

My dissertation, “She Left or He Left: Marriages at the Crossroads in Contemporary China,” investigates the role of gender in generating and processing divorce litigation. Sponsored by multiple sources of grants, I collected and compiled original data consisting of a probability sample of 1064 divorce litigation records, which spanned from 2014-2019, in a northern midsize city of China. I also conducted over three months of ethnographic observations in divorce courts and collected 33 in-depth interviews of divorce plaintiffs. Overall, my research demonstrates pronounced gender differences in motivations, experiences, and outcomes of divorce litigations. By revealing how gender-based inequalities in marriage life are connected to other social institutions, my work underscores gender as a key stratification system that recursively operates across multiple levels and intersects with other axes of social inequalities.

In the first chapter of my dissertation, I examine how intergenerational relations are mentioned, understood, and experienced by plaintiffs as one important dimension affecting gendered decisions to divorce. In China, marital discords are not limited to nuclear households. As a society where the intergenerational exchange is frequent, extended family members play a significant role in influencing marriage stability. In post-reform China, with the high female employment rate and nearly non-existent social welfare system for childcare, women have to rely on intergenerational support to balance work-family conflicts, especially for childrearing. Although intergenerational support can alleviate some of the competing demands between work and family for women, it introduces more people in the decision-making in marriage, which increases gendered relationship conflicts, especially between wives and their parents-in-law.

In the second chapter, I investigate how gender impacts the way plaintiffs express their marital grievances in the context of divorce litigation. Drawing on quantitative and qualitative content analysis of divorce litigation records, I found divorce motivations mentioned by plaintiffs are gendered. Even for reasons that are frequently cited by both genders, women and men derive different understandings and develop different narratives, revealing gendered expectations of what it means to be a “good spouse.”

My third chapter focuses on how the gender of both parents and children affects the judicial decisions in child custody disputes. The preliminary finding suggests that courts are more likely to grant child custody to mothers, especially when the child is the daughter. Due to the strict fertility policy, families with two or more than two children under the one-child policy are not common. My work shows, in families with two children, courts tend to divide siblings and “sort” children based on both genders of children and parents. For example, divorced fathers are more often granted custody of sons, whereas divorced mothers are more often granted custody of daughters. If children have the same gender, divorced mothers are more likely to get the younger child than divorced fathers. Such evidence reveals that legal operation can be an important engine in perpetuating gender stereotypes and creating social inequality.

My dissertation contributes to the literature on how gender-based inequalities in marital life connect to and interact with other social institutions. I extend work on how the state and market shape gender inequalities, which can lead to intensified gendered work-family conflicts. Further, my research challenges the prediction that families in societies like China will converge into the Western model to become more nuclear and individualized. I find a great heterogeneity and a strong pattern of coexistence of individualism and familism in Chinese marriage and family life, which calls for more nuanced theories to capture the complexity of different cultural and institutional contexts.