

The balinghou

Chinese parents bemoan the laziness and greed of their children, but this generation of young people has had enough

by **James Palmer**



Shanghai, July 2012. *All photos by Bruno Barbey/Magnum*

In 2004, fresh off the plane in Beijing, I was asked to judge

an English competition for high-school seniors. My two co-judges were pleasantly cynical middle-aged sociologists, both professors at Tsinghua University. After listening to the umpteenth speech about how China used to be poor, but was now rich and powerful, I remarked to one of them that the students seemed a little sheltered.

'They don't know anything!' she spat. 'They don't have any idea about how people live. None of this generation do. They're all so spoilt.'

It's a view I've heard time and again over the past eight years, and one of which the Chinese media never tire. The young get it from left and right. This January alone, the jingoistic Major General and media commentator Luo Yuan condemned the young for being physically and mentally unfit, ranting: 'Femininity is on the rise, and masculinity is on the decline. With such a lack of character and determination and such physical weakness, how can they shoulder the heavy responsibility?' Meanwhile the writer and social critic Murong Xuecun blasted them in the US magazine *Foreign Policy* because 'fattened to the point of obesity with Coca-Cola and hamburgers [...] the young generation only believes official pronouncements; some even think contradicting the official line is heretical. They do not bother to check the details'.

There's a measure of truth in these criticisms. The year I arrived, when I was going through the near-obligatory expat period as a teacher before becoming a full-time writer and editor, I had to forcibly drag a 19-year-old out of a classroom after he threw a temper tantrum, drummed the floor and refused to leave. Murong's claim that the young unwittingly swallow government statements doesn't stand up in an era where official credibility has been shattered by social media tools, but one can see where Luo's claims are coming from. Ironically, the children of army officers seem especially pudgy. The teachers at a senior academy attached to an army base described their bullet-headed charges to me as looking like 'stubby wobbling penises,' and held private

competitions as to which student was the most 'sausagey'.

Food metaphors are telling — older Chinese want to know: 'Why do they have it so easy, when we had it so hard?' The main target of this slating has been what the Chinese call the *balinghou* — young people who were born after 1980, who never knew food rationing and were raised after China's 'reform and opening' began. I'm talking here of the urban middle class, who dominate Chinese media both as purchasers and consumers. The raft of criticisms being levelled has very little to do with the actual failings of the young, but is a symptom of the yawning, and unprecedented gulf between young urban Chinese and their parents.

Zhang Jun, a 26-year-old PhD student, described the situation: 'It's not just a generation gap. It's a values gap, a wealth gap, an education gap, a relationships gap, an information gap.' Lin Meilian, 30, and a journalist, bluntly stated: 'I have nothing in common with my mother. We can't talk about anything. She doesn't understand how I choose to live my life.'

Parents who spent their own twenties labouring on remote farms have children who measure their world in malls, iPhones, and casual dates

This kind of distance is not unique to China. But most other countries can claim far greater continuity between generations. My adolescence in Manchester in the 1990s was different in degree, not in kind, from that of my parents in Bristol and Sydney in the 1960s. But the parents of China's post-1980 generation (themselves born between 1950 and 1965) grew up in a rural, Maoist world utterly different from that of their children. In their adolescence, there was one phone per village, the universities were closed and jobs were assigned from above. If you imagine

the disorientation and confusion of many parents in the West when it comes to the internet and its role in their children's lives, and then add to that dating, university life and career choices, you come close to the generational dilemma. Parents who spent their own early twenties labouring on remote farms have to deal with children who measure their world in malls, iPhones and casual dates.

Older Chinese, especially those now in their fifties or sixties, often seem like immigrants in their own country. They have that same sense of disorientation, of struggling with societal norms and mores they don't quite grasp, and of clinging to little alcoves of their own kind. In their relationships with their children, they remind me of the parents of the Indian and Bangladeshi kids I grew up with, struggling to advise their children about choices they never had to make. Yet for all the dissonance that geographical dislocation creates, the distance between a Bangladeshi village and a Manchester suburb is, if anything, smaller than that between rural China in the 1970s and modern Beijing.

Immigrants often have a stable set of values from their home culture from which to draw sustenance, whether religious or cultural. But for the children of the Cultural Revolution in China, there's been no such continuity. They were raised to believe in the revolutionary Maoism of the 1960s and '70s, and then told as young adults in the late 1970s that everything drilled into them in their adolescence had been a terrible mistake. Then they were fed a trickle of socialism, rapidly belied by the rush to get rich, and finally offered the hint of a liberal counter-culture in the 1980s before Tiananmen snatched it away. In the meantime, traditional values condemned as 'counter-revolutionary' in their youth are being given a quick polish and propped up as the new backbone of society by the authorities.

The young get slammed for their supposed materialism, but it's a set of values their parents hold more dearly still, since the one constant source of security for their generation has been money. Money — at least the fantasy of it — has never

abandoned them. 'The Chinese love money,' the PhD student Zhang told me, 'because it has no history'. Having gone through the gangster capitalism of China's rush to wealth, the older generation's bleakly amoral attitude toward how to get by can shock their children. Huang Nubo, a poet, rock-climber and billionaire property developer, now in his fifties, has been one of the few people to talk about this openly, speaking of the 'devastated social ecology' in an interview with the Chinese magazine *Caixin*. But Huang is a rarity, and cushioned by his own wealth; far more parents are concerned that their children aren't doing enough to get on.

While immigrants dream of their children becoming doctors, lawyers, or professors, domestic Chinese ambitions mostly lie elsewhere. Doctors are poorly paid, overworked, and unpopular, thanks to a flailing and corruption-ridden medical system. Lawyers are bound to the vagaries of the ever-shifting judicial system. Professors earn marginal incomes and rely on outside work to get by. The priority for Chinese parents isn't professional standing or public achievement, but money and security, regardless of what the job involves.

Zhang is a fast-tracked young academic who regularly attends high-level diplomatic and security conferences. (She was the only person I talked to who asked to use a pseudonym, conscious of her own Google sensitivity.) She said: 'My mother can't understand anything of what I do, especially since it doesn't come with any "perks". Last new year, I was home and my cousin was there too. He's a pharmaceutical rep. What that means is that he sells fake or overpriced drugs to hospitals, with the collusion of the doctors, and they split the profits. And my mom kept saying: "Oh, why don't you go into business with your cousin! He makes so much money!" She knows what his job involves but she never thinks of it as wrong.'

Chinese parents pour money into their children's education, but they also spend on short cuts. Most can't afford to do

what one acquaintance's billionaire mining family did when he failed to get into Tsinghua University: buy him citizenship in the Dominican Republic so that he could attend Tsinghua as a 'foreign student', with cash as his only qualification. But they could do as Zhang's mother did, and bribe her teachers every term to sit her at the front of the class, so that she wouldn't be lost among the other 50 or 60 students.

It's still possible to forge a career in China based on merit, though that's becoming harder as the rich and well-connected pull the ladders away. Take the arts, where just participating in a national-level dance competition requires a minimum payment of 20,000 or 30,000 yuan (approximately \$3,000 to \$5,000, in a country where average incomes for urban residents are around \$500 per month).

'The actual winner is chosen by talent. But you need to fork over the money to the judges to be in the running. So the girls either have to rely on their daddies, or they have to find new "daddies",' a 21-year-old dancer told me. In music, one of the country's top conservatories, once an incubator for greatness, now requires students to buy private classes from the director at 5,000 yuan (\$800) a time. If everyone else is playing dirty, even the most honest parents are left with little choice for their children's future, and some rue their own idealism. Han Suzhen, 57, a retired schoolteacher, commented: 'We didn't raise them in a way that adapts well to this world. We taught them ideals that were instilled in us, a kind of innocence. But today everybody is chasing the things we were taught not to value: we were taught to give to society, now they're taught to get for themselves in any way possible. It's the exact opposite. There's nobody talking about ideas or freedom.'

As has been the case for much of China's history, the most attractive prospect is an official job. On paper the salaries are low, but even an unimportant job in the extended hierarchies of officialdom comes with guaranteed benefits and security for life, known as the 'iron rice bowl'. A midlevel

position is a licence for extortion and string-pulling. Zhang told me: 'My cousin, the drug dealer, keeps pestering me. "Why don't you become an official? Then I can tell my business partners I have a relative who's an official, and we can both make money."'

Jobs in one of the giant state-owned enterprises, such as the oil behemoth Sinopec or the 'big four' banks, are the next best thing. These state-backed jobs are also *tizhinei*, 'inside the system', with all the attendant perks of generous expense accounts, strong social security and, at the right level, regular pay-offs. That's why they come with a price tag, whether in cash or in *guanxi*, an everyday Chinese term for influence, favour-trading and nepotism. Getting an initial opening requires parental backing. When a list of candidates for an entry-level job in a provincial state-owned enterprise was leaked online in December, it included the most influential relatives of each applicant.

Not every post can be bought. Li Xiang, a handsomely fey 25-year-old, is in the middle of the examination and interview process to become a central government official. 'But it's frustrating for me because my parents both work for the central government,' he said. 'There's a rule that you can't be in the same department as your immediate relation. The central government application system is much cleaner than the local government or the state-owned enterprises; you can't buy or influence your way in.'

He outlined the pros and cons of his move as we ate a pricey 400-yuan steak meal. 'It means a significant pay cut for me, from 10,000 in my current job to maybe 6,000 yuan, after tax. The first year or two is on probation, at 70 per cent of that. But the hospitals designated for officials are the best, especially the central government. The job is safe. Social security is strong. And I really do want to serve the people. That's why I applied for an advisory post to the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference [China's largely rubber-stamp parliament]. My parents were mad at

me! They yelled at me for going for a position without any power.'

Like Li, many of the post-1980 generation — contrary to their reputation for greedy materialism — want to help others. Levels of volunteering are higher than ever, though still significantly lower than in the West, and college students or young white-collar workers are the primary founders of NGOs. But to their parents, charity can be a dirty word. 'One of my friends has a sick wife, and very little money,' said Zhang, the PhD student. 'I wanted to give him 500 yuan to help him, but while I was waiting to meet him, I could hear my mother's voice in my head, telling me I was a fool. Every time I give money to someone, I feel like I'm being cheated somehow.' Another person I interviewed said: 'If I tell my mum I gave money, she berates me because I don't even have an apartment of my own yet.'

Failing to support your elderly parents can get you a jail term

And for parents whose own dreams were frustrated by history, the temptation to force their children into the path they wanted for themselves is even stronger. When I first met Luo Jingqing, with her confidence and air of slight world-weariness, I assumed she was older than her real age of 24. We talked over lunch in Element Fresh, an upmarket Shanghai-based chain popular with young professionals like her.

'My mom wanted to be a professional woman,' she told me. 'She went to a foreign languages high school to avoid having to be sent down to the countryside [a Maoist policy of the 1950s to '70s whereby 'educated youth' from the cities were sent to live among farmers]. It was that or join the army. From there she was able to get herself into the university, when it reopened, then after graduating she was assigned a job at the Japanese embassy. She met my dad there later, when she was 27. They got married because he knocked

her up, at least that's what my dad says. They're divorced now.'

'She always told me I ruined her life,' Luo continued. 'She'd tell me never to have children, because they spoilt everything. She told me that getting pregnant had wrecked her career, that it was my fault her life had stalled and she had ended up trapped by my father. She started telling me from as early as I can remember. Isn't it ridiculous?' She laughed, as people sometimes will when telling you about terrors long left behind. 'But, really, she just wants me to be her, the person she never managed to become. She wanted to be a doctor, so she really wanted me to become one. I remember yelling at her, "I'm not what you want me to be, and I never will be."' "

But trying to resist parental directives is tough. Ironically, one of the few consistent ideas to survive all of China's years of chaos has been the extreme debt owed by children to parents, most clearly articulated in Confucian philosophy but drummed in by a thousand aphorisms and pious tales. 'Filial piety is the root of all virtues,' as the saying goes. 'Love what your parents love, respect what they respect,' instructs another. This burden weighs particularly hard upon daughters. One typical morality manual issued by a Confucian nationalist organisation in 1935 taught that 'women are born with filial famine and ethical debt. So the purpose of their lives is to clear that debt.'

No culture values the serpent's tooth of a thankless child, but it's hard to imagine, in the modern West, a college dean getting front-page media coverage for returning to his village to wash the feet of his mother, or schoolchildren being made to practise kneeling to thank their parents. Even the law backs this generational fealty; failing to support your elderly parents can get you a jail term, though this, like most Chinese laws that don't directly benefit the government, is vanishingly rarely enforced. There was even an attempt to make visiting elderly parents mandatory.

These Confucian ideals have never matched reality. Chinese also has its share of idioms about filial impiety, like the description of a hypocrite as someone who 'neglects his parents and gives them a rich funeral'. And indeed, the old are frequently abandoned or neglected. Next door, in prosperous South Korea, with the longest unbroken Confucian culture in the world, the elderly are poorer, more likely to still be working, and four times more likely to kill themselves than the already suicide-prone Korean young. The suicide rate among older Chinese lags just behind Korea's, and has tripled in the past decade. But in Korea and China alike, disobedience to parents is theoretically held up as the worst of all possible sins.

Parental authority over children is often enforced with the crack of a stick. One of the standard imprecations to small children is 'I'll beat you to death!' The concept of 'Tiger mothers' might have caused a fuss in the West, prompted by Amy Chua's notorious 2011 book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. But in response, much of the Chinese media feted 'wolf dad' Xiao Baiyou, a Guangzhou businessman who wrote a book, originally called *Beat Them into Peking University* (2011), in which he smugly boasted of the atmosphere of totalitarian sadism he imposed on his four children, including beating them for arbitrary offences and denying them friends or play. In a French restaurant in Beijing, Zhang, the fast-tracked PhD student, showed me her calves, pitted with long white marks visible through her stockings. 'They're from when my mother used to cane me when I was little,' she said.

Family pressure is exacerbated by demographics. In the past, the burden of parental expectations was spread between several siblings. Today, the one-child policy has left the post-1980 generation at the bottom of a suddenly inverted pyramid. This has hit the marginally prosperous urban middle class the worst. In the countryside, family planning was lax enough that most twentysomethings have one or two siblings, while the rich were able to afford the

finances to have a second or third child, although sometimes widely spaced apart. But among young white-collar workers, each couple has to bear the burden of two sets of ageing parents, plus any grandparents tough enough to still be around. And with social security shaky at best, parents look to their children for security in old age.

Not surprisingly, the most visible manifestation of this is in buying property. Only a minority can afford to buy property, but they buy it young — at a median age of 27. The rural migrant workers who built China's new compounds will never be able to afford to live in their own constructions, but most of the twentysomething white-collar workers I know own their own Beijing apartments, usually costing somewhere between 1 and 3 million yuan, and bought on incomes of anywhere between 5,000 and 10,000 yuan a month.

'I'd rather cry in a BMW than laugh on a bicycle'

The money comes from parents, who often pour their entire savings, combined with cash borrowed from friends, other relatives, and sometimes even illegal banks, into their child's property in the capital. The pooling process was given a boost after the financial crisis of 2008, when the stock market plummeted while property remained white-hot. The house ownership obsession has gripped both generations: it's virtually impossible, among the urban middle-classes, to get married without one family providing a new flat for the couple.

'Look at these,' exclaimed a friend as we visited a book shop, gesturing at the racks directed toward advice for the young. 'All of them say the same thing; marry and get an apartment by 27, settle down, have kids. They're a trap laid by our parents to get us to do what they want.' Chen Chenchen, a canny newspaper colleague of mine, didn't see it in such conspiratorial terms: 'We're becoming closer and

closer to our parents because we're bound together by property, and we're getting more conservative as a result. At first, we thought we could afford to have values. But then we realised our parents were right, and the iron rice bowl is the golden rule. I resisted my parents pressuring me to buy a Beijing apartment in 2008 [when she was 24] but succumbed in 2010, and I'm glad I got it in time. Now we know that money is the most important thing.' Liu Juncheng, now 60 and a retired taxi driver, echoes this sense of drifting towards a kind of parity. 'It seems like our children, like us, had a lot of hope for society, but that their views changed real fast because of society; they got lost.'

But parental expectations can fray relationships further, too. 'I have a friend the same age as me,' Luo the young professional said, 'whose parents just paid the down-payment on her apartment. But her mom has been staying with her since November, and she wants to stay on. It's a one-bedroom flat.' Buying their children apartments isn't just a simple investment for parents, but a guarantee, at least in their minds, of an old age spent in their children's house. This was once an expected social norm, eased by large households and communal families, but with an increasing number of the elderly living alone, a financial bond to their children's property provides extra leverage.

Apartments are also an inextricable part of the dating game, especially as people move into their mid-twenties. Among the middle class, the parents of the groom are expected to provide an apartment for the new couple to live in if one hasn't become available already. Like many renters, I've had more than one lease broken after my landlord's son set a wedding date. 'We call boys "China Construction Bank", because you have to build for them, and girls "China Merchant Bank" because you can sell them,' commented my friend Min.

The media often deplore the commercialised nature of young love, exemplified in 2010 by Ma Nuo, a contestant on a dating show; when asked by an unemployed contender if

she would ride with him on his bike, she replied: 'I'd rather cry in a BMW than laugh on a bicycle.' It's true that the bling-laden snapshots of triumphant gold-diggers on dating sites and boastful blogs are deeply off-putting. But the criteria that parents give matchmakers, or advertise on placards that some of them carry around parks at the weekend while looking for suitable spouses for their unmarried offspring, are just as centred around salary, car and apartment.

The love life of another friend, who uses the English name of Sally, demonstrates the commercial and class realities of today's dating scene. Like many stories in China, hers sounds like a didactic Marxist fable of the 1930s, except without the happy ending where the now liberated woman joins the Communist Party. At university, Sally dated a rural boy who was a student representative and, highly unusually, a sincere believer in Communism. 'He was so honest,' she told me, ruefully. 'He wouldn't even take pencils from the student council room to use for himself.'

But he couldn't live up to the standards that Sally and her parents expected. She wanted a boyfriend who could buy her the phones and handbags she aspired to, while her parents wanted someone from a wealthy or well-connected family who could walk into a guaranteed career after university. She soon dumped him and, helped by a new nose paid for by her mother, snared a wealthy boy on campus.

A couple of years into the new relationship, however, she found the positions reversed. After being introduced to her boyfriend's parents, his news was grim. 'I can't marry you,' he told her bluntly. 'My parents expect me to marry a girl of my own class.' But, he reassured her, he was quite happy for her to be his mistress, and his multimillionaire father had agreed to put aside the funds he would need to support her.

From a purely economic perspective, it was a deal that made sense. Yet as well as security and comfort, Sally also

wanted at least the illusion of romance, not a nakedly commercial deal. So she broke off the relationship and began looking again. 'But I'll be honest,' she said bleakly, 'my mother told me: "Don't think you can get that kind of boy again, because you're not a virgin any more." I sold myself without getting the best deal possible.'

Women are in an ambiguous position in the marriage market. The gender imbalance caused by the one-child policy and gender-selective abortion, resulting in 120 boys to 100 girls in some areas, favours them. But they also face the barrier of being labelled 'leftover women' at 27, an arbitrarily fixed target rigorously enforced by the older generation.

Even the All-China Women's Federation, a supposedly feminist organisation run largely by female officials aged over 50, publishes articles on its website warning against the social dangers of unmarried women and the terrible fate that awaits the 28-year-old singleton. 'My mother keeps calling me and reminding me I only have a couple more years to find someone,' commented a weary 25-year-old friend. 'Of course, she wants me to pick one of the boring losers she keeps trying to set me up with.'

As soon as the sought-after wedding ring is in place, parental pressure switches to the production of grandchildren. A wonderfully cynical flowchart was circulated this Chinese New Year, showing the barrage of demands and criticisms from relatives aimed at young people returning home for the holiday. If you're single, why aren't you dating? If you're dating, why aren't you married? If you're married, why don't you have children? And if you have children, why aren't they putting on a show for us? When the child arrives, however, so do the in-laws, producing even more friction as parents, baby, and grandparents cram into a one-bedroom apartment.

Chinese expectations of marriage are often described as 'traditional' by the media, but they're an odd mix of the

post-Maoist quest for security and the trappings of Western commercial romance — the diamond ring, the white wedding dress. In response to social and parental prodding toward placing material concerns first, some young Chinese have invented a new term, 'naked marriage,' meaning getting wed purely for love, without house, ring, ceremony or car. The idea promises romance, but opinion is decidedly mixed, even from the young. A 2010 poll on sohu.com found that the majority of young women opposed the idea, seeing it as a way for men to dodge their responsibilities. Tellingly, the majority of young men supported it.

'My grandmother grew up in the 1930s and '40s, when China was much closer to the world, and so she understood how I see things'

It takes a certain grit to dodge convention altogether. Luo, the young professional, saw no need to play the dating game at all, instead living with a moderately impoverished foreigner in his mid-thirties. 'My mother has stopped pestering me about it, but I know she'd rather I was looking for a conventional Chinese guy, with an apartment and a career. My father says it's OK because my boyfriend is English, not a Yankee or a Jap. But I witnessed their whole miserable marriage, so I'm pessimistic about men. I gave up any ambition for a family. I don't have the ability to give happiness to a kid. I can't even take it on myself. And I don't want to have to think about how many houses to leave the next generation.'

However, while the relationships between the post-1980 generation and their parents are fraught with bitterness — whether over careers, houses or marriage — the distance between them and their grandparents is, curiously, much smaller. 'My grandmother took my ambitions to be a journalist seriously,' said Lin Meilian. 'And she was the first person to teach me English, from when I was very small. I

had so much more in common with her than my mother.'

Lin continued: 'My grandmother grew up in the 1930s and '40s, when China was much closer to the world, and so she understood how I see things.' It was a sentiment widely echoed, and not just because of the usual grandparental affections. The cosmopolitanism and potential of a time before China closed its gates bridged generations, but so did the willingness of grandparents to talk about their past.

Zhang told me how her grandfather had gone mad from persecution, leaving her grandmother to raise four children by herself. 'My grandmother was a factory boss,' Luo the young professional said, 'so she suffered during the Cultural Revolution. It's funny, because actually my grandfather was a landlord's kid. He was carried to school on the neck of a servant. He became a mid-ranking officer in the army, but when the crowds came for my grandmother, he just blended into them. Then they dragged her away and locked her in a "cowshed" [an improvised prison] for the next few years.'

'So your mother saw her own mother dragged away and betrayed by her husband when she was five or six?' I asked.

'I suppose she did. My grandfather just disappeared for years. There were three children, and the oldest sister had to look after them all. She was 14.'

This information had not come from Luo's mother, who, like most of her generation, had kept silent about her own suffering as a child. During the Cultural Revolution, having the bad blood of intellectuals or landlords meant schoolyard persecution, improvised beatings, less rations, and being blocked from every opportunity. Turning in your parents was never quite as fetishised as in the Soviet Union, with its cult of the martyred schoolchild Pavlik Morozov, supposedly murdered by his family in 1932 for denouncing his own father. But it happened. A Chinese acquaintance of mine, now in his fifties, once described having to kill his own brother to stop him turning in their parents for owning

banned books. Even if others might denounce them, children were made to sign condemnations — ‘Even though she gave birth to me and is my mother, she is a counterrevolutionary and is my enemy.’ Tens of millions witnessed their parents being harassed, humiliated, beaten, imprisoned or killed.

Li, the aspiring official, had a closer and healthier relationship with his parents than anyone else I talked to, in part because he had made the effort to understand them. ‘They struggled when they were my age. They worked hard to become someone I [might later] respect. My mum is from a really ordinary family, just workers, so she fought hard to get into university. And my grandmother didn’t think she was good enough for my dad. She really thought in class terms, even though she changed her own name and moved north so as not to be persecuted in the Cultural Revolution. She was the child of intellectuals, and her whole family was in Shanghai. When she went back to try and find them, there was no trace, all gone: parents, brothers, sisters, nieces and nephews.’

The worst story of parental abuse I heard came from a young woman who asked for anonymity. I’ll call her Lily. Smart, successful, and pretty in a fragile way, her relationship with her mother had been one of constant maternal disdain or insult — she’d been called ugly, lazy, stupid — culminating in an incident when she was 24. Lily received a long letter from her mother which told her she was adopted, that her various flaws proved that she wasn’t her mother’s child, and that this was why her mother had been unable to love her, and never would. In tears, Lily called her father and demanded to know why he had never told her. ‘What are you talking about?’ he said, confused, ‘I was there when you were born.’

Eventually. Lily’s mother half-admitted that the letter was a lie, concocted in another fit of hatred and bitterness. But a seed of doubt remained. The most convincing evidence of her real parentage, Lily thought, was her curly hair. It came

from her mother who was born in the early 1960s to a widow who had a brief fling with a visiting Italian Communist with an eye for opportunity.

‘So your mother grew up half-foreign and illegitimate, in the middle of a witch-hunt for all things foreign,’ I said. ‘I can’t imagine how hard that must have been for her.’

‘Maybe,’ Lily said. ‘We never talked about it.’

Correction: We printed the following in error 'This information had come from Zhang's mother'. As of 8th March it correctly reads 'Luo's mother'.

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