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Pathways to Empowered Motherhood in Contemporary China

Between Asserting Independence and Seeking Help

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Pregnancy is a critical time for negotiating empowerment in ways that both build upon and challenge state-promoted gender roles in contemporary China. Drawing on 51 interviews in a northern Chinese city, this essay argues that pregnant women pursue empowerment through two seemingly contradictory pathways: actively seeking support from partners to rebalance burdens and asserting independence to preserve autonomy. We analyse these strategies as forms of relational work that challenge patriarchal norms. While both pathways carry risks, they reveal women as active agents who are reshaping ideals of motherhood and gender relations in today's China, one negotiation at a time.

Chinese society has long been patriarchal, whereby men hold more privilege and power than women. Despite challenges and transformations over time, patriarchy has been a persistent and pervasive foundational organising principle of social and political life (Evans 2024). The ideological reinvention of neo-Confucianism as the moral standard in Xi Jinping's China (Yan 2021) has further promoted the ideals of the 'virtuous wife' and 'good mother' as not only desirable qualities for women to pursue but also central to the China Dream of national rejuvenation. Challenges to these gendered expectations have proliferated, including a growing refusal to have children, but

the pressures to conform to heteronormative models of the family remain substantial (Tao 2024).

The state's reiteration of stereotypical gender-based roles has detrimental effects on women's status, exacerbating women's double burden of household-based labour and work outside the home. Pressure on women to excel at these roles already affects them during pregnancy. Yet, pregnancy can also be a time of empowerment. Drawing on 15 months of fieldwork including observation during prenatal checks and 51 interviews conducted in a tier-three northern city in China between 2023 and 2024 by the first author, we show that women negotiate pressures and articulate empowerment in a range of seemingly contradictory ways.

Pregnancy is more than a bodily process; it involves social and cultural processes whereby mothers negotiate a new position within the family while preserving a sense of self (Lupton 2013). Accordingly, as our analysis will show, Chinese women's reflections on pregnancy do not focus solely on the health of the baby or even on the physical health of the mother, but on how women can remain empowered, sustain dignity, and pursue their own priorities through this major life transition.

Empowerment—defined as the expansion of one's ability to make strategic life choices when that ability was previously denied (Kabeer 1999)—is particularly crucial during pregnancy. Research consistently links it to positive maternal experiences, better health outcomes, and protection from mistreatment during childbirth (Diamond-Smith et al. 2017; Upadhyay et al. 2014). Cultivating empowerment during this period is therefore essential for a woman's entire life journey (Samari 2017). Given the pressures outlined above, what forms might empowerment take during pregnancy in contemporary China? How are they culturally situated and embedded within existing social relations?

Recent scholarship on feminism in China has shown that it responds to its social, cultural, and economic contexts in two ways. 'Entrepreneurial' feminism empowers women by leveraging traditional femininity and domesticity to their

advantage. By contrast, 'non-cooperative' feminism is founded on denouncing the marketisation of marriage and asserting women's autonomy (Wu and Dong 2019). Drawing on our original data, we similarly argue that pregnant women seek to empower themselves through two distinct pathways. The first centres on actively asserting their needs by explicitly seeking support, particularly from husbands—such as sharing information, encouraging their participation in prenatal appointments, and ensuring dedicated family time. The second entails preserving independence by minimising reliance on others, deliberately maintaining pre-pregnancy routines to uphold personal autonomy. In the closing discussion, we reflect on how these pathways to empowerment may offer some agency to pregnant women, while also inadvertently reproducing uneven power relations.

Empowerment as Seeking Help: After All, It's Not Just My Child, Right?

On the surface, seeking help may not seem to be a form of empowerment. Yet, our data suggest that pregnant women describe their demands for support as efforts to rebalance an otherwise unequally shared burden. As soon as Jing, a 28-year-old woman, confirmed her first pregnancy, she asked her husband to 'do his homework'. With everything feeling new and uncertain, Jing urged her husband to scour multiple social media platforms for information, then put what he found into an Excel spreadsheet for their shared reference.

Jing approached pregnancy as a joint project: 'I think it's his responsibility to get involved as much as possible ... After all, it's not just my child, right?' Jing keenly felt the gender imbalance in the embodied experience of pregnancy. 'He can't feel what's happening to me, or the baby, so this is fundamentally unfair,' she reflected. Her strategy was therefore clear: by engaging her husband in care, learning, and every prenatal visit, she sought to address the uneven burden of responsibility

during pregnancy, ensuring that their journey towards parenthood felt like a collaborative family process, not just hers alone.

Seeking help—or actively negotiating contributions—can also be a way for pregnant women to assert agency even in reproductive decisions. Before Cong, a 32-year-old, decided to have her second child, she made a clear ‘deal’ with her husband: he would help care for her and the baby during the night, both before and after the baby’s birth. The memory of her first pregnancy, marked by insomnia (and, after childbirth, lonely nights of breastfeeding), was a powerful motivator. ‘Every time I couldn’t fall back asleep, his sound, uninterrupted sleep made me really angry,’ she complained.

After enduring those difficult nights, Cong struck an arrangement with her husband: if she woke up during the night, he would wake up too and keep her company. Her motivation was simple: a profound sense of imbalance in the burdens of pregnancy. *‘It’s our joint decision to have a baby, but in the end, it’s only me who is suffering from this,’* she said, ‘it’s unequal.’

This strategy is not a plea for special attention, but a demand for a more equitable engagement. By framing pregnancy as a joint project, Jing redefined her husband’s role as an active participant to redistribute cognitive and emotional labour. Cong’s negotiation was more direct: her ‘deal’ was an act of relational repair, making her invisible suffering visible and shared. It is a powerful assertion that a joint decision must come with joint burdens. By ensuring their husbands were equally involved, these women could alleviate their own efforts, preserve their pre-pregnancy identities, and restore balance to a relationship often destabilised by pregnancy. These deliberate acts of seeking help are therefore powerful assertions of agency and a form of relational work aimed at building a more just partnership. In challenging traditional gender roles, this strategy actively constructs a new, more egalitarian ideal of parenthood in contemporary China.

Crucially, the success of this empowerment strategy is contingent on the partner’s receptiveness. The agency asserted by women like Jing and

Cong was effective because they had collaborative partners willing to engage in these new terms. However, women’s demands for support are not always met, underscoring that negotiation requires commitment from both sides. For instance, our interviews included a case where a husband agreed to stay home to provide care—a significant shift that emerged not just from a request, but also from mutual collaboration. Ultimately, while a woman’s demand is a powerful catalyst, reshaping gender relations is a joint project that requires a willing partner.

Asserting Independence: It’s My Decision to Have a Child

While Jing and Cong presented seeking support as a form of agency, other women viewed asserting independence and self-reliance as a pathway to empowerment. Keke, a 30-year-old woman in her first pregnancy, decided before becoming pregnant that she would not rely on support from her partner or her family during her pregnancy. She explained: ‘It’s my decision to have a baby. I’m not having a baby for anyone else.’

Keke felt empowered by taking control of her pregnancy. To prepare for the baby, she gathered information both online and offline, learning well in advance about the steps involved in pregnancy and infant care. Unlike many other pregnant women, she refused assistance from her parents and in-laws, despite them living nearby. She also intentionally managed her expectations of her husband: ‘There are a lot of things I can still do normally during pregnancy ... For example, I can still do housework, so I won’t specifically ask my husband to do it instead.’ For Keke, not relying on her husband was also a strategy to maintain a harmonious relationship: ‘No expectation means no disappointment.’

Hua, a 29-year-old woman in her second pregnancy, enacted her independence by deciding she did not want or need her husband to accompany her to prenatal check-ups, as is common. ‘I don’t

understand why people insist that their husbands accompany them to prenatal check-ups ... I'd rather go by myself unless I can't drive.' Hua elaborated on the futility of husbands' presence at the hospital by pointing out that, in many Chinese public hospitals, husbands are not allowed in the consultation room to protect patient privacy and maintain order. 'What can he really do? ... He just sits outside, plays on his phone, and waits. It's a waste of his time. Plus, he has to take time off work every time, and that's unnecessary.'

This rejection of performative support often extends to a broader refusal of special treatment. As the fieldwork revealed, women who preferred to attend check-ups alone also tended to resist being treated with excessive attention. Hua pushed back on the idea that pregnancy should come with elevated status. 'I don't want others to treat me in a special way. I still go to work. I do all my usual routines. Special attention makes me feel abnormal.' While treating pregnancy in such a matter-of-fact way may only be possible when there are no complications—as pregnancies involving more demanding conditions would undoubtedly create different dynamics and increase pressure on other family members to play a role—Hua's approach embodied a strong assertion of strength, autonomy, and a refusal to be treated differently during pregnancy.

Keke's and Hua's responses are a way of reclaiming agency when their autonomy feels eroded. This approach asserts independence and self-reliance to avoid the potential disappointment of relying on others (more on the implications of this below). Keke's statement that 'no expectation means no disappointment' exemplifies this mindset as a form of emotional self-preservation. By pre-emptively managing a core dynamic of her marriage, she protects herself from unmet needs and retains emotional control. Similarly, when Hua says special attention makes her feel 'abnormal', she is defending her core identity against a powerful social script that threatens to reduce her from a multifaceted person to the singular role of a 'patient' who needs regular health monitoring.

Their insistence on daily routines is a powerful assertion that pregnancy is one part of their life, not a condition that defines its entirety. By preserving familiar routines and rejecting excessive care, these women resist being subsumed into a dependent role, thus protecting their sense of self. These are more than just personal preferences; they are acts that challenge the traditional script of the fragile pregnant woman. Through their independence, they propose a new model of motherhood for a changing Chinese society—one that embraces continuity, self-determination, and the integration of personal identity with the changes of pregnancy.

Discussion: Relational Autonomy and New Motherhood

The cases of Keke, Hua, Jing, and Cong reveal two distinct ways in which Chinese women articulate empowerment, yet both are rooted in a common project: the negotiation of relationships and identity in a changing China. To fully understand the significance of these actions, we will discuss them through two complementary lenses: the concept of relational autonomy and the broader sociocultural context of contemporary China.

Relational autonomy is a feminist concept that challenges the traditional liberal notion of the atomised, independent self. It regards the ability to make authentic, self-directed choices as deeply intertwined with the quality of our relationships (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000). In this view, both 'asserting independence' and 'seeking help' are sophisticated forms of relational work, designed to shape an environment conducive to one's own agency.

Seeking help is a way of leveraging relationships as a resource. Jing's delegation of research to her husband is a prime example: she uses her partnership to expand her own informational and cognitive capacity, while retaining executive control as the project manager. Cong's negotiation for shared night-time waking is a more profound form of relational work: an act of enforced empathy. She

is actively rescripting the terms of her relationship to make it more just and supportive, thereby alleviating the isolating burden of suffering that can undermine pregnant women's agency. From this perspective, both strategies demonstrate that empowerment is a process of skilfully navigating connections—knowing when to create distance to protect the self and when to build bridges to enhance one's capabilities.

Conversely, asserting independence becomes an act of curating an enabling environment. When Hua resists 'special attention' or Keke manages expectations to avoid disappointment, they are not rejecting their relationships. Instead, they are carefully setting boundaries to protect their internal sense of competence and stability. They are shaping their interactions to ensure their relationships remain a source of support for their autonomy, rather than a source of constraint. This can be viewed as a proactive management of their social world to preserve the conditions necessary for self-governance.

These strategies take on another layer of meaning when viewed as a response to the shifting landscape of gender relations and ideals of motherhood in China. Their actions are not just personal choices; they are also micro-level negotiations with deeply entrenched patriarchal norms in contemporary China.

Seeking help, in this context, becomes a direct challenge to the traditional, gendered division of labour that assigns the entirety of reproductive and domestic responsibility to women. When Jing demands her husband's active participation, she frames pregnancy as a 'joint project', challenging the notion of men as passive bystanders. When Cong demands that her husband 'share' her physical discomfort, she is pushing back against a historical silencing of female suffering and asserting that a shared decision must entail shared burdens. By bravely demanding equal involvement, these women attempt to challenge old power hierarchies and build a more collaborative foundation for their families, echoing a broader societal push for more involved fatherhood and balanced partnerships.

The strategy of 'asserting independence' is a powerful rebellion against the traditionally conceived social roles that frame pregnant women as dependent and fragile. In a cultural context that regards pregnancy as a period of feminine vulnerability requiring intense protection (Li 2021), the insistence of women like Hua and Keke on maintaining their normal routines and identities is a radical act, in part resembling 'non-cooperative' feminism (Wu and Dong 2019). It signifies a move towards a new ideal of motherhood—one that embraces continuity, competence, and the integration of a maternal identity with a woman's pre-existing self. These mothers are actively constructing a more egalitarian partnership model in which women are not subsumed into a passive caregiving role.

Viewed together, whether women choose independence or seek help, their actions are driven by the same underlying goal: to redefine motherhood and gender relations in a changing China. These strategies represent both a mastery of relational autonomy and a creative resistance to outdated gender norms. By skilfully navigating their relationships, the women in this study become agents of change, forging a new, self-defined model of motherhood.

Two Strategies, One Imperative

Given that this is a qualitative project, we cannot draw statistical conclusions about how economic status, education, or other demographic markers affect whether women leverage independence or seek support. Instead, we find it valuable to reflect on the ways in which pregnant women frame these seemingly contradictory pathways as *their* way of reclaiming agency and control. Empowerment is not a solitary act, but a deeply relational process of managing connections, setting boundaries, and demanding a more equitable distribution of the labour involved in creating a family.

Just as Wu and Dong (2019) emphasised that women's empowerment is more multifaceted than strategic embrace or resistance to marriage, empowerment for mothers-to-be is similarly complex and entails potential risks. In an environment in which gender relations remain systemically unequal, the strategy of asserting independence can paradoxically become a trap. Women may find themselves constrained by a 'norm of independence', the new ideal of 'independent woman', which pressures them to take on an even greater share of physical and emotional labour. This approach brings the threat of further disempowerment, as it can frame a woman's sacrifice as a 'voluntary' choice. In turn, this masks the underlying structural inequities and can cause women to passively lose valuable negotiating space within their relationships. By stating that she avoids disappointment by suspending any expectations for support, Keke implicitly accepts that the effort required for managing pregnancy is inherently unequal and refuses to challenge this setup. This attitude could be seen as disempowerment, rather than empowerment. However, it is significant that in her narrative she presented her decision to make pregnancy her own responsibility as a way of taking control, *not* a way of giving in to unequal burdens. It would be ethically misguided for us as social scientists to disregard Keke's own way of presenting her choice and interpret it as purely a form of social reproduction.

Similarly, while the strategy of seeking help aims to create a more equitable partnership, it often falls short of true equality. Even when pregnant women succeed in getting their husbands to share tasks, they frequently retain the ultimate responsibility for the often-invisible cognitive and emotional labour of managing the entire process: assigning the 'homework', supervising its completion, and bearing the mental load of ensuring everything is done correctly. While they may delegate tasks, they remain the project managers.

These empowerment strategies are deeply rooted in a specific Chinese context in which historical legacies, state objectives, and patriarchal norms intersect with intense social pressures. The women

in this study are largely products of the One-Child Policy, a legacy that fostered both a sense of self-reliance from undivided parental investment and a need to guard their autonomy against immense family scrutiny (Zhu 2010). This generational experience now confronts a new era of state-led reproductive governance, as the shift from population control to the Three-Child Policy continues to treat women's bodies as a tool for achieving national developmental goals (Han 2025).

This state-level agenda unfolds within a hyper-competitive social environment of 'involution' (内卷), which reframes pregnancy itself as a high-stakes project requiring meticulous performance (Huang 2024). Finally, these pressures are codified in patriarchal state policies, notably the unequal maternity leave system. By granting mothers 158 days of leave while fathers receive as few as 15 (Shen et al. 2024), the state institutionalises childcare as a woman's responsibility, turning pregnancy into a potential career and motherhood penalty. It is precisely this complex collision—of a generation raised for independence, immense pressure to perform motherhood perfectly, and a state structure that reinforces gender inequality—that makes it necessary to understand these empowerment strategies in relation to the contemporary and historical context in China.

Whichever the chosen path, these everyday practices remain a form of intimate politics with broader social implications. The choices these women make within their homes, from how they negotiate a prenatal visit to how they delegate information collection, are forms of agency and creativity. They respond to outdated patriarchal norms, negotiate shifting gender dynamics, and actively create new, more egalitarian ideals of motherhood and family life. In so doing, these mothers are not just passive subjects of a changing society, but are also its active agents, shaping the future of gender relations in China one conversation, one decision, and one Excel spreadsheet at a time. ■

This text is taken from *Made in China Journal: Volume 10, Issue 2, 2025*,
edited by Ivan Franceschini and Nicholas Loubere, published 2026 by ANU Press,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/MIC.10.02.2025.28