A YORK UNIVERSITY PUBLICATION

Journal of the Motherhood Initiative

25th Anniversary Issue on Mothering and Motherhood

Spring / Fall 2025
Vol. 15

Oksana Moroz, Laura Bissell, Lauren E. Burrow, Tara Carpenter Estrada, Robin Silbergleid, Tammy Nyden, Ghada Alatrash, Ame Khin May-Kyawt, Zixuan Liao, Ariel Moy, Michela Rosa Di Candia, Sophie Brock and more

ZIXUAN LIAO

Maternal Ambivalence and Loss in a Changing China from a Daughter's Perspective

This article explores the intricate dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship amid the sociocultural transformation of post-Mao China from the 1980s to the present from a daughter's perspective. Employing an autoethnographic method combined with cultural and theoretical analysis, this article first examines how concepts such as "maternal ambivalence", "self-silencing," and "feminine attachment behaviours" manifest within the unique sociocultural context of China. The second section connects these theoretical and cultural frameworks to my narration of my mother's story, focussing on three key dimensions: her mothering, romantic suffering, and terminal illness. This article argues that my mother's maternal identity and personal suffering were deeply intertwined with the conflicts between traditional family hierarchies and the rise of emotional intimacy as a societal ideal for mother-daughter relationships in the 1990s. Her avoidant coping mechanisms, shaped by romantic trauma and sociocultural pressures, not only led to her precursory delusion and eventual death but also created silences in our bond that complicated my grieving process and deepened the transmission of trauma across generations. By weaving personal epiphanies with cultural and theoretical insights, this article contributes to the scholarship on motherhood, grief, trauma, and the evolving mother-daughter bond within the context of modernizing East Asian societies.

A Daughter's (Un)Biased Perspective

My mother hid all her secrets in her piano—the piano she bought for me during my childhood and moved with me three times. Although I no longer play it, the piano became a source of comfort after her death. When moving to Canada, I unexpectedly found a secret file bag hidden in the piano I left behind. These well-preserved letters, diaries, and legal documents outline her poignant and traumatic love story. I went through her writings with her sisters,

and through their accounts, I came to know her more as a woman than a mother and gradually realized the influence her traumatic experiences had on me. In the hopes of better understanding my mother's story and her mothering, I intend to explore her traumatic grief in divorce and her silence and authority in mothering that ultimately allows me to reconnect with my mother—both as a woman and as a mother.

My mother was born in 1964 on the eve of the Cultural Revolution, a proletarian movement led by the communist leader Mao Zedong. I was born in 1990 in a town in China under the single-child policy. Since reforms and opening up in 1978, which marked the start of the post-Mao era, China has undergone a significant socioeconomic transformation. This shift has also dramatically altered Chinese culture and familial relationships, introducing a focus on individualization and personal self-fulfillment (Evans, "The Gender of Communication" 981). However, traditional filial piety—the virtue that orients collectivist and family ethics and values love and respect for parents and elders—remains a code of conduct with universal social significance in China (MacCormack). Accordingly, my cross-generational relationship within this context aligns with contradictions inherent in China's social structure at the family unit level.

This article draws on my personal experience, my mother's secret diary, and family accounts to interpret her suffering and mothering. As a daughter, I can only partially understand the internal experience of mothering, and my perspective may be biased. However, the unique perspective of an adult daughter situated in a Chinese sociocultural context could benefit broader motherhood studies by incorporating an autoethnographic approach alongside cultural and theoretical analysis. Autoethnography is an academic writing approach that investigates and describes (graphy) the author's personal experience (auto) and, more importantly, critically uncovers the social and cultural discourse (ethno) through deep self-reflection. Autoethnography explores personal "epiphanies"—moments that shape a person's life (Ellis et al. 3)—and enlightens the audience "in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles" (Bochner and Ellis 111).

To critically reflect on and contextualize the inherent subjectivity of a daughter's perspective, this article engages with theoretical frameworks in maternal studies, psychoanalytical feminism, and cultural theory. Drawing on Adrienne Rich's distinction between institutional motherhood and the lived experience of mothering, I examine the tensions in my mother's maternal identity. The concept of maternal ambivalence, as articulated by scholars like Barbara Almond, is central to understanding my mother's conflicting emotions of love, depression, and control. Additionally, Jane Ussher's research on women's mental disorders and attachment helps frame my analysis of how my mother's trauma and silence shaped our bond. Finally, Harriet Evans's

exploration of women's gendered sense of self in post-Mao China helps situate my narrative within the broader sociocultural transformations of the era.

This article argues that my mother's sufferings, romantic trauma, and maternal identity are deeply intertwined with the transformation of the Chinese political economy and culture in the twenty-first century. Her maternal ambivalence stems from a conflict between the hierarchical family discipline rooted in Confucianism and the rising societal expectations for a communicative and emotionally close mother-daughter relationship since the 1990s. Her romantic sufferings reflect her avoidant coping mechanisms, which not only led to her precursory delusion and eventual death but also brought silence in our attachment and complicated my grief of her maternal loss.

Maternal Ambivalence in Social Transformation

Motherhood studies were in the spotlight of feminist theory by the mid-1970s, about a decade after the start of second-wave feminism (see Chodorow; Lazarre; Rich, for example). As second-wave feminists began to chall-enge women's traditional roles, they worked on redefining motherhood, which had been viewed as limiting women's agency. Adrienne Rich critiques institutional motherhood, arguing that patriarchal norms confine women to the roles of wife and mother, denying their other identities (39-40). Along Rich's lines, O'Reilly refers to mothering as opposed to motherhood, purporting that feminist and empowered mothering "could be experienced as a site of empowerment, a location of social change" (805).

My mother was born during the period of second-wave feminism. However, the wave sweeping the West barely reached China. Instead, women's status was dominated by China's national conditions. Women's liberation influentially began in 1958, the eighth year of the foundation of the new China, when Mao advocated for women to engage in a variety of productive labours and do the same as men, encouraging a gender-neutral representation of women (qtd. in Evans 12). In the Mao era, the ideology of gender equality (*nannü pingdeng)* was secondary to the proletarian revolution. As a result, the ephemeral liberation of women shattered when the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, and the "public images of a sweet and gentle femininity" reappeared (Evans, *The Subject of Gender* 13).

The traditional gender role differences in China are rooted in millennia-old Confucian philosophy. According to the spatial and ritual division of "inside" (*nei*) and "outside" (*wai*), women are strictly restricted to their domestic roles and do not have a role beyond their family (Rosenlee ch. 3.2). A good woman should act up to "three Obediences and the four virtues" (*sancong side*), which requires her to obey her father, husband, and son and regulate her actions and

speech (Rosenlee ch. 4.1). In the early twenty-first century, while the ancient code has been abandoned long since the establishment of new China, the "men outside the home, women inside" (*nanzhuwai, nüzhunei*) point of view still influences the spouses' family practices. This embedded gender hierarchy explains the fixed expectations of women's domestic roles in the liberation movement and the resurgence of traditional feminine images after that.

Within motherhood studies, the mother-daughter relationship is one of the primary areas of inquiry. Evans elaborates on the specificity and signification of the mother-daughter relationship in gender studies: "Narratives about the relationship between daughters and mothers reveal powerful ties linking the present and future … and offer rich insights into processes and meanings of change in understandings of gender" (*The Subject of Gender* 17). Derived from Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory of sexual differences, especially the Oedipus complex, the theme of the mother-daughter relationship has historically centered on separation, particularly emphasizing the decisive influence of early childhood experiences (Benjamin; Chodorow; Friday). This theoretical perspective, however, overlooks sociocultural factors and the adult daughter's agency and marginalizes the specificity of female identities in family relationships. In recent decades, more scholars have argued that closeness instead of separation is the key to the mother-daughter relationship (Edelman; Evans; O'Reilly). Drawing upon Western feminist writers, O'Reilly emphasizes that the close mother-daughter relationship empowers the formation of the daughter's self-worth, especially in her adolescence (163). Evans draws a similar conclusion in her research on daughters and mothers in urban China, indicating that the adult daughter's self, while maintaining independence, "remains tied to the mother's as a condition of its own formation" (*The Subject of Gender* 2).

The evolving sociocultural situation in China also represents such mother-daughter dynamics. In traditional Chinese family systems, a married daughter is likened to "spilt water" (*pochuqu de shui*) that cannot be gathered up again, symbolizing her forced separation from her parents' home and subordination to her husband's family (*The Subject of Gender* 18). Conversely, in contemporary urban China, Xiong Jingming's case study demonstrates a transformation of the mother-married-daughter relationship from separation into closeness. The married daughter stays close to her mother, particularly through the mother's involvement in rearing the daughter's offspring. Although such ritual practice denotes the oppression from patriarchal society, Xiong believes it also manifests mother-daughter solidarity (106).

When the mother-daughter relationship moves beyond Freud's psychoanalytical framework and towards a sense of closeness, the interplay between contemporary values and traditional discourses creates various conflicts and dilemmas in mothering. O'Reilly acknowledges the paradox between the

promise of feminist mothering and the feminist maternal practice that remains to be solved (819). Barbara Almond defends "the dark side of motherhood" and proposes "maternal ambivalence" to depict mothers' mixed feelings of loving and hating towards their children and their subsequent anxiety, shame, and guilt due to being socially unacceptable (2). She classifies the main causes that may intensify ambivalence, highlighting rigid social expectations and cultural imperatives of being a good mother and engaging in correct child-rearing (9).

Maternal ambivalence shows more complex representations regarding daughters' age groups and more oppressed social norms in contemporary China. For their toddler daughters' future happiness, Chinese mothers often wish for their independence and excellence, recognizing these qualities as essential for women to secure a place in society. However, they are concerned about their daughters being too independent and excellent to be accepted by a social hierarchy where men are assumed to excel over women (Fong et al. 89). Researchers believe such dilemmas reflect unequal gender rights in contemporary China (110). Chinese mothers are expected to develop a communicative bond of mutual trust with their adolescent and adult daughters. Associated with the marketization and urbanization in China's post-Mao era, Harriet Evans proposes an emotional or intimate turn starting from the mid-1990s—"from a generalized assertion of women's emotional qualities to the recent growing emphasis on women's capacity for sharing and communicating with [their] children" ("Chinese Modernity" 136).

Except for serving political and economic reforms, other main reasons for this trend include the overall improvements in material conditions and the one-child policy. As living conditions steadily improved, the focus of parenting shifted from material safety to spiritual insurance, while the one-child policy enabled parents to dedicate themselves to the well-rounded growth of a single child. As Evans explains, "Cautioned not to spoil her single child, nor to give in to the desire to overwhelm her child in 'oppressive love,' the successful mother has to be the skilful domestic manager, empathetic friend, and moral advisor to her happy and healthy child" ("Chinese Modernity" 134). Meanwhile, Evans's interviews with daughters illustrate mothers' challenges in achieving this standard and daughters' aspirations for this ideal relationship and sense of dismay (129–32). Once a mother's and daughter's expectations are inconsistent, Xiong claims that conflicts possibly arise in their relations (101). This conflict with the daughter's expectations aggravates the mother's guilt and anxiety.

In summary, rapid sociopolitical changes in post-Mao China have reshaped ideas of the "good woman" and "good mother," creating tensions between traditional values and contemporary expectations. However, the influence of conventional parenting values does not disappear. Caught in the middle of

various expectations, mothers confront dilemmas, manifesting maternal ambivalence. Furthermore, my mother's coping mechanisms in her romantic life mirrored her maternal ambivalence, which, in turn, influenced her ability to connect emotionally with me as a daughter. Through the lens of the mother's suffering and death, I subsequently explore how the mother's trauma passes onto the daughter and influences the daughter's self-formation.

Shared Trauma and Complicated Grief

We face many losses in life, from early separations to major events like divorce and death. Loss is accompanied by subsequent grief and mourning, which are psychological and physical manifestations in reaction to loss. Freud classifies mourning as normal and pathological. Whereas normal mourning helps the mourner develop new relationships after the mourning process, pathological grief indicates patients' inability to adapt to new environments and change their life patterns (Freud 250–51). Although Freud's distinction between normal and pathological mourning has greatly influenced grief studies, feminist scholars like Jane Ussher challenge its male-centered perspective, highlighting the ways married women's depression and grief in facing relationship breakdown are often pathologized within a framework of traditional gender norms (42).

Before the mid-twentieth century, divorce in China was rare and deemed scandalous. Women must be obedient to their husbands and rely on bearing a son to secure their status in their husbands' homes (Lu and Wang 414). In 1950, the enactment of the first marriage law changed the legal context of marriage by prohibiting bigamy and arranged marriage. However, the divorce rate was still low until the 1980s when the new marriage law and one-child policy were implemented. With the social and economic transformations, new policies facilitated free-choice marriage, lessened the restriction on granting divorce, and greatly decoupled marriage and reproduction (Evans, *The Subject of Gender* 184; Lu and Wang 415). The crude divorce rate from 1990 to 2000 steadily grew, according to the China National Bureau of Statistics, but kept at less than one in one thousand, which was far behind the United States and European nations (Lu and Wang 44).[1] Evans believes that the relatively low divorce rate in this period simultaneously resulted from "a lengthy history of a cultural model of patrilineality" (*The Subject of Gender* 128) combined with incomplete gender equality driven by the communist government, which clings to the traditional gender roles of family and domestic life for political stability (12).

Xiong believes that "the legitimacy of women's freedom in their choice of marriage partners and divorce" (5) is a major factor affecting women's status in the family and familial relationships in contemporary urban China. My

mother got divorced from my biological father in 1993 when I was three years old and had her second divorce in 2006 after a ten-year remarriage. In the 1990s, it was common to view marriage as the most significant event to determine a woman's happiness for the rest of her life. According to Suet Lin Hung's study, less educated female subjects regard divorce as unacceptable and pathological and ascribe the failure of marriage to divorced women's mental illness or personality flaws (4). In comparison, my mother had a postsecondary education, which was rare in that period in the small town where she was raised. After graduation, she devoted her whole life to her profession as a music teacher in an elementary school. As such, higher education and reputable employment endowed her with a greater sense of self and independence and the authority to divorce, challenging the environment where the marriage decision was still family-based—families and friends would discourage women from divorcing for the sake of children's wellbeing. Instead, my mother did not disclose any thoughts to her family until the divorce was finalized. Her self-silencing, on the one hand, suggests that she was a liberal feminine subject, taking control of her destiny. On the other, it reflects her attempt to avoid shame in a Chinese culture where the collective often takes precedence over the individual ("Psychotherapy in China"). Furthermore, psychological counselling was not an option for her, since seeking help for mental health issues was still a stigma for many people at that time (Higgins et al. 105). As such, her avoidant coping mechanisms isolated her from support, shaping the avoidant attachment between us during her illness and death.

John Bowlby defines attachment as "an ongoing relationship … an internalized propensity to seek proximity to and contact with a preferred attachment figure, usually the mother" (352). By interacting with mothers, children develop either secure or insecure attachments, in which overprotective parenting leads to anxious attachment, whereas emotional distance fosters avoidant attachment. In their relationship with others, "the anxious/ambivalent remained excessively reliant on others … whereas the avoidant became compulsively self-reliant and distrustful of others" (Parkes and Prigerson 191). Resonating with insecure attachment, Dana Jack proposes "feminine attachment behaviours" with self-silencing as a primary schema. Self-silencing represses women's own needs and expressions in relationships, extensively correlating with women's depression and even risk of death (Jack 40).

Bowlby's theory, while foundational, has been critiqued for prioritizing early childhood attachments and loss. My mother's story illustrates how divorce as a loss brings traumatic experiences and how cultural and relational factors can reshape attachment dynamics well into adulthood. My mother died from lung cancer when I was twenty-two years old, but the underlying trigger of her disease was her posttraumatic stress disorder after her second divorce. In the 1990s and 2000s, extramarital affair on the husband's part was

the biggest reason for divorce (Ma), and my mother's second marriage was no exception. Chinese society exhibits much higher moral tolerance of men's sexual infidelity than that of women, with men who have an affair being labelled "successful" and "attractive" to some extent. In contrast, women having an affair carry the stigma (Liu et al. ch. 5.2). Even though women like my mother are cheated on and are victims, they are blamed for failing to manage their husbands or having lost sexual attraction through aging. Self-silencing and avoidant attachment made my mother bear the humiliation and social pressure alone, culminating in persecutory delusion—a type of delusion in which individuals firmly believe that someone or a group is planning to harm them despite a definite lack of proof. Although her romantic suffering is personal and specific, her traumatic disorder reflects the dilemma of the group of highly educated and working women in China's fast-changing society; they are trapped between the image of excellent and independent women and the shackles of conventional gender expectations.

Although my mother endured her delusions in isolation, she could not face late-stage cancer without me. A fatal illness renders the continuity of the mother-daughter relationship a conjunct challenge (Manderson 192). In China, daughters are called "mother's little heart warmer" (*tiexin xiao mian'ao*) not only because of their irreplaceable emotional bond but also because women are expected to be responsible for the burdensome care of elderly or ill parents (Huang et al. 60). Women's significantly more frequent, intensive, and emotionally invested caregiving compared to men highlights unequal gender role ideologies and entails judgment of a daughter's filial piety and intimacy with her parents.

Furthermore, chemotherapy and radiation therapy can dramatically change the patient's body due to the severe side effects. As the illness gets worse, the patient loses all hair as well as control of the body's functions and suffers from intense pain. Through a psychoanalytic feminist lens, Naomi Lowinsky claims that the feminine body fundamentally constructs a woman's identity. Therefore, "when a daughter watches a mother die, especially from an illness, she becomes aware of her own physical vulnerability as a female" (Edelman 274). The mother's way of dealing with the physical distortions influences the daughter's attitudes toward illness, stress, femininity, and body image (110), to which I would like to add anxiety, self-esteem, and shame, as well as self-compassion and vulnerability.

When a mother dies from an illness, the mother-daughter relationship is not terminated; instead, the attachment embraces the experience of grief and mourning following the loss of the attachment figure (Groh 11). An avoidant adult in bereavement tends to inhibit their grief and produce feelings of guilt, where the grief does not disappear; rather, the complicated course of grief leads to prolonged grief disorder (Parkes and Prigerson 294). My avoidant

manifestations—including self-reliance, self-criticism, and celibacy for eleven years after my mother's death—denote my persistence and internalization of the attachment pattern to my mother and the transmission of trauma from my mother to me. Next, I recount some pivotal experiences surrounding my mother's mothering, romantic suffering, and terminal illness, illustrating the complicated mother-daughter dynamics in the context of social transformation in China.

Daughter's Narratives within Chinese Culture

My Mother's Mothering

My grandmother had four children, and my mother was the oldest one. Among the four daughters, my mother's personality was most like my grandfather's. "Both of them were quite introverted and serious," my grandmother said. "They always kept things to themselves and did not communicate with us." My grandfather was a typical parent in a patriarchal society, getting everything his way and allowing no one in the family to question him. One incident my grandmother shared revealed the severity of his parenting style. When my mother was in primary school, one day at home, she held a textbook and asked my grandfather how to pronounce a specific word. The strong accent might have distorted his pronunciation; my mother pointed out that her teacher did not pronounce it as he did. Regarding her response as challenging to his parental authority, my grandfather immediately slapped my mother. The blow was so hard it left her whole face red and swollen.

My mother's mothering style manifests the transmission of traditional parenthood values. She was a controlling, serious mother with high expectations. She bought a piano for me and taught me to play when I was five. With the support of a good instrument and a hands-on teacher, I was supposed to make great achievements in piano playing. However, I quickly quit when I was enrolled in middle school. The main reason was my mother's strictness and constant scolding, which made me too afraid of practicing in front of her. One vivid memory stands out: We were sitting on the piano stool, and she excoriated me loudly in my ear after I practiced a piece of music. I could barely register her words; the sheer volume overwhelmed me. Instinctively, I put my hands over my ears. In an instant, she slapped my hands and yelled even louder, "Don't you dare not listen!" It was only later, after learning about my maternal grandfather's parenting style, that I began to understand the transgenerational connections behind her strictness.

My mother's authority extended to alienating me from my biological father. After she divorced my biological father, I rarely had contact with him. He had not fulfilled the obligation of paying child support, which increased my mother's burden of raising me alone, intensifying her resentment towards him.

Wanting me to stand by her side, my mother restricted my meetings with my father and instilled her unilateral narrative in me. As a child, I accepted her narrative and willingly cut off contact with my father, as if to show loyalty to her and gratitude for her sacrifice. While this dynamic generally reflects that Chinese parents naturally believe they have the right to intrude into children's lives, it also highlights the deep-rooted desire for a symbiotic relationship between a mother and daughter.

As Evans elucidates, communication has become a new requirement to be a good mother in twenty-first-century China. This expectation could result in Chinese mothers' ambivalence, as they have been accustomed to maintaining prestige. My mother rarely discussed things with me beyond studying, neither her hardship in raising me nor her troubles in her marriage. Similarly, I was reluctant to share my adolescent troubles with her because I was educated that the most important thing for a student is studying well. This belief left me feeling that seeking understanding or sympathy would be futile. When my mother was struggling with the messiness of her second divorce, I experienced my silent distress—changing my name after hers and having everyone at school know. While I wanted to support her, I dreaded my peers' reactions and their curious stares. In pain, I wrote "It's not my fault; I cannot bear it" on a notepaper and then tied and hid it in my piggy bank. The sentiment may sound only like adolescent sentimentality, but the short sentence expressed my frustration with the unavoidable changes in my life brought about by my mother's circumstances. The next day, when I was putting in another notepaper, I was astonished to find the previous one was opened and creased, with a deep pinch mark that had even torn the paper. My mother must have found and read it. I could even imagine her implacable guilt, anguish, and sense of disempowerment culminating at that moment. Yet, she never mentioned it. Neither did I. Her silence, while isolating, may have been an effort to protect me from her pain, reflecting the cultural expectation for mothers to endure hardship without complaint.

My mother's other side as an independent, strong-willed, and assertive woman in the new era deeply influenced me as well. She taught me to do the laundry and cook when I was young, wishing me to be self-reliant instead of marrying better in the future. She dared to travel alone to Singapore even though she knew nothing about English and had never gone abroad. While she did not talk too much, her daily life practices served as an example and guided and encouraged me to break down the obsolete social disciplining of women. After her death, I returned to the university for further studies as a master's student to realize my artistic dream and then pursued the PhD path in Canada—my first time travelling abroad. Social prejudices, like "women shouldn't aim too high," faded as I pursued my goals.

My Mother's Romantic Sufferings

I did not know my mother had persecutory delusions until the day we took her ashes back to my hometown. Following the funeral home's arrangement, I held the heavy and big marble urn throughout the journey. In the car, her sisters began to discuss my mother's prolonged suffering from persecutory delusion and its causes. The most significant symptom was her unreasonable belief that her ex-husband and his mistress had poisoned her towel and she requested her sisters to send it for inspection. Even though the result showed nothing abnormal, she continued to doubt other things—I suddenly understood why she had locked doors and shuttered windows every day.

During the funeral procession, my aunts followed the Chinese custom of throwing paper money. While papers drifted behind us, my mind drifted, too. Did my mother have psychosis? Instantly, her image as an elegant woman and a serious teacher was almost subverted in my mind, and I felt my mother being alienated from me. Simultaneously, I felt guilty for not realizing that her suffering and anguish were far greater than I had imagined.

Almost all my mother's secret documents are about her ex-husband. She even carefully preserved the hand-written letters they exchanged when they first met each other. However, the finer sounding those words were, the harder she was hit later when she discovered his affair. In her diaries, she astonishingly recorded the man's everyday whereabouts and mentioned her deteriorating health, self-soothing thoughts, and me.

> As your wife, I have never betrayed you in the past. I am not betraying you now, and I will never betray you in the future. I believe you did not betray me as well but did something wrong out of impulse. You just have to wake up and change. Marriage for a day is a hundred days of grace, and marriage for ten years is even deeper. Remember, we have been thick and thin together; now what is important is having a happy life. I sent many text messages, but he never replied. He only replied when I asked him to call. Every time, he asked for mutual understanding and trust but did not talk about the actual content. (June 2006)

> I do not know exactly what he wants to do. Anyways, I am recovering well now, and school will start in a few days. Family matters cannot be changed quickly just by me saying so. I just need to relax, live a healthy and happy life, take good care of my daughter, let her live happily, and make progress in her studies. I read several articles in *Reader's Digest* today, which deeply inspired me to understand the true meaning of life: Safeness is a blessing, ordinariness is a blessing, and peace is a blessing. (August 2006)[2]

My mother's words were rational, restrained, and wise, denoting her good education along with traditional family values at the same time. She proactively sought communication with her former husband, yet her focus remained on facts and reason, often suppressing her emotions. This inhibition made her writing sound as if she were describing someone else's life. Through repressing anger, she expected to avoid relationship breakdown; through rational analysis and self-criticism, she tended to prevent herself from being overwhelmed by her horror, anxiety, and loneliness. While my mother's emotional restraint shaped my approach to self-expression, my interpretation of her actions remains inherently influenced by my perspective as her daughter.

My mother and my life path separated when I left home and studied at a university in another city. Enjoying my time on campus, I thought everything was getting better. However, it was during this period that the traumatic experiences broke my mother's body and soul. Her ex-husband refused to pay the remaining damages, colluded with his mistress to make a false counter-charge, and maliciously spread personal correspondence between him and my mother at the school where she worked. After my mother filed for civil enforcement, my stepfather and his mistress could not avoid their obligation but maliciously brought a bag of coins and asked my mother to count them. Reading my mother's complaint letter to the court, I could imagine how she was repeatedly traumatized by recounting the details of the events that hurt her. How could she not feel fear dealing with such a catalogue of personal persecution? In public, she appeared tough and unyielding; in private, the repression of her emotions led to feelings of helplessness and powerlessness, resulting in a physical and emotional breakdown. My mother's romantic suffering not only left psychological scars but also set the stage for her emotional detachment and subsequent physical decline during her terminal illness.

My Mother's Terminal Illness

A painful illness that leads to the death of a loved one leaves behind correspondingly agonizing memories (Parkes and Prigerson 76). Indeed, I do not remember much about my mother's hospitalization and treatment, nor do I recall the exact details of our conversations, as we rarely opened up to each other. However, I vividly remember the moments when I had to assist her with even the simplest daily routines, tasks she could no longer manage. In these moments, the body became our primary medium of communication, a channel through which we shared our vulnerability and mutual trauma.

My mother was diagnosed with small-cell lung cancer in my first year of employment at a software company in a city two-hour drive north of my hometown. This aggressive cancer has a "high degree of malignancy, rapid disease progression, poor prognosis and easy recurrence" (Cui et al. 355).

Therefore, we knew initially that my mother might not survive for more than five years or, according to medical data, the average life span of two to three years. The fact of mortality initially left me frozen, then brought an uncanny feeling to me: How should I live together with my mother to face the countdown to her end?

The life-threatening disease violently disrupted our everyday world. Before her diagnosis, my mother was busy with the interior of her new apartment in the city where I was working, envisioning a life with me after her retirement. To continue to work normally and provide better care for my mother, I brought her to live with me and hired a domestic worker. I accompanied my mother day and night to the hospital, giving my best to ensure her comfort. When she rested at home, I improved my living skills and looked after the rest of the things for our new home. As if by being busy with instrumental tasks, the anxiety and fear of my mother's anticipatory mortality were lessened.

Even so, I still noticed that my mother acted overly optimistic. Although I was relieved to see her responding positively to treatments, I was also concerned by how rarely she expressed negative emotions. In the first courses of treatment, as the cancer cells were effectively inhibited, she appeared confident, talking and even singing cheerfully in the inpatient ward. She had enough energy to lecture me about "knowing the ways of the world" and to express her disapproval of my boyfriend. Even when she had to shave off her beautiful hair, she did so without complaint, although she was a woman who always cared about appearance. However, she firmly refused to read the articles by recovered patients that I carefully collected to encourage her. I knew she was avoiding her fear.

We all expected the furnishings to be finished as soon as possible because the cancer returned faster and more aggressively, so living in the new home might have been her last wish. Only a few months after the completion of the interior work, with no time for formaldehyde to dissipate, we moved into our new home. My mother was initially pleasant but increasingly struggled to control her body. A couple of nights, I was roused by the noise from her attempt to slide off the bed. Due to side effects, she had to go to the bathroom quite often, but she did not awaken me, even though she could barely stand up. I hurriedly caught her and led her to the washroom. There were two lights in the bathroom; one was white and bright, and the other was yellow and dim. In a hurry, I opened the dim light every time. But I wanted to open the bright one. Why could I not do such a simple thing well? Since then, the yellow and dim light, our stumbling steps, and my mother's constantly slipping body have formed a haunting montage, unreasonably fixed in my mind. During my period of mourning, if someone accidentally turned on that light, it would trigger a horrifying flashback, evoking an intense sense of helplessness and hopelessness.

Before long, my mother passed away in the hospital. When she was still conscious, her last words to me were: "Watch me." In Chinese culture, "seeing parents off to their end" (*song zhong*) (qtd. in Chow 385) is a crucial practice through which children fulfill their filial duty. Her last wish turned out to be about me. Those two simple words transcended responsibility, social expectations, and the fear of the end, manifesting the deepest connection between a Chinese mother and daughter. It was her way of expressing her need and love for me. At last, I fulfilled my mother's dying wish. Through long-term mental and physical exhaustion, death seemed a relief for both of us.

Conclusion

I now more deeply understand my mother as a mother and a woman. While motherhood studies have explored diverse perspectives—such as queer, adolescent, and Black mothering—motherhood and mothering in the contemporary Chinese context, along with the implications of maternal bereavement in the mother-daughter relationship, remain underexplored. This article used autoethnography and cultural analysis to examine how my mother's mothering, romantic suffering, and terminal illness intertwined with my life as a daughter, shaping my attachment to and identification with her. Reflecting on personal experiences during China's social transformation in the post-Mao era, this study argued that my mother's identities as both a mother and a wife were constrained by the tension between traditional Confucian family values and contemporary revolutionary ideologies, leading to her maternal ambivalence and prolonged emotional distress. Through shared trauma and the transmission of attachment styles, my grief over her illness and eventual death became complex, reflecting a desire for a continuous bond and mutual identity.

As a single case study, this research is shaped by my perspective as a daughter. By emphasizing the intersection of personal narrative and cultural analysis, this study contributes to understanding maternal ambivalence in patriarchal societies and the enduring bonds in mother-daughter relationships, offering a path towards self-healing and awareness. Furthermore, it challenges the psychoanalytical focus on early-child separation by reframing the mother-daughter relationship as a continuous and evolving dynamic, extending into adulthood and bereavement. This research also lays a foundation for my future exploration of mother-daughter relationships in contemporary artwork, fostering a more empathetic understanding of daughter artists' emotions and motives in depicting their deceased mothers and uncovering the psychic structures of both mothers and adult daughters.

Endnotes

1. The crude divorce rate is the number of divorces per one thousand residents that year. In 1994, four per one thousand people divorced in the United States and 2.7 per one thousand people in the United Kingdom. Data source: OWID based on UN, OECD, Eurostat and other sources. (Ortiz-Ospina and Roser)
2. Quote from my mother's diary, translated by the author. Diary of the author's mother, June and August 2006, days unknown.

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Journal of the Motherhood Initiative
25th Anniversary Issue