world. In contrast, zishu nü committed themselves to following precepts of womanhood laid down by their society. They were the most active role models of womanhood in the local community. No one abandoned them, or was abandoned by them. Zishu nü belong to category of people called \textit{rushi} in Chinese. The third motive for becoming a nun was Buddhist belief. While this is the purest of the motives for women wanting to be nuns, the population of this group is also the smallest. These women usually came from rich families that supplied them with a good education and gave them a philosophical understanding of Buddhism. They joined in this religion consciously. The difference between this group of women and zishu nü is obvious, as zishu nü did not usually receive a good education in Buddhist doctrine and they did not practice religion at such a sophisticated level. On the other hand, if a zishu nü really was so devoted to

\textsuperscript{28} The reference to evident these aspects of nuns, see Guangzheng Wu \textit{Religion and Female(Nüxing yu zongjiao xingyang)}, Changchun: Liaoning Picture Press, 2000, pp. 134-187.
Chapter 4: Practical Reality

Buddhism, she would choose to be a nun rather than stay with her family in this 'normal world' (*sushi*).

The second difference between *zishu nü* and nuns is the qualification required to be a member of the group. In addition to their varying motives for joining a Buddhists order, nuns also belonged to different levels of society. They could be of any age, from newborns to women as old as seventy or eighty, and they could be from any occupation. Nuns included women who were students, politicians, housewives, concubines, and even prostitutes. They had only one thing in common: as soon as they became nuns, they had to cut all ties with their previous life. In front of the Buddha, they are all the same. In contrast, a *zishu nü* had to be a virgin, and she had to swear to remain virgin for the rest of her life. Equally importantly, she had to remain part of her family and fulfill her duty to her family, otherwise she would be criticized, as described in Chapter 5. Furthermore, she could have the ceremony to declare that she was *zishu nü* only in a definite period of her life, between the ages of fifteen and twenty-nine, as I examined in the last section.

Third, in the practice of Buddhism there are two points which are especially noticeable. First of all, to be a nun, a woman has to pass through an initiation process. She has to have a nun as her supervisor (*yizhi shi*) in a temple, in order to study the basic rules and doctrines of Buddhism. Her supervisor has to ask the permission of everyone in the temple to take on novice nun. If consent is given, the novice has to shave her head and learn the first ten rules (or precepts) of behavior, which is the first step towards becoming a Buddhist nun. Henceforth, she has to proceed through a three different stages and study three hundred and forty-eight rules associated with the renunciant lifestyle. After satisfactorily completing this study she can be received as a 'nun'. Even as a Buddhist nun at home she would have to undergo a similar novitiate, which was simpler, but she would still have to study some basic Buddhist doctrine, demonstrate her faith and commitment to following the Buddha before a qualified nun or monk, and practice the rules for a nun. When I asked my
interviewees about their knowledge of this enrolment and the rules or laws associated with becoming a nun, most of them answered me: ‘No, I have no idea about these things. How complex! Can’t I just believe in the Buddha or the Goddess of Mercy?’

Even zishu nü in Zhaoqing, who maintained the most strict life and adherence to the basic rules of Buddhism among zishu nü, had no experience of all these steps. They said that they just followed other zishu nü in what they did and believed in Buddha. It is clear that zishu nü practiced some elements of a Buddhist life-style, but they were not nuns in a formal ritual sense, nor were they officially nuns at home. Moreover, as discussed in previous section, the ceremony to become a zishu nü is a normal rite of passage in traditional Chinese culture.

For a woman to be a nun, as we know from the initiation procedure, requires strict practice of Buddhism. For example, she has to be a vegetarian and eat only two meals every day. There is a rule which says that a nun may not have any kind of food after lunch, and only those who do physical work all day could enjoy another meal at night. Her dress may only be nun’s uniform, which, in China, is always black. Except for some group activity, she has to stay in her own house to meditate (dazuo). There are rules that cover almost every aspect and minute detail of her life. Even a nun at home has to follow some rules, including vegetarianism, being at home at a specific time studying and thinking about Buddhism, and going to the temple at a specific time to study rules and theory. There are one to three days in every month declared to be lasting ‘zhai’. On such days, a nun at home must not eat after lunch, following the practice of temple nuns. However, zishu nü do not have such rules. Most of them keep one day a month as a special day. On that day, they pray to the Buddha or the Goddess of Mercy more often than normal people, practice vegetarianism, and follow other traditions in the basic spirit of Buddhism. In other words, the zishu nü practice of Buddhism was stricter than that of ordinary people, but more flexible than that of nuns.

There is another point about the religious practice of zishu nü that deserves
mention. Theoretically, when a person believes in Buddhism, they are not supposed to believe in or worship gods of any other religion; this is especially true of monks and nuns living in a temple, since they could not even worship their own ancestors. This is one of the most basic rules of Buddhism. What I found amongst zishu nü is quite different. For example, Bingyu Hall, the house built by more than fifty zishu nü in Shatou Village, is supposed to be the place where zishu nü could enjoy their retirement together. This hall is also known as 'Heling jing’an she’ which means ‘quiet and peaceful lodge under He Hill’ and shows a strong Buddhist idea. The zishu nü in Shatou Village regard themselves a Buddhist, but the construction and arrangement of the building itself tells us something different. There is a niche for the local god at the gate of the building and there are three main rooms within the hall. One of these rooms is devoted to the tablets of zishu nü who have passed away. In the central room are statues of three Goddesses: the Goddess of Mercy sits in the middle, and she is flanked by Goddess Tianfei who sits on the right, and Goddess Jinhua sits on the left (see Figure 4.11). The final room is for Lord Guan, the God of safety, good luck and righteousness’ (yi) (see Figure 4.12).

Figure 4.11. Central room in Bingyu Hall, Shatou Village, Shunde District, showing the three goddesses who are worshipped there. Photographed by Ziling Ye, December, 2006.

Figure 4.12. Lord Guan in the final room in Bingyu Hall, Shatou Village, Shunde District. Photographed by Ziling Ye, December, 2006.
The thirteenth of May in the Chinese lunar calendar is the birthday of Lord Guan, and there is always an entire village celebration. People ‘invite’ the statue of Lord Guan, which is set in the Bingyu Hall, outside, and four young men take it around the village. In this ritual, zishu nü perform the supervision work and are the primary people who worship Lord Guan on behalf of the whole village. Moreover, during other local religious festivals, be it for Daoism or another local religion, the zishu nü would either hold a celebration themselves or join in with the local ceremony. This ritual facilitation occurred on more than forty-five days in the year, compared to only seven or eight days that specifically related to Buddhism.

The last difference, relating more to symbolization, concerns differences in appearance between zishu nü and nuns—most specifically their hair which is immediately noticeable. Nuns, of course, should have shaved heads. Nuns who live at home may keep their hair, but it should always have been arranged in the same plain bun. The second of Buddhism’s eighty-four instructions concerning women’s ‘tempting and evil’ appearance and behavior is about hair: ‘women love to comb and twirl their hair to tempt men.’ In contrast, zishu nü are not bald; in fact, all the zishu nü I met and interviewed loved their hair very much, and were always very proud to tell me how beautiful their hair was when they were young. I have very long hair myself. When I did interviews, hair was always a good topic to begin with. More than ten women asked if they could comb my hair, and told me that one way to show off their proficiency at handwork was to show how beautifully they could arrange their hair. Hair was always a good trigger for them, which prompted them to recall their days of youth beauty. Of course, these women who loved having beautiful hair, would resist cutting it in order to be a nun.

**Work and Holidays**

Work, according to my interviewees, was the main function of their lives. In the
majority of cases, the incomes of the zishu nü provided the most important economic support for their families. Consequently, zishu nü saw work as the most fundamental aspect of their lives. In this section, I will introduce the zishu nü’s occupations, which were determined by different economic patterns in different areas including silk factory workers in Foshan, maids in rich families in Shunde, straw mat makers in Zhaoqing. I will also include a short introduction to some other ways of earning a living undertaken by some zishu nü. For each occupation I will focus on two aspects: working conditions and income.

In previous literature, researchers have focused on silk industry workers suggesting this was the most popular occupation for zishu nü. However, my fieldwork showed that sericulture was most popular only in the Nanhai District. Most of the zishu nü in Nanhai chose to be in sericulture while women in Shunde chose to work in domestic service overseas, farming or fishing at home. Consequently, I will introduce the silk factory workers’ lives in the area of Nanhai district and Foshan, the closest city to Nanhai, where lots of women went in order to find a position in modern silk factories.

In her book, Stockard describes the whole process of traditional sericulture in rural areas by taking Shunde as her model. However, she did not describe the silk worker’s life in the modern industry and modern factories, which was a much more popular choice for most women in the early twentieth century. According to my interviews with zishu nü women, the silk factory worker’s life was incredibly difficult. They were kept working for long hours in terrible conditions for very little recompense. I went to the nursing home of the Gongjilong Silk Factory, which was one of the biggest silk factories in the whole Guangdong Delta. There were more than twenty old women living in that nursing home who were zishu nü. Here is the story from one of my eighty-six year old interviewees, Gao Ming, which presents a true picture of the female sericulture workers life in Republican China:

I went to Gongjilong Silk Factory to be a silk worker when I was nineteen years old. However, I began to work in my neighbor’s house to help them reeling the silkworm when I was four. When I was nine years old, I had begun to work on the machine already, for at least twelve hours everyday. When I was fifteen years old, I went to Vietnam with my aunt (father’s sister), who was a zishu nü too, and we worked in a silk factory there. Only about two or three years later, the Japanese army occupied Vietnam. I lost my job because of the war and had to come back my village. After the war, I came to Foshan, becoming a worker in this factory till now. The condition of the work was terrible when I first came here. Every working hall was about ten thousand square meters in size. Machines were just laid one by one, with less then one meter in between. That was the room for us. We did not have a dormitory. The machine was about two and a half meters high. On the level at about two meters high, there was a place where we could fit a one board a meter wide, which was our bed. When we had to sleep, we put the board on the machine ourselves, and climbed on to it. Some of the workers turned over and fell from the ‘bed’, getting injured. The factory would not pay for our medical care. On the contrary, if you were too sick to work, you had to leave the factory. There were lots of women who stayed at the front of the factory gate, wanting a job here. The boss only cared how many bunches of silk material the factory could produce every day. If you were reported sick, you lost your job. So, even when we got sick, the best thing was to hide it from everybody. We did not have a specific space for cooking either. Every worker had their own cooking stuff under the machine—a small stove, a small pan, rice and soy sauce. We could not afford meat, only a small amount of vegetables everyday. There were more than one thousand female workers in this factory then, but there were only two small bath rooms, about ten square meter each. You had to carry the water into it yourself. In summer, there were usually more then ten women in one bathroom. You had to pick the right time to go there. There was only one toilet in every working hall for more than one hundred workers. One woman would stand in front of it to stop two girls going into the toilet together, because two girls would talk to each other, which would take too much working time.30

In addition to long working hours, the women were paid piece rates; there was no fixed salary. For every bunch of silk produced the worker would be paid one yuan thirty-eight fen. However, a skilful worker would work for more than forty hours non-stop, without sleeping or eating, to produce a bunch of silk. Most female workers would have to work without a break for about three or four days, sleeping only four or five hours per night, to earn one yuan thirty-eight fen. Over a month they could earn on average from eight to ten yuan. The basic cost living was about four to five

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30 Interview with Gao Ming, in the nursing home of Gongjilong Silk Factory, Foshan District, 21 December 2006.
yuan per month per woman. This was enough to buy a small amount of vegetable and rice for each meal, but not a new dress or soap for the shower. Of course, the women workers did not have time for shopping or any entertainment either. Even at Chinese New Year, the women would get only one day off. These female workers had to work more than seventeen hours every day, three hundred and sixty-four days every year in order to survive and contribute to their natal family. Nor were the working conditions in Gongjilong Silk Factory the worst. Actually, it was much better there than in some other smaller factories and home silk-making places in rural areas. That was the reason why so many women made the same choice as Gao Ming to work in the Gongjilong factory.

In comparison with a silk industry worker, being a maid in a rich family could be a much better choice if a position was available. Maids earned a higher salary, did lighter work, received good food and had time to sleep. Here are my interviewee, Hu Daidi’s memoirs about her work experience in Hongkong.

After I arrived in Hong Kong with my aunt, I began my life as a maid for some rich families. From when I was seventeen years old until I was more than sixty years old, I stayed with five or six different families. The male masters in these families were a French man, a construction business man, a famous designer, a medicine business man, and so on. All of them had respectable jobs, good incomes and high social status. The mistresses usually stayed at home as housewives. However, they did not need to do any housework. For example, in the construction business man’s house, there were two chief cooks—one was in charge of Chinese food, and another cooked western food—two drivers and one maid. As the maid in a family like this, I did not actually have to do lots of work. On normal days, I got up at six o’clock in the morning, prepared the breakfast, and laid the table for the masters. Breakfast began at around seven. After it was finished it was time for the servants to have food. Then I had to clean the house, wash clothes and iron them, and then lay the table for lunch, help the mistress to prepare afternoon tea sometimes, and then dinner. At around half past six in the evening, it was the time for me to have dinner. The whole night after dinner belonged to me. It was not hard work, though it was difficult to maintain a high standard. For instance, when laying the table for any meal, every one in the family had their own seat and chopsticks with their English names on it. I had to remember all of the seats and put the chopsticks in the right place, also the knives and forks when the masters wanted to have western food. In other words, I had to be familiar with both western and Chinese manners. It could be a tough job for a girl like me who had only one year Chinese schooling in a rural area. However, I did it by being
smart and using my good memory. Some masters’ families liked me very much. For example, the eldest son in one of the families only wanted me to look after him—as did his mother. They did not allow any other maids to touch his things. So my salary rose higher and higher. From fifteen Hong Kong dollars per month when I first got Hong Kong, my monthly income had increased to one thousand dollars when I was force to quit my job because of my back complaint when in my sixties.31

Daidi said she was lucky to have so many good masters, which was an important consideration for all the women who were doing that type of work. This is a totally different story from Gao Ming’s experience in the silk factory. It is surprising, then, that being a domestic servant was the first choice for Shunde zishu nü. But this was not for the reason, given in previous research, that because sericulture was declining in the Guangdong Delta, women lost their chance to work so that they had to go overseas. The fact is that being an overseas worker was a much better choice for a zishu nü and her family. Gao Ming told me that she went to Hong Kong when she was about thirteen years old, hoping find a job as maid there, but was unsuccessful. She was forced to go back Foshan to be a silk worker.

Of course, not every one could be as lucky as Daidi. Some of my interviewees who went to Singapore told me that there were some women who went to Singapore but could not find a job there. Generally speaking, for a maid or laborer in Southeast Asia, there were several problems that had to be overcome. First, it helped if a prospective domestic worker had a good network to help her find a family where she could work as a maid. This network was usually made up of zishu nü from the same village or area, which I will discuss the detail in Chapter 5. Second, the women had to be smart and capable of staying with in one high class family for a long time. For example, as Daidi said, she had to be familiar with both Chinese and Western manners and customs. Third, working for another family meant that the domestic staff did not have much opportunity for time off, especially on festivals and public holidays, which could be their busiest days. For example, Daidi never spent Chinese New Year with her own family. Moreover, when her mother died, Daidi had to stay in

31 Interview with Hu Daidi in her house, Zhaipu Village, Shunde District, 14 December 2006.
her master’s house to look after a sick child and she could not go home to attend her mother’s funeral.

Compared to Nanhai zishu nü working in early modern sericulture, Shunde zishu nü domestic servants had more holidays, but, they still amounted to less than ten days every year. There were usually two ways that domestic workers working overseas could arrange their holidays. One was to have a day off every one and half months and spend it with her zishu nü sisters working in the same city. They would usually go shopping together for their family and have some entertainment, such as going to a Canton Opera or playing Majiang (Mahjong). Another choice was to go home. Hu Daidi said,

If I wanted to go back home that year, first, I would have to ask for leave from my masters at the beginning of the year. From Hong Kong to Zhaipu Village, now it will only take you several hours by car. During my working period, it would take me three days. I had to take the ferry to Macau first, then to Zhongshan, Xiaolan, and finally I would arrive home. Going back to Hong Kong took me much the same time as coming home. Consequently, each visit I could stay with my family for only three to four days, while spending at least six days traveling. However, I still tried to come back as often as possible, in order to take more money and necessities to my family.32

However, no matter what the working conditions were, being a maid was the best choice for these women from poor families. They were able to contribute much more money to their natal families because of their relatively high incomes, which is the real reason why zishu nü were more respected in Shunde than in other areas.

In Chapter 1, I have introduced zishu nü from Zhaoqing, an area that has not been discussed in previous research on the topic. In Zhaoqing, the zishu nü women are straw mat makers, which is also new to the scholarly understanding of the occupations undertaken by zishu nü. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, Zhaoqing, which was called Gaoyao before the beginning of the twentieth century, was famous for its straw mat making industry. Hand-making straw mats was a complex and long process and the work of the zishu nü covered most of the steps involved. Xia Huitian

32 Ibid.
Ziling Ye described her work to me briefly.

Making straw mats was hard work. There were four steps. We bought straw from farmers. This straw was supposed to be cut in a definite length already, about one and half meters long. The first step was to flatten then stems by using a big stone hammer, which weighed about ten kilograms. Second, these flat straws were put into a big pot to boil them. Dye was put into the pots to color them into three different colors, red, black and yellow. Then we would dry them under the sun. When this was finished, we could make a mat. There were five sizes of mats, from the smallest to the biggest. Usually, when a girl got married here, a straw mat is an important item in her dowry list. Consequently, the biggest one, two and half meters square, was the most popular one. Making one of this size mat would take a skillful maker around ten days. The biggest, best mat could be folded into a shape about twenty centimeters by fifty centimeters square. You can imagine how soft it should be.33

The zishu nü I interviewed began their work in childhood. As mentioned before, the life-style of zishu nü in Zhaoqing was different from other areas. In Zhaoqing, from an early age, they had stayed together in the same location, far away from their natural family. Their working time began when they were very young. Xia Huitian began to do this work when she was four years old. At that time, she was in charge of drying the straw. Later, when she was nine, she was strong enough to flatten the straws, which was really heavy work. She started to make mats when she was fourteen, when her adopted mother thought she was skillful enough to do the real work. She did not stop working until she was sixty years old. Her friend Zhai Siqun is still making mats, which provides most of her income now. She will be seventy-seven years old this year (2007). Although popular, straw mats are still quite cheap in the local area. The price has continued to drop since modern industry became began to manufacture this commodity. Around 1940, the hard work of these women in mat making could support only a simple life style. Some of them also did some other short-term casual work, such as working on city road-construction projects.

Besides the three above-mentioned occupations, there were some other professions that some zishu nü chose to work in. For example, some of them were

33 Interview with Xia Huitian in her house, Zhaoqing District, 27 December 2006.
hairdressers (shu tou po), who ran their own businesses beside the road. Some of them became professional bridesmaids who were in charge of the hosting rites at the wedding ceremony and accompanying the bride on the first night of the marriage (da jin jie). Some zishu nü who were from rich families bought pretty young girls from poor parents, and educated these young girls (mei zai). When these girls were fifteen to eighteen years old, the zishu nü would sell them to rich family as concubines. These, however, were older occupations of the zishu nü; very few of them remained in these occupations during the first half of twentieth century.

Because the great majority came from poor families, most zishu nü began to work when they were quite young. Some began in their early teenage years, or even when eleven or twelve; some of them began even earlier when they were younger than ten years old. After they began work, it was relentless—every day, every month, and every year, for sixty, seventy, or even eighty years. They worked for their families, sending most of their income home and leaving only an amount to cover basic necessities for themselves. As one of my informants explained, ‘We were treated as a working machine ourselves, but we had no choice. I had to survive; my family needed money.’

For most of them, there were fewer then ten days in each year when they could rest from the hard work. However, not one of my interviewees regretted her decision to become a zishu nü.

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34 Interview with Gao Chun, nursing home of Gongjilong Silk Factory, Foshan City, 19, December, 2006.
Chapter 5
Relationships

Figure 5.1 Zishu nú, Hu Daidi, her brother Hu Liangsong and Liangsong’s wife at home. Photographed by Ziling Ye, December, 2006.
In previous chapters, I have examined three aspects of zishu nü’s practice of daughterhood: the economic and ritual aspects, and the family tradition. In this section, I will concentrate on the stories about interpersonal relationships amongst zishu nü, and between zishu nü and other members in their natal families or ‘legal families’, which have a critical role to play in the self-identification of these women.

**Interpersonal relationships between zishu nü and other family members**

Stockard comments in her book that: ‘no claims and obligations were ascribed to sworn spinsterhood; each spinster individually negotiated relations with her natal family. The practice of spinsterhood varied considerably, reflecting different individual circumstances and local constraints.’ It is correct that each zishu nü would negotiate her relationship with her family individually. However, there are some common features, which indicate similar roles and status in their natal families.

Interpersonal relationships are an important perspective from which to explore the zishu nü’s role and status at home. If it is true that these women identified themselves as daughters to their clan—to re-emphasize, this is daughterhood in their clan as a whole and not just to their parents—their main task was to contribute to their natal lineages’ development. Consequently, the other members of the family treated them as formal members of the family, rather than as ‘outsiders’, which would have been their position had they married into another family. This meant that a zishu nü enjoyed some rights and performed her duty as a daughter, while other members of the family respected these rights and enjoyed the results of her work. Of course, this interpersonal relationship is not only on the economic or ritual level, rather, the emotional link also played an important role in the whole project of identification.

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1 To a Zhaoqing zishu nü, her family usually is not the biological one but the one associated with her adopted mother and other adopted sisters, which is called the ‘legal family’ in this thesis. I will describe it further later in this section.
3 Please see my analysis in Chapter 2.
building and in the running of the family or clan. I will mainly examine four kinds of relationships between a zishu nü and her family: the relationship with her parents, with her siblings, with her sisters-in-law (her brother’s wives), and with the younger generation in her family, her nephews and nieces.

**Zishu nü and their Relationships with their Parents**

Generally speaking, most interviewees maintained a good relationship and a strong emotional link with their parents. First of all, as children, they respected their parents because their parents worked hard to contributed economically to the family. Gao Ming from Nanhai talked about her father in this way:

> My father was a great man. My mum was always pregnant and busy giving birth to babies. However, most of them died soon after they were born. There were five children in my family, three boys and two girls. I am the eldest. I saw my father get up at four or five to farm, and work all day without any complaint. I began to help my father when I was four. He took care of me when we worked together and never asked me to do any heavy work. When I left my home to go to Foshan city to be a worker in a silk factory, I was only eleven or twelve. The day I left our village to go to the city with other girls, he saw me off long long way away from my village. I know that he was worried about me.  

Huang Qundi’s mother took her to Singapore for domestic service work when she was twelve years old:

> We had to support my father and four brothers who stayed in my home village. My mother earned money for my family like a man. She did any job she could find there, sometimes two or three part-time jobs together as a maid or cleaner. I followed her to her working place to help her at first. Then, several months later, I had to do a maid’s job myself. She was a good teacher and a good mother. She would give me lots of good ideas when I met trouble during work. All of my family respect and love her.

An interesting point is that these zishu nü, and many others I interviewed, had experience of working with one or both of their parents when they were very young—often when only ten years old or even younger. In their comments, they

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4 Interview with Gao Ming, in the nursing house of Gongjilong Silk Factory, Foshan District, 21 December 2006.
5 Interview with Huang Qundi, in Bingyu Hall, Shatou Village, Shunde District, 16 December 2006.
showed their understanding and respect primarily for the parent with whom they worked most. From the stories above, we can see that Gao Ming always talked about her father and Huang Qundi focused on her mother’s work. They were witnesses of their parent’s hard work for their family and the respect that they earned by this hard work. Because of their own efforts to improve the economic situations of their families, following their parents’ example, these zishu nü daughters were true children to their father and mother, so that the parents in turn were proud of their daughters. This pride became one motivator which drove the zishu nü to work hard, to prove their filial piety and love of their parents. That’s why they often said that they had to work hard to maintain honour (zhengqi) their families, especially their parents.

Another interesting point is that most of my interviewees mentioned their good relationship with their father first, and talked about it more than their relationship with their mother. In their stories, the father is not the serious and strict head of the stereotypical elite Confucian family, but rather a source of support his beloved daughter. Huang Hekui put it this way:

My father spoiled me a lot. He never beat me or criticised me. When it was getting cold in winter, he always put my hands on his chest to warm them. He hoped that I would marry a good husband from a good family. He disagreed with my decision to become a zishu nü. He often said: ‘I only have you as a daughter. Even if I have only half a daughter (banbian nü), I would let her marry a good husband.’

The image of her father warming her hands on his chest during winter is very moving. It is easy to picture this father who loved and spoiled his daughter. Huang Hekui went to Singapore to live on her own as a zishu nü.

After I got to Singapore, I did not earn lots so I was afraid of going back home. In my thirteenth year there, I heard from someone from my village that my father was seriously sick, that he was staying in his bed and calling my name. I was very upset, and decided to go back home with my sixth aunt to visit him. My father was really happy when he saw

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6 However, most of interviewees worked with their father rather than their mother.
7 Interview with Huang Hekui, in Bingyu Hall, Shatou Village, Shunde District, 16 December 2006.
us, he talked with me for a long time, till one or two o’clock in the morning. I think my father must have been exhausted after such a long time talking. That’s why he passed away the next morning. He was only sixty-one years old then. After my father’s funeral, I stayed at home for whole year before I went back to Singapore.8

We can feel Huang Hekui’s sorrow in her narrative. The father she remembers is not only a master and leader of the whole family, but also a figure of love. He did not ignore her because she was a girl. Rather, he spoiled her and tried to satisfy his little daughter, and talked with her long into the night before he passed away. At the same time, as a daughter, Huang Hekui’s love for her father is displayed quite clearly in her narrative. For example, she felt shameful for not earning enough for her family—although the economic situation of her family was not so dire that she was forced to earn a great deal—and she so regretted not visiting her father more often during her working life that she stayed at home for one year after her father’s funeral. This strong emotional link was reiterated by many of my interviewees.

Culturally, they were not encouraged to open their heart to show this love. The revelation of their true feelings usually was only permitted when one of the parents of a zishu nü got sick or died. When Hu Daidi described her saddest day, she mentioned the difficult time she experienced when her mother died.

One day, I was cooking, cutting green vegetables. Suddenly, my finger was cut terribly. (She showed the scar to me.) I felt very upset then, it had never happened before. About five or six days later, I received my father’s letter, which told me about my mother’s death. I calculated the days; it must have been the day I cut my finger. I felt so sad that I could not sleep at all for long time. I cried every night. However, I could not ask for a holiday to go home—my master would fire me for that. I saw my mother’s tomb one year later when I came home the next time. Even now when I think about that, I feel terribly upset. I am sorry for my mum. At that time, I was about thirty years old. My father died when I was around forty-five years old. Because of my previous master’s immigration to Canada, I lost my previous job and was waiting for the next one when I received the letter which told me about my father’s serious disease. I went back home immediately to look after him. There was only me and one of my aunties who looked after him when he could only stay in bed, barely conscious. Other people had to go to their work. I had to clean him everyday, feed him some easy food and medicine, to help him go to toilet, and so on.

8 Ibid.
My aunty would help me with the feeding. Only I could only do some of the other work myself as his daughter. There had to be one person staying beside him every day as he could pass away at any time. I think I did everything I could do for my father as a good daughter. My father died three months later. I went back Hong Kong after his funeral.9

Because of this strong emotional link, a zishu nü’s parents usually had a strong influence on her decision making. When they pressured their daughter to do something, this pressure was mostly emotional. Huang Shunxing explained that she was stopped from going to Singapore because of her parents’ worrying.

My grandmother (mother’s mother) and uncle (mother’s brother) were both in Singapore, and asked me to go there too. However, my parents only had me as their daughter, and they did not want me to go overseas. They tried their best to stop me going there (si huo bu rang wo zou) and I was forced to give up on the idea.10

How did her parents force her to give up this idea? I did not meet Huang Shunxing again to seek this answer, but Huang Kairen, who had had a similar experience, told me about her parents’ behaviour. They were crying and they ‘criticized me for not being a filial daughter, and threatened that if I went away, they would commit suicide.’11 This half emotional and half moral threat was the most common way for Chinese parents to control their children once they became adults. Another aspect of this influence was apparent in the women’s decisions to become zishu nü. Still taking Shunxing as an example, her father supported her plan to become a zishu nü because he did not want his daughter to leave and go to another family.

When I was fifteen years old, my brother married. My sister-in-law was called Xiuqiong. Her brothers and sisters met me at the wedding. They told everyone afterwards that: “Xiuqiong’s sister-in-law [Shunxing] is really pretty.” A lot of marriage-matchers went to my family when they knew that, but they were refused by my father. My father said: ‘my daughter will not get married.’ From childhood to adulthood, I was never scolded, or even shouted at, by my father.12

9 Interview with Hu Daidi in her house, Zhaipu Village, Shunde District, December 14th, 2006.
10 Interview with Huang Shunxing, in Bingyu Hall, Shatou Village, Shunde District, 15 December 2006.
11 Interview with Huang Kairen, place, date.
12 Interview with Huang Shunxing.
In an attempt to pursue some of economic security in her retirement, a zishu nü’s parents, especially her father, would leave some inheritance to her or at least ask their other children, usually the zishu nü’s brothers rather than her sisters, to look after her when she returned to her home-village. For instance, Hekui’s father left her a small house; Qundi’s father left her a house and some money; Daidi’s father asked Liangsong, his youngest son, to look after Daidi if she wanted to come back. When Gao Ming’s father died, her family was still very poor and depended on Gao Ming’s income economically. Because her father could not leave any inheritance to Gao Ming, in his will, he asked his son to serve and respect Gao Ming as a member of the older generation rather than as a sister.

From these stories, we can see that there are three aspects to a zishu nü’s emotional link with their parents: mutual respect, mutual love, and a great influence of the parents on their daughter’s decision making. This pressure, notwithstanding, these narratives showed a real and warm picture of a parent-child relationship in traditional China, rather than the cold and strict elite family of common understanding. This warmth existed between siblings as well. Most of my interviewees pointed out that their siblings, especially their brothers, treated them very well, and tried their best to take care of them and protect them (zhao gu wo, hu zhe wo), economically as well as emotionally.

Here is Huang Hekui again, about her brother.

My second elder brother treated me very well. If it was not for him always asking me to come back home in his letters, I would not have come back so early. Two years after I came home, my brother passed away. The house I am living in now is a gift from my brother, which was built by him. When he was about to build it, I sent home some money for the construction. After he passed away, I sorted his possessions and found that he kept all the letters I sent to him from Singapore. He had also dated the receipt and reply on the envelopes. His handwriting is beautiful. Because he had more than ten years of private school study, he was good at Chinese writing. Nowadays, when I reread these letters in my free time, I have lots of beautiful memories.13

13 Interview with Huang Hekui, in Bingyu Hall, Shatou Village, Shunde District, 16 December 2006.
Writing letters was always a good way to maintain contact with family members, especially for zishu nü who worked somewhere far away from home. During the era before telephones, letters were almost the only way they could communicate with their families and find the motivation to continue their work and their difficult, lonely lives in a strange place. Hu Daidi’s experience when she worked in Hong Kong provides a good example:

I wrote letters home quite often. Actually, I could not write myself so I always paid a man who made a living by writing letters for other people. The man lived two districts away from my master’s house and I had to take the bus to go to his place every time. I told him what I wanted to tell my family, which were always good things, in order to stop them from worrying about me; in Chinese, this is called ‘tell good things but not bad things’ (bao xi bu bao you). Likewise, when my family in my home village contacted me, they did the same thing. Consequently, all the letters are similar to each other, ‘everything is fine here, do not worry about me, you have to take care of yourself...’ However, we still wrote to each other quite often, and I wrote especially to my youngest brother Liangsong. I missed my family so much that when I talked to the man who wrote for me, I cried almost every time, and asked him not to write about that to my family. Although I could not write myself, I could read. Every time I received letters from home, I read them again and again before sleeping. I would have better and sweeter dreams the day I received a letter. When I felt lonely or met some difficulties, I would read them too. Almost every letter was read ten times.

Daidi continues to preserve most of the letters from her family, especially the ones from Liangsong, her youngest brother. She said that he is her favourite sibling, and mused that this may be because he is the youngest. She had a box of letters and showed me some of them (see Figures 5.2 and 5.3). These letters were folded neatly and packed in chronological order. I was surprised and moved by her collection. However, when I told my other interviewees about this situation, they laughed and told me that almost every zishu nü who worked outside her village did the same. Some of them had more than five hundred letters, and all treasured them.

14 Liangsong is the brother who is now living with Daidi.
15 Interview with Hu Daidi in her house, Zhaipu Village, Shunde District, 14 December 2006.
Another important link between a zishu nü and her siblings, especially her brothers, was the financial and material aid they gave to each other. When a zishu nü was young and earning money, she would contribute most of it to the family, and her siblings were the main benefactors of these contributions. When she got older and returned home without money, it was expected that her siblings would support her. In Huang Shunxing’s story, it was like this:

My elder brother spent three thousand yuan to buy some timber, another one thousand yuan to make this timber into coffins; one for himself, the other one for me. My elder brother was really nice to me. The house at the corner of this street was built by my nephew (elder brother’s son). After my elder brother’s death, I moved in there. One night, that house was robbed by a thief and a bag of my clothes was stolen. My nephew thought it was not safe for me to stay there alone, and arranged for me to move into my grand-nephew’s house. So I only did cooking and rested in the old house at the corner of the street. My parents left me the old family house as a place to live when I was old. Now that I do not need it, I rent it out. At first, there was a contract in my family that my brothers were responsible for all my hospital fees and funeral fees. It was be my youngest brother who was responsible for my day-to-day needs, which consisted of one hundred yuan for me per month. However, my youngest brother has three sons and five daughters and his life is already difficult enough. He only paid me this allowance for one month, then my elder brother asked me to live with him; he took charge of my living expenses. So my youngest brother did not need to support me anymore.16

16 Interview with Huang Shunxing, in Bingyu Hall, Shatou Village, Shunde District, 15 December 2006.
We can see that Shunxing’s brothers fulfilled their obligations, in a loving way, to help her when she was old. They arranged everything according to the economic circumstances of the individuals involved. Moreover, they understood each other and shared their obligation together. Huang Hekui described a similar situation in her narrative:

My siblings are all very nice to me. My full sister married a Hong Kong man and my full brother also went to Hong Kong with his wife. My step-sister married into another village, not too far from mine. My two step-brothers stayed in this village. Every time when I went back to my village, they both asked me to stay with them, to enjoy my twilight years there. Although we six siblings have different mothers, we still have very good relationships. When my step-siblings were young, it was me who helped my step-mother to bring them up.\(^{17}\)

Although family members sometimes live far away from each other, they still contacted and visited one another quite often. This kind of family relationship is an ideal one in Han culture, and it was practiced by these ordinary people. Liangsong said to his sister: ‘Whenever you have a problem you can come back to my house, which is your house too. I promise you that if there is only one bowl of porridge here, you will have half of it.’\(^ {18}\) According to Liangsong, it was his duty to serve his sister as she had made such large sacrifices for her family when she was young. Obviously, Daidi appreciates his attitude and enjoys this relationship very much.

In addition to these emotional and economic links, it was sometimes necessary for a zishu nü to play the role of a housekeeper in her brother’s family. For example, Gao Ying’s second sister-in-law died around 1952, leaving a baby only two months old. As a man, Gao Ying’s brother did not know how to take care of this little baby. Realising the situation, Gao Ying took the baby home. However, she could not stay in the dormitory of the factory with the baby so she had to rent another apartment outside. At that time, she worked in the silk factory with a low income, which was not enough to feed the baby, feed herself and pay the rent at same time. Consequently,

\(^ {17}\) Interview with Huang Hekui, in Bingyu Hall, Shatou Village, Shunde District, 16 December 2006.
\(^ {18}\) Interview with Hu Liangsong, Zhaipu Village, Shunde District, 14, December, 2006.
she was forced to find several other part-time jobs, such as sewing and working in construction sites, which were paid on a day by day basis. Meanwhile, she kept visiting her brother regularly, almost once a week, in order to clean his house for him. She persisted with this kind of life for more than seven years until her nephew was seven years old, and was old enough to go to primary school. When talking about the reason she was did all these things for her brother, she said:

I am his elder sister. If I did not do it for him, who would do it? He was, a widower, how would he know how to take care of kids! He even needs a woman to look after him! It is not right to leave a baby in a house without a woman. He was not rich enough to remarry then. It is my nephew, my family; of course I should and loved to do my duty.19

Certainly there were conflicts, arguments and even fights between family members, including zishu nü and their parents or siblings. But it would very unusual for them to tell other people. Both the zishu nü and their families would regard these conflicts as the ‘shame of the family’ (jiachou) and would not tell others readily (jiachou buke waiyang). Hu Daidi is the interviewee with whom I have maintained contact longest since my pilot research, and we had a very good relationship and level of communication. I found some hints in the letters she showed me about an argument that happened around 1985 between her and her sister who married in Hong Kong. When I asked her about the argument, she felt a little embarrassed at first. Later, she explained to me that there had been a difference of opinion about how to deal with a particular economic dilemma faced by her family at the time, but she refused to tell me the details. ‘Nothing important,’ she said, ‘tongue and teeth will fight with each other sometimes. Which family does not have any arguments? That is not important.’20

One interesting point in their narratives was that almost all of my interviewees emphasized their relationships with male family members, such as their fathers or brothers, but spoke less about or even ignored the female members, such as

19 Interview with Gao Ying, in the nursing house of Gongjilong Silk Factory, Foshan District, 22 December 2006.
20 Interview with Hu Daidi.
their mothers or sisters. Yet they did have close links with their female family members as well. However, while they would not talk about it initially when I did ask specific questions about their female relatives, their answers were positive. For instance, Daidi told me that she saw her sisters in the same way as her brothers. One of her younger sisters, who was only two years younger, followed her to Hong Kong after several years, by which time Daidi had a better job than her original one. She introduced her younger sister to some rich families as a maid. This sister met a man who she liked when she was around twenty-five, and she got married one year later. Daidi was quite happy for them and helped to arrange the wedding as a senior member of her sister’s natal family. In other words, she played the role of eldest sister or even mother with respect to her sister’s wedding’s arrangements. As Daidi herself emphasized, she and this sister in Hong Kong would take care of each other, since they were the only members of their family living in the city away from home. When Daidi was in her seventies and too sick she had to stay in the Marie Hospital in Hong Kong for two years. It was this sister who took care of her. ‘But she got married,’ Daidi said, ‘she could not focus only on me, as she had to take care of her own family with her husband and kids and her in-law family. It was difficult for her. That was one of the reasons why I decided to come back to live with Liangsong (her youngest brother) when I left the hospital.’

This initial focus on the attitude of fathers and brothers may indicate that the zishu nü still regarded the male members of the family as the primary and superior group. As the power in a patriarchal family, the love and protection of these men gave approval for a zishu nü’s existence and role in the family, and legitimized her status. Further, as male members in the lineage, they were usually the ones to receive the most direct benefit from a zishu nü’s economic contribution to her family. It would be noted too, that most zishu nü accepted or even supported women’s sacrifice for the sake of men in the home; an example is the dedication of Gao Ming to her brother.

21 Ibid.
and nephew. Another example is Huang Yanpei’s ceremony to declare her status as a zishu nü in Shaotou.

When I was around 20 years old, my aunt (father’s sister, who was also a zishu nü) decided to hold the ceremony for me, as my brother was getting to the marriage age. If I had not held the ceremony before his wedding, our family would be laughed at by local people. On that day, I asked a favour of another zishu nü in my village; on a vacant field besides my house, she re-combed my hair into a bun, and I knelt to the local God at the entrance of our village. That was the entire ceremony, there was no new dress, and of course no banquet either. We saved the money in order to hold the wedding ceremony for my brother. Not much later, my father remarried. One or two years later, my younger brother held his wedding.22

Although Huang Yanpei regretted her simple ceremony and from what she said I could sense her grievance about this unfair situation, she still felt proud that she did all of these things for her father and brother. She did not show her dissatisfaction or complain; rather, she chose to be ‘silent’ about her inferior status to the men in her family.

Generally speaking, I found that in a zishu nü’s family, in her own generation, if we do not count her sisters who got married, the zishu nü’s status was often lower than her brother, but higher than her sister-in-law, her brother’s wife. This situation suited her identity and position as an adult daughter to her natal family. Generally speaking, there were three different kinds of relationships between a zishu nü and her sisters-in-law articulated by my interviewees in their narratives. In the first type of relationship, a zishu nü controlled the household instead of her sisters-in-law, who were also under her control. This situation often occurred in families with the tradition of having a zishu nü in every generation. Huang Hekui’s family followed this pattern. Here is the story, from Hekui’s perspective, of her mother’s life under the control of her zishu nü aunts:

My mother had three sisters and one brother. It is said that it was my aunts who went to my mother’s home to arrange this marriage of my parents. They liked my mother when

22 Interview with Huang Yanpei, in Bingyu Hall, Shatou Village, Shunde District, 13 December 2006.
they first saw her. Then my mother became my father’s wife. . . . When my mother worked in my father’s family, she had to follow my aunts’ instructions and their moods (kan guma men de lianse zuo ren). She liked to smoke, but never did it in front of my aunts. Every time she wanted to smoke, she hid herself in a room, quickly smoked a little, and then went back outside to work.  

Those zishu nü in the position of Huang Hekui’s aunts were called ‘aunts or daughters who control the household’ (bajia gupo) in the local area. As a daughter—a woman who has a biological link with the family—she was trusted by her parents and brothers much more readily than a daughter-in-law. In addition to making her contribution towards the survival and development of the lineage, such zishu nü were set, by the elder generation and her brothers, in the position of controlling the household, which should otherwise would normally have been her sister-in-law. These zishu nü were supposed to be fair to all their brothers, and were treated as a link that tied the big joint family together. However, a zishu nü usually viewed her sister-in-law as a competitor, consciously or unconsciously, and pressed and controlled her even more than the mother-in-law had done. Moreover, these zishu nü often had very strong personalities.

The second situation was the more common one among my interviewees. Zishu nü usually went outside the village for work and spent long periods of time away from home. They would treat their biological family members as family, but would not extend this consideration to their sisters-in-law. In the mind of the absent zishu nü, her sister-in-law was attached to her brother. In this circumstance, the zishu nü would not try to control the family household during her working life, and when she came back in her retirement, her brothers would have already divided the family property and organized their own joint families with their wives and children. As a sibling, she could and should enjoy their respect and financial aid, but she had lost her chance to control her sisters-in-law; instead, she had to ask the permission of her sister-in-law to stay in her brother’s house. Given this situation, she would tell herself

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23 Interview with Huang Hekui, in Bingyu Hall, Shatou Village, Shunde District, 16 December 2006.
that she was staying in her brother's house, and would remain distant from her sister-in-law. Because of their age and/or their belief in Buddhism, zishu nü would usually try to stay away from the power struggle in the household. Hu Daidi, Gao Ming, and Xing Gu were all good examples of this type. On the other hand, most zishu nü in this situation were the eldest daughter and child in their generation, and so the sister-in-law, as a younger person, was supposed to serve and respect her. Generally speaking, their relationships were distant and polite. To put it in their own words, 'water in the well does not offend the water in the river' (jinshui bufan heshui).

The third kind of situation, in which zishu nü and her sister-in-law had a very good relationship, was very unusual. However, this did occur occasionally and sometimes their relationship was even better than that of real sisters. It mainly happened when the sister-in-law was much older than the zishu nü. She might then take on the role of an elder sister-in-law (saozi) and the responsibility of a mother to her sister-in-law. Another possibility was that before she married this zishu nü's brother, the girls were already good friends. Nevertheless, according to my fieldwork this kind of situation was very unusual.

Compared to the relationship between a zishu nü and her parents, or between a zishu nü and the people of her own generation, including her siblings and sisters-in-law, the relationships between these women and the younger generation was much simpler. A zishu nü's dedication to her family was repaid by the filial piety of the next generation of her family, her nephews and nieces; especially after her parents and other people in her generation had died, it was the responsibility of the subsequent generations to serve and look after this 'aunty' or 'grand-aunty'. Here are some stories from my interviewees.

(1) From Huang Hekui:

Now that I do not have any income, I mainly rely on my nephews. My nephews are all businessmen, and are quite rich. One of them who lives in Daliang now sends me money regularly, enough for me to live here. Because I am a vegetarian, I do not want to eat with
my nephews. Every night, my youngest niece comes here to stay with me to sleep. She is a grade two student in senior high school now, and will be a university student soon. I have no idea where she will stay afterwards. Every festival, my nephew will ask me to come for dinner, and cook special vegetarian food for me.\(^\text{24}\)

(2) From Huang Shunxing:

I was born in this village, and I have lived here all of my life. The farthest place I went to is Macau. I have been there three times already and I have three grand-nieces living there. It was they who asked me to go there, picked me up from home and paid all the costs of my travel there. They are very nice to me. Every time when they come back here, they give me some money and necessities. All of my clothes now are gifts from them. They are all my elder brother’s granddaughters. My grand-nephews and grand-nieces in Hong Kong or Macao always give me lots of money for my life and my entertainment. I do not need to buy any dresses myself—they buy all of them for me. I asked them to not buy so many, as I have not had a chance to wear some of them. But they never obeyed.\(^\text{25}\)

(3) From Gao Ying:

Those seven years were not a waste. My nephew is a very smart boy and he now works in the government. He treats me as his real mother. At every festival he takes me up to his house, cooks for me and buys me new dresses. His family calls me every week, telling me about their lives. I never feel lonely because of their attention.\(^\text{26}\)

These interviewees were happy not only because their descendants were filial, but also because the number of descendents was high. Shunxing counted hers like this:

My elder brother and two of my younger brothers have died. Now, in my generation, only I and one of my younger brothers are still alive. I have fourteen nephews, twenty-one grand-nephews, twenty-three grand-nieces and nine great-grand-nephews.\(^\text{27}\)

Shunxing was very proud when she said this. She thinks that it means that her family has become better and better and that her contribution to the family was worthwhile.

\(^{24}\) Interview with Huang Hekui, in Bingyu Hall, Shatou Village, Shunde District, 16 December 2006.

\(^{25}\) Actually, Shunxing was very happy when she said that. It means that all of her grand-nephews and grand-nieces are very nice to her, very filial. Interview with Huang Shunxing, in Bingyu Hall, Shatou Village, Shunde District, 15 December 2006.

\(^{26}\) Interview with Gao Ying, in the nursing house of Gongjialong Silk Factory, Foshan District, 22 December 2006

\(^{27}\) Interview with Huang Shunxing, in Bingyu Hall, Shatou Village, Shunde District, December 15\textsuperscript{th}, 2006.
The same kind of smile appeared on Gao Ying’s face when told me that she was going to have her second great-grand-nephew in three months time.

These nephews and nieces and other members of the younger generations were educated by their parents, especially their fathers, to show filial piety to their aunts, who as zishu nü had contributed to their families. For example, Hu Liangsong asked his son and daughter to write to Daidi regularly when they were studying writing in their primary school (see Figure 5.3). One of the important items in their letters was to report on their study. Another example is Guo Yong who is looking after his ninety year old zishu nü aunt, partly because his father specifically asked in his will that he do this duty. These younger generations were told that these aunts were the seniors in their family and lineage, who deserved to be respected.

In conclusion, the zishu nü contributed their energy, time, emotion and money to their natal family, thereby earning the respect and support of other family members. Of course, there was some conflict between them—mostly between a zishu nü and the family members of her generation, her siblings—but given a chance they will tell anyone that they are a good family. However, this understanding of family in the minds of most zishu nü did not include their sisters-in-law, although most would choose to keep peace between them, especially in the period when my interviewees practiced the custom. Thus, one of the most important aspects of a zishu nü’s identity was her link to her natal family, and her status and role in the family as an adult daughter. Another link that was important in her life was her relationships with other zishu nü as part of a sisterhood.

Sisterhood

Besides the relationship with other family members, another important interpersonal relationship for zishu nü was their relationship with each other, which was a form of sisterhood. This sisterhood was another agency through which zishu nü could seek support. In this section, I will examine three aspects of this sisterhood or friendship.
First, I will examine the network that the zishu nü built amongst themselves to support their work and economic conditions. Second, I will look at the emotional links among zishu nü. Finally, I will take the Zhaoqing zishu nü sisterhood as an example to explore the difference between the meaning of sisterhood and the meaning of family for a zishu nü.

As described in previous chapters, there were different economic patterns in different districts of the zishu nü area, and zishu nü from these districts were concentrated in different occupations. For example, most of the Shunde zishu nü were domestic servants in Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia or other parts of Southeast Asia; zishu nü from Nanhai chose to work in sericulture; Zhaoqing zishu nü made a living by making straw mats; and Dongguan zishu nü were farmers or maids overseas. The formation of a zishu nü interpersonal network was influenced by the demands of these different industries, but once established, there was a reverse influence of this network on the industries themselves. This relationship is particularly visible in the process of employment. First, when a woman was looking for a job, she would choose job that was offered by the local industry, because her network with other people, especially other zishu nü, could help her to find a position in that industry much more easily than in other fields. When she became a worker in that industry she would help her family, zishu nü sisters and other friends who were hunting for jobs, just as other people had helped her.

For instance, Hu Daidi went to Hong Kong when she was seventeen years old, following a same-surname aunt who was zishu nü and who also worked in Hong Kong. She found her first position as a maid with the assistance of this aunt—the master was a good family friend of the master her aunt was serving. She served in that family for two years until her masters migrated to America. Before they left they introduced Hu Daidi to a friend, in whose house Daidi served for another five years. Daidi’s second master was very satisfied by Daidi’s work and trusted her. In her second year in this job, Daidi’s female master asked her to find a girl as trustworthy as Daidi
from her home village for another friend who needed a maid. Daidi introduced one of her closest zishu nü friends to them, and in the process became the guarantor of this friend’s work, just as her aunt had been for her. According to Hu Daidi and the other interviewees in Shunde, a family who wanted domestic service preferred to use this kind of network between friends to find a good maid, rather than seek help from the labour market. The former way was more effective, quicker, and most importantly, the family could be more certain about the maid’s morals and ability. At the same time, the Shunde zishu nü who were working in the domestic service industry used this reputation to offer their friends the opportunity to have a good job in the industry. Gao Ming’s experience in Hong Kong sheds light on another aspect of this situation. Gao Ming is from Nanhai. Her father heard that there was a huge labour market for women to serve rich families as maids, so he took ten year old Gao Ming to Hong Kong with the hope of finding a job for her. However, there was no chance for them because this market was already occupied by the Shunde zishu nü. Nobody wanted to introduce Gao Ming, who was from Nanhai, to a potential employer. One year later, Gao Ming had to come home from Hong Kong with her father.28

As a girl born and raised in Nanhai, Gao Ming’s best work opportunity was in sericulture, which was the supportive industry in the local area. As soon as she got back home, she went to Foshan with her friends, hoping to get a job in the Gongjilong Silk Factory, which was one of the biggest silk factories in the whole Guangdong area. This time, Gao Ming and her friends found three zishu nü who were from their village, and were introduced to the recruiting officer of the factory. The next day, they all got an offer of work there. According to Gao Ming and Gao Chun, more than four fifths of the female workers in the factory were from Nanhai district, which made it very easy for women from Nanhai to find a job using the support network built by these zishu nü. In

28 Gao Ming’s age should not have been a problem to her job hunting. Although Hu Daidi went to Hong Kong when she was already seventeen, most Shunde girls went to work in domestic service industry when they were ten or eleven. Some of them were only nine years old. Young girls would be in charge of some easier housework, such as washing and cleaning, rather than complex work such as arranging dinner which was a butler’s task. After three to five years doing simple house work, these maids would rise in status in her master’s family—perhaps even as high as butler. For more detail see Chapter 4.
contrast, the proportion of workers from other areas was very small, even from districts that were also famous for their sericulture development such as Sanshui and Shunde. We see that modern sericulture in the Foshan area was dominated by the Nanhai zishu nü in a way very similar to the domination by those from Shunde of the domestic service industry in Southeast Asia. In addition to the Shunde and Nanhai districts, the relationship between the zishu nü network and local industry was similar in Zhaoqing, Dongguan, Zhongshan and Panyu.

Second, regardless of whether it was domestic service or sericulture, the industry most zishu nü were involved in required them to stay for a long time in cities or places away from their home villages. Therefore the zishu nü used their network to gather into a society those people, especially zishu nü, whose home was in the same area. Members of this society helped each other, economically and spiritually, and shared the same customs and moral values of their hometown. There were three main functions of this society: to support each other with friendship in order to counter the depression caused by loneliness, to help zishu nü waiting for new jobs, and to watch over each other as in their home village in order to maintain the moral principles practiced in their hometown. The first function could be categorized as part of the emotional link between individual zishu nü, and I will examine it later. But now, I will consider the other two functions served by this kind of sisterhood society.

The zishu nü society was a social community organized in terms of sisterhood. There was usually a fixed location for society activities, and several officers who served as a council in charge of the society’s daily affairs, who were elected by the members in the society. Members contribute a sum of money as an annual fee to keep the society running. There was not necessarily only one zishu nü society in a given city. Usually, every village or district with sufficient numbers of workers in the city,

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29 In relation to annual fees, different zishu nü societies had different rules. Some of them asked every member who had job to give a certain amount in annual fees, such as one Panyu zishu nü society in Hong Kong; some of them requested members to donate as much money as they were able, such as one Shunde zishu nü society in Singapore. Generally speaking, the amount of money one zishu nü contributed to the society determined the status, respect and emergency help she could get from the society. At the same time, people who only used the resources of the society without making any contribution would be criticized by others, which was a source of shame could cause trouble in the future.
would have its own zishu nü society. For instance, Shatou village in Jun’an had its own zishu nü society with more than two hundred members in Singapore in the 1930s, while there were not too many Dongguan zishu nü in Singapore at that time, and there was a zishu nü society for about one hundred women from all over the Dongguan district. Theoretically, every zishu nü from the same home area could join in the society directly. Actually, when a zishu nü decided to go to another city for work, she had to have at least one relative or friend who had been working there for a while. Therefore a new member joining the society was usually introduced by an old member. This ensured the safety and stability of the membership. One of the most important and practical functions of a zishu nü society, especially overseas, was helping out zishu nü members in need, especially with regard to their careers. Financial aid and temporary accommodation were offered by the society to unemployed zishu nü, and the society also provided the service of calling members to notify them of new job opportunities and introduce them to recruiters. Financial aid mainly involved regular loans made to unemployed zishu nü at very low interest in order to reduce the financial burden on these women, and to give them enough time to look for a good job. Temporary accommodation meant that unemployed zishu nü could stay in short-term accommodation offered by the office, without paying, until they found a new job.

Chaoshun Hall in Singapore was one of the zishu nü societies for Shatou village zishu nü working in Singapore (Figure 5.4). Huang Aiqun described its running:

Chaoshun Hall in Singapore is our second home. We zishu nü sisters do not have many chances to meet during the whole year, so that if there was a party in Chaoshun Hall, every one of us would try her best to make it. We would first decide a date together, then go and ask for a holiday from our masters separately. Unless there was something special happening, the masters would agree with it. Chaoshun Hall used to be the house of a rich family. Its owner had been too poor to maintain it. With one of our friends as the mediator, all the zishu nü in our sisterhood paid part of the cost. From then on, it became

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30 When zishu nü had a job, accommodation was always offered by their boss, no matter whether it was domestic service or sericulture. Some other occupations, such as dajinjie and hairdressers, usually ran their own businesses and could pay for their accommodation themselves.
the place for zishu nü to have a party or discuss some urgent things....Several years later, the zishu nü working in Singapore went back to their home villages for their retirement. After a discussion, we sold Chaoshun Hall. Every one who paid annual fees each year got her share of the money, around several thousand yuan.31

Figure 5.4. Sisterhood in Chaoshun Hall in Singapore, 1947. Source: Shunde Women’s Federation, Shunde zishu nü, n.p., 2006. p. 19.

As we can see, the zishu nü helped each other during their working lives by organizing their own society and network when they were away from their home village and their families. At the same time, the emotional link between them, which was their friendship or sisterhood, supported them mentally and emotionally during their life far away from home. This is different from modern women who emphasize their independence and their identity as individuals and work for themselves. Zishu nü worked mainly for the well-being of their natal families. A zishu nü’s identity was as daughter to her family and her efforts were directed towards her family’s survival, well-being and development. In this aspect, zishu nü relied emotionally on their families. When they were forced to leave their home village for their jobs—my interviewees used the word beijinlixiang in Chinese when they talk about it, which means ‘leave their native place’, indicating that they had no alternative, and most of them thought of this relocation as an important part of their contribution to the family.

31 Interview with Huang Aiqun, in Bingyu Hall, Shatou Village, Shunde District, 16 December 2006.
These zishu nü felt extremely lonely and without help. Hu Daidi’s experience is a good example:

When I first arrived in Hong Kong, got a job as a maid and started living with my master’s family, I missed my family a lot. I cried almost every night before I went to bed, worrying about my parents’ health and my siblings’ well-being.32

Similarly, when Gao Ying went to Vietnam she was thirteen years old; she spent all her free time with her aunt and cousin, talking about how much they missed their family and worrying about them. Only then, she would not feel lonely and had a vivid sense of her sacrifice to in leaving home.

In this situation, the friendship and sisterhood among zishu nü came to be valued and relied upon by all zishu nü, and helped them to endure their long working periods in a distant land. The society established a cultural and interpersonal environment similar to their hometown community, and it reduced a zishu nü’s panic at the unfamiliarity of the working city’s culture; the society became a second home. The Shunde zishu nü in Singapore and Hong Kong usually went to the opera and shopping together after a long work period. The Nanhai zishu nü in Foshan sometimes organized work and rest periods in turns amongst themselves in order to reduce the pressure of the work. The Panyu zishu nü in Guangdong city and Shunde zishu nü in Singapore organized a party on the ‘Seventh of July’ (qiqiaojie) every year for group sisters and their friends (see

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32 Interview with Hu Daidi in her house, Zhaipu Village, Shunde District, 14, December, 2006.
Besides sisterhood and friendship in a group, zishu nü had private friendships involving only one or two women. Because they did not have children or other family members to look after them when they met difficulties or got sick, these private friendships became an important source of warmth that they treasured. I heard lots of moving stories about such relationships. Liang Junhang and Zhao Huiming in Zhaoqing were very close friends. In June 2006 when she was seventy-eight years old, Liang Junhang was very sick and confined to her bed. There was nothing that a hospital could really do for her, so she insisted on staying at home in order to save money. Of course, for the same reason, she refused to hire a nurse. As a zishu nü in Zhaoqing, she had been sent to the Goddess of Mercy Hall by her natal family when she was two years old. She was her adopted mother’s only adopted daughter, which meant that she had no adopted sisters to look after her, and she had no adopted daughters herself. Liang Junhang’s closest friend, Zhao Huiming, was already seventy-five years old. She understood Liang Junhang’s decision, and considered it her own responsibility to look after her. Every night, Zhao Huiming helped Liang Junhang to have a bath before bed, and then slept on a bamboo bed besides her rather than going back to her home, which was only ten meters away from Liang’s house—Zhao was worried about Liang’s needs during the night. Every morning, Zhao got up half an hour earlier than Liang to make her breakfast, and then stayed there all day to talk to her and make her food. Cleaning Liang’s house became Zhao’s adopted daughter’s job. Other zishu nü who belonged to the Goddess of Mercy Hall went to visit Liang almost every day, but only as normal friends, chatting with Liang and Zhao. Zhao looked after Liang for five months until Liang passed away in October. When I went to Zhaoqing in January, 2007, Liang’s house was locked. I heard this story from the other zishu nü there and some social workers who helped to look after these women. When other people mentioned Liang’s

33 For a detailed description of these activities, please see Chapter 4.
name or her story in front of Zhao, she always just waved her hands with sorrow in her eyes. Her adopted daughter told me that Zhao was very upset every time she heard Liang’s name.

There is a similar story about Gao Ming and Gao Ying in Foshan, which I witnessed first-hand. Gao Ming and Gao Ying were both from Nanhai, but not from the same village; Gao is a common surname in the local area. Gao Ming and Gao Ying met each other in the factory when they both worked there. Gao Ying, who was the quieter and softer of the pair, is one year older than Gao Ming, who seems more outgoing and has a stronger personality. Since Gao Ying is also physically smaller than Gao Ming, she looks like Gao Ming’s younger sister. They are best friends and now both live in the nursing home opened by the factory. In this nursing home, the rooms are occupied by pairs of single women, usually zishu nü, and there is a different floor for men. Gao Ming and Gao Ying do not share a room but they do live next door to one another; they said that the room arrangement was planned by the factory, and although they want to live together they do not want to make trouble for the leaders and other women in the house. However, they do almost everything else together. In another zishu nü’s words, they ‘go into the room together and walk out together’ (tongjin tongchu). Every morning, they both get up at around half past five, do some simple stretching exercises together, and eat breakfast together. In the afternoon, they go for a walk around the nursing house if it is sunny, or play majiang with the other old ladies. Before I finished my interviews in that nursing house, I went to say ‘goodbye’ to Ming and Ying, and found that they were having lunch together in Ming’s room. Ming was complaining that Ying was too skinny, and that she had to have some more to eat and take better care of herself.

Ming and Ying said that they became best friends in the 1950s when they were promoted as heads of their own work groups. When the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) began to manage the factory in 1951, the working conditions

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34 About Gao Ming and Gao Ying’s different personalities, please see Chapter 3.
changed significantly. The workers got their own dormitory and no longer had to work as hard, and had a stable income every month. From that time the zishu nü in the factory began to have free time and energy to develop their friendships with each other. On the other hand, the leaders of the factory advised the zishu nü in the factory to get married, and made an effort to create opportunities for them to meet men, including balls and parties. Consequently, many zishu nü in the Gongjilong silk factory changed their minds and got married, and the population of zishu nü in the factory reduced to one third of what it had been. The remaining zishu nü who insisted that they would not want to get married became closer to one another, and this was true in particular of Ming and Ying. Ying’s sister-in-law died in 1952. As the only woman in the family, Ying had to look after her brother and her new-born nephew. Ming helped her to rent a room close to the factory in order to combine her work with babysitting. Further, Ming sometimes helped with Ying’s work in order to give her more time to look after the child. When Ying reached retirement age, her nephew mentioned that he would love for Ying to live with them, but she refused and chose to go into in the nursing home, partly because she thought that retired life with Ming and her other zishu nü friends would be more interesting and less lonely than life with the younger generation. Ming said that Ying had a bad fate, that she had contributed all of her youth and life to the well-being of her family. Ying thinks that Ming is a tough woman who controlled her own destiny.

Friendship or sisterhood among zishu nü, such as the relationship between Liang and Zhao, Ming and Ying, was not rare in my fieldwork. These relationships raise a question: is this merely friendship and sisterhood, or is it lesbianism? Many researchers have tried to find the answer. Stockard did not answer this question directly, but did not find evidence to establish that the women were lesbian. She found that ‘sex’ was an offensive topic for Chinese women of the zishu nü’s age.\(^{35}\) Nobody wanted to talk about it. Some Chinese scholars have found clues pointing in this direction in written material and in the opinion of people in the local communities,

suggested that there were many lesbians among the zishu nü.\textsuperscript{36} My field interviews lead me to a position similar to Stockard’s: it appears that there were lesbians among the zishu nü; but there is no evidence that the proportion of lesbians among the zishu nü was higher than in the female population generally.

This conclusion is based on the answers and accounts of my interviewees. When I asked a zishu nü in Zhaoqing: ‘Do you have some friends, one or two, who are very close to you and with whom your relationship was better than with your other normal friends? I hope I can hear some stories about your friendship,’ I was truly referring to ‘friendship’ only. But my interviewee misunderstood me. She said:

I do not have ‘friends’ like that! I know some journalists or books\textsuperscript{37} said there was something\textsuperscript{38} like that (naxieshier) between zishu nü. I will not say it never happened, but it is very very rare. All my life, I only knew about two or three couples like that. But I knew hundreds of zishu nü. Most of us were pure and clean (qingqingbaibai) women. We were friends and sisters, and only friends and sisters, to each other. Those dirty things were people’s imagination! They do not know us; they love to talk about these scandals. You should not believe them,\textsuperscript{39} ‘do not let one rat’s dropping destroy the whole pot of congee.’ (mo rang yike laoshushi huai le yiguo zhou).\textsuperscript{40}

This answer was totally beyond my expectation. Immediately, I realized that she had mistaken my word ‘friends’ for ‘lesbian couple’. However, it offered me a good chance to explore the attitude of zishu nü towards lesbianism. I asked similar questions of other zishu nü in Shunde, Dongguan, Nanhai and Zhaoqing, and got similar answers to the one given above. Other observations have led me, I agree with what my interviewees told me. There are two main reasons for this, which I will now examine.

The strongest reason was these women’s attitude towards ‘sex’. As discussed in Chapter 3, zishu nü understand ‘sex’, or any sexual behaviour, as a ‘dirty thing’, a sufferance, no matter with whom, or whether it is man to woman, man to man or

\textsuperscript{37} She meant fictions here.
\textsuperscript{38} When she said ‘something’, she said it in an emphatic tone, wrinkling her eyebrows, and showing her distaste towards it.
\textsuperscript{39} ‘Them’ here means ‘some journalists and books’.
\textsuperscript{40} Interview with Zhao Huiming, Zhaoqing, 29, December, 2006.
woman to woman. Objectionable behaviors included hugging, kissing, touching and having intercourse. No matter how close two women were, they would not engage in such behavior. Their care and love for each other was spiritual and emotional, but not physical. Moreover, zishu nü valued their friendship and sisterhood, and they would not allow this ‘dirty’ concept to pollute their pure emotional links. As my interviewee said, those zishu nü involved in ‘scandals’ were ‘dirty women’ who were not good zishu nü; they were the ‘rat’s dropping’. This viewpoint agrees with the local community’s ideas about ‘chastity’ and ‘dirty sex’. Some lesbian couples, according to my interviewees, felt it was a dirty thing themselves, and never declared their identity as lesbians, in order to avoid criticism and isolation from other zishu nü. Good friends such as Gao Ming and Gao Ying spent lots of time together after their retirement, when they were sixty years old. Young or middle-aged zishu nü would keep a certain physical distance from each other in order to avoid a misunderstanding.

The second reason concerns working conditions: it would have been very difficult to initiate and maintain a lesbian relationship under the demands of their work. Taking domestic service and sericulture as examples, a zishu nü who was a maid or butler had to live in her master’s house with her master’s family. Holidays during the year usually totalled less than ten days, which meant that even best friends could meet for at most only ten days during the whole year. Workers in sericulture had to work more than seventeen hours per day and had only one or two days rest in the entire year. In the words of one of my interviewees: ‘Every one was too exhausted to die (lei de si dou mei liqi si). Who could be free enough and have such energy to think about such things!’ Although long working hours and a lack of opportunity to meet is not enough reason to deny the existence of lesbian relationships amongst zishu nü, it certainly reduced the likelihood of individual zishu nü becoming lesbians.

Even best friends would have some conflicts or arguments. One of my interviewees told me that she had a big argument with her best friend who was a zishu nü in Hong Kong in the 1970s. The cause of this quarrel was that her friend thought my
interviewee told her boss something about her personality, which caused her boss to fire her. 'Actually, it was not me. I explained this to her but she still did not trust me.' my interviewee said. They did not talk to each other for years until another zishu nü friend patched up things between them. However, they were not good friends after that. This interviewee told me her reason in this way, 'She does not trust me. What is the meaning to be a friend or sister to a person who does not trust you?' Quarrels were common in the Gongjilong Silk Factory as well. Because all the zishu nü workers were in one sisterhood and in career competition at the same time, it was difficult to avoid some conflicts. It happened that a zishu nü got sick. She did not tell anyone but her best friend, because she hoped that her friend could share some work with her while she was ill. However, her best friend secretly went to the boss to tell him of the illness, and she recommended her own younger sister to replace her friend in the position. Situations like this arose often before the CCP managed the factory, which made it difficult for zishu nü to form strong friendships. Thus, actually, friendship and sisterhood became a dilemma for most zishu nü. On the one hand, friendship and sisterhood were important to them, for their career and their emotional well-being, as discussed earlier, and the sisterhood society did many things to help individual zishu nü. On the other hand, sisterhood was not a relationship regarded as trustworthy as family. In terms of moral principles, if an individual zishu nü had to make a choice between her friend’s interest and her family’s, she would choose her family’s, as required by conventional Han cultural morality. Some zishu nü would even choose to act against moral principles in order to benefit their family, such as the ‘bad’ zishu nü in the silk factory in the example above. Situations like these created an environment where the attitude of zishu nü towards sisterhood was that they attached great importance to it, but at the same time tried their best not to rely on it.

It is interesting to compare the zishu nü’s attitude towards conflicts within their sisterhood with their attitude towards conflicts within their families. Most of my interviewees felt very free to talk about their conflicts with their friends, or conflicts
that happened between other zishu nü. In their opinion, conflict between two zishu nü is not ‘a fight between teeth and lips’ rather, it is argument between different individuals or families. The difference between these two attitudes towards conflict shows the zishu nü’s opinion of the value of sisterhood and family. In their mind, no matter how close two women were as zishu nü, this relationship could never compare to their relationship with members of their family, with the possible exception of their relationship with their sisters-in-law. In their own words, they ‘have to distinguish the close and the distant’ (gin shu you bie). ‘The close’ here means family, while ‘the distant’ indicates sisterhood.

Sisterhood in Zhaoqing is a good model with which to observe the zishu nü’s attitude towards ‘sisterhood’ and ‘family’. For example, in Zhaoqing, which is in the central part of the Guangdong Delta, zishu nü kept different residence traditions from the zishu nü in the Pearl River Delta. Although some Chinese researchers pointed out that there was a residence model among these women regarding where they would live with their sisterhood instead of their natal family, they did not provide enough evidence to establish this as a fact. English researchers understand this type of residence as a ‘spinsters House’ (gupo wu). Such a ‘spinsters house’ was frequently owned by zishu nü themselves, and ‘provided a home for the ill or dying spinsters and a place for her tablet after death’. In other words, it was another choice of residence for zishu nü besides their natal family, and the only choice for them as a place to set their tablets after death in some areas. Nevertheless, for Zhaoqing zishu nü, the common house they lived in was not a ‘secondary’ choice, but their only residence. In this sense, Zhaoqing zishu nü can be seen as the only instance we can find nowadays of zishu nü living within a ‘sisterhood’. This seems to suggest that the sisterhood could be closer than the

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41 Some modern films which describe zishu nü’s lives constructed these women’s lives on the basis of the assumption of joint living arrangements. For example, the movies Zi Shu and Women as Flower (nüren hua).
42 See Marjorie Topley, ‘Marriage resistance in rural Kwantung, women in Chinese society’, in Margery Wolf & Roxane Witge (eds), Women in Chinese Society, Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 67-88. So far, not one western researcher has introduced the idea of members of the sisterhood living in residence all of their lives, and cutting or keeping very loose links with their natal families.
43 Stockard, Daughters of the Canton Delta, p. 85.
family, but this is not the case. Taking the Zhaoqing zishu nü as an example, I will look at two aspects of a zishu nü’s interpersonal relationships. One aspect distinguishes the value of family and sisterhood in a zishu nü’s opinion, while the other is an examination of the ‘family’ structure and function among zishu nü between two generations. Before looking into these two aspects, it is necessary to study some basic information about the Zhaoqing zishu nü, the beginning of their residence in the Goddess of Mercy Hall, and their working and living unit (Figure 5.6).

There is only one zishu nü residence still in existence in Zhaoqing, which is called the Goddess of Mercy Hall (Guanyin Tang). This hall is around four hundred square meters in area and contains four bedrooms, two Buddhist worship rooms, one kitchen, and one store room. There is a story about the beginning of the Goddess of Mercy Hall which tells that an old couple called He adopted four zishu nü as their daughters, and taught them the skill of making straw-mats. These four zishu nü then adopted their own daughters or students who continued the trade. This was called ‘growing and spreading more branches and leaves’ (kaizhisanye) in my interviewees’ words—as expression usually used to describe one’s clan or family’s development. Most zishu nü living in the Goddess of Mercy Hall were from a rural area called Jindu. In January

Figure 5.6. One corner of the Goddess of Mercy Hall in Zhaoqing. Photographed by Ziling Ye, December, 2006.

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44 According to local history, there were twelve halls like this in Zhaoqing city, more than five hundred zishu nü lived there, during the period of the end of Qing Dynasty and the beginning of Republican China. However, my interviewee said that the number of the hall was not correct. Most halls are built only for Buddhism function, but not for zishu nü to live in. Some of them were ‘spinster houses’. There were three or four similar halls as Goddess Mercy Hall which we can see now. But the number of zishu nü was probably right. Goddess Mercy Hall was the biggest and most famous one in this area, in which more than one hundred zishu nü lived around 1930s.

45 The address of the Goddess of Mercy Hall is Three street, Tajia Road, Zhaoqing.

46 About this story, please also see Chapter 1.
2007, there were still nine zishu nü living near the hall. Most of them originally moved to the Goddess of Mercy Hall area when they were less than ten years-old. There are three reasons that suggest why they moved in. One is that they were adopted by a zishu nü in the older generation, and lived there as an adopted daughter; this was the case for Xia Huitian. As the second daughter in her natal family, when Xia Huitian was one and half years old, her aunt (gugu or her father’s younger sister) who was a zishu nü living in the Goddess of Mercy Hall, asked her father if she could adopt one of his daughters. That was the beginning of Xia Huitian’s life in the Goddess of Mercy Hall. Another reason for living there was the economic situation in one’s natal family. Hu Emü went to the Goddess of Mercy Hall when she was nine years old, as her natal family was too poor to bring up six children. They had no farm and no regular income. Her parents decided to send some of their children to an orphanage house (yuying tang), otherwise the whole family would have to move to the city to survive by begging. As the third daughter of her natal family, Emü left home when she got permission from her natal parents, went to the Goddess of Mercy Hall and begged a zishu nü to adopt her. After a test of her ability to do some manualwork, this zishu nü officially adopted her. Therefore Emü lived in the Goddess of Mercy Hall with her adopted mother and another two adopted sisters. She hoped that she would be able to keep in touch with her biological family, but it was too difficult, especially during the war.

It is important to point out here that these adopted daughters did not necessarily become zishu nü themselves. All of the girls living in the Goddess of Mercy Hall had to learn how to make straw mats as their job. Xia Huitian learnt it when she was five years old, and Emü learnt it as soon as she was adopted. Actually, the Goddess of Mercy Hall was more a straw-making labor organization than to sisterhood residence. When Er Gu’s adopted mother asked her if she wanted to join this residence, she said: ‘Straw mat making is a very difficult work. Are you sure that you could persist with it as your occupation?’ But she did not say ‘A zishu nü’s life is difficult. Are you sure that you want to be one of us?’ Another point is that all women in the residence called their
adopted mother ‘teacher’ (shifu) rather than ‘mother’ (niang). These girls could choose to be zishu nü or not when they reached the marriage age. For example, Xia Huitian’s adopted mother asked about her plans for the future on her fifteenth birthday. She had two choices, to either become a zishu nü or get married; Huitian chose to be a zishu nü. Her adopted mother held the ceremony for her one month later. Xia Huitian did the same thing for her own adopted daughter when she was fifteen years old. Her adopted daughter said that she wanted to get married, so Huitian behaved like an ordinary mother and asked a match-maker to arrange some blind dates for her adopted daughter. The girl made the decision herself, and there was never any kind of indication from her adopted mother that she ‘should’ choose one particular path.

In summary, the zishu nü in Zhaoqing who lived in one residence had a non-biological or semi-biological link with each other, and the society they organized and lived within was a guild system of straw-mat making rather than a zishu nü sisterhood. Considering its origins, the framework of this organization was similar to that of a clan or patriarchal system. The old couple He were the first ancestors of this ‘clan’; their four daughters were the second generation, and so on. However, the zishu nü in the clan kept their own surnames, so that the only power binding together everyone in the clan was the emotional link between individuals. As more and more zishu nü joined the clan, there was to more and more conflict. Not surprisingly, in a pattern similar to any big clan in traditional China, the clan was divided into smaller units, like families. One day in the 1940s, according to my interviewee Ming Gu, her two adopted mothers moved out of the Goddess of Mercy Hall to stay with their student Ming Gu in a smaller house ten meters from the big Hall. Although they were the first ‘family’ to move out, other ‘families’ had had the same idea for some time. Even in the hall, every small family had their own room and cooked for themselves. The economic running of the residence depended on the head of every small family from the

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47 In Xia Huitian’s case, she called her adopted mother ‘teacher’ (shifu) too, rather than ‘mother’ (niang) or ‘aunt’ (gugu).
48 In Xia Huitian’s generation, most girls chose to be zishu nü rather than get married, while in next generation, most girls chose to get married rather than to be a zishu nü.
beginning, so there were no problems or conflicts regarding economic division. Within one and a half years, around eighty zishu nü moved out of the big hall with their own ‘families’, to stay in smaller houses nearby. This continues to be the living arrangement of those zishu nü still living in the area.

Theoretically, for any individual zishu nü, her family members (in the sense of these smaller subgroups within the residence) would be closer to her than other zishu nü. However, there was competition between zishu nü in one generation within a family. For example, the mother might show favoritism to one daughter, there could be conflict regarding the arrangement of financial affairs, or the mother could be too strict to her adopted daughters. These conflicts could only happen within a family and, in this case, friends from another family could provide support. This situation happened in other, natural, families as well. To an individual zishu nü, family was the foundation of her life; supporting her family was the purpose of her work, and her family was the home of her emotions. By comparison, her sisterhood was a source of support and knowledge when she met difficulties within her family, and in other fields where her family could not offer any help.

In previous pages, I examined these women’s interpersonal relationships within their families and the sisterhood. In their representation, the figure of a zishu nü was that of an exemplary moral example: they were perfect daughters who dedicated all of their lives to their families’ well-being and development, and they were trusted friends or sisters who built an effective social network to support each other, practically and emotionally. By contributing to their families and building a network within their sisterhood, they indirectly influenced the development of the local community, economically and culturally. There are two ways that they influenced the local economy: one was that zishu nü sent their income home to their family, which indirectly contributed to the local economic development—when everyone in the local community received a definite amount of money from their zishu nü sisters, the local government and other economic agencies shouldered a reduced burden in their support
of local people's survival. Another influence of zishu nü on the local economy was that their internal social network influenced local industry patterns, as shown in the section on 'sisterhood'.

Culturally speaking, the relationship between zishu nü and local customs is similar to the one between zishu nü and local industry. Zishu nü adhered to the ideal of womanhood in the dominant culture, according to the circumstances of local custom. Consequently, the local community and society accepted and encouraged their behavior. As role models, zishu nü influenced local practice of moral principles from the dominant culture. This relationship requires us to explore the zishu nü custom in a broad cultural-historical context.

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49 See 'Economic motivation' in Chapter 3, and 'Sisterhood' in Chapter 5.
50 Regarding examples of this argument, see 'the cult of chastity' and 'role model and networking' in Chapter 1.
51 In relation to the relationship between zishu nü and local cultural circumstance, also see Helen Siu, 'Where were the women: rethinking marriage resistance and regional culture in South China', Late Imperial China, vol. 11, no. 2, (December 1990): pp. 31-62, p. 41.
Appendix
Report of oral history collection (fieldwork) in China

From 6 December 2006 to 6 February 2007 I did fieldwork in Guangdong Delta in China, including Guangzhou, Foshan, Shunde, Nanhai, Zhaoqing, and Dongguan (see Map 1.1). I interviewed nineteen women who had formally been zishu nü. There were two ways in which I conducted the interviews—individually and in group meetings. The duration of each of the interviews differed depending on a multiplicity of different situations, such as the health condition of each informant, the free time they had then, and so on. Some informants loved to tell all the details and changes in their lives, while some refused to supply details about their emotional life. Generally speaking, every informant had about a one and half hour interview. The longest one was around six hours conducted over three days, while the shortest one was about forty minutes. Table 1 gives details about my informants. For confidential reasons, some of their names have been altered.

Table 1 Zishu nü interviewees.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Living area</th>
<th>Interview date</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hu Daidi</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>Shunde, Jun’an, Zhaipu</td>
<td>13/12/2006, 14/12/2006, 15/12/2006</td>
<td>Around 6 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huang Hekui</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>Shunde, Jun’an, Shatou</td>
<td>16/12/2006</td>
<td>About 2 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huang Qundi</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>Shunde, Jun’an, Shatou</td>
<td>16/12/2006</td>
<td>About 2 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huang Shunkai</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>Shunde, Jun’an, Shatou</td>
<td>17/12/2006</td>
<td>About 3 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gao Chun</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>Foshan (originally from Xiqiao)</td>
<td>19/12/2006</td>
<td>About 2½ hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gao Ying</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>Foshan (originally from Xiqiao)</td>
<td>21/12/2006</td>
<td>2 hours, (group meeting with Gao Ming)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gao Ming</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>Foshan (originally from Xiqiao)</td>
<td>21/12/2006</td>
<td>2 hours, (Group meeting with Gao Ying)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feng Er Gu</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>Zhaoqing</td>
<td>23/12/2006</td>
<td>1 hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xia Huitian</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>Zhaoqing</td>
<td>27/12/2006</td>
<td>2 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wu Yamei</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>Zhaoqing</td>
<td>28/12/2006</td>
<td>1 hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhao Huiming</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>Zhaoqing</td>
<td>29/12/2006</td>
<td>1½ hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He Liu Gu</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>Zhaoqing</td>
<td>04/01/2007</td>
<td>2 hours 40 minutes (group meeting with Mo Qunyang, Zhai Siquin)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mo Qunyang</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>Zhaoqing</td>
<td>04/01/2007</td>
<td>2 hours 40 minutes (group meeting with He Liugu, Zhai Siquin)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zhai Siquin</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>Zhaoqing</td>
<td>04/01/2007</td>
<td>2 hours 40 minutes (group meeting with Mo Qunyang, He Liugu)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Besides these women, I also interviewed some of their relatives, their neighbours or some other local people in order to get their opinions on the historical issues surrounding zishi nü. This type of interview was not in a regular format. Some of them were conducted as I was being taken to find particular zishu nü women; some of them were taken at the dinner table when the whole family was there. However, I told every of my informants that what they told me may be in my thesis, and they all agreed to allow me to publish their words. Table 2 gives some details regarding these other informants.

Table 2. Interviewees who are not zishu nü.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Relation with zishu nü</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hu Liangsong (male)</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>Hu Daidi’s youngest brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hu Huiyou</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Hu Daidi’s nephew, Hu Liangsong’s daughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guo Jianxing (male)</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>His eldest aunt is a zishu nü sister, who is taken care of by Guo. Because of her health condition, I could not interview her. Although I did have good discussion with Mr Guo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chen Aimei</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>Guo Jianxing’s wife.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Huang (male)</td>
<td>Older than 80</td>
<td>Senior man in Shatou, the village in which Huang Li’e, Huang Kaiqun, Huang Juying are living.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huang Kaiqun</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>Friend of Huang Li’e and Huang Qundi, who got married when she was eighteen years old.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lan Ying</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>The manager of the retirement home, in which there are more than 20 zishu nü sisters, such as Gao Chun, Gao Ying and Gao Ming, who used to work as workers in silk factory living.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms Zhao</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Neighbour of zishu nü</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Jiang (male) and his family</td>
<td>Neighbours of zishu nü in Zhaoqing.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mo Yi</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Adopted daughter of Mo Qunyang, who got married and has a grand-daughter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Bo</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Neighbour of Lan Gu, whose aunt was a spin-sworn sister too, but died two years ago.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Unless otherwise noted the informants were female.
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