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**INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE, WOMEN,
AND RESISTANCE IN POSTSOCIALIST
CHINA**

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Intimate partner violence is defined as behaviors toward an intimate partner that result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering. Such behaviors include but are not limited to physical abuse, psychological torment, forced sexual intercourse, sexual coercion, and other forms of controlling behaviors. Studies have demonstrated that the prevalence of women being abused by their intimate partners is often times intertwined with a wide array of factors such as age, education, socioeconomic status, marital conflicts, history of abuse in childhood, and alcohol and drug use (Aldarondo, 1996; Martin, 1999; McCauley, 1995; Roberts, 1998; Xu et al., 2005).

Research has demonstrated that intimate partner violence has increasingly become one of the most paramount issues faced by all societies and regions (see Parish et al., 2004; Tellez, 2008; Lodhia, 2010; Alcalde, 2006; Yount et Li, 2009; Koepping, 2003). Worldwide about one in every four women has undergone, or is currently undergoing, intimate partner violence (Zhang, 2014). Indeed, intimate partner violence happens in all languages and in all societies.

In China, for thousands of years, the society was dominated by the Confucian ideology. The family, according to this ideology, is the cornerstone of the society, the stability of which is pivotal in maintaining the stability of the country as a whole. The stability and harmony of the family, according to the Confucian ideology, is contingent upon the hierarchical relationship between the husband and the wife. The husband is accorded with the ultimate authority in family issues, including financial decisions. The wife, however, is assigned with the role of a daughter, a wife, and a mother who is obedient to the father before marriage, to the husband after marriage, and to

the son after widowhood, with four virtues, which is termed as “three obediences and four virtues.” Such patriarchal ideology is so deeply entrenched in society that intimate partner violence was often times concealed as a private family issue, and hence ignored (Zhang, 2014; Xu et al, 2005).

The Third World Women’s Conference in Nairobi in 1985 attended by Chinese female intellectuals prompted a recognition of violence against women as a social problem (Xu et al, 2005; Zhang, 2009a; Edwards, 2009; Hester, 2012). In postsocialist China, intimate partner violence has become an increasingly severe problem. It was reported that over 95 percent of intimate partner violence in China was committed by men against women (Zhang, 2004). Intimate partner violence in China has increased by 25.4% since the 1980s (Hou et al, 2011). It was estimated that 35.7 percent of women in postsocialist China suffer intimate partner violence (Huang, 2008).

Given the severity of this social problem, it is surprising that to date no ethnographic studies of intimate partner violence against women in mainland China has been conducted. This can be a result of the stigma surrounding intimate partner violence that inhibits discussion, and in turn, research on this topic. This study is the first ethnographic research on women’s lived experiences, discussions, and responses of intimate partner violence in their daily lives. Since the summer of 2014, I have been conducting research on online chat groups organized by women who are victims to intimate partner violence. I have been an active participant in these groups on a daily basis, with my identity and research purpose fully disseminated to the women in the groups. At the beginning of my research, I searched for chatrooms that specifically addresses the issue of intimate partner violence and joined five chatrooms out of twenty. Each of the chatroom has over 200 (some have 500) participants who are in conversation with each other every day. On a daily basis I am in these online rooms chatting with women, lending my sympathetic ear, and offering some advice. Over time I became friends with many participants in the chatrooms due to my daily presence and conversations with them both in the chatroom and on the phone. Women in these online chatrooms told me that they were not

able to tell anyone about the violence they experienced at home due to the stigma and embarrassment surrounding the topic. In their desperate need to talk about their experiences and seek support, they searched online chatrooms and found these groups that center on the issue of intimate partner violence. In these chatrooms they exchange their stories, comforted each other, received emotional support, and offered advice to each other. The women told me that these chatrooms provided a space wherein they were able to talk about their suffering, vent repressed agony and anguish, and receive others' supportive responses, a process that most resembles talk therapy sessions. The majority of these women are in the age range of 25-40, ranging from stay-at-home mothers and full-time wives to working women. Some use their phones to access these chatrooms, some use computers, and others use internet cafes. During my research, I have formed friendship with many women, and have been in regular contact with them via email and telephone.

In this paper, based on my ethnographic research with the women since the summer of 2014, I will analyze and explore women's responses and resolutions against violence to demonstrate women's agency and resistance against violence in postsocialist China. This paper comprises of five sections. The first section will discuss violence against women and critical race theory. The second section will offer a literature review of violence against women in China. In the third section, I will explore structural constraints that shape women's experiences of violence on a daily basis. In the fourth section, I will illustrate women's resistant strategies to thwart intimate partner violence in their daily lives. I will conclude in the final section. As I illustrate below, the U.S. based critical race theory is useful for this study on violence against women in postsocialist China, as this paper draws on the intersectional theory that brings racism and sexism into focus and eschews racist assumptions that Chinese women helplessly succumb to their patriarchal culture and accept the abuse.

Violence Against Women and Critical Race Theory

Research on violence against women, in general, has focused on topics such as legal issues concerning such violence

(Fineman, 1994), instructions on escape from such violence (White, 1985; Nicarity, 1989), analysis of women's shelter movement (Shechter 1982), and possible reasons for such violence (Dobash, 1979; Walker, 1984; Jones, 1994; Roy, 1977; Hammer and Maynard, 1987; Hoff, 1990). Recent feminist works have challenged and critiqued the previous sociological and psychological models of violence against women that theorized such violence as either a family issue or a psychopathological problem of one party (Karmen, 2003). The feminist approach departs from the previous theories by presenting that gender inequality, i.e., male dominance in the family and society, is the central organizing principle that catalyzes and perpetuates violence against women (Sokoloff and Pratt, 2013; Levinson, 1989; Erchak and Rosenfeld, 1994; Steimnetz, 1995; Gal, 1991; McElhinny, 2003; Sokoloff and Pratt, 2005; McClusky, 2001).

In addition to gender inequality, critical race theory (Gordon, 1999) also acknowledges that racism is so entrenched in the U.S. society that it is systematically institutionalized in the dominant culture. Racism is a fundamental tenet of the power structure and structural violence in the society, reproducing the prejudice and discrimination of people of color within a system of white supremacy and white privilege.

Intersectionality (Browne and Misra, 2003) within critical race theory moves beyond race and identifies multiple structural inequalities of race, class, sex, sexual orientation, and national origin as the origin of oppression and disempowerment. These factors are not mutually exclusive or static, but operate either independently or concurrently with each other in creating the intersections of systems of domination. Some argue that the "interlocking" approach from the Combahee Collective is more promising. This approach refutes the monolithic model and underscores the multiple dimensions of oppressions that people of color face to capture the complexities of the power structure.

Violence against women, in this framework, is not a monolithic phenomenon, but a complex social problem of the interactions between multiple forms of oppression and social hierarchy. Feminist researchers have pointed out that social locations based on race, ethnicity, class, immigrant status and

family relationships not only shape women's experiences of intimate partner violence, but also determine their strategies and options to cope with violence in their lives (Sokoloff and Pratt, 2013). For instance, since certain services are not available to women in minority communities, women are not able to access these services (ibid). Therefore, it is essential to understand the ways in which race, class, gender, ethnicity, and immigration status interact to shape women's experiences of violence before we can provide women with intervention strategies.

It is the racial ethnocentrism in the U.S. that contributes to the culture of violence that reinforces the fundamental belief that women of other cultures are inferior to their American counterparts and may even contribute to their own victimization (Dasgupta, 2013). My research refutes and debunks the implicit ideology that women of other cultures, unlike White women, are submissive, weak, and subservient to their patriarchal culture (Volpp, 2013). Rather, as I show in this paper, Chinese women exhibit a great deal of courage in employing and utilizing a wide array of strategies of resistance against intimate partner violence, which challenges and renounces assumptions of passivity and submissiveness associated with Asian women. Although at times these acts of resistance are not very efficacious, they are, however, in a promissory note, part and parcel of their empowerment process leading them to ultimate emancipation.

Intimate Partner Violence in China

In China, gender inequality and violence against women were addressed as part of a political agenda by the Communist Party during the 1930, 1940s and 1950s. The Communist Party emphasized gender equality to exact women's labor in their participation in the labor force. Following the establishment of the Communist China, however, the issue of violence against women vanished from the political agenda (Hester, 2012). During the Cultural Revolution Period (1966-1976), the Communist Party held an ambiguous attitude toward violence against women, and only underscored women's integration into the public sphere (Hester, 2012).

The postsocialist China witnessed a decline of women's social status associated with a change of state policies that undermined women's wellbeing (Wang, 2003; Zheng, 2009a). For instance, economic transitions from planned economy to market economy in China have shrunk state sectors and downsized state-owned enterprises. To bring this economic transition into fruition necessitated a large-scale lay-off and unemployment. State discourse called on women to return home, to be laid off first, and to sacrifice for the success of the economic reform (Zheng, 2009b). Due to such gender biased state policies, it is not surprising that sixty percent of the current unemployed population in China is women, and that job loss and feminization of poverty increase women's vulnerability to intimate partner violence.

Domestic violence has increasingly become a serious social problem in China. For instance, in 2008, Sun Xiaomei, a professor at the Chinese Women's College, said, "Domestic violence is a social phenomenon that crosses all social strata and is becoming more and more common. There is an urgent need for legislation" (Jiao cited in He and Hang, 2013). In 2010, after the state supported organization All China Women's Federation received 52,000 petitions from women who suffered from domestic violence declared that "domestic violence poses a severe threat to women's rights in China" (He and Ng, 2013a).

The literature on intimate partner violence in China has focused on collected oral stories of women, training materials to doctors and law officers on intimate partner violence, legal aid, international influences and organizations, and surveys and questionnaires to couples to determine the relationships between intimate partner violence and individuals' educational background, childhood experiences, and satisfactions toward marriages (Song and Xue, 2003; Zhang and Liu, 2004; Tao, 2004; Guo, 2003; Zhang, 2009b).

To date there has not been any ethnographic research conducted on women's lived experiences and responses to intimate partner violence in postsocialist China. This research in China not only fills in the void by bringing to the forefront women's experiences and agency, but also contributes to the worldwide literature on violence against women through debunking cultural stereotypes of these Chinese women as

helpless and passive, and foregrounding structural inequalities (such as class and gender) that constrain and shape the lives of these women. While giving voice to these women and underscoring their struggles and strategies, this research simultaneously recognizes the structural inequalities that thwart and hamper their resistant efforts against violence.

Structural Constraint

Women I talked to have tried formal sources for help such as calling the police and approaching the state-supported All Women's Federation which offers assistance to women by providing consultation and mediation between the partners, but to no avail. Neither the police nor the All Women's Federation has been able to offer women redress for the violence they have received from intimate partners. Both the police and the All Women's Federation have attempted to mediate between the couple, but provided nothing to help protect the women.

Indeed, mediation is a standard procedure for the police and the All Women's Federation in such situations, which involves talking to and persuading the husband to apologize to the wife. Overwhelming reports have recorded that although women have reported to the police numerous times on their severe physical injuries resulted by their husbands' physical violence, the police did nothing but ask the husbands to apologize and write promise notes that it would not happen again (see Xing, 2013).

In one case, for example, it was reported that a woman who was physically abused by her husband called the police numerous times and also appealed to All Women's Federation, but to no avail (Zhao, 2014). Later she became blind as a result of her husband's beating. Her neighbors called the police, but the police treated it as a family conflict and did nothing to her husband (*ibid.*). In another case, a woman was beaten and stabbed by a knife numerous times by her husband until she was paralyzed and bedridden. Although she sued him in court, he was found innocent due to his alleged mental problems (Guo, 2014). Indeed, most male abusers are held unaccountable by the law as the police consider it as a family issue, resulting in the husband's worsened abuse to the wife (Kai, 2014).

Researchers who have observed court trials and conducted extensive interviews with judges have pointed out that in China, judicial mediation undermines the rights of abused women in divorce cases (He and Ng, 2013a; He and Ng, 2013b). Even when the judges are able to determine that domestic violence is committed by the husband, this violence issue however, is often erased in the stage of judicial mediation (ibid.). Indeed, in my interviews with employees in All women's Federation, I was told that it happened many times that despite the efforts of the employees to mediate between the women and their husbands, a while later they received the news that the women were beaten to death by their husbands. In contemporary China, murder as a result of intimate partner violence accounts for 10 percent of all murders (Zhang, 2014).

In the absence of legal redress and legal justice, women are forced to rely on their own strategies to deal with the violence perpetrated on them. The extreme strategy is termed "reprisal violence" in Chinese legal cases, conducted by abused women on their abusive husbands (Sun, 2013). It was reported that women's "reprisal violence" against their abusers accounts for 11.2 percent of all the crimes committed by women (Sun, 2013). As Chinese scholars and organizations have reported, women's jails are filled with women who have injured or killed abusive husbands to seek justice on their own (Tatlow, 2013). In one jail in Anshan of Liaoning Province, for instance, these women comprise of 60 percent of all the inmates. In another jail Fuzhou of Fujian Province, these women account for 80 percent of all the women who serve heavy sentences (Tatlow, 2013).

In numerous legal cases, when a husband beat or tortured his wife to death, he was either found innocent or only sentenced to three to six years in prison (Guo, 2014; Guo, 2012). In one case, for example, a woman was tortured to death, but the husband received no legal consequence (Guo, 2014). In another case, upon a woman's file for divorce, the husband was furious and beat the women to death. He only received a sentence of six years and a half in prison (Guo, 2014).

However, when a woman fought back and killed the abuser, she was sentenced to execution by court (Tatlow, 2013).

In one case, for example, Li's husband had been abusing her for a whole year by burning her face and legs with cigarettes, grabbing her hair and hitting her head against the wall, locking her on the balcony for hours in the winter, beating her body three times a month, and threatening to kill her with the several guns he owned (Tatlow, 2013; Duan, 2012). Throughout the year of the physical abuse and torture, Li had sought formal venues from the police and the All Women's Federation but received no help from them.

In 2012, she called the police after a beating but the police responded that it was an affair between married couple and hung up on her. She approached her neighborhood committee, and the committee told her to go to All Women's Federation. She went to the All Women's Federation, and the Federation told her to the police. She was kicked from one place to the next without any redress. When she approached the local justice department to file for divorce, officials advised her to just tolerate the abuse as she would be left destitute if her husband refused to divorce. In the end, she stayed in the marriage. In the last abusive episode, she fought back and killed her husband with a gun. Despite all the documentations of her husband's abuse, including photographs of injuries and medical reports after hospital treatment of her injuries inflicted by her husband's violence, the court disregarded all these evidence and sentenced her to death (Tatlow, 2013; Duan, 2012).

As shown, much more severe sentences are often imposed on women who fight back against abusive husbands. A study of 121 female inmates in a Sichuan jail who serve for attacking or killing their abusive partners reveals that 71 were sentenced by court to death or life in prison and 28 were sentenced to at least 10 years (Xing, 2011). As evidenced by the study, 80 percent received the heaviest possible sentences for bodily harm or murder, compared with men who, for murder only, received no legal consequence or three to six years sentence (Xing, 2011).

Resistance and Strategies

In the absence of legal and social protection, all the women I talked to have employed their own innovative measures to

struggle and resist against violence perpetuated by their intimate partners. They have resorted to creative ways to seek aid and challenge the violence inflicted on them. Below I will explore women's responses and approaches, i.e., avoiding and hiding, escape, talking back, fighting back, murdering and suicide, and using informal sources for help. As shown below, women's agency is navigated within the cultural and structural constraints to contend with violence, as women's resistance, often times, is shaped and determined by whatever resources available to them.

Escape

Escape is often a luxurious strategy beyond reach for women who are full time housewives relying on their husbands to survive financially. These women told me that their husbands control the family finance. Without any bank savings to sustain themselves financially, escape is untenable. In the word of a woman I talked to, "If I escape with a baby, both of us will die of hunger." These women, therefore, often times resorted to strategies other than escape.

For women who have some savings, limited it might be, escape is a viable option. The reason that women choose to escape rather than return to their natal family is often due to the shame and disgrace their return will bring to the family. Below I will recount several representative stories of escape.

Yi's parents strongly disapproved of her marriage to her husband, but she insisted that she choose him herself because he was caring and loving to her and that she did not mind his unfavorable financial condition and his faraway hometown. Prior to marriage, he was, in Yi's own words, "extremely good" to her. After marriage, however, Yi found herself tortured and abused by him on a regular basis, including beating, cursing, turning on gas to terrorize her, attacking her with a spring knife, strangling her neck, throwing objects at her, and threatening to kill her with his dagger. When the baby was two months old, he took the baby and threatened to throw the baby to die on the floor just because the baby cried and disrupted his sleep. When she begged him to release the baby, he became more violent, telling her that he is going to let her and the baby die together.

After her baby was eight months old, he took the baby away from her, forbidding her to see the baby unless she was submissive to him. Her first child was born with a C-section surgery, and within less than a year, she was pregnant again. He asked her to jump up and down so that the baby could drop out of her body dead.

She requested divorce several times, but each time her request was rejected by him and resulted in more physical abuse on her. Before she escaped, in the last episode of abuse, he believed that she was going to leave him. He asked her to choose one way to die: either being killed by his dagger, or being strangled to death. Eventually, however, he released her.

Yi, at the age of 27 and fifty days pregnant, finally managed to escape to a strange city, as she could not bring herself to tell her parents. She was warned by doctors not to get pregnant within one year of C-section surgery, but she did. Doctors told her that if she insisted in giving birth to the baby, she and the baby may die in the end. Reluctant as she was, in this strange city where she knew no one, she went to a hospital and aborted the child.

Yi said to me, “This is my own choice. This path was chosen by myself. Whatever it takes, I will finish it on my own.” She insists that if she returned home, she would lose her parents’ face in front of everyone. She said, “At that time [when I was about to marry him], no one liked him. Now they are all proven correct. If I go back, everyone would laugh at my parents.” Yi said it is her fate, which she has to accept.

Since Yi escaped, her husband has been begging, threatening, and using her baby as a bargain to make her return. He threatened to send her relatives pictures that he had taken of her in bed. He also threatened to rob her of any opportunities to see her child in her entire life. Yi said, “My child is my life. It’s like killing me if I cannot see my child.”

Yi said eventually when the savings runs out, she will either go back with a gun or seek help from her natal family. She said, “When I have a gun, I will aim him with the gun, kill him and then kill myself.”

Like Yi, Xuan, a 30-year-old woman, escaped from her husband. Xuan met her husband online when she was in her mid-twenties. He cared about her so much that when she was

sick, he took care of her. After they got married six years later, however, Xuan said that he had changed. Four major incidents of his abuse hurt her deeply. In the first case, when they had a skirmish about when to purchase a house, he beat her up. In the second case, during her pregnancy, because she told him that she was not feeling well enough to iron his clothes, he got extremely furious and beat her up. After that incident, she aborted the child. Half a month after her abortion, at dinner table, because she forgot to bring him chopsticks, he was enraged again, throwing everything on the table to the floor, and then beat her. In the third case, Xuan suggested that he not get too indulged in internet games since he had been playing it day and night without eating or sleeping. Infuriated, he threw heavy objects at her and flipped a burning hot teapot over her feet, causing her feet severely burned and injured.

Xuan's mother died when she was little, and she did not want to burden her dad with her misery. After recovery, Xuan escaped to a city that was 200 kilometers away from home. Although her husband apologized, begged, and did everything he could to make her return, Xuan said she is not returning, as she is afraid of being beaten to death by him.

While Yi and Xuan escaped on their own, other women escaped with their children from their husbands. Ling, for instance, told me that she took her baby with her and escaped to another city. She said she had some savings enough for her to hire a baby sitter during the day time when she went out looking for a job. She insists that women can live without men, and that men are not able to realize what a mistake they have made until they lose everything.

While some women are able to escape successfully without being tracked down by their husbands, other women are not that fortunate. Some women were traced back by their husbands in their attempts to escape, which often times ended with more abuse.

Pleasing and Avoiding

Pleasing and avoiding are two commonplace strategies at the initial stages of abuse. To please the husbands, women try to do what their husbands want, apologize to them, praise them, and engage in behaviors that they desire. The purpose of these

strategies is to appease their husbands, diffuse the tension, and minimize the abuse inflicted on their bodies. The following story of Chun is representative in utilizing this strategy.

26-year-old Chun has a one-year-old baby with her 41-year-old husband. Chun is a stay-at-home mom and a full-time wife. Her husband has been supervising national construction projects such as bridges, skyscrapers, and city squares for more than a decade. She said that her husband looks great outside and no one could ever believe that he beats her at home. When Chun's husband is in good mood, he is really good. He would bathe the baby, wash his dirty clothes, and even wash her clothes or do anything for her. When he is happy, everything is good.

However, when he is not in a good mood, anything she does will make him angry. Yelling at her is a daily routine. Beating her is a habit of his. He claims that she deserves being cursed at and beaten if she is not obedient or submissive to him. He demands that she satisfy him in everything. Otherwise he would get furious and beat her. For instance, he complains that the way she carries the baby is not right. He complains that the way she handles and folds the clothes is not right. He complains that the way she reads a phone number is not right, as the first three digits should be read before the last four digits. In his eyes, these things are not done correctly, so she deserves to be yelled at and beaten. Whenever he beats her, he also hashes back things she did long time ago, telling her what she did wrong. At these times, Chun would try her best to appease him and reduce the abuse by promising that she will correct her mistakes and that it will never happen again.

Chun said that her husband acts like a master, a harsh supervisor or coach, demanding absolute submission and obedience from her. Whatever he says, it has to be that way. He would yell out: "Servant girl (Ya tou), pour water for me. Servant girl, I want to drink coffee. Servant girl, massage my back for me." Upon his demand, when he wants to smoke, she has to hand him the cigarettes. When he wants to drink, she has to pour water for him. When he wants to brush his teeth, she has to squeeze out the toothpaste for him. When he wants to eat sunflower seeds, she has to peel the seeds out of the shells and hand them over to him. When he comes home drunk and

yells at her to give him slippers, she has to be agreeable and compliant in taking off his shoes and putting on slippers for him. Chun complains that he is too dominant, violent, and repressive, but she tries her best to meet his needs to appease him, diffuse the tension, and avoid abuse.

Chun also avoids him to minimize the abuse. One morning, for instance, her husband was in bed when she went to the bathroom. In the bathroom, she heard him yelling at the baby because the baby was too noisy. Upon his yelling, the several-months-old baby got scared and started crying. Hearing the commotion, Chun knew he was mad. She then avoided him by hiding away.

Pleasing and avoiding are rarely efficacious. As shown in the next section, most women move beyond this early stage strategy to something else, such as talking back, fighting back, escape, and seeking help from to the natal family. This is what Chun did later. She switched from pleasing and avoiding to talking back and fighting back. Her husband was surprised at her change and commented that she is now rebelling against him. She asked him, "Why do you treat me this way? Is it because you despise me for not working and spending your money? You made me feel that you don't treat me as your wife." Her talking back and reasoning with him often times invite more abuse from him. Eventually she requested divorce, which was enough to scare him into apologizing to her and promising that he is going to change and will never beat her again.

Chun took the baby with her and went to her natal home to stay a while. She never told her parents about the abuse at home, as she did not want them to worry about her. Chun said when she grew up, she saw her dad hitting her mother's head onto the wall, beating her head, and threatening her all the time. She was scared every day. It was not until she was 18 years old when her dad stopped beating her mom.

Chun commented that marriage is sour, sweet, bitter, and spicy, with all kinds of sorrow mixed in it. A short time separation with her husband will be good, she said. To her, her marriage is not entirely tragic, but has some happiness in it.

Chun attributes the abuse to the Chinese society in general and her financial reliance on her husband in particular.

She said, “He is habituated to beat me. China, after all, is a patriarchal society. Most men think men and women are not equal, women should listen to men.” In this patriarchal society, Chun feels being controlled by her husband. Although she hopes that her husband will stop the abuse as he grows older, she is also prepared to go out to work and be financially independent after the baby gets older so that she can walk out of this violent relationship and stand on her own.

From Talking Back and Fighting Back to Murder and Suicide

Women assert that there is no point calling the police, as they offer no help. So they take the matters to themselves and resist through talking back and fighting back. Like Chun who moved from pleasing and avoiding to talking back and fighting back to resist her husband’s abuse, almost all the women to whom I have talked employ both verbal and physical resistance.

Women feel that they have to do something to stop their abusive husbands. Otherwise their violent husbands will become uncontrollable and take beating them as a habit. They told me that the reasons for the abuse are usually ridiculous as the husbands would find fault in anything they do. Like Chun whom I mentioned in the previous section, at the beginning women thought they made a mistake, so they apologized to their husbands to please them and diffuse the tension. However, later they found out that even when they corrected the alleged “mistake” and did better to appease them, the abuse continued. Then it dawned on them that they should stop being obedient and subservient and start resisting and fighting back.

As shown in Chun’s case, talking back entails questioning the abuser’s intention of abuse, confronting him about the relationship, requesting divorce, and telling him to stop the abuse. Some women tell their abusive husbands that they are animals, scumbags (*wang bad an*), mentally ill, and that no one else will be with them. Other women reason with their husbands. Women told me that talking back vents their repression and frustration. Unfortunately, talking back and reasoning back also can result in more abuse by their husbands. The following case is one such example. When Lin and her husband shopped in the mall, Lin spent 200 yuan on food and

clothes, which was agreed upon by her husband. On the way home, however, he suddenly got upset about her spending too much money. Lin talked back, “You have just agreed to spend this amount of money on food and clothes for me. Why are you suddenly upset now?” He responded that he was not worried about the money. Lin continued to ask him, “Then why are you so upset?” Unable to answer Lin’s question, he became so infuriated that he dragged Lin to an alley and beat her up. Later, after they got home, he threw all the stuff they bought onto the floor, pulled her into the bedroom and beat her up again. Although in some women such as Lin’s cases, talking back and reasoning results in harder abuse, women such as Lin are not deterred.

Some women choose a time when their husbands calm down to talk to them about the abuse. Hong is an example. Every time her talk with her husband leads to his apology to her, admitting that he is guilty of losing temper and beating her and that he acts less than an animal. Indeed, he confesses and apologizes after each abusive episode, but his abuse continues without any change. Hong soon stops listening and just ignores him. He asked if she is a mute or deaf, since she stops responding to him. Later Hong moves from silence to talking back. She told her husband that he acts like a patient who has just escaped the mental illness hospital, and that he has mental illness.

While talking back entails verbal resistance, fighting back involves using physical force, weak as it may be, to fight against the abuser. As shown in the following two examples, women overwhelmingly lament that they lack the matching physical strength to effectively fight back. Xiao always fights back when her husband beats her. However, she is not able to make any injuries on him, as she lacks the strength. As a model, Xiao just did a photo advertisement of stockings for a store, for which he called her a “slut” (sao), complaining that she wore skimpy clothes like a prostitute to be photographed. He beat her face and body with her high heel shoes, resulting in her two months’ hospitalization. Xiao said, “At the beginning I screamed my heart and lungs out and fought back as much as I could, but later with all his beatings, I was not able to let out any sound.” Although she screamed and engaged in physical

resistance, in the end she did not have as much as strength as he had and was severely injured. Xiao described him as an insane, sick dog. Had she had the strength or a weapon, she said, she would have killed him.

Mei used to always fight back, but since her husband's strength was too much for her, physically she was not able to resist as much as she wished. He spent time traveling from cities to cities and getting massages from women, while she stayed home taking care of the baby. However, he accused her of seducing men. He often uses Mei's passwords to check on her cell phone and online accounts. One day he left his own mobile phone at home. When he got back and noticed that his boss did not call, he suspected that she had an affair with him. He insisted that she talked to him and then deleted it from the record. Mei talked back, telling him that he was mentally ill. He called her "debased" and beat her up. She tried her best to resist and fight back. He used a thick stick to beat her back until the stick broke. He also used a kitchen knife to cut off her left hand's middle finger. Although her sister took her to the hospital to reconnect the finger, her middle finger is not able to stretch straight. Another time he stabbed Mei's hand, leaving a scar. Each time Mei said she fought back, but was too weak to match her husband's physical strength.

Due to the insufficient effect of verbal and physical resistance, many women contemplate the extreme case of fighting back – murdering the abuser and then committing suicide. This often occurs when all the previously mentioned strategies such as avoiding and pleasing, escape, talking back and fighting back are exhausted and to no avail. Killing and suicide are perceived as the last resort in such situations.

Thirteen years ago, Sun married her husband and followed him to a city that is far away from her relatives, families, and friends. During these thirteen years, Sun has been abused by her husband, and found no help from either the police or the state-supported All Women's Federation. Sun said that anything could trigger his abuse, such as her refusal to have sex with him. Helpless as she feels, she usurps all her strength to fight back, ready to murder him and commit suicide afterwards. She said her principle is "either the fish dies or the net gets torn" (yusi wangpo). She elicits this Chinese saying

to indicate that she is determined to engage in a life-and-death struggle with him. She fought back every time when he strangled her neck. One time, since he often comes home late, at dinner time she only boiled the dumplings enough for her daughter and herself. Enraged that his portion was not boiled, he cursed at her and beat her up. She resisted with a knife and caused injuries to him.

Women told me that the Chinese law offers light punishment to abusive husbands who murder their wives. If it were the same case for women, they said, they would all murder their husbands with weapons. Yu commented on her husband, "It's not because he cannot control it. It's because there is no consequence to his behavior." Yu continued to say that if the law punishes him, he will never do it again. Yu lamented that she is physically weaker than her husband, and that divorce is not viable, as the justice department will give the custody right of the child to her husband since she is financially dependent on him. Yu said she has thought of killing him and committing suicide dozens of times. She said next time he beats her again, she will do all she can to kill him, and then commit suicide. After all, Yu said, "There is no difference between life and death in my life."

As mentioned before, all the women to whom I talked have sought help from the police and All Women's Federation, but to no avail. In their words, "The police and the All Women's Federation are dog's fart (gou pi)," meaning that they are useless. Indeed, their husbands asserted to them that they could beat them to death without going to prison. Many women told me that they are prepared to take the risk of killing the husband before taking their own lives.

The following two women are representative of these women. Ju's husband threatened to kill her entire family if she filed for divorce. Similar to Ju's case, Hua's husband rejects divorce. When she mentioned divorce once, her husband not only strangled her neck, but also locked her and her daughter in the kitchen, turning on the gas to let them die. Eventually he released them. Women like Ju and Hua swore to me that one day they will take actions to kill their husbands and then suicide, although putting this thought into action often requires a great deal of thinking and preparation. Ju said,

Every time when I think of killing him and then myself, I think of my child and my parents. What would happen to them if I killed him and myself? These thoughts have been tormenting me with an immeasurable amount of pain. I inquired about all the medications that can cause death, but every time when I was about to use these medications on him and myself, I paused. I felt an immense amount of pain. Let him and I perish together (*tonggui yujin*) - this thought is always on my mind, countless times.

These women aspire to end the lives of both their husbands and themselves, but often times, the thought of their children and parents refrains these attempts. As they related to me, it is selfish to only focus on releasing their own pain through death and not think about the repercussion of their death on their parents and their children. Entangled in these conflicting thoughts, women often go through a number of strategies such as avoiding and pleasing, talking back and fighting back, escape, seeking help from natal family, and hunger strike, before taking extreme measures such as killing him and suicide. Min said, “One day I will repay him ten times the sufferings he gave me. My life has been destroyed by him. I have no fear but hatred now. I just want to make him pay the price. This is life: if you are not able to walk on a paved path, you have to walk on a thorny small road. I need to treat violence with violence (*yibao zhibao*).” Indeed, as mentioned earlier in the paper, a large number of women have done so, and women who have injured or killed their abusive husbands account for a substantial number of female prisoners in China.

Non-State network – Natal Family

For some women who enjoy a support system with their family members and relatives, the natal family is an important source of support and help. Often times, it is not until the women realize that their personal strategies prove to be ineffective and unsuccessful that they start seeking help from their natal

families. This information network of the natal family, however, is often only available to women who are not only physically close, but also emotionally tied, to their natal families, excluding those whose abusers intentionally isolate the women from their families and friends through verbal and physical threats. The following two groups of women are often not able to access this informal resource. The first group of women, after marriage, follows their husbands to their husbands' hometown, which is physically far away from their natal families, relatives, and friends. The second group of women marries their husbands against their parents' disapproval, and hence fears bringing shame and humiliation to their natal family and themselves by seeking their help.

When women seek support from their natal families during a crisis, their family members are able to intervene and control their husbands. Yan is a stay-at-home mom. When she learns that her husband, a government employee, has had multiple extramarital affairs, she forgives him. However, he continues to have a mistress – a foot masseuse. One day Yan walked into the house, catching her husband in bed with his mistress. Upset about seeing them together, Yan warned them that she needed to tell his superior about this affair. Angry at her words, her husband and the mistress started beating her. They stripped her clothes and beat her whole body black and blue until she lost consciousness.

Her neighbor heard the commotion and called the emergency. She was then taken to the hospital where she was diagnosed with multiple bone fractures throughout the body, including two fractured ribs and two fractured feet bones. She subsequently had 6 stitches on the face.

In the hospital, Yan called her brother for help. Her brother found her husband and his mistress and beat them up so severely that both of them were hospitalized with multiple severe injuries. Her brother commented, "If our father did not pull me away, I would have killed him. I grew up with my sister and we are very close. I will not let anyone bully or beat her." Yan's brother and father confronted her husband that if her husband dared to sue them for his multiple injuries and put any one of them to prison, they would beat his entire family to death or paralysis. Their threatening words have been so

effective that Yan's husband's entire family members are in retreat and never dare to provoke any members of Yan's family again. The strong support of her natal family is enough to intimate Yan's husband into submission.

Women like Yan told me that a man beat his wife because he has never tasted being beaten without being able to resist. As they said to me, if a man knows that someone will beat him in response to his beating of his wife, he will not dare to beat his wife any more. As in Yan's case, her husband stops beating her from then on, as he knows that her brother will beat him.

In another story, Ping's father warns her husband that if he beats his daughter once, he would beat him twice, which is enough to stop her husband from further abuse. Another woman Tan also told her brother about her abusive husband. Her brother immediately brought a number of guys to see her husband, telling him that: "If you beat my sister once, we will beat you twice. If you make her lose one hair, we will make you lose a handful of hair. Feel free to try if you don't believe it." After that her husband never beats her and behaves himself.

Women like Yan, Ping, and Tan are fortunate to enjoy the support from the informal network of their natal families. As mentioned earlier, other women, for various reasons such as being physically apart and emotionally distant from their natal families, are not able to access this support system. Liu, for instance, when her father was alive to confront and control her husband, was able to terminate the abuse. However, after her father died, she lost her support person and was once again subject to her husband's physical abuse.

Conclusion

This paper takes on critical race theory and debunks racist assumptions that Chinese women passively and helplessly accept their abuse. Rather, as illustrated in the paper, women actively engage in a number of strategies and struggles to resist violence in their daily lives. Through foregrounding women's experiences from diverse social locations and giving them voices, this paper demonstrates that their agency is constrained and hindered by the structural inequalities such as economic, social, and legal limits. In the absence of legal protection,

whether they stay with or leave their violent husbands not only depends on the efficacy of their strategies and resistance, but also relies on other factors such as their children, their parents, their economic dependence, and their financial constraints.

As illustrated in the paper, women exercise a host of resistant strategies including avoiding and pleasing, escape, talking back and fighting back, seeking support from informal networks, murdering their husbands and taking their own lives. In addition to these strategies, some also choose to temporarily separate from their husbands until things quiet down. Others manage to accumulate and keep all the evidences of the injuries from the violence and hope one day they will be helpful in court for divorce. For many women who are financially dependent on their husbands, however, divorce is not a viable option.

Women are self-reflexive when realizing that their husbands are as violent as their fathers. These women grow up watching their fathers beating their mothers. They later marry their husbands who do the same to themselves. Often times it is by no means their intention to marry someone like their violent fathers, but somehow they end up with someone just like their abusive fathers. Aware of this unhealthy cycle, women are brave enough to exert all their efforts to break out of the cycle rather than repeating it.

To the women, their violent husbands are the object of their intense hatred. In their imagination, they either bury their husbands alive, or let them die miserably before cutting them to eight pieces and feeding their dead flesh to the dogs or the field as fertilizers. In their own words, "Injuries on the body can be healed, but injuries in the heart can never be healed." Women lament to me that they have never received education about intimate partner violence in schools as they grow up. Within this restrictive and constraining structural, economic, and legal context, when laws and regulations fail to protect them, women are compelled to bear the brunt of restoring justice through inventing new wheels of strategies of resistance and thwarting the violence in their daily lives, even if it means murdering their husbands and taking their own lives.

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