LEFTOVER WOMEN IN CHINA:

A NARRATIVE STUDY OF THE STATE, FAMILY, AND GENDER RELATIONS

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis provides a qualitative research study conducted through narrative interviews with women in China who are commonly referred to as "leftover women". The term *sheng nü* ("leftover women") was initially coined by the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) in 2007 to categorise single women aged over 27. The thesis highlights the conflicts faced by Chinese women, as many single women have attained career success and accomplishments comparable to those of men during the modernisation period; however, despite these achievements, single women continue to face derogation, discrimination, and social stigma in public discourse due to their unmarried status. Conducting research on "leftover women" under the theoretical framework of individualisation, detraditionalisation, pure love, self-identity, neoliberalism, and gender theory has proven to be a productive approach to gaining a deeper understanding of the concept's critique and shedding light on the expectations, anxieties, and pressures experienced by women regarding their societal status. This thesis offers an original contribution to these debates by exploring how Chinese single women made life choices and constructed self-identity under the impact of current social policies, parental expectations, Chinese traditional cultures, heterosexual and patriarchal norms. I present my findings from narrative interviews carried out with women aged 27–40 from major cities in China. The data analysis is organised based on three main topics: state, family, and gender relations. This thesis argues that while Chinese single women have achieved greater autonomy and freedom in their public lives, thanks to improved educational and career opportunities, their choice-making and construction of self-identity in their private lives still rely on institutions and traditions, and remain closely intertwined with China's economic, social, political, and cultural environment.

DEDICATION

To my mum and dad, thank you for your love and endless support.

CONTENTS

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACWF   All-China Women's Federation

CCP   Chinese Communist Party

MCA   Ministry of Civil Affairs

NBS   National Bureau of Statistics

PRC   People's Republic of China

SOE   State-Owned Enterprises

SES   State Employment System

INTRODUCTION

This thesis provides a qualitative research study conducted through narrative interviews with women in China who are commonly referred to as "leftover women". The term *sheng nü* ("leftover women") was coined by the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) in 2007 to categorise single women aged over 27. Later, the derogatory term was embraced the Chinese Ministry of Education and Xinhua News, the official media agency for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), perpetuating its usage (Fincher, 2016). The derogatory term has gained widespread usage to depict unmarried heterosexual urban women in their late twenties or older (specifically, aged 27–35) who are focused on their careers (To, 2015). It has gained prominence on Chinese social media platforms, sparking discussions about the trend of women nowadays delaying marriage unlike previous generations.

This research primarily focuses on a specific group of educated and career-oriented "leftover women" between the ages of 27 and 40, who identified as heterosexual and had never been married or had children. These women resided in major cities across China. Some were raised in urban areas, while others had migrated from rural regions. They came from diverse family backgrounds, with some being the only child and others having siblings. These highly educated women possessed impressive education qualifications and successful careers, with some having studied or worked abroad. Within this group, some had been in romantic relationships, while others had never been involved in any romantic partnerships.

Conducting research on "leftover women" has proven to be a productive approach to gaining a deeper understanding of the concept's critique and shedding light on the expectations, anxieties, and pressures experienced by women regarding their societal status. This thesis argues that while Chinese single women have achieved greater autonomy and freedom in their public lives, thanks to improved educational and career opportunities, their choice-making and self-identity construction in their private lives still rely on institutions and traditions, and remain closely intertwined with China's economic, social, political, and cultural environment. The thesis further highlights the conflicts faced by Chinese women, as many single women have attained career success and accomplishments comparable to those of men during the modernisation period. However, despite this, single women continue to face derogation, discrimination, and social stigma in public discourse due to their unmarried status.

The relationship between the state, institutions, traditions, and individuals' choices and identities deserves further exploration within the unique Chinese social context. This exploration can be facilitated by applying Western theories such as reflexive modernisation, individualisation, detraditionalisation, pure love, self-identity, neoliberalism, and gender theory proposed by Western feminist scholars to the Chinese contexts. It is also important to examine whether these Western theories can be effectively applied to the Chinese context. The voices, experiences, and emotions of single women deserve to be acknowledged and amplified, allowing for an exploration of how they perceive their own identities and make life choices that extend beyond the confines of mainstream public discourse.

To delve into the life experiences of these single women encompassing their education, career, dating experience, relationships, and interactions with family and society, as well as to understand how these single women perceived themselves and constructed their identities within the context of derogatory discourse, my work aims to establish a connection between these single women and the political, social, and cultural environment of China. This research endeavours to investigate how these single women navigated the challenges and constraints they encountered in the Chinese context, aiming to understand their decision-making processes and the construction of their self-identity within the framework of prevailing social policies. Particular emphasis is placed on highly educated single women who had successful careers, exploring the obstacles they might face in terms of their profession, living arrangements, family dynamics, and personal relationships as single individuals. Additionally, this research aims to examine how these women interacted with their parents and extended family members regarding their personal lives and relationships, illuminating the dynamics between Chinese parents and these women by tracing their life stories from early childhood to the present day. By examining these women's responses to gender bias, discrimination, and inequality in past relationships or dating experiences, this research also aims to shed light on how women navigated their interactions with male partners or dates within the framework of gender norms and patriarchal systems.

This research adopts qualitative narrative interviews, employing a feminist narrative approach and incorporating online methods as a result of the COVID-19 restrictions. Its purpose is to investigate the experiences and narratives of "leftover women" in various aspects of their lives, including dating experience, intimate relationships, early education experiences, career journeys, daily social interactions, and their interactions with men, family, and society. The fieldwork took place between March and August 2021. Thematic analysis serves as the chosen method for this research, and the analysis chapters are structured based on the themes that emerged from the qualitative data. Further elaboration on the research aims, questions, and methodological choices will be provided in subsequent sections and chapters.

Background of the Chinese "leftover women" phenomenon

As a result of the ongoing modernisation and social transformations in China, coupled with factors such as the One-Child Policy and the increasing cost of raising children, the country is experiencing a decline in marriage rates. This has led to a significantly ageing population and increased demographic pressure. According to the data from the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) (2021), from 2017 to 2021, the marriage rate dropped from 7.7% to 5.4%. In 1990, the percentage of unmarried women aged 30 to 40 in China was only 0.6%, but by 2019, it has increased to 11% (Hu, 2019). Additionally, the age at which Chinese people get married the first time has been consistently rising. In 2010, the average age for men's first marriage was 25.75, and for women, it was 24. However, by 2020, these ages have risen to 29.38 for men and 27.95 for women, with the increase being slightly faster for women (The State Council, 2020).

Studies also point out that the majority of unmarried women in China are highly educated with a good career who live in urban areas (To, 2015; Ji, 2015b; Fincher, 2016). One research showed that there is a significant proportion of unmarried women in urban areas (29%), surpassing the number of unmarried men (22%) (iResearch, 2021). According to Liu (2021), 40% of the single employees in Chinese companies are highly educated women.

Nonetheless, the Chinese governments agenda of increasing the workforce population, promoting economic growth, alleviating ageing pressures, and maintaining social stability has placed immense emphasis on marriage and family formation (Xinhuanet, 2018; People's Daily, 2020). Consequently, this societal expectation poses a significant predicament for single women, particularly within the confines of a patriarchal society. Single women are burdened with the dual pressures of balancing career aspirations and family expectations, as they are expected to conform to traditional gender roles and assume the responsibility of caregiving for the family. The unmarried status in contemporary China is often depicted as precarious, devoid of future prospects, deviating from societal norms, and conflicting with Confucian moral values.

The pressure experienced by single women is further amplified by institutions such as the Chinese government and state media (Fincher, 2016). Within public discourse, single women face intensified gender discrimination, particularly since the mid-2000s when media attention began to focus on the challenges faced by unmarried, highly educated, urban professional women who choose to delay or reject marriage. As discussed, these accomplished women,

residing in urban areas, have been branded "leftover women" by state media (Fincher, 2016). Their increasing age, starting from their mid-twenties, is perceived as rendering them less desirable in the marriage market, resulting in their derogatory classification as "leftover" for failing to be "chosen" by men.

Furthermore, single women face the pervasive use of discriminatory and prejudiced language online. Within the contemporary Chinese society, critics commonly perceive "leftover women" as distant, unappealing, and excessively focused on their careers, prioritising education over starting a family, which is seen as a threat to the social fabric of the nation (Kuo, 2014). These women are frequently criticised for being overly indulged, excessively selective, or morally loose, resulting in their inability to find a suitable partner (He, 2018). A household with a single woman, particularly one who is independent and self-reliant, is viewed as unconventional, destabilising, and even perilous (Lake, 2018). The label "leftover women" carries implicit associations of being unfeminine, unattractive, abnormal, and leading an uncertain life that diverges from the traditional Confucian moral standards in China, rendering them unappealing prospects for marriage.

Numerous published books and research works examining the phenomenon of "leftover women" (To, 2015; Ji, 2015b; Fincher, 2016) feature accounts from urban Chinese women who shared their experiences of facing discrimination in the marriage market and expressed their anxieties about remaining unmarried in their late twenties. These studies commonly acknowledge that

many of these "leftover women" felt a sense of urgency to find a husband and get married quickly in order to conform to societal norms and meet social expectations. The pressure these women faced is multifaceted, originating from family, friends, and the broader Chinese political, social, and cultural landscape. The influence of Confucian values and traditional family ideologies, reinforced by the state, compels women to prioritise marriage and parenthood as part of their filial responsibilities. Research indicates that women have experienced pressure from their parents to marry and have even encountered interference in their personal lives (To, 2015; Fincher, 2016; Liu, 2019). Moreover, within the current political and social climate, single women also encounter social exclusion stemming from governmental policies, possibly leading to a profound sense of guilt or shame in their day-to-day interactions with friends, family, and the larger Chinese community.

Previous research on single women

The increasing prevalence of highly educated, professional single women in China has contributed to a significant growth in the academic literature within sociology, media studies, and cultural studies that examines the concept of "leftover women". Over the past decade, the quality of research of this topic has notably improved. In conducting a comprehensive review of existing studies on single women and "leftover women" in China, certain limitations were identified. To address these gaps in the research field, the primary objective of my thesis is to delve into the topic of "leftover women" and provide valuable insights.

Scholars adopting a political-economic perspective have sought to analyse the phenomenon of "leftover women" within the broader context of socio-economic factors, which shape the conditions under which this highly gendered phenomenon occurs. These researchers focus on the social structural transitions taking place in China and argue that China's economic development and industrialisation have brought about changes in marriage and ageing issues. According to Xu and Xia (2014), marriage in China is currently undergoing a transitional phase, and the discourse surrounding "leftover women" is viewed as a conservative reaction to the social changes accompanying China's rapid economic growth in recent decades. These scholars highlight how social structural factors such as urbanisation, industrialisation, and economic development have facilitated social mobility and equal educational opportunities for Chinese women. As a result, individualism has emerged among professional women, challenging the patriarchal and collectivist norms prevailing in Chinese society. Similarly, Leta Hong Fincher (2016) attributes the subordinate status of women in marriage to issues such as sex-ratio imbalance and gender-based socio-economic disparities arising from economic development. These scholars provided insights into how the concept of "leftover women" is shaped by political and economic factors, employing a macro perspective within a political-economic or Marxist framework. While these studies acknowledge the structural changes and social transitions as the macro-level backdrop for the phenomenon of single women, they tended to overlook the gender inequality and patriarchal norms deeply entrenched in Chinese society. Furthermore, they did not adequately address the negative impact of derogatory terms and discrimination on Chinese single women. This approach fails to amplify the voices of this

marginalised group and overlooks women's lived experiences and emotions within this macro-level context. It is crucial to adopt a feminist research perspective (Smith, 1987; Jackson, 2001) that encompasses the standpoint, everyday life, experiences, and perspectives of Chinese single women.

Various studies have approached the topic of "leftover women" from diverse perspectives and disciplines such as psychology, business, historical, and cultural studies. For instance, Liu and Kozinets (2022) employed the theoretical framework of courtesy stigma management to explore the social identity of "leftover women" in relation to gift-giving, drawing insights from family culture, marketing, and consumption. Other scholars, like Gaetano (2014), have focused on the culture and history of mainland China to examine the recent rise of "leftover women". They argue that the Chinese society has historically regarded heterosexual marriage as essential for family formation, societal harmony, and adherence to Confucian values. Therefore, a woman's identity, role, and status have traditionally been derived from her kinship position and affiliation within the Chinese cultural and historical context. These studies offer intriguing perspectives from psychology, business, historical, and cultural studies to analyse the phenomenon of "leftover women". However, they predominantly emphasise the influence of Chinese family culture and women's social identity within this specific social context, while overlooking women's agency, subjectivity, and personal choices. They have provided valuable insights into the impact of Chinese cultural values on "leftover women", but failed to fully

consider the individual experiences, autonomy, and decision-making of women within this framework.

Some scholars have taken a sociological approach to examine the phenomenon of "leftover women" by exploring women's choices in the marriage market, the influence of patriarchal norms in Chinese marriage and family, and women's unequal social status in Chinese society. Sandy To's (2013, 2015) and Gui (2022)'s research, which utilised semi-structured interviews with "leftover women", focus on women's strategies and choices when seeking partners. They delved into the materialistic reasons behind these differences and highlight how filial and patriarchal constraints in Chinese society contribute to the phenomenon of "leftover women". The expectations of parents regarding women's marital partners, discrimination from men towards accomplished women, and the persistence of patriarchal values concerning traditional gender roles significantly influence women's decisions in marriage. Yingchun Ji (2015)'s and Xie (2021)'s research also analysed and discussed the emergence of "leftover women" as reflective of social and ideological changes in China, transitioning from traditional to modern family ideals and from arranged to love marriages. They explored the shift from parental control and male dominance to individual autonomy and women's independence. In comparison to previous research, these studies have placed a greater emphasis on gender inequality and the social constraints and pressures faced by women. However, they approached gender inequality solely from a binary perspective, failing to question the heteronormative marriage norms and the prevailing nuclear family structure in Chinese society. Additionally, they overlooked the

experiences of these "privileged" women in terms of self-identity and gender expression from a post-feminist standpoint within their dating and relationship experiences. Moreover, these studies lack comprehensive discussions regarding the relationship and interaction between these women and the Chinese social and political environment, as well as the detailed experiences of women under the influence of social policies and laws related to migration, employment, social care, marriage, and family.

Other scholars have adopted a different approach, placing greater emphasis on the interplay between politics, discourse, and gender, as well as questions of representation and identity. Leta Hong Fincher's book (2016) strongly criticised the state and its media for stigmatising "leftover women" and pressuring them to hastily enter into family and marriage relationships in order to maintain social stability and control population growth. In a recent article, Gong et al. (2017) examined the stigmatised portrayals of single women in news coverage and astutely argues that the media employs "controlling images" as a discursive strategy to reinforce the characteristics of the dominant group as normal and superior, while casting negative images onto the subordinate group. Feldshuh (2018)' and Liu (2019) focused their research on the role of media in shaping gender discourse and perpetuating gender stereotypes, specifically investigating how "leftover women" are presented in media, portraying single womanhood as deviant and problematic. These studies delved deeper into the control exerted by the Chinese government and the relationship between the nation and individuals. However, they still lack discussions on the specific impact of policies and laws on single women, as well as the use of qualitative

interviews to explore the daily lives of single women. Furthermore, further analysis is needed to examine the power dynamics of institutions such as family, marriage, and the nation that contribute to the phenomenon of "leftover women".

Previous studies on single women in Western contexts have employed various research methods, such as semi-structured interviews (Sandfield and Percy, 2003), discourse method (Lahad, 2013), narrative approach (Reynolds and Taylor, 2005; Simpson, 2006), and descriptive phenomenology (Sharp and Ganong, 2007), to explore women's identity and subjectivity. Theoretical studies by Budgeon (2008, 2016) and DePaulo and Morris (2005) have also questioned discourses surrounding accountability, choices, and heterosexual norms in relation to single women and singleness. However, in previous studies on Chinese "leftover women", the use of narrative approaches to explore single women's life stories should be considered. Furthermore, there is a lack of discussion regarding women's choices, accountability, and questioning of heterosexual norms and the emphasis on being in a couple within Chinese society. In my own research, I aim to fill this gap by conducting narrative interviews. Through these interviews, I seek to understand how women narrated their life experiences from childhood to the present, how they interacted with their social, cultural, and political environments, and how they made personal choices and constructed their sense of self within a broader social context.

In my research, I take a different approach to studying the phenomenon of "leftover women" by focusing on the individual experiences and stories of these women. Instead of adopting a broad and macro perspective, I employ qualitative narrative interview methods to delve into the subjectivity and meaning that underlie the everyday realities of single women. While previous studies have primarily concentrated on family ideology and parental culture, I aim to expand the discussion by exploring the relationship between single women and the political and social context they navigated. I also intend to examine how women's choices were influenced by social policies and laws. Furthermore, my research involves a more in-depth analysis of women's accountability, choices, and the impact of heterosexual norms on singleness, drawing on theories from feminist and gender studies. Through narrative interviews, women had the opportunity to structure their stories in their own unique ways and share their experiences of decision-making and self-discovery. Instead of taking marriage as a given or focusing solely on women's strategies for finding partners, this research aims to explore the challenges posed by mainstream social values and dominant political, social, and cultural norms in the Chinese context. It seeks to understand how these women constructed their self-identity by challenging, disagreeing with, negotiating, or compromising with social expectations and norms prevalent in Chinese society. Additionally, this research also examines the broader macro background to the phenomenon of "leftover women" by analysing women's narratives. It focuses on the relationship between individuals and society, exploring how women perceived their identity and sense of self within the broader Chinese context.

Theoretical framework

This thesis resides at the convergence of several academic fields, including sociology, gender and feminist studies, family and marriage studies, social policy studies, and social and cultural studies in East Asia. By incorporating perspectives from diverse disciplines and theoretical frameworks, I aim to comprehend the intricate sociological dynamics between "leftover women" and various aspects of Chinese society, such as the state, policies, family structures, marriage practices, and gender culture.

To comprehend the intricate relationship between Chinese single women and society, my research draws inspiration from sociologists such as Ulrich Beck (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Beck et al., 2003) and Anthony Giddens (1991, 1992). These scholars have explored concepts such as individualisation, modernisation, and individuals' choices in modernity. It has been argued that these Western theories can be applied to understand East Asian and Chinese society and discuss different social problems in this different social context (Yan, 2009, 2010b; Chang and Song, 2010). In applying these theories to the Chinese context, my aim is to examine whether they can adequately capture the complexities of the Chinese case and identify any limitations in their applicability outside of Western Europe. I seek to analyse the process of individualisation in China, where the central system has experienced significant changes while many institutions and traditions persist, and examine how this process manifests in the daily lives and choices of individuals. I am also informed by other relevant literature that has different opinions on topics of individualisation and modernisation such as Smart and Shipman (2004)

and Hofmeister (2015), who emphasise the influence of social context, institutions, traditions, networks, and the choices of others on individual decision-making. Given the unique political system, cultural practices, religions, and social traditions in China, it is essential to critically assess the applicability of theories developed in Western contexts. Additionally, I am also interested in Cherlin (2004)'s study on marriage and its meanings, and discuss whether Gidden's pure love theory (Giddens, 1992) could be applied into the case of Chinese women's daily life and their understanding of love and marriage relations. By focusing on the experiences and narratives of Chinese "leftover women", my research aims to challenge Western-centric perspectives and expand sociological theories by offering insights from a non-Western context.

I am also influenced by a wide range of social studies conducted in East Asian and Chinese societies, which offer valuable insights into the influence of family ideology and traditional Confucian culture on individuals in China. These studies have provided a unique perspective that is crucial for understanding social phenomena within Chinese society. Many researchers have examined the role of filial piety in parent–child relationships and its impact on Chinese society (Yeh and Bedford, 2003; Fong, 2007; Liu, 2008a; Yan, 2013; Qi, 2016; Zhang, 2016a; Liu, 2017). Furthermore, there have been insightful investigations into the social policies implemented in China, such as the one-child policy, and their effects on Chinese families (Tsui and Rich, 2002; Fong, 2002, 2004, 2007; Greenhalgh, 2008; Xie, 2021; Tu and Xie, 2020). Additionally, there are studies focusing on the themes of sex, love, and marriage culture in modern Chinese society conducted by researchers (Higgins et al., 2002; Davis and Friedman,

2014; Davis, 2014; Farrer, 2014; Cai and Wang, 2014; Zhang and Sun, 2014). The rich body of Chinese and East Asian research on women, gender, marriage, and family relationships has also informed my understanding of the choices and daily lives of single women in the Chinese social context. These studies consistently argue that Chinese individuals are influenced by parental expectations and pressures when making choices. Therefore, my research, inspired by these Chinese studies on marriage and family relationships, aims to contribute to the discussion on the relationship between Chinese single women and their choices, plans, and understanding of marriage and family. I seek to explore how these women navigated their life choices and constructed their self-identity while facing parental expectations and pressures within the Chinese context.

I am particularly influenced by a vast body of research and literature that explores feminism, gender and sexuality studies, and focuses on various topics including ageing and body regulation (Foucault, 1976, 1982, 1998; Budgeon, 2016; McRobbie, 2004; Gill, 2007, 2008; Gill and Scharff, 2011), traditional gender roles and patriarchal norms (Hartmann, 1976; Chambers, 1986; Delphy, 1977, 1980, 1992, 1993; McDonough and Harrison, 1978; MacKinnon, 1982; Jackson, 1993, 1999, 2001; Jackson and Cram, 2003; Walby, 1991; Fox, 2009; Ferree, 2010), traditional gender expression (Raush et al., 1974; Burke et al., 1976; Flax, 1982; Valverde, 1985; Cancian, 2018; Hite, 1987; Jackson, 1993), singleness and heterosexual norms (Rich, 1980; Anderson, 1999; Jackson, 1993; Ingraham, 1994; Budgeon, 2008, 2016; DePaulo and Morris, 2005), and post-feminism and neoliberalism (Budgeon, 2001, 2011;

McRobbie, 2007, 2004; Gill, 2007, 2008; Gill and Scharff, 2011; Oksala, 2013). Of particular interest to me is understanding how single women navigated their choices and constructed their sense of self within contexts characterised by unequal gender relations and heterosexual norms. My research aims to make an original contribution by examining how these women engage with men and their dating experiences within heterosexual relationships. I explore their perspectives on love and relationships, their expressions of heterosexual identity, their reflections on age and body, and their understanding of gender identity, roles, and subjectivity within the context of marriage. By analysing participants' past dating and relationship experiences, my work seeks to apply feminist and gender theories to the Chinese context and shed light on the complexities of these single women's identities and choices within the framework of patriarchy and heteronormativity.

Research aim and questions

Drawing from existing research on single women and the phenomenon of "leftover women", as well as relevant theoretical frameworks, my research addresses a fundamental question that forms the foundation of the entire study:

- How do Chinese single women make choices and construct their self-identity in the Chinese environment?

Firstly, I aim to focus on the women's choices, and explored their decision regarding their personal lives. I investigate whether their choices are influenced by their living environment, or have been questioned or challenged by the mainstream lifestyle discourse. Secondly, I aim to focus on the self-identity of these women, exploring how they construct their sense of self as single women, and whether their self-identity is also influenced by their environment. More importantly, through women's narrative experience, I plan to seek how they agree, negotiate, conflict, argue or even compromise with others regarding their choices or self-identity. Additionally, I aim to understand their experiences, feelings, thoughts, attitudes, values towards this process of choice-making and self-identity construction.

The research will be divided into three main sections: **State, Family, and Gender**. The first section on State will focus on the impact of current social policies and laws on the lives of these single women. The second section on Family will focus on the impact of Chinese family culture and traditions on the lives of these single women, including the interaction between these women and their parents, extended family, and the broader family network. The third section on Gender will focus on gender and sexual relations through these women's dating and relationship experiences with men in the Chinese context.

Drawing from existing research on single women and the phenomenon of "leftover women", as well as relevant theoretical frameworks, my research question is divided into three sections of Chinese contexts that form the foundation of the entire study:

- In the Chinese social and political environment

This section seeks to investigate the daily experiences of single women in Chinese society, examining how they perceive and navigate the influence of current social policies and laws on their lives. By addressing this question, I aim to uncover the limitations and challenges faced by single women in their everyday lives, explore the interplay between Chinese social and political institutions and the choices made by single women, and examine how they navigate decisions related to their careers and marriages while constructing their sense of self within the unique social and political context of China.

- In the Chinese cultural and family environment

This section aims to delve into the daily interactions between women and their parents and families regarding their personal lives and singleness. It explores how women navigate and reconcile with the traditional Chinese family culture, whether through disagreements, negotiations, or compromises. The primary focus is on examining the relationship between Chinese parents and women by exploring their life stories from childhood to the present, shedding light on women's self-identity and choices under parental pressure and expectations.

By addressing this question, the goal is to understand how women make choices influenced by traditional family and cultural pressures and how they shape their sense of self through the narratives of their family stories.

- With their male partners or dates in their past relationships or dating

This section seeks to investigate the dynamics of women's past dates and romantic

relationships, specifically examining the gender bias, discrimination, and inequalities they have encountered in their interactions with men. By addressing this question, the aim is to explore how women navigate and shape their own body image, self -perception, and identity as heterosexual women within Chinese society. Additionally, the question aims to shed light on how women make choices regarding their relationships within the context of prevailing heterosexual and patriarchal norms.

To address these questions, I intend to delve into the experiences and narratives of "leftover women" across different aspects of their lives, such as their dates and intimate relationships, early education experiences, careers, daily social interactions, and their interactions with men, family, and society. In order to capture the richness of their stories, this study employs qualitative narrative interviews to explore the life narratives of these women across various topics. Thematic analysis is utilised to examine the women's narratives and identify recurring themes and topics. It is important to note that the purpose of this research is not to establish

definitive facts or truths about social issues or inequalities present in Chinese society. Rather, the aim is to offer an interpretation of these single women's experiences, choices, and self identity through their narratives within the Chinese social context. Further details regarding the methodology is elaborated on in the methodology chapter.

Thesis structure

In this part, I provide an overview of the overall structure of this thesis. In order to address the aforementioned research questions, I begin by presenting a comprehensive literature review on the subject matter, which is divided into two chapters: the first chapter focuses on the Chinese background, while the second chapter delves into the theoretical framework.

The first section of Chapter 1 provides an overview of the Chinese background relevant to the "leftover women" phenomenon. In this section, I discuss the economic, social, cultural, and political aspects of Chinese society that have implications for the lives of Chinese women, particularly those who are single. The examination begins by delving into the influence of traditional Chinese culture during premodern times and the subsequent societal changes witnessed in modern Chinese history. The focus is initially placed on the concepts of Confucianism and traditional family customs that prevailed in ancient China. The discussion then shifts to the topic of gender equality during the Mao era and the emergence of a new China.

The opportunities and challenges faced by women in the post-Mao era are explored. Lastly, the dynamics of love and marriage relationships in contemporary China are analysed.

The second section of Chapter 1 offers an overview of the historical and contextual factors associated with social policies, welfare, and laws in China, focusing on their implications for Chinese women's lives. Within this section, I explore the background of urbanisation, migration, and housing policies, shedding light on the experiences of women in accessing urban resources and the dual nature of benefits and exclusions. The discussion also encompasses an examination of the current social welfare programmes offered by enterprises and the gender inequalities prevalent in the workplace, highlighting the challenges faced by women in their careers. Furthermore, I delve into the context of China's ageing society and social care for families, and analyse the pressures placed on individuals by the existing social care system. Additionally, I explore the background of family ideology and marriage policies, illustrating how the Chinese government has reinforced the significance of marriage and family, consequently subjecting single women to blame, stigma, and exclusion. Lastly, the section delves into the anxieties surrounding the body, age, and beauty experienced by Chinese women, emphasising the disproportionate value placed on women's fertility. By introducing the economic, social, cultural, and political background, I aim to examine how women navigated their interactions with the Chinese environment and explore how these single women made life choices and constructed their self-identity within this specific social context.

In the first section of Chapter 2, I examine the application of Western theories to the Chinese context and discuss the nuances and limitations of understanding individualisation in China. I explore the implementation of reflexive modernisation and individualisation theories (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Beck et al., 2003; Giddens, 1991, 1992) within the context of Chinese society and the research topic of "leftover women". Furthermore, I delve into the relationship between individuals and the state, drawing on Yan (2009, 2010) arguments regarding the applicability of the individualisation thesis in the Chinese context. This critical analysis enables me to evaluate the application of these theories in China, including how individualisation has shifted dependence from the state to the family. Additionally, I discuss Giddens' theory of pure love (Giddens, 1992) and Cherlin's research on contemporary meanings of marriage and family (Cherlin, 2004), critically examining the theories of detraditionalisation, pure relationship, and self-identity within the Chinese context. The section also explores single women's choices and subjectivity within the framework of individualisation and neoliberalism. Finally, I present an analysis of women's sense of self and how it is constructed within the specific social, political, and cultural context.

In the second section of Chapter 2, I delve into gender and feminist theory within the context of the research topic of single women. I examine key concepts and arguments from feminist and gender theory and explore their application to the study of single women. I discuss traditional gender roles, gender expression, and how these concepts can be understood in the context of heterosexual and patriarchal norms, with a specific focus on their relevance to China.

The section also addresses the influence of heterosexual norms and societal attitudes towards singleness. I explore the social exclusions experienced by single women as identified in previous studies, particularly in East Asia. Furthermore, I analyse the roles of age and body image and examine the body anxieties faced by single women. Considering the educational and career backgrounds of single women, I discuss the emergence of empowered femininity and the strategies employed by single women within the frameworks of neoliberalism and post-feminism. Drawing on the concepts and arguments found in gender and feminist literature, I investigate single women's interactions with men in their dating and relationship experiences, seeking to answer the third research question regarding how women navigate the gendered environment in China and how they made choices and constructed their sense of self within this specific cultural context.

After providing an overview of the existing scholarship in the preceding sections, I proceed to outline the research design and methodology in Chapter 3. Within this chapter, I offer an explanation and justification for the selected research methods, which primarily include narrative interviews, online research methods, and thematic analysis. I articulate the philosophical underpinnings of my research, discussing the ontology and epistemology that shape its approach. Furthermore, I provide a comprehensive discussion on the sampling design, encompassing factors such as women's age, location, and status. I delve into the reasons behind choosing narrative interviews as the primary method and elucidate how a feminist approach was integrated into the conduct of these interviews. As a result of the COVID-19 restrictions, I

have adapted an online format to my research, prompting an exploration of the advantages, challenges, and the solutions employed during its execution. The researcher's reflexivity is also examined to elucidate the relationship between the researcher and the research itself. Additionally, I outline the ethical considerations inherent in my study and consider potential methodological avenues for future research endeavours.

After providing the methodological justifications for this project, the subsequent three chapters present the findings of my research. In Chapter 4, I delve into the challenges faced by single women within the Chinese social and political environment. I examine how these participants perceived and interpreted the meaning of marriage relationships, made life choices, and constructed their self-identity. Through an analysis of their experiences within the framework of current social policies and laws, this chapter argues that women's life choices and sense of self continued to be significantly influenced by state laws and social policies, as they still heavily relied on the state, family, and marriage to access social benefits. Despite the individualisation and social transformation witnessed in Chinese society, which have reduced individuals' dependence on the state, these women were still expected to make decisions within this political and social context. Furthermore, I discuss how participants faced pressure regarding ageing and economic growth in Chinese society. There is an expectation for women to marry and have children in order to contribute to society, while these single women often found themselves excluded from accessing resources and attaining equal social status. Consequently, I argue that even though these single women had detached from the state

allocation system due to the impact of individualisation, they still faced societal pressure to

conform to mainstream choices of marrying and starting a family promptly in order to secure

their basic rights and social resources.

Chapter 5 focuses on the interaction between single women in this study and their families, as

well as the broader Chinese social and cultural environment, with regards to their self-identity

and life choices. By examining how participants engaged with their Chinese families, I provide

insights into how they navigated and responded to conflicts arising from their environment.

Through an analysis of their interactions with their parents and extended family, this chapter

argues that family ideology and parental pressure continue to constrain women's life choices

regarding marriage, partners, and self-identity. The research findings indicate that while women

in this study received support from their parents in terms of education and career development,

they also encountered traditional notions of love and sexuality within their parental upbringing.

Consequently, marriage was often perceived as the sole goal for establishing relationships. Due

to parental expectations, these unmarried women experienced a strong sense of failure, leading

them to comply with their parents' wishes and pursue marriage promptly. Despite having gained

increased resources and opportunities through education and career advancements, these

women relied more on the institution of the family to make life choices rather than

independently making decisions. Therefore, I argue that although women had experienced

greater autonomy in their education and career development within the context of Chinese

modernisation, family ideology, and filial traditions had replaced the state as the primary source

of dependence for these single women. Ultimately, this traditional influence significantly impacted their life choices.

Chapter 6 delves into the challenges faced by single women in this study within a socially unequal gender environment and patriarchal society. It explores their experiences in past relationships and how they have constructed their sense of identity. Through an analysis of the participants' encounters with gender discrimination and inequality in dating and previous relationships, this chapter argues that prevailing heterosexual norms and patriarchal rules posed obstacles to establishing equal relationships with ideal partners. Moreover, these norms influence how women shaped their self-perception and identity as heterosexual single individuals in Chinese society. Despite the social transformation and modernisation that China has undergone, and the increased educational and career opportunities available to these single women, the existing traditional gender dynamics continue to regulate their choices and behaviours in personal relationships. Although women in this study actively sought to form their own love relationships and aspire to have equal marriages, their bodies, choices, and self-identity remained constrained by the prevailing heterosexual norms and gender hegemony in Chinese society. Therefore, this chapter argues that while the application of gender theory and the thesis of individualisation in the context of "leftover women" had empowered women to proactively pursue their own love relationships, their agency was still limited by the pervasive influence of heterosexual norms and gender power dynamics in Chinese society.

Throughout my thesis, I examine how single women made choices and constructed their self-identity through their interactions with the Chinese economic, political, social, and cultural environment. By exploring their engagement with Chinese social policies, family dynamics, parental influences, and relationships with male partners, I argue that against the backdrop of modernisation and individualisation in China, these women who delayed marriage continued to rely on institutional and traditional factors in shaping their decisions. The women in my research exhibited a reliance on the state system to attain social benefits and status, and they depended on family structures to conform to societal expectations and norms. Moreover, their lifestyle choices and options remained confined within the boundaries of heterosexual and patriarchal norms prevalent in Chinese society. Throughout my thesis, I shed light on the limitations of applying the thesis of individualisation in the Chinese context, particularly for individuals like these single women. Although they had gained increased autonomy and freedom through improved education and career prospects, their choices were still bound by institutional and traditional factors, as they navigated the specific social context they inhabit.

In the concluding chapter, I summarise the overall contributions of my research, emphasising its relevance to discussions on individualisation, gender, feminism, and Chinese and East Asian studies. Ultimately, my conclusion reinforces the arguments put forth throughout my thesis and offers a final justification for the significance of this research endeavour.

CHAPTER 1 CHINESE BACKGROUND

In this chapter, a thorough analysis is provided regarding the Chinese context, which includes the historical aspects of both premodern and modern China, Chinese traditions, cultural norms, and social policies. Through an examination of Chinese history and social policies, the goal of this chapter is to explore the position, opportunities, and obstacles faced by Chinese women. This exploration will facilitate a deeper understanding of the social factors contributing to the phenomenon of Chinese "leftover women" in this particular setting, as well as shed light on how Chinese women navigate their interactions within the economic, social, political, and cultural dimensions of their environment.

The first section of this chapter delves into the traditional Chinese cultural norms in premodern times, as well as the societal transformations experienced by Chinese women during modern Chinese history. Firstly, an examination is conducted on Confucianism and Chinese family traditions in ancient China, covering aspects such as filial piety, arranged marriages, the significance of childbearing, and the dominance of patriarchal and patrilineal ideologies.

Secondly, the focus is shifted towards discussing gender equality during the Mao era and the establishment of the new China, wherein individuals heavily relied on the centralised state system for social resources. Within this context, women were encouraged to leave their homes and engage in employment to contribute to the state's economic growth, albeit with limited opportunities in manual labour predominantly within factories or farms. The introduction of the

One-Child Policy further exacerbated gender inequality as women's reproductive rights went unprotected, resulting in the abandonment of female babies.

Thirdly, the chapter explores the opportunities available to women in the post-Mao era, particularly since the 1980s when the centralised state system collapsed due to social transformations and modernisation. Women could no longer rely on the system, leading to a period of redundancy for many. Gender equality in the workplace significantly declined due to marketisation and privatisation reforms. However, the educational and economic reforms in the 1980s and 1990s did provide women with increased educational opportunities, with many benefiting from being the only child in Chinese families. I provide an overview of urbanisation, migration, and housing policies, focusing on the income disparity between urban and rural areas in China. Additionally, I explore how urbanisation has prompted numerous women to relocate to major cities in search of better educational and career prospects. However, prevailing urban policies, such as housing regulations and residency registration, often prioritise married couples, leaving many Chinese women dependent on their husbands or parents to secure housing in these urban centres. The subsequent part delves into the challenges faced by Chinese women in their careers. This encompasses discussions on the gender imbalance in educational and professional opportunities, the existing maternity welfare system, legal rights concerning employment, instances of sexual harassment and gender discrimination encountered in the workplace, and the structure of the state employment system. Furthermore, I shed light on the ageing society

and social care for Chinese families, including the issues surrounding eldercare, the high cost

of nurseries, and the revival of traditional Confucian ideologies promoted by the state.

Lastly, the chapter examines the dynamics of love and marriage relationships in modern China.

While love and marriage freedom have evolved throughout Chinese history, various traditions

and cultural norms persist amid a lack of established standards for sexual education, while

Chinese parents continue to play a substantial role in the marital choices of young individuals.

It examines the low marriage and birth rates in China and how the government has intensified

its promotion of family and marriage ideologies, often pressuring women to assume greater

responsibility in these realms. The popularity of matchmaking events and online dating among

young Chinese people is also explored. Furthermore, the discussion addresses the stigmatisation

of single women in China, the government's promotion of the derogatory term "leftover

women", and the enduring influence of traditional family values and gendered division of

household responsibilities, leading to Chinese women frequently encountering blame and

exclusion from social policies based on their unmarried status. The final section analyses the

body, age, and beauty anxieties experienced by Chinese women, as well as the excessive

emphasis placed on women's fertility. Specifically, I examine how society exerts additional

pressure and sets higher expectations on highly educated career women in terms of their

physical appearance, beauty standards, and age.

1.1 Confucianism and Chinese family traditions

This section examines the influence of traditional Chinese culture during premodern times and the societal transformations that have taken place in modern Chinese history. The discussion begins by exploring the concepts of Confucianism and traditional family customs prevalent in ancient China. Subsequently, attention shifts to the topic of gender equality during the Mao era and the emergence of the new China. The opportunities and challenges faced by women in the post-Mao era is examined. Lastly, the discussion delves into the dynamics of love and marriage relationships in contemporary China.

1.1.1 Filial piety

During the pre-revolutionary (or imperial) period in China, Confucianism held significant influence as the predominant ideology. It placed great importance on the harmonious family unit as the foundation of society and emphasised the concept of filial piety as a fundamental virtue and the bedrock of civilisation (Stacey, 1983; Charles, 1993). Filial piety refers to the attitude of obedience and respect that younger individuals are expected to display towards their elder family members.   Elders, by virtue of their age and experience, are regarded as authorities possessing wisdom, while the younger generation is expected to demonstrate care and reverence towards them. Under the principle of filial piety, young individuals are expected to listen to and learn from their elders, seek their guidance, and adhere to their teachings. As Evans (2007) puts it, filiality, the requirement that children fulfil expectations of material care and ritual respect of their parents, has long been considered a pillar of China's cultural and social tradition. Filial piety is considered an essential moral value within the framework of

Confucianism and is viewed as a crucial element for maintaining social harmony (Mann and Cheng, 2001).

The concept of filial piety has also influenced the belief that parents, especially elders, should have a significant say in choosing a spouse for their children (Xu and Whyte, 1990; Xu et al., 2014). Within the context of marriage, Confucianism highlights the obligation of children to obey their parents and prioritise family interests over personal desires. In ancient China, marriages were commonly arranged by families, taking into account factors like social status, family background, horoscope compatibility, and financial considerations. Parents, often assisted by matchmakers, played a central role in identifying potential partners for their children. The aim was to ensure that the union would benefit not only the individuals involved but also their families and society as a whole (Xu et al., 2014). Spouses' personal feelings toward each other are comparatively unimportant when it comes to loyalty, coorperation, and harmony within the larger kinship unit (Jankowiak and Moore, 2016). The traditional value of *men dang hu dui* (compatible family backgrounds) has been a prevalent marriage pattern since ancient times in China (Qi and Niu, 2012). This pattern suggests that the husband's and wife's families should share similar political, social, or economic status and prestige (Wei and Guo, 2017), with the expectation that an ideal couple should have compatible family backgrounds. Thus, filial piety, a core virtue in Confucianism, also contributes to the acceptance of arranged marriages. Children are expected to demonstrate respect and obedience to their parents, which includes abiding by their decisions regarding marriage. The belief is that parents have their

children's best interests in mind and are better equipped to make choices that will lead to a stable and harmonious marriage. In this setting marriage is never between just two people but involves a wider set of interested actors whose behaviour was strongly shaped by their views of the family's interest as a corporate entity (Jankowiak and Moore, 2016).

Influenced by Confucianism, having children is regarded as a vital responsibility rooted in filial piety. This notion is captured by a Chinese proverb, "There are three ways to be unfilial, the worst is not to produce offspring", emphasising the importance of individuals in ensuring the continuation of their family lineage and the preservation of their heritage through procreation. The Chinese idiom *tian lun zhi le* (family union and happiness between grandchildren and grandparents) further exemplifies how filial piety required young individuals to meet their parents' expectations and secure their happiness by having children of their own. It is believed that by becoming parents, individuals could bring the joy and fulfilment of grandparenthood to their own parents, thereby showcasing their commitment to filial piety.

1.1.2 Patriarchy and gender hegemony

Confucianism prescribes a family structure characterised by patriarchal and patrilineal ideals (Charles, 1993). Typically, families reside in a household comprising multiple nuclear family units, organised along a patrilineal lineage, either as a stem family or an extended family, all under the dominion of a male family head (Jankowiak and Moore, 2016). Stacey (1983) argues that patriarchy in China manifested as a social and familial system in which male dominance

over women and children stems from the societal role of fatherhood. This power dynamic is further reinforced by an economic framework in which the family unit holds significant productive responsibilities. According to Bøe (2013), the authority held by the male head of the family in terms of property ownership, has led to the economic dependence of other family members, necessitating their continued presence and shared residence within the joint family structure. Consequently, Confucian ethics have established a distinct hierarchy of relationships and an unquestionable distribution of authority, where younger individuals are expected to defer to their elders, and women are to submit to male authority (Stockmann, 2013).

Within the context of male-dominated patrilineal family traditions, women are typically expected to marry into their husband's family, leaving their own homes to care for their husband's parents. Such feudal customs perpetuated women's subordination to their father, husband, and even their sons, as a result of the patriarchal and patrilineal system (Lee and Wang, 2001). A traditional Chinese proverb, "A daughter who is married is like water poured out", vividly portrays the notion that once women are married, they belong to their husband's family rather than a member of their own parents' household. Under the patriarchal and patrilineal traditions, the primary goal of the marriage was to enable the continuing of the patrilineal family line and therefore the first duty of a new wife was to produce a son (Jankowiak and Moore, 2016).

Charles (1993) argues that following marriage, the ideal woman is not expected to work or even be seen outside the home, and her life is characterised by deference to male authority. Confucian ideology dictates that men should be active in the public sphere while women should confine themselves to the domestic realm. In traditional families, women primarily fulfil the roles of supporting and facilitating their husband's productivity within the patriarchal structure, while also taking on responsibilities related to reproduction, household chores, and child-rearing. As Jankowiak and Moore (2016) argued, when bringing a new bride into the household, a groom's parents would be concerned that she be hard-working and skilled at household chores and that she not disrupt family harmony. However, scholars have found in ancient Chinese history, even with dominant discourses emphasised the segregation of the sexes and *nanzhuwai nvzhunei* (working outside and women staying inside), women and men fulfilled separate and yet complementary tasks of producing food and clothing. The ideal of men working outside and women staying inside was only strictly observed by elite families (Eyferth, 2012; Peng, 2022).

Traditional Chinese society subjected women to objectification through the influence of patriarchal and patrilineal ideals in marriage and family dynamics. Confucian tradition tells women that they face *san cong* (three obediences): first to the father, then to the husband, and finally, as widows, to their sons (Jankowiak and Moore, 2016), women's behaviours is strictly mandated by the Confucian doctrines, in which inferior obligation as well as obedience to the mor powerful members in the family hierarchy (men and older generations) (Sung, 2022). The expectation placed on Chinese women is to conduct themselves in a manner that is docile and

submissive. This is reflected in the Chinese proverb, "A woman who does not speak is considered a lady", which signifies the traditional belief that women should embody qualities such as modesty, submissiveness, and silence. Within patriarchal societies, women are often expected to be present but not to voice their opinions, with their primary roles revolving around domestic responsibilities and providing support to their husbands. The ideal image of a woman is that of a *xian qi liang mu* (virtuous wife and good mother), which dictates how much a woman should contribute to her marriage and family rather than prioritising her own autonomy. Women who speak out or display independent and outgoing personalities are considered to deviate from traditional femininity. Furthermore, the Chinese idiom *lang cai nü mao* (a talented man matches with a beautiful woman) underscores the societal emphasis placed on women's reproductive function, while disregarding their talents and potential for career development within the confines of traditional family ideology. Throughout Chinese history, single women have faced derogation and stigma. In ancient China, unmarried women were referred to as *lao gu niang* ("old maids") (Evans, 1997). Those daughters who stay at home unmarried and drain their natal patrilines of resources (food, clothing, houseroom) would be perceived as "worthless daughters" (Santos and Harrell, 2016). These proverbs align with the principles of Confucianism, which stress the importance of upholding social order and maintaining the proper functioning of the family unit.

1.2 Gender equality in Mao era and new China

In this section, the focus is shifted towards discussing gender equality during the Mao era and the establishment of the new China, wherein individuals heavily relied on the centralised state system for social resources. Within this context, women were encouraged to leave their homes and engage in employment to contribute to the state's economic growth, albeit with limited opportunities in manual labour predominantly within factories or farms. The introduction of the One-Child Policy further exacerbated gender inequality as women's reproductive rights went unprotected, resulting in the abandonment of female babies.

1.2.1 The central governance by the state

In the 1950s, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) implemented policies and initiatives with the goal of diminishing familial bonds and loyalties, and promoting allegiance to the communist agenda and the new form of government established after the revolution (Bøe, 2013). The traditional system of thought and values was deemed obsolete and there was an ideological shift towards embracing the communist ideals propagated by the Party and the government. During this period, Confucianism, ancestor worship, and patriarchal authority were classified as remnants of feudalism that citizens of the People's Republic of China (PRC) were encouraged to renounce in favour of embracing the new ideals of Maoist communism (Jacka et al., 2013).

China has undergone a significant transformation into a party state, which emerged as a powerful and ultimate authority that individuals associated with in order to establish a sense of belonging and self-development. During the Mao era, the state implemented several central

systems to organise and govern individuals within the state framework. For example, the *hukou* (household registration) system divided the Chinese population into rural and urban residents, with only urban residents being entitled to more secure employment, healthcare, and other social benefits provided by the state. This is also a residential registration system introduced to control internal migration and differentiate between rural and urban citizens, tying individuals to their place of origin and restricting their rights and benefits to that specific location (Liu, 2005; Bøe, 2013). Initially introduced in 1958, the *hukou* system served three main functions: controlling migration, managing social protection, and preserving social stability (Boquen, 2023). This system has created a framework that imposes restrictions on the free flow of resources, making it challenging for rural residents to access education, employment, healthcare, and other public services unless they obtain an urban *hukou*.

Another central system was the employment system, where individuals were assigned employment within a *danwei* (specific collective or work unit). This system controlled various aspects of individuals' lives, including their dating and marriage relationships, which were sometimes influenced by their superiors within the *danwei* (Liu, 2008b; Yan, 2010; To, 2015). Through these urban *danwei*, the state assumed the roles traditionally held by Chinese families, offering education, employment, housing, childcare, pensions, and other benefits, and providing its citizens with a reliable support system from birth to death, commonly known as the *tie fan wan* ("iron rice bowl"). The comprehensive welfare and security provisions shed light on the social functions of *danwei*. Particularly in the case of state-owned enterprises,

danwei have become a "self-sufficient and multifunctional social community" (Sung, 2022). In return for this comprehensive support, the state expected loyalty and dedicated labour from its citizens. As a result, Chinese individuals became increasingly reliant on this centralised state system to access social resources.

1.2.2 Women's employment rights

In the era of Mao, there was a push for Chinese women to step out of their homes. The slogan "Women hold up half the sky" was promoted, and the CCP aimed to increase the nation's productivity by assigning urban women jobs within the planned economy (Fincher, 2016). For women who grew up in the Maoist era, working outside of home was something they took for granted as an important component of a woman's life (Peng, 2022). This shift had a significant impact on women, as they were detached, often forcibly, from traditional family, kinship, and community networks, as well as from the constraints of traditional values and norms, which were largely Confucian and patriarchal (Yan, 2010). Moreover, women were called upon to actively participate in political, economic, and social campaigns sponsored by the party state, and to redefine themselves as citizens of the nation state rather than solely as members of their families. This represented a particularly liberating experience for generations of women, as they had previously lived in the shadow of their ancestors throughout their entire lives (Yan, 2010b; Peng, 2022).

Under Mao's leadership, there were deliberate endeavours to mobilise women and incorporate them into the labour force. This was in line with Mao's vision of a socialist society, where gender differences were minimised and women were encouraged to engage in productive work alongside men. The government propagated the notion that women's emancipation would be accomplished through their active involvement in economic and political activities. In urban areas, *danwei* not merely was a work arena but often comprised living and social facilities such as housing, schools, childcare, hospitals, and canteens (Sung, 2022). Thanks to the socialist state's commitment to socialise reproductive labour by providing public welfare of domestic and childcare services, the state temporarily alleviated working women's burdens at home, which allowed women to participate in the labour force outside the family (Peng, 2022).

Some scholars such as Jie (2001) argued that the Maoist reform and system has provided equal opportunities for women to join the labour force, women have been provided permanent positions in the same way as men. She also argued that the reform and the system distributes work and rewards equality between women and men, which has left a significant long-term impact on women's employment opportunities (Jie, 2001; Sung, 2022). Since 1950, as a result of economic development plans and various reforms, China had witnessed a substantial rise in the proportion of urban women participating in the labour force, Chinese women's employment rates under socialism were among the highest levels in the world and gender earning gaps were low (Attané, 2012; Wolf, 1984; Ji et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, during Mao's era, despite the high employment rate among women, the available job opportunities for women were largely confined to manual labour in sectors such as factories or farms. Men were regarded as stable better paid, and more skilled labourers by granting them more prestigious jobs than women (Bauer et al., 1992; Jiang, 2004). Whyte's research (1984) reveals that in 1977 to 1978, men still dominate higher-level professional jobs such as foremen, skilled production workers, and police officers; while over 80 percent of school teachers, care workers, street cleaners, and ordinary workers are women, seemingly contradicting the state discourse of gender equality. In the state and the collect sector, women only comprise 32 percent of the urban industrial labour force (Walder, 1988). Tang argued that a large number of women usually gained insecure and unstable jobs that lack of welfare provision, and they were hired as "outsourced labour" so that they could be fired later when the labour demand lowered in certain industries (Tang, 2013). Under the planned system of employment in the socialist era, many were unable to choose jobs or improve the quality of their employment (Peng, 2022).

In addition, women's work was not paid equally during the Maoist era. Although the socialist state promoted equal pay for equal work in ideology, in practice a man performing field labour typically earned ten points per day, while a woman earned between six and eight (Hershatter, 2011). Even when they did the same task with the same quality of result as men, women were routinely paid less than men (Peng, 2022). Furthermore, the number of rural women and the

amount of workload they carried often exceeded men, many of whom undertook technical and managerial positions in enterprises (Peng, 2022).

Some scholars argued that even the state has socialise various forms of domestic and reproductive labour under *danwei* system, unremunerated and undervalued household-based work continued to remain primarily the domain of women (Peng, 2022; Sung, 2022). In the 1950s, the campaign targeted women to advocate the salient role of housewives, and women's roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers were highlighted as contributions to society through husbands and family (Davin, 1975, 1976; Evans, 2010). The fact that men moved into factory and construction work and agricultural development came to heavily rely on women's labour in the fields, spinning, weaving, and shoemaking inside the household became domestic affairs, hidden away at home and invisible for purposes of generating income or assessing women's actual labour burden (Hershatter, 2011). As Peng (2022) argued, an important problem remain in both Marxist theory and socialist practice of women's liberation, that it was considered as a "natural" association between women's biological sex and social role of caring for the family. Thus, the socialist state neither challenged traditional gender ideals about family roles nor required men to share household labour (Ji et al., 2017), resulting in the double burdens of women who became worker-mothers. Chinese women in the Maoist era have continued to perform labour in both public and private spheres (Peng, 2022).

Overall, feminist scholars note that such Maoist notions of "gender sameness" essentially erased gender by demanding that women the same sacrifices as men but without granting them the same benefits or rights as their male counterparts (Jin, 2006; Zuo, 2013). It is crucial to acknowledge that these measures were primarily driven by the state's objectives of economic development and societal transformation rather than a genuine commitment to gender equality (Fincher, 2016). Discrimination and inequality persisted across various facets of Chinese society, including limited access to leadership positions, wage disparities, and adherence to traditional gender norms and expectations (Fincher, 2012, 2016; World Economic Forum, 2020). Whether and where women worked and what kinds of work they held continued to be largely determined by state policies of economic development that were themselves inflected by gender ideologies (Peng, 2022). In addition, through the central *danwei* system, the private sphere was well integrated into the public sphere while patriarchal traditions were more or less confined to the private family and domestic roles remain gendered (Ji, 2017). Working women's housework was regarded as their own particular   problem and housewives' unpaid labour was considered secondary to the paid work in *danwei* for the construction of socialism (Song, 2011). Women's roles within the family and society thus largely remained unchanged, with them disproportionately burdened with domestic and caregiving responsibilities.

1.2.3 Marriage and traditional love relationships

Since the Mao era, Chinese society has also experienced significant social transformation in sex, love, and marriage. As Yan (2010b) argues, the purpose of marriage and starting a family

during the Mao era was primarily driven by the national goal of economic growth through production and reproduction. In 1950, the introduction of the Marriage Law aimed to rectify the practices of the feudal society by emphasising principles such as the freedom to choose a partner, monogamy, and equal rights for both genders (Hare-Mustin, 1982). As Evans (1997) argued, with the promulgation of the new Marriage Law in 1950, free-choice marriage became the main formal expression of the CCP's commitment to women's struggle for sexual equality. The model of marriage ratified by the law described a relationship between equal companions who shared responsibility for childcare and domestic tasks. Combined with new rights of divorce, the right to choose a marriage partner now empowered women, which has challenged the gender hierarchy, and been regarded as a positive step to protect women from male abuse (Evans, 1997). Sung (2022) also stated that the law manifests two functions: a tool for women's liberation and a motivator for women's participation in economic development, especially for women in urban areas due to the better communications and more prioritised law implementation in the cities (Diamant, 2000).

Nevertheless, scholars also discussed the negative impact of the Marriage Law on women's rights in Mao era. Evans (1997) argued that the law was premised on a naturalised and hierarchical view of gender relations that limited the extent of the challenge that women could launch against the patriarchal system. In Evan's opinion, monogamous relationship naturalised construction of heterosexuality, thus, women's transgression signified a potential threat to female fertility as well as family stability. Thus, those women who postponed marriage, feared

of becoming pregnant or spent too much time on education brought disruption and conflict to their marriage, which reasserted hierarchical gender boundaries. A woman was destined to become a wife and mother to support her husband's interests and service his needs, and reproduction of the next generation was projected as woman's 'natural duty' (Yu, 1993; Evans, 1997). Remaining single, and thereby forgoing the joys of mother hood makes women feel 'incomplete and unfulfilled' (Wei, 1950). According to Evans (1997), dominant discourses in Mao era have indicated an attachment to female conduct as the principal standard and agent of marital harmony.

Between the 1950s and the 1970s, although marriage in Mao era were more free-choice based, main discourses of sexuality still remained conservative and controlled by the party-state. Under party control of the press, media and publishing, relative few articles appeared on specifically sex-related matters. In the absence of a formal programme of sex education, the publication of a few articles and books about sexuality was to give young people a 'correct understanding of sex' as a basis for understanding love, marriage and family (Wang et al., 1956; Evans, 1997). In those books, sexuality was constructed based on the binary opposites and biological differences of male and female, and reproduction was perceived as the fundamental and natural purpose of sex. Thus, in the 1950s, sexual activity was considered morally and legally acceptable only within the context of marriage, and the representation of sex did not focus on its place in individual experience, but on its function as a means of enabling the individual to contribute to the family and society (Evans, 1997).

The Marriage Law also established the main context for pre-marital courtship relations in the 1950s. The ACWF encouraged young people to have freer social contact and make friends, which represented courtships as the dominant pre-marital ritual and provided young people with the opportunity to select marriage partner on affection and love (Evans, 1997). Courtship was publicised as a means of preparing young people for marriage by enabling them to discover the meaning of love via a process of mutual acquaintance, friendship and trust. Nevertheless, as discussed earlier, the traditional sex culture has prevented young people to engage in ordinary day-to-day social contact so that real 'free' choices for marriage could not be achieved. Traditional Chinese culture did not condone premarital cohabitation (Parish et al., 2017) and the government's regulations on marriage reinforced societal opposition to cohabitation during the Maoist period (Zhang, 2017).

The CCP's policy throughout the 1950s promoted love-based marriages, but the love in question was supposed to conform to socialist ideals and contribute to the building of the new society and familial relationship (Jankowiak and Moore, 2016). In addition, when young people selected their ideal partner, they also expected to have shared social and political commitment under the socialist ideology, while only focusing on love feelings would lead to self-criticism of selfishness and 'bourgeois' attitudes (Evans, 1997). As Yan (2010) argued, romantic love was condemned as corrupt and reactionary in Mao era.

Although marriage was promoted to be built on free choices, *danwei* as individuals' welfare system and networks still undertook the role of matchmaking. As Jankowiak and Moore (2016) argued, communist ideology has undermined the authority of the powerful lineages and parental power. Thus, parents still had some influence on their children's marriage, but they could no longer legally force choices or decisions for their children. The diminution of parental intervention in the negotiations of marriage by no means encouraged young people's free initiative, still, as Whyte (1995) pointed out, state and bureaucratic agencies including the work unit, the neighbourhood committee, universities and mass organisations, took over many of the advisory, counselling, introductory and proscriptive functions formerly associated with parental responsibility, they have provided young people with various opportunities to find a marriage partner. Sung (2022) also pointed out that private matters have become a public concern in Mao era, and *danwei* actively contributed to women's identity as wife and mother by approaching them in their early or mid-20s and attempting to introduce them to men. Whether individuals could get married, live in a new house, or get access to birth control pills were fully decided by the state system.

1.2.4 The One-Child Policy and fertility rights

Since the 1970s, the implementation of the One-Child Policy in China resulted in even harsher violations of women's human rights than before. This policy led to invasive measures aimed at monitoring and controlling their reproductive lives, including coerced abortions (Karl, 2010). As described by Greenhalgh (2008), women's bodies became mere tools for state-controlled

contraception, serving the urgent demographic targets set by the government. Disturbing statistics from 1983 reveal that approximately 20 million babies were born, while more than 14 million foetuses were aborted. Additionally, over 16 million women underwent sterilisation procedures and more than 17 million intrauterine devices were inserted (Whyte et al., 2015). Research by Cai and Feng (2021) indicates that female sterilisation became the default practice, despite male vasectomies being a safer and more cost-effective alternative. In rural areas, forced sterilisation campaigns were carried out, with women being forcibly taken to operating camps where their tubes were tied in unprofessional and unhygienic conditions. The poorly performed operations and the lack of adequate post-operative care resulted in lifelong disabilities for many women. Forced abortions and sterilisation campaigns led couples to hide pregnancies, and expectant mothers would frequently move from one place to another to evade the authorities (Ahluwalia, 2021).

Moreover, the implementation of the One-Child Policy not only violated women's reproductive rights but also reinforced the deep-rooted tradition of son preference, resulting in increased mental pressure on women and significant gender inequality in China. In an agrarian context, sons were preferred due to their perceived greater financial return and the ability to continue the family lineage, while daughters were typically viewed as having an inferior status as they married into other families (Hesketh and Zhu, 2006). Despite efforts by the Chinese government to promote gender equality and the slogan "Having a girl is as good as having a boy", these long-standing gender preferences could not be changed overnight (Wang, 2005; Wang and

Zhang, 2022). The pressure to bear a son had led to women experiencing psychological stress and abuse from their families, as argued by Cai and Feng (2021). This pressure, combined with expectations related to marriage, family, and professional performance, increased the likelihood of women in China being diagnosed with psychological disorders such as schizophrenia and facing higher rates of suicide. Furthermore, the prevalence of son preference had resulted in a rise in sex-selective abortions, female infanticide, and the abandonment of baby girls. A study estimated that in provinces with high rates of child abandonment, up to one in ten female births were affected in the 1990s (Chen et al., 2015). While some abandoned girls were adopted, others became "missing" girls who did not survive due to parental neglect, discrimination, or the perception that raising daughters was an unnecessary expense and a waste (Ahluwalia, 2021). Even today, the impact of the One-Child Policy and son preference has contributed to China having one of the most severe gender imbalances at birth, with a sex ratio of 112 male births per 100 female births (UNICEF, 2018).

1.3 Women's challenges and opportunities in post-Mao era

This section explores the opportunities available to women in the post-Mao era, particularly since the 1980s when the centralised state system collapsed due to social transformations and modernisation. Women could no longer rely on the system, leading to a period of redundancy for many. Gender equality in the workplace significantly declined due to marketisation and privatisation reforms. However, the educational and economic reforms in the 1980s and 1990s did provide women with increased educational opportunities, with many benefiting from being

the only child in Chinese families. I provide an overview of urbanisation, migration, and housing policies, focusing on the income disparity between urban and rural areas in China. Additionally, I explore how urbanisation has prompted numerous women to relocate to major cities in search of better educational and career prospects. However, prevailing urban policies, such as housing regulations and residency registration, often prioritise married couples, leaving many Chinese women dependent on their husbands or parents to secure housing in these urban centres. The subsequent part delves into the challenges faced by Chinese women in their careers. This encompasses discussions on the gender imbalance in educational and professional opportunities, the existing maternity welfare system, legal rights concerning employment, instances of sexual harassment and gender discrimination encountered in the workplace, and the structure of the state employment system. Furthermore, I shed light on the ageing society and social care for Chinese families, including the issues surrounding eldercare, the high cost of nurseries, and the revival of traditional Confucian ideologies promoted by the state.

Then this section examines the dynamics of love and marriage relationships in modern China. While love and marriage freedom have evolved throughout Chinese history, various traditions and cultural norms persist amid a lack of established standards for sexual education, while Chinese parents continue to play a substantial role in the marital choices of young individuals. It examines the low marriage and birth rates in China and how the government has intensified its promotion of family and marriage ideologies, often pressuring women to assume greater responsibility in these realms. The popularity of matchmaking events and online dating among

young Chinese people is also explored. Furthermore, the discussion addresses the stigmatisation of single women in China, the government's promotion of the derogatory term "leftover women", and the enduring influence of traditional family values and gendered division of household responsibilities, leading to Chinese women frequently encountering blame and exclusion from social policies based on their unmarried status. The final section analyses the body, age, and beauty anxieties experienced by Chinese women, as well as the excessive emphasis placed on women's fertility. Specifically, I examine how society exerts additional pressure and sets higher expectations on highly educated career women in terms of their physical appearance, beauty standards, and age.

1.3.1 Urbanisation, migration and urban identity

China's remarkable economic growth in the past few decades has been accompanied by a significant increase in urbanisation. The dismantling of the central collective system has compelled individuals to actively seek opportunities in urban areas. According to Fincher (2016), the Chinese government has prioritised urbanisation as a key policy to stimulate economic growth, leading to the formulation of the National Urban Planning Law in 1989 (Kamal-Chaoui et al., 2009). By 2020, the urban population has expanded to 64%, a stark contrast to the 13% in 1950 (Seto, 2013; Watanabe, 2021). However, it is worth noting that there is a significant income disparity between urban and rural residents. In 2020, urbanites earned an average annual income of 43,834 yuan (£5,100), whereas rural residents averaged 17,131 yuan (£1,990). Over a seven-year period, the income gap between the two groups has

widened by 57% (Watanabe, 2021). In major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, the urban disposable annual income of around 70,000 yuan (£8,139) exceeded the national average in 2020, as reported by the NBS (InvestorInsights, 2021).

The process of urbanisation has resulted in the emergence of a new middle class in urban China, characterised by a growing urban population with middle-income levels (Zhang, 2010). These individuals are influenced by cultural images of modern lifestyles from abroad. In these urban areas, diverse cultural backgrounds coexist, and traditional forms of community beyond the family are gradually fading away. This shift, brought about by urbanisation and migration, has also had a significant impact on Chinese women. As urbanisation progresses, women no longer solely serve as a workforce for their families, instead, they are venturing out of their familiar family environment, migrating to larger cities, and establishing their own lifestyles. This transition has granted them the opportunity to forge their own paths, which may differ from those of their parents. Women now have the freedom to choose their lifestyle, place of residence, living environment, and social networks, allowing them to develop their own independent set of values. Many career-oriented women in this generation live in urban areas due to their parents' migration from rural areas or their own pursuit of better education and career prospects in large cities (Davin, 2005; Zhang, 2014). As previously discussed, China's sex ratio is significantly imbalanced. However, according to the NBS (2021), the data shows that there were slightly more women with urban *hukou* than men (252 million women compared to 251 million men).

In large cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, the sex ratios of the population with urban *hukou* were 104 women and 102 women per 100 men, respectively.

The *hukou* system in China encourages the migration of skilled individuals to cities to boost local economies while excluding those with lower levels of education from accessing urban resources. According to Boquen (2023), only 35% of urban migrants possess an urban *hukou*, leaving the majority of city inhabitants without full access to social protections and resources. In the 2010s, the Beijing government implemented policies to remove the so-called *di duan ren kou* ("low-end population"), including the working class with little education or career background, in order to alleviate urban governance pressures and promote economic development (Morris, 2022). Despite policies that prioritise educated and career-oriented individuals, the strict *hukou* system imposes various conditions and requirements even for educated urban migrants. Take Shanghai *hukou* registration requirements as an example (Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, 2022): typically, urban migrants are expected to work and reside in Shanghai for a period of 5 to 7 years to be eligible for an urban *hukou*. With a high-tech company or a postgraduate degree background, the duration may be reduced to 1 to 2 years. Married couples receive additional considerations in their *hukou* application if one of them is qualified. Currently, having a Shanghai *hukou* primarily offers benefits such as the ability to purchase a property in Shanghai, and ensure access to education for their children in Shanghai.

Similar to the *hukou* system, housing has emerged as a crucial urban resource in China. With the collapse of the central collective system, housing was privatised, allowing individuals to purchase their own homes. According to Chen (2020), this privatisation has led to a rapid increase in homeownership starting from the mid-1990s, but it also has unintended consequences, such as a significant rise in housing prices since the early 2000s. Li and Fan (2020) state that the surge in housing prices has further contributed to the appreciation of housing wealth. As a result, purchasing houses has become a primary means of wealth accumulation among Chinese families over the decades. According to the China Household Wealth Survey Report 2019, housing property constitutes 71.35% of urban family wealth (Li and Fan, 2020). The 2017 Chinese Social Survey (Li and Fan, 2020) reveals that in 1988, only 13.7% of urban residents aged 25–69 owned housing property, with 84.5% residing in public housing. However, by 2017, 92.9% of the same age group owned a property, and 39.6% of these properties were acquired from the market. The housing wealth of urban residents in China has multiplied. In 1995, the average housing wealth per family was a mere 17,000 yuan (£1,977), but by 2017, it had increased 37-fold to 635,600 yuan (£73,906).

In recent years, the Chinese government has implemented various measures to regulate the housing market and prevent excessive investment in real estate. These restrictions include policies that only allow individuals with urban *hukou* to purchase houses in specific urban areas. Additionally, many urban policies favour married couples over single individuals when it comes to accessing urban resources. Single mothers, single individuals, or married couples

without children do not receive the same benefits. Overall, married couples are consistently given priority in accessing resources compared to single individuals. For many singles, only those with higher purchasing power or those who have paid taxes for an extended period are able to easily purchase their own homes.

These urban policies that prioritise marriage and family have led many young people in China to rely heavily on their marital status or family connections. The marketisation and modernisation of Chinese society, coupled with the state's reforms in providing housing and urban resources, have shifted the responsibility onto individuals, forcing them to depend on their families and personal networks for support (Yan, 2009). For example, women may rely on their future husband for housing. Research by Fincher (2016) on the gender wealth gap in China revealed that women's families often expect men to be able to afford a house before marriage or anticipate valuable gifts, such as *cai li* ("bride price"), from the groom's family. Women may also depend on their parents for financial assistance in purchasing a house. Reports indicate that 57.54% of single women aged 20 to 25 buy a property with assistance from their parents (Meng, 2021). Thus, even though the policies prioritise married couples, many single women are planning or purchasing their first house in these cities with parental support. Meng (2021) found that owning a house can reduce a single woman's desire and need for marriage, as it provides a greater sense of security compared to marriage. In order to secure a financially successful future for their children (Xie, 2021), parental support has become the primary source on which young people rely to access urban resources (Qi, 2016).

1.3.2 Women's education opportunities

Chinese women have experienced increased autonomy and more equal education opportunities as a result of education reforms and the implementation of the One-Child Policy. Since 1977, the restoration of the National College Entrance Examination has enabled women to pursue higher education and seek employment in the labour market (Liu, 2018). The examination, known as *gao kao*, was standardised by the Ministry of Education in 1978, allowing students across the country to take identical examinations without any age or educational background restrictions. Additionally, in 1985, the Chinese government established the Nine-Year Compulsory Education System, which mandates that every child attend school for six years of primary education and three years of junior secondary education, funded by the government without tuition fees.

The implementation of the One-Child Policy, coupled with the education reforms, has led to unprecedented investment in the education of urban women, as they do not face competition from siblings, especially brothers (Evans, 2010; Yan, 2013). This has resulted in a "privileged" educational status for women in their early years (Fong, 2002). As a consequence of these policies, the participation of girls in education has significantly increased, leading to an equal female-to-male ratio in higher education enrolment by 2010 (Liu, 2016b). The statistics indicate that in certain large cities like Beijing and Shanghai, the number of women with a bachelor's degree exceeded that of men, while in urban areas of provinces like Hebei, Shanxi, and Liaoning,

the number of women with a master's degree was also higher than that of men (NBS, 2021). However, it is important to note that women born in small towns or rural villages, where the government allowed rural families to have more than one child, are not always treated equally compared to urban women whose parents heavily invested in their education (Fong, 2002; Tsui and Rich, 2002).

Following a series of economic reforms in the 1980s, China experienced significant economic growth, leading to an increase in personal income, particularly in urban areas. According to the NBS, China's per capita disposable income rose from 904 yuan (£106) in 1990 to 36,883 yuan (£4100) in 2022 (Xinhua, 2023). This substantial income growth enabled many Chinese families to financially support their only child's education overseas. In 1981, the State Council introduced the "Temporary Regulations on Self-funded Study Abroad", allowing Chinese students to pursue education abroad. From 1978 to 2018, the number of Chinese students studying overseas reached 650,000, as reported by Caixin Media (Liu, 2021b). In 2019, Chinese students accounted for 33.74% of the total number of foreign students in the United States, 21.99% in the United Kingdom, and 36.58% in Australia (Liu, 2021b). This trend of pursuing education overseas particularly benefited urban women who had previously faced limited educational opportunities due to the One-Child Policy. In 2014, it was reported that 63% of Chinese international students in British universities were female (Wang and Miao, 2016). Furthermore, 94% of Chinese female students received financial support for their studies from their parents, exceeding the percentage for male students by 6% (Kajanus, 2015; Tu and Xie,

2020). This generation of urban daughters has been viewed as more privileged during China's rapid economic development, an unintended consequence of the One-Child Policy (Tu and Xie, 2020; Xie, 2021).

Under the background, singletons in urban China are the first generation to enjoy unprecedented levels of prosperity, the first to experience extensive contacts with Western culture, and the first to have access to the Internet (Jankowiak and Moore, 2016). As Jankowiak and Moore (2016) stated, though tales of "little emperors" and "little empresses" often exaggerate the spoiled nature of the singleton generation, it is true that having no siblings means that parental attention is not diluted: the singleton child gets it all; he or she also gets all the pressure. In Fong (2004)'s research, a number of young Chinese talk about the weight on their shoulders given that they are their parents' only hope for a promising future. Chinese parents heavily invest in their children and continue to support them in their adulthood, thus, the youth in under great obligation to providing old age care for their parents, which will be discussed in the section 1.3.4; and parents may regard this heavily-invested offspring as their private product (Ji, 2017). Educational support went along with clear expectations of the students' whole-hearted gratitude toward their supporters (Santos and Harrell, 2016), thus, this generation of singletons are expected to return their love to parents pay off parents' investment.

1.3.3 Marketisation and women's career challenges

In the 1980s, the Opening-Up reform was introduced, initiating market-oriented and privatisation measures to establish a "socialist market economy" (Huang, 2018). These reforms marked a shift towards loosening state control and promoting economic liberalisation. The focus of the "Opening-Up" reform was on opening the country to foreign investment, and encouraging the growth of a private sector with neoliberal policies applied to various industries (Ji et al., 2017; Ji and Wu, 2018; Peng, 2022; Sung, 2022). It also involved further reforms aimed at privatising and downsising state-owned industries. As a result, state-run welfare provisions were scaled back or privatised, and the current system relies on individual insurances (Peng, 2022; Sung, 2022). Despite the presence of an authoritarian government and continued state control over key resources and industries, many urban individuals who had previously been dependent on the state employment system found themselves redundant and had to venture into entrepreneurship and establish their own small businesses. Chinese individuals feel compelled to rely on the market and seize opportunities amidst the ongoing urbanisation and market-oriented trends.

However, the reforms implemented in China did not lead to equal opportunities for women compared to men. During the 1990s, as market-oriented reforms took place, leadership and professional positions became scarce. Women working in state-owned enterprises experienced a rapid loss of jobs, particularly those in leadership roles who were often forced to transfer to lower-paying jobs in collective industries or retire (Liu, 2008b; Tiefenbrun, 2017). Women were pressured to withdraw from the labour force as a way of easing problems of excess labour

supply, especially when unemployment was serious among men. Reproductive responsibilities were pushed back into the family so that enterprises could lower their financial burdens and productive costs (Peng, 2022). Among the redundant workers, a majority were women, especially those who had not received adequate education in the past. Women accounted for 60% of redundant workers but only made up 40% of the overall workforce (Summerfield, 1994; Song, 2003; Liu, 2008b). In an effort to prioritise and secure jobs for men, the government propagated gender stereotypes that portrayed women as weaker and less capable workers (Liu, 2008b). Consequently, acute urban unemployment and underemployment among women rendered female labour in general more contingent and expendable than male labour, and caused many women's departure from the public domain of work (Ji et al., 2017; Peng, 2022). The image of strong and heroic women workers, which had been promoted during the Maoist era, was now ridiculed as an obstacle to China's modernisation (Tiefenbrun, 2017). While women have been persistently treated as contingent labour for the broader economy to suit the country's changing political agendas and economic needs, the sociocultural perceptions of women and expectations of their domestic roles have remain relatively unchanged (Ho, 2020).

Women's domestic roles as wife and mother were emphasised and interpreted as a "natural" result of their biological sex, and the naturalisation of femininity as wifehood and motherhood in turn justified women as unfavourable workers compared to men (Song, 2011). Following the implementation of market reforms, there has been a significant decline in the proportion of females participating in the labour force, as well as a decrease in equal wages and opportunities

for women in senior roles due to economic policies and job market inequalities in China (World Economic Forum, 2020). In 1990, the employment rate of urban women was 14.5% lower than that of men (Fincher, 2016). Between 1990 and 2010, the proportion of urban female labour force participation experienced a significant drop, reaching 60.8% (Kuo, 2014). Women only accounted for one third of the non-agricultural workforce (Tiefenbrun, 2017), and only around 35% of women held senior or higher positions in companies (Qiao, 2021; Li, 2022a). According to Peng (2022), in the early years of the reform era, manual labour tasks in factories usually became women's work, while technical and managerial tasks were often assigned to men. Sung (2022) found that many job ads specify preferred gender, either "men only" or "more suitable for men", even though prohibited by law. Furthermore, in 1990, the average annual salary of urban women was 77.5% of that earned by men, but by 2010, it has decreased to just 67.3% (Attané, 2012). In 2020, Chinese women earn an average of 39% less (61%) than men (World Economic Forum, 2020). In the context of resurgence of traditional gender ideology, women's advancement in higher education encounters structural and cultural obstacles to transfer into gains in the labour market (Ji and Wu, 2018). This gendered division of industrial labour was interpreted as resulting from different labouring capabilities between men and women: women and men were believed to have different capacities suited to different tasks (Rofel, 1999). This also strengthened the society's ingrained belief in women's traditional identity (Ji et al., 2017; Sung, 2022).

Without improvements in medical care and maternity leave provisions, the burden of fertility and childcare falls heavily on women. Despite government efforts to encourage larger families with the Three-Child Policy, the birth rate continues to decline (Davidson, 2022). When the government aims to increase the birth rate without improving maternity welfare for women, it reinforces the expectation that women should leave work and take on greater family responsibilities, rather than make autonomous choices. According to the updated family policies (Huang and Huang, 2021), Chinese women are legally entitled to a minimum of 98 days of paid maternity leave, with some provinces having extended it to 158 days. In contrast, paternity leave typically lasts for less than 10 days, further perpetuating the notion that childcare is primarily the responsibility of women. Additionally, when the cost of maternity leave falls on many for-profit enterprises, hiring women, especially those who have not yet had children, becomes more expensive compared to male candidates (Li, 2021). Several studies and reports have shown that women's marital status and pregnancy plans are commonly scrutinised during the job recruitment process, allowing companies to avoid hiring "high-risk" female employees (Larson, 2014; Xie, 2021; Sun, 2021b; Sung, 2022). Due to the lack of supportive welfare policies, Xie (2021) found in her studies on Chinese middle-class women that some pregnant career women voluntarily choose to temporarily leave their position for childbirth. However, women have been affected by the rhetoric of personal choice and individual rights to justify women's sacrifice for family needs under the double demands of familism (Ji, 2015a). Neoliberal reforms of economic restructuring extol the role of the market and corporations and propel the retreat of the state from providing public social welfare, and as a result exacerbate

fluctuations in women's unemployment and underemployment (Peng, 2022). Urban professional women in reform-era China are aware of the challenges brought by their reproductive roles as wives and mothers to their productive roles as workers, which is one of the reasons the new Three-Child Policy did not receive as positive of a response from women at reproductive ages as policymakers expected (Peng, 2022).

Educated professional women in China continue to face varying degrees of sexual harassment and gender discrimination in the workplace, highlighting the persistent gender inequality in working conditions (Liu, 2016a). As Peng (2022) stated, gender-based discrimination in Chinese corporations partly resulted from the fact that women lacked access to well-established, male-dominated business networks of *guanxi*, and were therefore at a disadvantage to men who formed and manipulated *guanxi* to their advantage. Sung (2022) argued that Chinese organisations adopted paternalistic leadership, which is strikingly male-biased by assuming males as default leaders and explicitly neglecting the roles of women. These women often encounter difficulties in asserting their rights within the existing legal system. Over the past four decades, while women have gained more career opportunities as a result of economic reforms and marketisation, they have also become subjected to objectification and commodification in the workplace (Liu, 2016). In 2016, the Chinese government introduced the "National Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women's Development", which aimed to promote gender equality and eliminate gender discrimination. Additionally, on 8 March 2023, the government released its first set of guidelines to address sexual harassment of women in the

workplace. However, these guidelines were criticised for their lack of clarity and enforcement mechanisms (Zhuang, 2023). The ability of women to claim their rights and seek legal support in cases of harassment still heavily relies on the state legal system, which has been reported to be inadequate in protecting women. A notable example is the case of XianZi, a woman who was unable to appeal her harassment claims against a TV host due to insufficient evidence (Tsui, 2022), further highlighting the lack of practical enforcement.

In addition to the lack of social welfare for women, Chinese companies have also been criticised for their failure to safeguard labour rights due to the absence of relevant regulations and inadequate legal enforcement (Yip, 2021). The term "996" has emerged to describe a harsh work culture prevalent in many private companies, where employees are expected to work from 9 am to 9 pm, six days a week. The economic reforms and the advent of the market economy have provided opportunities for development in these private sectors. As noted by Yan (2010), many Chinese individuals opted to transition from state-owned enterprises to private companies in the early 1990s in search of increased income and prospects within the market economy. However, over the past three decades, the protection of individual rights within these private sectors has remained incomplete due to the absence of comprehensive labour laws and regulations in China. The Labour Law of the PRC (The National People's Congress, 1994) stipulates that a standard workday should be eight hours long, with a maximum of 44 hours per week, and any work beyond that should be compensated with overtime pay. However, enforcement of these regulations has been insufficient. According to Sung (2022) and Ji et al.

(2017), private enterprises are characterised by their profit-driven nature, thus, individual's work performance is monitored by a rigid evaluation system, and female candidates are usually not preferred in the job recruitment and promotion. Therefore, major positions of power and decision-making are mainly held by men among these private sectors.

Although there is a growing awareness of individual rights and the rights movement in China, it remains heavily influenced by state power and the traditional belief that an individual's identity and rights are contingent upon the state (Yan, 2010b). Consequently, despite the dismantling of the central allocation system many years ago, the state employment system (SES), which includes state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and government positions, has regained its status as a preferred career choice for many individuals due to better working conditions and social benefits. Following the reforms in SOEs, a Party-dominated political governance structure was established (Jin et al., 2022), requiring employees to demonstrate loyalty to the Party. The state employment system is still widely perceived as providing *tie fan wan* – secure jobs and enhanced social welfare directly through the Party system. Sung (2022)'s research showed SOE was still referred as *danwei* by employees, similarly in functions, it has provided free housing, schools, canteens, childcare facilities and even longer maternity leave. Han and Zheng (2019) and Lin et al. (2020)'s studies acknowledge that while employee salaries only cover daily expenses, the SES offers lifelong employment and various benefits and services free of charge, including retirement pensions, housing, healthcare, and education expenses for their children, all being funded by the state's fiscal appropriations. Nevertheless, Sung (2022)'s

research also found that among 95 million Party members, only 28.8 percent were women in 2021. The male-dominated networking activities create a dilemma for women, especially for working mothers who have to take into account childcare responsibilities. In business trips, male employees are preferred as women are regarded as "inconvenient" in business travel. Consequently, despite the collapse of the central allocation system, individuals' careers continue to rely heavily on the state, government, and the CCP, as these entities retain significant control over enterprises and social welfare provisions, even though among SES and SOE, there are still structural gender bias and discrimination existing and leaving significant impact on women's rights.

1.3.4 Ageing society and social care in Chinese families

While the One-Child policy successfully achieved its primary objective of population control in China, it had unintended consequences, including the rapid ageing of the population, which is having significant ramifications for China's labour-intensive industries. Over the past four decades, as urban families have only been allowed to have one child, there is now a limited number of young people entering the workforce to offset the growing population of older individuals reaching retirement age. This demographic shift is also attributed to factors such as increased life expectancy and declining fertility rates. In 2020, individuals aged 65 and older accounted for 13.5% of China's 1.4 billion population, a significant increase from 8.87% a decade ago (Cheng et al., 2021). Projections indicate that the proportion of individuals over 60 years old is expected to reach 28% by 2040 (World Health Organization, 2022). As Sun (2021a)

asserts, this current population structure presents challenges, as fewer workers are contributing to the public pension system while the number of seniors requiring support is growing. In 2019, the Chinese Academy of Sciences projected that China's urban state pension fund would be depleted by 2035 (Sun, 2021a).

The significant demographic shift in China has brought forth numerous challenges in public health and social care for the elderly. Currently, public elderly care institutions in the country are often affordable but have lengthy waiting lists for applicants, indicating a high demand for these services (Zhang, 2021). However, due to insufficient funding, many of these institutions face various problems, including a lack of qualified nursing staff and inadequate care services and facilities. In an attempt to address the gap in elderly care, the Chinese government is encouraging the establishment of private elderly care institutions. However, Zhang (2021) reports that conditions and prices for these institutions vary widely. Many elderly individuals living in urban areas cannot afford costs for private care even with their savings and pensions. Similar challenges exist within the healthcare system in China. While most individuals have basic healthcare coverage, those living in rural areas or with lower incomes may struggle to afford expensive treatments for serious illnesses. Some advanced or long-term treatments require individuals to pay out-of-pocket. Additionally, the rising cost of health insurance, imposed by the government, has become unaffordable for many elderly individuals, leading to frustration and resentment (Bradsher, 2023).

Despite the lack of welfare and social support, the Chinese government has shown reluctance to improve the existing welfare system. Instead, there has been a recent emphasis on calling upon young people to assume the responsibility of taking care of the elderly. As a result of an incomplete health and social care system, the burden of family care has shifted to the younger generation. According to the 1980 Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Seniors, children have a duty to provide support and assistance to their parents, and if they fail to do so, parents in need have the right to demand support payments from their children (Article 21) (Qi, 2016). The 1996 Law, which is still in effect today, states that aged care primarily relies on the family and family members are responsible for the care and welfare of the elderly (Article 10) (Qi, 2016). In 2013, a law was implemented in China that requires adult children to visit and care for their ageing parents. Municipal authorities have even granted "filial leave" to employees as a means to encourage them to visit their parents more frequently (Zhang, 2016b), exerting pressure on young people to assume greater family responsibility.

In recent years, due to the incomplete welfare system, the Chinese government has placed greater emphasis on filial piety as a core traditional value. In 2004, seven central government branches cosponsored a nationwide educational campaign advocating "respecting, loving, and helping senior citizens" (*zunlao, ailao, zhulao*) with the goal of finding and publicizing new "filial exemplars" (Santos and Harrell, 2016). In 2012, the government issued the "New 24 Paragons of Filial Piety", which conveys the message that caring for one's family elders is a cherished virtue among the Chinese nationalities, reinforcing the importance of filial tradition and Chinese culture in policies and laws (Xie, 2021). For the current generation of only children who have received

significant parental investment in their education and housing in urban areas, resulting in closer emotional bonds with their parents (Evans, 2010; Liu, 2008a), and failure to fulfil filial duties can lead to a sense of shame or *diu lian* (loss of face). While one of previous studies Fong (2002) have shown that married daughters were traditionally seen as unable to support their parents after marriage due to the belief that they would then belong to their husband's family, recent research (Yan, 2013; Qi, 2016) has indicated that most young people in this generation, regardless of gender, are willing to respect their parents' feelings, fulfil their filial responsibilities, and take care of them.

In addition, the declining total fertility rate in the country can also be attributed to the increasing costs associated with raising children and the demand from young people for better childcare services and support (Yu, 2023). According to a report by state news agency Xinhua in 2021, only around 5% of children under the age of 3 have access to day-care services (Ni, 2021). As a result, many families in need of day care cannot afford the high fees charged by private facilities that are in high demand. Consequently, young people have to rely on intergeneration support to assist with childcare responsibilities (Song and Ji, 2020). Chinese parents, particularly mothers, are willing to provide support in caring for their grandchildren to alleviate the burden on the couples (Goh, 2009; Goh and Kuczynski, 2010). As Peng (2022) and (Ji and Wu, 2018) argued, grandmothers who are often considered as less educated and professional are usually expected to help with traditional forms of domestic labour such as cooking, cleaning, and washing.

Therefore, both young people and older adults increasingly depend on their families for social care functions. The strong bond between parents and children has led to instances where parents intervene in their children's relationships or choice of partner to ensure they can rely on their children's family for care. For instance, studies conducted by Liu (2008a) and Yan (2013) highlight that Chinese parents expect their child's future partner to possess strong moral values and be willing to share filial duties. Furthermore, parents prefer partners from nearby cities or towns to make it more convenient for their children to live close by and provide support. Given the absence of a comprehensive welfare system, individuals often rely on their families for practical support, and the family's function as a source of economic stability and reproduction has been accentuated. Consequently, the family unit has become the most dependable "welfare agency" for individuals due to the lack of a comprehensive social care system. As Ji (2017) argued family members have to stick together as a safety net, to some degree through their obligations towards each other as defined by Confucian tradition. Consequently, the family unit has become the most dependable "welfare agency" for individuals due to the lack of a comprehensive social care system (Santos and Harrell, 2016).

1.3.5 Sexual education and modern marriage

During the 1980s, there was a shift in cultural attitudes due to the rising popularity of film, novels, short stories, and the mass media, which brought topics like romantic love and freedom

of marriage to the forefront of Chinese society (Evans, 1997; Yu and Xie, 2015b; Zhang, 2017). According to Evans (1997), since the late 1980s, the ideological struggle over love and sexuality would appear to have been resolved. In the 1990s, the gradual inclusion of sexual education in schools further fostered the expression of sexual love among Chinese youth and their desire for increased sexual freedom (Yan, 2010b). Furthermore, alongside the economic reforms, the implementation of the One-Child Policy also played a role in separating sex from reproduction. The policy encouraged married couples to use contraception, thereby indicating that sex for the sake of love and pleasure was deemed important within marital relationships (Pan, 2007; Farrer, 2014; Xie, 2021).

The landscape of love and sex among young urban Chinese has undergone a remarkable transformation, leading to a loosening of the traditional connection between sexual intimacy and marriage (Cherlin, 2004). It is contended that in China, romantic love has become the foundation of marriage for many urban dwellers in recent decades (Zhang and Sun, 2014), and love is seen as both an emotional expression of passionate feelings and a long-term commitment through the institution of marriage (Jankowiak, 1989; Farrer, 2014; Xie, 2021). From the 1980s, pre-marital cohabitation between couples was reportedly on the increase (Evans, 1997). Young people now exhibit a greater acceptance of premarital sex and cohabitation, signalling a shift in societal attitudes (Farrer, 2014). This change has expanded romantic possibilities and provided more freedom in the matter of love, resulting in challenges in establishing lifelong relationships and, in some cases, a decreased desire for such relationships (Yang, 2017). Individuals now

tend to have higher expectations when choosing a partner and delay marriage until later in life (Qi and Niu, 2012). The increasing age at which people marry in recent decades is gradually influenced more by personal choices (Cai and Wang, 2014).

However, despite the increased freedom in marriage choices and partner selection among Chinese individuals (Yu and Xie, 2013, 2015a), traditional values still persist in Chinese society. Since the 1980s, in an ideological atmosphere dominated by conservative fears of contamination by the bourgeois West, open support for sex education was necessarily constrained (Evans, 1997). Pre-marital sex and cohabitation was not legally protected (Evans, 1997), and was even linked to "antisocial behaviour" (Farrer, 2002). The provision of comprehensive sexual education in schools is still lacking, and open discussions about sexual topics remain sensitive both in public and on online platforms (Xie, 2021). In Farrer (2002) and Rofel (2007)'s research, women mention their lack of sexual knowledge and the near impossibility of sexual experience before marriage. There are many ambivalent discourses on sex education in schools, though actual dating culture is diverse and complex in society at large; the education system still adopts a purified, sanitised, and moralised discourse and dating (Wang and Ho, 2011). There is also almost no family sex education in China: parents tend to treat their daughters as "pure children" rather than sexually mature adults, which are closely related to the ignorance of sexuality in Chinese cultural tradition and political discourses (Wang and Ho, 2011).

Additionally, women continue to be objectified and subjected to sexual double standards under patriarchal values, with female chastity still considered important in the eyes of many Chinese men under heterosexual norms (Li and Xu, 2004; Farrer, 2014; Huang, 2017; Xie, 2021). Due to the moralised public discourse surrounding female sexuality, women face pressure to abstain from premarital cohabitation to protect their reputation, and young girls are often prohibited from engaging in *zao lian* (precocious love relationships) in school (Farrer, 2014; Xie, 2021), and parents had a moral duty to distract their children from perils of 'precocious love' (Evans, 1997; Farrer, 2002). Thus, the concept of virginity serves to regulate and control women's behaviour but does not impose similar restrictions on men, men's sexual experience may be perceived as a desirable trait in a lover (Farrer, 2002, 2014). Farrer (2002)'s research showed that women attributed their own norm of virginity to men's insistence on a virgin bride, and women's standard for sexual behaviour still focus a great deal on how men react to women's sexual experience. Female virginity was perceived as a prerequisite for marriage and the 'most previous gift' for their future husband (Evans, 1997), and marriage continues to be perceived as the only acceptable life path for Chinese women. As scholars (Xiao, 1989; Wang and Ho, 2011) argued, female chastity and sexual vulnerability produced binary images of good/bad girl, and women's power resource comes from her virginity and her resistance to early marriage. Women's pleasure, desire, sexual agency and their subjectivity has been ignored (Wang and Ho, 2011). Thus, values and ideology of sex in post-Mao era is rigidly grounded in heterosexist assumptions.

It has been observed that women in modern Chinese society place greater importance on their personal happiness and their partner's traits, such as shared interests and lifestyles. Young people also believe that husband and wife should seek feelings of mutual love and respect in modern marriages (Jankowiak and Moore, 2016). In Rofel (2007)'s research, it showed that Chinese women placed more importance on the "self", emphasising self-realisation and self-development. Women tended to think that the self's need for self-realisation is in conflict with commitments to marriage and also to children, and regarded not having children as having a free self of desire as opposed to a kinship-oriented self. In Rofel's opinions, women's desire produced a split gender subjectivity: either to be the single, free woman, or the respectable, married woman. This generation of young women have been trying to get rid of traditional family women's image from the previous generation, and desperate for more freedom and independence.

However, factors like education, income, and family background of the prospective spouse continue to hold significant value (Qi and Niu, 2012; Wang and Nehring, 2014; Yang, 2017; Liu, 2019). Additionally, some argue that the spouse-matching pattern influences women's marriage decisions, with women preferring to marry someone from a higher socio-economic status, while men tend to prefer marrying someone from a lower status (Lei et al., 2014; Luo and Sun, 2015; Liu, 2019). To (2015) uses the term "marriage capital" to describe an individual's educational background as their potential advantage in the marriage market,

indicating the continued importance placed on their partner's personal background. Male-female differences in expectation have not entirely disappeared: men who hope to get married are still expected to have stable jobs and to afford a place of residence for the newly married couple, and a woman still depends on the success of her marriage to secure her living (Wang and Nehring, 2014; Jankowiak and Moore, 2016; Santos and Harrell, 2016). As Farrer (2002) found, Chinese women especially those living in large cities, have been trying to find a balance between "material conditions" and "romantic feelings". They aim to look for husbands who will provide the best economic conditions for them and their children in the future, yet still expecting to fall in love. Jankowiak and Moore (2016) also found that especially China's single-child generation understands the importance of pragmatic interests while embracing a long-term, warm, even intense, love bond, with trust, shared feelings and joint activities for a good marriage.

With the rapid social and economic changes in China over the past few decades, the influence of traditional arranged marriages has declined in many urban areas (Hung, 2017). Nonetheless, it has been observed that Chinese parents still have a considerable influence in their children's dating lives. Several studies on Chinese dating practices have confirmed the active involvement of parents in their children's online and offline dating endeavours (Zarafonetis, 2014; Zhang and Sun, 2014; Lake, 2018). In public parks, for instance, elderly individuals may hold pieces of paper containing their child's personal information, including age, height, occupation, and property, along with their desired qualities they are looking for in an ideal partner. Parents

would engage with each other to assess compatibility before allowing their children to meet potential partners. The value of filial piety remains central and young people are expected to comply with their parents' wishes. This also significantly impacts their choice of partner. Research by Lake (2018) and To (2015) revealed that, in accordance with traditional patriarchal practices, parents often reject lower-status partners for their daughters, as they may not be deemed suitable as the family's head or primary breadwinner. Yan (2013) also discussed how Chinese parents typically make final decisions regarding divorce, asset division, and child custody for young couples. Both Qi (2016) and Yan (2013) found that around 70% of Chinese young people respect their parents' opinions and would agree to break up with their partner if requested, considering it an act of filial piety. As Jankowiak and Moore (2016) argued, the most common source of conflict between parents and their children where romantic affairs are concerned is the clash between the feelings of the young person and the parents' perception of their child's long-term eco nomic prospects. Steinfeld (2015)'s research demonstrated that in many Chinese relationships, love culture has been largely supplanted by Confucian values, with convenience playing a more significant role in marriages than love or romance.

1.3.6 Marriage ideology and policies in Chinese society

As a result of the ongoing modernisation and social transformations in China, the country is experiencing a decline in both marriage and birth rates. This has led to a significantly ageing population and increased demographic pressure. According to data from the MCA (2021), from 2017 to 2021, the marriage rate dropped from 7.7% to 5.4%. Additionally, the age at which

Chinese people are getting married for the first time has been consistently rising. In 1990, the percentage of unmarried women aged 30 to 40 in China was only 0.6%, but by 2019, it had increased to 11% (Hu, 2019). In 2010, the average age for men's first marriage was 25.75, and for women, it was 24. However, by 2020, these ages had risen to 29.38 for men and 27.95 for women, with the increase being slightly faster for women (The State Council, 2020). In addition, according to the World Bank (2022), the number of births per woman decreased from 2.5 in 1990 to 1.7 in 2010, and further dropped to 1.2 in 2020. In 2022, the birth rate fell to 6.77 births per 1,000 people, down from 7.52 in 2021, reaching the lowest recorded level (Master, 2023).

To address the challenges posed by the low marriage and birth rates and to mitigate the ageing pressure, the Chinese government has utilised media and ideological reinforcement to promote familial values. Beginning in the early 2000s, the concept of *he xie she hui* (the Harmonious Society), influenced by Confucianism, was introduced as a means of tackling social, economic, and ageing issues while ensuring social stability under the leadership of the CCP (Xinhuanet, 2018). The belief in a harmonious society is closely intertwined with the idea of a harmonious family. The family is considered the foundational unit of society, and maintaining harmony within the family is seen as vital for achieving overall harmony in the broader community. Under the framework of promoting the concept of the Harmonious Family, there has been a reinforcement of traditional social and family values. Particularly in recent years, Xi Jinping's government has introduced the term *jia feng jian she,* emphasised the role of the family in providing support for individuals, including the care of elderly family members

and the education of children, with the aim of enabling individuals to make greater contributions to society as a whole (Xinhuanet, 2018; People's Daily, 2020). Within the current ideological framework, Xi emphasised in his speech at the ACWF (ACWF, 2018):

> Women should always take the lead in loving our country, fostering a loving family relationship, promoting traditional family values, and caring for the elderly and children...balancing work and family, and becoming modern women who contribute to both the family and society.

In this discourse, women are compelled to assume greater responsibility in maintaining family harmony and emotional connections as wives and mothers, influenced by traditional gender stereotypes and divisions of household labour. Being a capable wife and mother who can manage family affairs and contribute significantly to household tasks is considered crucial for the foundation of the family unit and social harmony (ACWF, 2018). This idealised image places Chinese women in a situation where their first priority should be their family and children, leaving little room in their lives for "individualistic" concerns and resulting in a highly family-centric lifestyle (Bøe, 2013). Consequently, a woman who remains unmarried or childless within a marriage is not seen as fulfilling her role and capacities as a woman.

To reinforce traditional family values, discourage divorce, and address the declining marriage rate, the Chinese government has implemented various marriage and family policies. For

instance, in 2020, the government introduced the "cooling-off period", which mandates that couples seeking divorce must wait for a 30-day period before finalising the process. Following the implementation of this law, data published by the MCA indicated a 70% decrease in the divorce rate (Davidson, 2021). However, some statistics have also shown a significant annual decline in the marriage rate, prompting questions about the practical effectiveness of this policy in "saving marriages" (Wang, 2022). Furthermore, critics argue that the "cooling-off period" should not be applied to divorces involving domestic violence, but several cases of violence or murder have raised concerns about the practical implementation of this provision (Davidson, 2021), potentially exacerbating issues of domestic violence and gender inequality within family relationships.

To promote gender equality and ensure the well-being of individuals within family and marriage relationships, the Supreme People's Court, China's top court, has introduced new laws and civil measures to protect victims of domestic violence. For instance, in 2016, the first Anti-Domestic Violence Law was enacted, and in 2022, a protection order was issued that recognises harassment and insults by a spouse as forms of domestic violence. However, there are still significant challenges in the practical implementation in domestic violence cases within the legal system. Advocates for domestic violence victims and lawyers in China have pointed out that the courts often deny or overlook women's claims of intimate partner violence, preventing victims from seeking compensation for physical injuries and other losses (Cao, 2022).

Within the framework of familism, multiple entities such as media, companies, and local communities are aligning their efforts with the policies of the ruling party in China. Notably, certain Chinese companies and local communities have been observed organising group dating events aimed at helping employees and residents find potential marriage partners. These events are frequently organised by dating agencies for young Chinese individuals and can be found through online searches for "offline matchmaking events" (Dasanjiang, 2021; Sohu, 2023). In recent years, popular online dating apps like Momo, Tantan, and Soul have gained significant traction, accumulating over 150 million monthly active users combined (Che and Wang, 2022). Since 2010, various dating shows have emerged, with the latest one, "Heart Signal", departing from the earlier focus on marriage found in shows like "If You Are the One" (Bai, 2023). Overall, the societal atmosphere in China has been imbued with the belief that finding love and a romantic relationship is considered a successful and ultimate goal for many single individuals.

Under the prevailing marriage and family ideology, numerous online media platforms have started disseminating narratives with titles like "solving the problem of singleness" to exert pressure on young individuals (China Daily, 2007). These narratives create a stigma around being single, while elevating heterosexual couples to the highest social status. In recent years, efforts to reinforce traditional family and marriage values have transformed the *Qixi* festival, originally a gathering for unmarried women to engage in folk games and share crafts or wishes, into a Chinese Valentin's Day exclusively celebrated by couples for romantic love. Single individuals are often urged to attend dating or matchmaking events on this day (Kuo, 2013).

Furthermore, discounts or memberships offered by restaurants, theme parks, and sports centres are typically only available for couples or families. In contrast, single individuals may be derogatorily referred to as *dan shen gou* ("single dogs"), or *guang gun* ("bare sticks") in Chinese internet slang, with "dog" being an insult in Chinese culture and "bare sticks" alluding to a single person who does not contribute to the family tree (Zhou, 2016).

As a result of the public discourse shaped by the government and media, coupled with a lack of comprehensive sex and love education in schools, there has been a noticeable increase in the availability of "dating skill courses" offered by universities, companies, and dating agencies for single individuals (People's Daily, 2021). These courses aim to enhance students' motivation and proficiency in communication, developing healthy interactions with the opposite sex, and gaining a deeper understanding of what constitutes a fulfilling marriage (Cheshire, 2019). Moreover, numerous self-proclaimed "dating experts" have emerged, providing young people with advice on successful dating and relationships (Wee, 2017). Many online "experts" have sought to provide strategies for participants, particularly targeting women, to increase their attractiveness and improve their chances of finding a spouse. Women have always been expected to take the responsibility to find a partner, build a family, and maintain a harmonious society.

1.3.7 Chinese single women and social blame

In the 1980s, media discussions often portrayed pity and sympathy towards single individuals, with some suggesting that single women were unfortunate victims of circumstance (Xiao, 1986). During the early 1990s, media coverage of unmarried women continued to be negative, depicting them as incomplete and unfulfilled individuals. Articles were published discussing well-educated and socially established single women, implying that certain mental or biological conditions explained their single status (Evans, 1997). Furthermore, in the 1990s, unmarried women were widely portrayed as a threat to marital harmony and family stability. When societal expectations dictate that women bear the responsibility for marriage and family formation, it is inevitable that they will face blame from both the government and society for remaining single.

Cai and Wang (2014) argue that education directly influences the timing of marriage, meaning that financially independent women with higher education and professional careers are less likely to prioritise early marriage and starting a family (Yu and Xie, 2013; Cai and Wang, 2014). According to Liu (2021), 40% of the single employees in Chinese companies are highly educated women. To (2015) suggests that highly educated and accomplished single women may choose to focus on their careers rather than relying on a husband for financial stability. They may prefer to lead fulfilling lives without conforming to patriarchal expectations in their pursuit of romantic relationships. Qian and Jin (2018) support this idea, noting that women with higher income, resources, and education have more autonomy in making decisions about marriage and fertility. They are less likely to succumb to societal and filial pressures to marry at a young age. Furthermore, Gong and Li (2015)'s research reveals that when the majority of

Chinese men choose to marry down, highly educated women with successful careers often find themselves involuntarily single (Ning, 2008; Gao, 2011). Consequently, similar to women in developed countries like the United States and Japan, Chinese women with higher education and accomplishments have lower marriage rates compared to their less educated peers (Lake, 2018).

Chinese society has stigmatised single women over the age of 27 and labelled them as "leftover". The concept of "leftover" has been endorsed and propagated by the Chinese government, placing the blame on single women themselves for their inability to find a husband. This term primarily applies to urban women with higher education and a successful career (Hu, 2019; To, 2015; Fincher, 2016). It suggests that these women sacrifice their "personal happiness", which is believed to be attainable through marriage and starting a family, in favour of pursuing career success or professional goals (To, 2015). Yan (2010) explains that Chinese individuals have a duality of self, a smaller self for personal interests and a larger self for contributing to or sacrificing for society. This duality helps explain the creation of the derogatory term "leftover women" in 2007 by the ACWF, a government-run institution established in 1949 with the aim of "protecting women's rights and interests" (ACWF, 2013). While the ACWF has contributed to the discussions on gender, women's economic and social status, and women's political identity within official discourse (Liu, 1993; Evans, 1997), Barlow (2004) argues that the ACWF does not always represent the genuine interests of women but rather the interests of the state. The ACWF has adapted its goals to align with the needs of the nation at any given time

(Fincher, 2016). As Tiefenbrun (2017) points out, the CCP has promoted the role of women in the workforce but has also encouraged them to work only when needed and sent them home before men when the workforce was saturated. Behind the label of "leftover women", Chinese women face the dual burden of working outside the home and being pressured to form a family at a young age.

The term "leftover" implies that these single Chinese women are passive and waiting for men to choose them, reinforcing the idea that women are not expected or unable to take the lead in the marriage market or in dating relationships. In present-day Chinese society, critics often perceive "leftover women" as aloof, unattractive, and self-important careerists who prioritise education over family, thereby posing a threat to the social fabric of the country (Kuo, 2014). These women are also frequently blamed for being too spoiled, picky, or promiscuous to find a spouse (He, 2018). The label of "leftover women" carries connotations of being unfeminine, unattractive, abnormal, and living an uncertain life that deviates from China's traditional Confucian moral standards, making them undesirable for marriage. Women are primarily viewed as reproductive entities responsible for bearing children for the nation's benefit (Fincher, 2016). As discussed earlier, the fate of Chinese women is intimately tied to the fate of the nation.

Under traditional gender norms, intelligent, successful, and independent women are often derogated in Chinese society. For example, Chinese women with a PhD or who are a scientist are sometimes referred to as a "third sex" or "UFO" (ugly, foolish, and old), indicating that

their intelligence challenges gender boundaries to the extent that they are humorously treated as being less human and unappealing to potential male partners (Kuo, 2014; Lake, 2018). Successful career women may be labelled as *nü qiang ren* ("iron women"), which carries a sexist judgment implying that they deviate from the traditional feminine image and may not contribute much to household chores as expected by tradition (Xie, 2021). Women who are fearless and assertive are called *nü han zi* ("manly women"), suggesting that they resemble men more than women. It is evident that this "masculine" description does not align with men's ideal category of women who possess stereotypical feminine charms (To, 2015). The resurgence of traditional values in Chinese society not only devalues women with strong educational backgrounds and professional careers but also stigmatises them, as traditional expectations dictate that women should be docile, submissive, and obedient to their husband's needs.

There are also narratives about women being selective in their choices (Liu, 2019). The concept of "leftover women" is often associated with perceptions that these single women have unrealistic and excessively high expectations of men. They are sometimes labelled as being picky or having the "princess syndrome", which refers to a sense of entitlement, self-centredness, and demanding behaviour, expecting others to cater to their needs and desires (Kuo, 2014; To, 2015; Zhang, 2020; Jiang, 2019). It is widely believed that women become "leftover" because they had been too selective when they were younger. Society expects women to take their own actions and adopt strategies to address their singleness. To (2015)'s research showed that Chinese "leftover women" actively employ various strategies, such as prioritising

relationships and marriage over their careers, considering partners from Western countries, or even contemplating relationships with men of lower economic status but who hold egalitarian values. The perception that women are to blame for being picky implies that they should take responsibility for their singleness, proactively take steps to solve the problem, and conform to traditional family ideals as soon as possible. It also suggests that selectiveness is seen as a privilege available only to women in their twenties, while women in their thirties, forties, or older must compromise or employ strategies to mitigate the risk of remaining single indefinitely.

Some scholars employ feminist perspectives to critique the phenomenon of "leftover women", focusing on issues of gender equality and gender relations. Zhou (2010) argues that the emergence of this phenomenon reflects male dominance, as women are considered "leftover" because they resist being subordinate to men. Gong and Li (2015) emphasise that women's economic independence and educational background contribute to their desire for autonomy in marriage, while patriarchal beliefs restrict their freedom and choices. Gao (2011) highlights the evident conflicts between women's independence, career development, and the traditional role of a housewife. Women prefer a husband who shares household chores and career pressures, rather than a partner who expects them to fulfil the idealised image of a perfect housewife.

According to the third survey on the status of women in China conducted by the ACWF and the NBS in 2010 (Shen, 2016), among dual-income families, over 72% of women performed most household chores, such as cooking, washing up, laundry, cleaning, and childrearing, while

only 16% of men shared these responsibilities. Additionally, 45.2% of women took on the task of tutoring children, and 39.7% cared for elderly family members, which were 28.2 and 22.9% higher than men, respectively. The survey also revealed that around 10% more men aged 30–39 (59%) than women (49%) agreed that it is the man's role to support the family and believed that men should be active in the workforce while women should focus on domestic duties (Shen, 2016). Hence, not only does the government promote traditional family ideology, but a larger proportion of Chinese men than women also adhere to the gendered division of household labour.

In recent years, the Chinese government has reinforced its emphasis on heterosexual marriage and family ideals, implementing policies that exclude single individuals, particularly single women. Despite the restrictions on the number of children allowed per couple having been relaxed, these regulations do not apply to single women. The China National Health Commission, in 2019, continued to deny unmarried women access to assisted reproductive technologies such as in vitro fertilisation and egg freezing (Zhang, 2019). According to Chinese health regulations (Gov, 2001), only married couples are eligible for such services, including access to sperm banks and egg freezing. Single men, on the other hand, are permitted to freeze their sperm without any obstacles. The Chinese government expressed concerns, as noted by Kuo (2019), that allowing single women to freeze their eggs would further delay childbirth, exacerbating the country's already low birth rate and significant ageing population issues. Furthermore, due to the government's suppression of human rights, women in China face

difficulties in making or winning legal claims. In addition, unmarried women are rendered ineligible for government benefits, including medical care and paid leave (Wang, 2021). In many Chinese provinces, if a single woman becomes pregnant, authorities often deny her child's *hukou*, which is akin to a social security number that grants access to essential services such as education and healthcare. The rights of single women are not adequately protected compared to those of married women since the government only recognises marriage and the nuclear family as the sole form of family. Consequently, families comprising single women or single mothers with children are excluded from basic family and social rights within Chinese society.

1.3.8 Body, age, and beauty anxiety of Chinese women

Within Chinese society, the age of thirty carries significant importance, as it is perceived as a critical milestone influenced by societal expectations, as observed on various social media platforms (Ren, 2016). A Confucian proverb, *san shi er li* ("Thirty, stand on one's own feet"), has been adopted to regulate the stages of life and choices made by Chinese individuals. However, as discussed earlier, those women who remain single beyond the age of 30 are often regarded as having missed the opportunity for a fulfilling life (Ren, 2016). This is also attributed to the close association between a woman's age and her fertility. As McMillan (2006) argues, society often presents reproduction and motherhood as natural aspects of a woman's life, with childbirth seen as an inevitable consequence of female biology. In China, there is a widespread

belief in the concepts of a "golden marriageable age" and a "golden fertility period" that end

before the age of 35. Women who give birth after 35 are considered "high-risk pregnant women"

based on medical advice from various authorities (Jiaen Deyun Hospital, 2022; Dingxiangyuan,

2022). Xie (2021) further asserted that in Chinese culture, 27 is viewed as the deadline for

marriage, 30 the ideal time for pregnancy, and 35 the alarming deadline for a risky pregnancy.

Consequently, many Chinese single women not only have to plan their timing for childbearing

but also consider when to take a significant break from their careers for maternity leave.

Moreover, the Chinese job market operates with an unspoken rule that discourages the

recruitment of individuals over 35 years old by companies (Zuo, 2022; Liu, 2023).

Nevertheless, as highlighted by Yip (2022), many Chinese single women employ strategies to

counteract the stigma associated with being single in their 30s by showcasing their wealth on

social media platforms. Although Sung (2022) stated that it is still inconclusive that women in

China nowadays are better off than in any earlier period, a report by Accenture in 2019 revealed

that Chinese women aged 20 to 60 hold significant purchasing power, amounting to £1.2 trillion

(Choi, 2020; Yip, 2022). This new-found financial independence has prompted more single

women to re-evaluate whether they wish to adhere to the traditional path of marriage and family.

Even for those who do not explicitly flaunt their buying power on social media, many choose

to share photos online that portray their contented single lives, particularly among certain online

influencers. However, the pervasive influence of consumerism (Rofel, 2007) in Chinese society,

propagated through social media, has led many women to invest significant effort and money

in various beauty products, luxury gyms, and anti-ageing clinics in order to maintain a youthful, attractive appearance reminiscent of their younger selves. This consumerist ideology particularly appeals to well-educated women with successful careers who can afford expensive beauty and anti-ageing services and products. A popular saying on Chinese social media, "There are no ugly women, only lazy ones", has further fuelled the pressure on women to prioritise their sexual attractiveness (Tsai, 2013). According to a report by Deloitte (2022), women between the ages of 26 and 40 account for 74% of all customers in the aesthetics industry in China, with over half of the women stating that they visit beauty clinics primarily to "please themselves rather than men". It is noteworthy that many consumers in the aesthetics industry also frequently visit luxury gyms and purchase anti-ageing skincare products, which can significantly impact the monthly income of middle-class women. Various companies employ slogans aimed at encouraging women to embrace this trend, typically revolving around themes of self-discovery, self-love, and self-fulfilment. However, while "pleasing oneself rather than men" has become a new goal for women in their daily lives, the extent to which women have truly achieved freedom and autonomy within patriarchal and heterosexual norms remains a subject of scrutiny.

Peng (2022)'s research showed that Chinese while-collar women pursue the ideal shape of stabilising muscles around the mid section even after birth-giving. In Peng's opinion, the development of a refined set of core muscles could become a status marker of the female body dedicated to a tremendous amount of self-discipline and hard work. Facing challenges brought

by reproduction to their careers and bodies, women worked hard to keep their right to work and bodies in shape, as a response to the societal demands for increasing both their productivity and their reproductivity. Hard work and self-discipline in the process of women's training of core muscles sought to maintain those women's association with the public domain of productive labour and distance them from the private domain of reproductive labour (Peng, 2022). As Carolan (2005) argued, a fit, exercised, well-regulated body symbolises a personal triumph motivated by rationality and control over impulses of consumption. Only by overcoming tensions between the dual imperatives of consumer capitalism – production and consumption, work and play, and self-discipline and self-indulgence – can we achieve the ideal body beautiful (Carolan, 2005).

Chinese women not only face the pressure of ageing but also experience anxiety about their appearance. According to Evans (1997), practices of bodily management, long and obsessively publicised in Western societies, are now prominent in the Chinese media. The popularity of anti-ageing products in East Asia and the widespread use of "beautification" apps, where women can digitally enhance their features such as enlarging their eyes, slimming their legs, and erasing wrinkles, have further contributed to the narrow definition of beauty on social media (Ren, 2018). As Evans (1997) argued, the recuperation of an essential femininity and the sexualised female body that has taken place in official and popular discourses has diversified the meanings associated with wifehood. Women are expected to have the uniform image of happy housewife and the desiring sexual partner. Presently, the prevailing beauty standard in

China, known as *bai you shou* ("white, young, thin"), is relentlessly pursued by young women across the country. Regardless of their age, many women strive to conform to this mainstream ideal through unhealthy means, all in the pursuit of looking young and attractive. Research conducted by Zhang et al. (2018) revealed that 57% of Chinese single women in their twenties and thirties desire to be much thinner, leading to a rise in underweight individuals. Many single women have also been diagnosed with eating disorders as they attempt to conform to this beauty standard (Su, 2022; Chen et al., 2018). In response to similar concerns, France passed a law in 2008 to prohibit extremely thin models, aiming to combat eating disorders and unattainable beauty standards. Additionally, the UK government launched a body confidence campaign in 2010 to promote positive body image (Chen et al., 2018). However, the Chinese government has yet to enact any legislation or provide institutional support to address the body and age anxieties experienced by women.

CHAPTER 2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter serves as an introduction to the theoretical framework of the entire thesis. It primarily explores the theories of individualization, detraditionalisation, pure love, choices, self-identity, and neoliberalism in the first section, followed by feminist and gender theory in the second section. The main focus of this chapter is on critically examining their application within the Chinese context, specifically in relation to the topic of Chinese "leftover women".

In the first section, the impact of reflexive modernisation and individualisation on women in Western and Chinese contexts is discussed, including their relationship with the state and family in the Chinese context. I also explore detraditionalisation, pure relationships, self-identity, and their application in Chinese marriage and family culture. Lastly, the influence of individualisation and neoliberalism on choices and self-identity is examined, specifically in relation to singleness and "leftover women" in China. In the second section, I apply gender theory to Chinese single women. Firstly, I analyse traditional gender norms and their constraints on women's lives in contemporary society, focusing on their reflection in Chinese society. Secondly, the devaluation of singleness despite the increasing number of single women and the influence of heterosexual norms is explored. Thirdly, I address social exclusions experienced by single women in terms of resources and rights, particularly in Chinese society. Fourthly, age pressure and body anxiety as factors contributing to the phenomenon of "leftover women" and the impact of ageism and sexism on single women is discussed. Lastly, I explore new

femininities, post-feminism, and the expectations placed on single women to find a husband, balance work and life, and maintain their sexual attractiveness within a patriarchal society.

2.1 Individualisation and single women in China

The phenomenon of the increasing number of single women reflects that the relationship between the society and individuals is rapidly changing in modern society. How an individual relates to society and to structure can possibly be explained by the individualisation process. Institutional changes like social modernisation and structural changes in social institution have resulted in individuals being detached from what they were formerly attached to. For example, Chinese women regard getting married and having children as a natural life path in the past, but currently more women prioritise their own education and career, delay their marriage and family plan, and identify the new shape of their lives (Giddens, 1991; Hofmeister, 2015; Kuo, 2014). In this section, I critically discuss the theory of reflexive modernisation and individualisation, and what impact it has brought to women in Western contexts. Then I explore how individualisation is applied in the Chinese context, the differences it has compared to that in Western contexts, and the relationship between individuals and the state under the impact of individualisation. Next, I analyse, due to individualisation, how individuals became detached from the state and relied on family more, while state and family still remain the institutions and traditions that influence individuals' life in Asia and China. The concepts of detraditionalisation, pure relationships, and self-identity are examined, then how these theories applied in China is also discussed, focusing on the differences of marriage and family culture in China from

Western contexts. In the last subsection, I explore the concepts of choices and self-identity under the impact of individualisation and neoliberalism, and how they can be applied to the phenomenon of singleness and "leftover women" in China. Although these theories have been applied to both genders, particularly in Western contexts, my focus is on examining their specific impact on women within the Chinese context.

2.1.1 Reflexive modernisation, individualisation, and women

Modernisation (Kumar, 2023), in sociology, refers to the transformation of society from a traditional, rural, agrarian society to a secular, urban, industrialised one. This process involves comprehensive changes in the economic, social, political, and cultural spheres. The theory of modernisation originated in Western Europe and was significantly influenced by Max Weber's work (1904), Weber examined societies undergoing rapid economic growth and technological advancements as they abandoned traditional practices.

However, according to Beck et al. (1994), Western society has entered a new stage known as reflexive modernisation. In this stage, progress can potentially lead to self-destruction. The process of modernisation undermines and transforms its own structures, including class divisions, social strata, occupations, gender roles, and nuclear family dynamics. According to the theory of reflexive modernisation, as Beck et al. (1994) state, the success of Western modernisation has led to the collapse of the old industrialised society. The existence of all previous industrial classes had been based on the unchanged maintenance of the old mode of

production; hence, constant revolutionising of production and uninterrupted disturbance of all social relations distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier times. This leads to the self-destruction of the industrial society, where all previously established relationships are swept away.

In this process characterised by robust economic growth, rapid technological advancements, and increased job security, the industrial society is being propelled towards a new era. The triumphs of capitalism has given rise to a new social paradigm (Beck et al., 1994) that opens up greater educational and career prospects for women. For instance, there is now increased female participation in the workforce, breaking down the traditional boundaries between work and non-work. According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002), women are no longer solely confined to familial responsibilities; they now have more leisure time, venture beyond the familiar confines of their families, migrate to larger cities, and build their own unique lifestyles and life paths that may diverge from those of their parents. The average educational attainment of girls and young women today surpasses that of their parents, particularly their mothers. The expansion of educational opportunities has granted women a broader range of prospects in the job market. The better educated they are, the higher the likelihood of finding personally fulfilling work that supports their livelihoods.

In this transformative process, as traditional customs and institutions lose their reliability, individuals are compelled to assume their own decision-making with associated risks and

responsibilities. As Beck et al. (1994) argue, the diminishing presence of social structures that foster cohesive orders releases people from the confines of the industrial era and thrusts them into the global risk society. Mechanisms and centralised systems can no longer be relied upon, leaving individuals to shoulder risks and responsibilities. Within this new societal framework, individuals are expected to navigate uncertainty, embrace personal risks and opportunities, and even confront conflicting self-narratives that fragment the concept of identity (Beck et al., 1994). Consequently, society is shifting towards greater individualism.

In this risk society, the collective resources that formed the bedrock of modern industrial society are being depleted and exhausted, such as the nuclear family, gender roles, and housework as a form of labour. Within this process, women experience heightened independence, pursue higher education, embark on their own career, delay marriage and family life, and stop depending on men as sole providers or conforming to traditional gender roles (Beck et al., 1994; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). A generational shift occurs where parents' lifestyles, choices, and plans no longer serve as adequate role models for the next generation; women increasingly face novel situations where old traditions and rules prove ineffective, necessitating the development of their own solutions (Beck et al., 1994).

In the context of reflexive modernisation, individualisation emerges as an inescapable force. In Western societies, where welfare states have replaced binding traditions, individuals are compelled to construct, shape, and piece together their own life stories, identities, social

networks, commitments, and beliefs through self-responsibility (Beck et al., 1994; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). It is incumbent upon individuals to establish themselves as unique entities, to plan, comprehend, design, and take action, or else face the consequences in the event of failure. In the past, one was born into a traditional society with predetermined conditions. However, in the pursuit of modern social advantages, active effort and agency are required. The outcomes, both opportunities and burdens, are now shifted onto the individuals (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

The traditions surrounding marriage and family dynamics have become contingent upon people's choices and decisions, introducing inherent contradictions that necessitate their being viewed as personal risks (Beck et al., 1994). Moreover, Beck et al. (1994) also state that individualisation has compelled women to establish and sustain their own educational development and professional career, as failure to do so can lead to continued dependence on their husband's financial support within marriage. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) argue, women now possess a greater degree of agency, albeit not entirely unrestricted, in deciding whether they genuinely desire marriage or prefer to remain single. They have the option and the obligation to lead independent lives beyond the traditional constraints of family and other customs. However, this pursuit of autonomy must adhere to the new guidelines and rules set forth by institutions such as the state and the job market (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

The individualisation thesis originated from a Western European perspective, a time when individual rights and freedoms were safeguarded by political democracy. In Western Europe, individuals heavily relied on the security and support provided by the welfare state (Yan, 2010b). Consequently, social democratic countries in Western Europe recognised the need to reduce such dependence by promoting greater individual choice, agency, responsibility, and the development of a "do-it-yourself biography". This further demonstrates the self-radicalising and reflexive nature of modernity (Yan, 2010b). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) extended the concept of individualisation to China, highlighting parallels between the crisis of the welfare system in the West and the collapse of the central state system in China. As a result, individualisation in China shares similarities with individualisation in Western countries, where individuals are increasingly detaching themselves from the state and institutions, actively making their own choices and forging their own paths.

In their examination of the individualisation process in China, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) observed that in the past, people had limited autonomy in their personal and professional lives. Under communism, the state provided a minimal safety net, offering subsidised housing, job training, and healthcare. However, this system of state care, intertwined with work collectives and lifelong support, is now crumbling. It is being replaced by contracts that tie income and job security to individual ability and performance. People are now expected to take control of their own lives and pay market prices for the services they receive.

This shift is equally applicable to single women who are more frequently stepping out of their home, pursuing higher education and career opportunities, and engaging in job competitions alongside men. Simultaneously, they must independently seek out their potential future husband and consider their own expectations and requirements. Some may choose to delay marriage much later than the previous generations, while others may opt to remain single without prioritising marriage or starting a family. In the context of individualisation in China, the traditional foundations of marriage and family relationships appear to be eroding, with more women choosing to stay single. Women find themselves less compelled to conform to traditions or follow the same paths as the previous generations in light of this process of individualisation in China.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that individualisation in the Chinese context has distinct social underpinnings and entails unique consequences. Therefore, it becomes crucial to delve into the divergences of individualisation in China in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the choices made by individuals, particularly single women, within this specific context.

2.1.2 Individualisation in China: the relationship between individuals and the state

Yan (2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2013) expanded upon the theses of reflexive modernisation and individualisation in the Western context (Beck et al., 1994; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) and applied them to the Chinese society. Yan has provided further discussion on how

individualisation is reflected in Chinese society. Within the Chinese context, Yan argues that Beck's individualisation thesis offers a robust theoretical framework for comprehending the Chinese case, as it emphasises the transformative shifts in the relationship between individuals, society, and the state.

In Chapter 1, it has discussed how Mao's reforms aimed at strengthening the state system resulted in a weakening of the family and kin's influence, with many of their functions being transferred to state institutions. Yan refers to this transformation, under Maoist socialism, as a "partial and collective type of individualisation", which was seen as China's pursuit of modernity (Yan, 2010b). According to Yan, Maoist China represented a highly developed collectivist society where individuals experienced a significant loss of freedom and autonomy. They lacked the ability to choose their place of work or residence, and their participation in public life was primarily as citizens of the nation state rather than solely as members of a family (Yan, 2010b).

Following the collapse of the central state system in post-Mao China, individuals who had previously been part of that system found themselves compelled to establish their own social networks and form communities in new cities. This situation mirrors the description provided by Beck et al. (1994), wherein individuals are responsible for making choices and decisions regarding their city of residence, job opportunities, and property purchases in these urban areas. Against this backdrop, Yan contended that the privatisation of housing, the marketisation of

education, and the marketisation of medical care are all institutional changes initiated by the state to compel individuals to assume greater responsibilities and undertake higher risks through active participation in market-based competition.

According to Yan, the central focus of individualisation in China differs from that of the West. Rather than a complete shift in the individual–society relationship, as observed in Western Europe, the key aspect of individualisation in China lies in the evolving connection between the individual and the party state. Yan argues that the Chinese approach to individualisation stems from the party state's efforts to harness the benefits of a market economy while maintaining political control and eschewing individualism. The party state has suppressed liberal notions of individual rights and autonomy, sacrificing individual freedom for the sake of national interests. Throughout the post-Mao era, Chinese individuals' choices and lifestyles have been closely intertwined with the state system and policies, regardless of their degree of reliance on the state. The goal of modernisation in China is to mould individuals into responsible citizens dedicated to building a strong and modern China, rather than allowing individuals unrestricted freedom in choosing their lifestyles. Yan (2010) posits that a society can undergo the process of individualisation without embracing individualism. However, due to the distinctive party state background, the individualisation process in the Chinese context diverges from the arguments put forth by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002). The power of the party state continues to regulate individuals' personal lives, while Chinese traditional culture still persists. Consequently, it becomes necessary to re-evaluate the individualisation thesis by

examining the Chinese case in order to comprehend the phenomenon of "leftover women" within this specific context.

When examining contemporary history in China, it becomes evident that the process of modernisation and individualisation has often been propelled by the power of the party state and social policies. As a result of this process, the relationship between individuals and the state undergoes transformation; concurrently, the dynamics between families and individuals are also changing. The state-led modernisation and individualisation exert influence over the choices and lifestyles of Chinese individuals, particularly women, prompting them to venture outside their homes, pursue higher education, seek career opportunities, and physically relocate from their original communities and families to larger cities, as explored in Chapter 1. As previously discussed, Yan argues that the state's promotion of individualisation has weakened the traditional position of the family. However, it is worth noting that despite this, families and kin groups continue to serve as networks of social security for individuals, with families assuming the role of an institution that provides welfare benefits and social resources in lieu of the state. In the following section, I will delve into the topic of individuals detaching themselves from both the state and family traditions, while simultaneously relying on their families to access social resources and social security.

2.1.3 Individualisation in China: from state to family

In the context of individualisation as described by Beck et al. (1994) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002), the individual is portrayed as an active participant, designer, and director of their own life story, identity, and social connections. This perspective assumes that individuals possess autonomy and freedom to make independent choices. However, in contrast to Western Europe, where individual autonomy is deeply ingrained and upheld through the recognition of individual rights and the establishment of mechanisms to limit state power and protect personal freedoms, China has a history of suppressing liberal notions of individual rights and autonomy, considering them as potentially dangerous (Yan, 2010b). Furthermore, in the Chinese context, individualism has long been associated with egotism, and collectivist and family ideologies continue to prevail in society. Within this family-centric Chinese society, individualism is often perceived as morally flawed, synonymous with selfishness, and utilitarian self-interest that disregards the rights and interests of others (Yan, 2010b). While certain historical conditions for individualisation seen in the West, such as industrial capitalism, modernisation, marketisation, and globalisation, also exist in China, there are additional structural factors at play in the Chinese context. Factors like limited social welfare, familial responsibility for social reproduction, and family-based social and economic competition contribute to the reinforcement of institutionalised familism (Chang and Song, 2010). Without embracing individualism, individuals cannot fully detach from previous systems, and they continue to rely on institutions like the family for their well-being.

Furthermore, the process of individualisation in China does offer individuals increased mobility, choice, and freedom. However, unlike in Western contexts, this individualisation occurs with limited institutional protection and welfare support from the state. According to Beck et al. (1994), institutional dependency is a notable characteristic of advanced modernity and an integral part of the societal conditions that drive individualisation. Yet, in the Chinese context, Yan (2010a) argues that the absence of certain social institutions, such as the welfare state, leads to a heightened reliance on interpersonal relationships. For most urban Chinese, the primary social safety net consists of family and personal networks. Consequently, individuals are compelled to turn to their families and *guan xi* (personal connections) in search of a new safety net or to re-establish stability (Yan, 2009). In this collective form, individuals are still required to establish a sense of belonging and self-development. Therefore, in the absence of a welfare state and centralised allocation systems, family becomes even more central to personal and social life as a consequence of the individualisation process. Throughout this process, women have not completely detached from their familial responsibilities, and they continue to perceive family and marriage as crucial life choices.

In numerous East Asian countries, the processes of modernisation and individualisation have demonstrated that the society remains rooted in the centrality of the family. Chang and Song (2010) conducted a study on individualisation in South Korea and found that as the social institutions associated with the first wave of modernity, such as the state, industrial economy, firms, unions, schools, and welfare systems, exhibit clear deficiencies in fulfilling social roles

and providing the expected individual benefits, families become burdened with increased responsibilities and obligations towards their members. Similarly, in countries like Singapore and Japan, research indicates that policies in familist societies and non-welfare states are built on the assumption that women will primarily take on caregiving roles and that the family will universally serve as a support network (Dales, 2013). While the capacity of families to offer such support may vary, they have largely replaced the state as the primary institution attempting to provide assistance to the best of their abilities. As other institutions of modernity decline in functionality, reflexive modernity often amplifies the coexistence of Confucian, instrumental, affectionate, and individualistic characteristics within Asian families (Chang, 1997; Chang and Song, 2010). This emphasis further deepens the complex responsibilities shouldered by women within these familial dynamics.

According to Bøe (2013), the transformation of family structures and the process of individualisation in Chinese society does not necessarily imply a weakening of familial bonds. On the contrary, the risks associated with a rapidly modernising society can lead individuals to rely more heavily on their families, while also providing them with the opportunity to redefine and reshape the family structure in response to the evolving conditions of Chinese society. Traditional values, collective identity, and the family unit itself all become valuable resources that individuals can utilise to exercise their agency (Yan, 2010b). Rather than completely detaching from traditions and institutions, individuals in the Chinese context continue to be partially regulated and influenced by the power of the state, with the family remaining a strong

bond within society. This differs from the argument put forth in Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) thesis on individualisation, particularly in the Chinese context, where individuals are still subject to state control and rely on the state to secure their rights and freedoms. Additionally, the family is not merely an elective relationship but should be recognised as a vital institution for individuals in Chinese society.

2.1.4 Detraditionalisation, pure relationships, and self-identity

In addition to individuals disengaging from the state, another aspect of the individualisation process is detraditionalisation, which refers to the gradual erosion of individuals' attachment to traditional institutions (Koster and de Beer, 2009). As detraditionalisation takes place, traditional practices no longer hold mandatory status. Instead, individuals must consciously choose and often even create their own traditions, deriving meaning solely from their personal decisions and experiences (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). By disengaging from traditional values, norms, beliefs, and ideologies, individuals gain heightened autonomy and greater freedom to shape their lives according to their own preferences (Mills, 2007). Examples of detraditionalisation include the increasing reversibility and instability of roles (such as rising divorce rates and the growing number of single women) and the decoupling of roles (such as parents not needing to be married or partnered). Individualisation signifies a shift from obligatory, lifelong decisions imposed by others (such as family members, governments) to flexible, optional, and changeable choices (Hofmeister, 2015). As the influence of social groups and institutions on individual attitudes and behaviours diminishes, individuals become self-

determined and autonomous in their decisions regarding family and marriage (Hofmeister, 2015). Women, who have previously been burdened with family responsibilities, are now increasingly extending their aspirations and expectations beyond the traditional family structure, prioritising their career over family commitments, or choosing to remain single without conforming to societal expectations of a traditional family (Macmillan, 2005).

Giddens (1991, 1992) has explored the growing individualisation of personal life. Through the process of deinstitutionalisation and detraditionalisation, the influence of social norms and legal regulations in family life is diminishing, while the significance of personal choice is increasing. In the past, marriages were often arranged by parents or relatives in China, rather than being initiated by the individuals themselves. However, it has now evolved into a relationship primarily founded and sustained on the basis of emotional satisfaction derived from close interpersonal connections (Giddens, 1991). Giddens discusses the emergence of "pure relationships", which are characterised by intimate partnerships formed for their intrinsic value with their longevity depending on the satisfaction derived from emotional closeness and love. In these relationships, traditional gender roles are eroding, allowing for a more equitable distribution of sexual and emotional responsibilities, and promoting mutual understanding and knowledge between partners (Giddens, 1991; Jamieson, 1998). According to Giddens, marriage is increasingly viewed as a source of emotional fulfilment rather than an obligatory institution. It has transformed into a matter of personal choice rather than a societal necessity. In this context of pure relationships, the flourishing of individualism has facilitated the freedom to

choose a partner based on love, but it is also seen as potentially undermining the commitment to a long-term partnership (Jamieson, 1998).

Considering the arguments put forth by these sociological theorists, questions are raised about whether it is still necessary to view marriage and intimate relationships as traditional institutions. If marriage and intimacy have transformed into "pure relationships" in modern society, as suggested by Giddens and other theorists, can this perspective be applied universally across different societies and cultures? In Smart and Shipman (2004)'s research on transnational families living in Britain, it becomes evident that for many individuals, marriage may still involve the formation of alliances between kin or be influenced by negotiations among competing family interests. While some individuals may prioritise their own desires and wishes, the decision of whom to marry is often not a straightforward "free choice" made independently of the expectations and desires of parents and other family members. Kinship and family culture continue to exert a significant influence, shaping the context within which choices are made. Smart and Shipman's research reveals that in many contemporary relationships, individuals blend aspects of individualisation, such as love, with a strong commitment to traditional cultural values. They critique the individualisation thesis for seemingly overlooking the role of parents, kinship ties, and broader concerns beyond personal well-being in the lives of individuals. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the dynamics of marriage and intimate relationships are complex and can vary across societies and cultures. While individualisation and the pursuit of personal happiness play a role, the influence of kinship, family values, and

broader social factors should not be disregarded in understanding the choices individuals make within their relationships.

A further aspect that warrants discussion is Giddens's theory of the self as a reflexive project (1991) and its relevance to the concept of the pure relationship. Giddens proposes that a pure relationship is closely intertwined with the self-reflexive nature of individuals, where they actively shape and explore their own identities. This reflexivity fosters self-awareness, which, in turn, reduces dependency within intimate relationships. In the context of a well-functioning pure relationship, each individual maintains their autonomy and engages in a process of self-discovery to construct their own sense of self. This process of self-exploration and self-expression has empowered women to attain higher levels of autonomy and freedom within their relationships. In traditional societies, there were societal expectations that femininity required women to be connected to a man. However, in modern times, women have acquired a new understanding of themselves and their relationship with their partners. They actively plan for their own lives rather than passively waiting for a man, taking greater responsibility for their own well-being. As a result of increased self-exploration and self-expression in contemporary society, women have developed a strong sense of confidence, achievement, and autonomy in shaping their own identities. This shift has allowed them to embrace their individuality and assert themselves within their relationships, contributing to more balanced and egalitarian dynamics.

However, there are scholars who have raised concerns and critiques regarding Giddens's theory of self-identity. Jamieson (1998) argues that Giddens's emphasis on self-construction and authenticity as the primary criteria for self-reinvention may promote an extreme form of individualism. This perspective runs the risk of portraying individuals as detached from the influence of others and overlooks the impact of interpersonal relationships on the formation of the self. Critics of Giddens argue that his theory promotes a continuous self-monitoring that aligns with a pervasive and self-obsessive individualism, potentially undermining intimate relationships (Jamieson, 1998). There are concerns about a future where self-satisfaction and self-preservation take precedence, eroding the necessary compromises inherent in committed partnerships. Furthermore, there is apprehension that this perspective may depict both men and women as equally self-centred, jeopardising the foundation of meaningful connections. In fact, Hofmeister (2015) suggests that people may exhibit more herd-like behaviour rather than conforming to the individualisation thesis. Despite making their own choices, individuals often tend to follow the crowd, learn from others, and consider past experiences and observations when making decisions (Koster and de Beer, 2009). Hofmeister argues that while an individualised life may seem ideal if it were solely based on human agency, personal preferences, and self-responsibility, most people actually rely on learning from others, overcoming obstacles, and applying lessons from the past when making decisions.

Furthermore, Hofmeister (2015) highlights that having greater decision-making power at the individual level throughout one's life is both a burden and a privilege. It is important to

recognise that the descriptions of individualisation and the excessive focus on individuality often overlook the significance of social class ties in shaping individual life trajectories and outcomes. Giddens and Beck, in their theories, appear to downplay the widespread influence of inequality by suggesting that transformations in intimacy could undermine the ways in which the broader social context produces gender and power dynamics, as noted by Jamieson (1998). According to Jamieson, the introspective questioning of "Who am I?" must contend with more immediate concerns such as securing basic needs like shelter and sustenance. This raises the question of whether the thesis of individualisation and the notion of pure relationships can be fully applicable to Chinese single women who possess a strong educational and professional background. This research will specifically address this issue and endeavour to find an answer.

Therefore, when applying the theories of detraditionalisation and pure relationships to the Chinese context, it becomes apparent that there are limitations. We can observe a prevailing trend where Chinese women are still expected to marry and adhere to family traditions under social pressure. Nevertheless, some scholars argue that marriage and family have undergone restructuring and should not be simply regarded as traditional relationships. For example, in Cherlin (2004)'s research, he argues that in many Western countries, marriage has been undergoing a process of deinstitutionalisation since the last century. The social norms that previously dictated people's behaviour within marriage as a social institution have weakened, leading to an increasing number and complexity of cohabiting unions, non-marital childbearing, and the emergence of same-sex marriage. Furthermore, in modern intimate relationships,

individuals strive for personal growth and deeper intimacy through open communication and shared emotional expressions with their partners. They pursue the freedom to make personal choices and develop themselves to create their marital journeys. As stated by Whitehead and Popenoe (2001), while marriage may be losing some of its broader public and institutional characteristics, it is gaining popularity as a "Super-Relationship", an intensely private spiritual union that combines elements such as sexual fidelity, romantic love, emotional intimacy, and togetherness.

Under the influence of individualisation and detraditionalisation in East Asia, as a result of gender inequality and the heavy burden placed on women within families, an increasing number of women are choosing to remain single and distance themselves from family responsibilities. Scholars from East Asia, such as Chang and Song (2010), have discovered that families have become overwhelmed, leading many women to view family dynamics as shifting from a source of social support to a cause of personal vulnerability. Consequently, these women are motivated to reduce the risks associated with family life by extending or returning to individualised stages in their lives. The unequal distribution of familial responsibilities and risks borne by women stem from the gendered structure of family relations and obligations, which can be traced back to historical Confucian traditions and the construction of gender roles within industrial capitalism. Women continue to bear the disproportionate burden of family care work and household management, and providing social support without experiencing meaningful transitions. Unsurprisingly, within the private sphere, there has been an increasingly pervasive

trend of blaming women for family misfortunes and personal setbacks, which further exacerbate the marginalisation and individualisation of women as a collective group. As a result, women are compelled to undergo significant restructuring of their family dynamics, responsibilities, and individual life choices. Against the backdrop of modernisation and individualisation driven by the state, a social trend of defamiliation emerges within family-centred Asian societies, particularly affecting women. Defamiliation, as defined by Chang and Song (2010), signifies a decline in family life and relations rather than their complete abandonment or abolition, even when the family continues to remain the central norm of society. It can also be understood as a form of refamiliation, encompassing various patterns of demographic, social, and psychological restructuring of families, as women initiate a moral and emotional detachment from the family.

2.1.5 Single women's life-planning, choices, and self-identity

In contemporary society, as discussed, processes of individualisation not only enable but also necessitate an active contribution from individuals (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). As a result, individuals gain greater autonomy, choice, and agency in shaping their lifestyles and identities (Gill, 2008). However, alongside these benefits, individuals also face a shift in opportunities, burdens, and risks onto their shoulders from previous institutions. Failures are now perceived as personal failures with a sense of self-responsibility, and people must adapt to an uncertain future (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Consequently, individuals are compelled to develop strategies and make plans to mitigate life risks.

Giddens (1991) introduced the concept of life planning, arguing that the settings of modern social life are increasingly diverse and segmented. Therefore, individuals must actively engage in their own strategic life planning. Life planning serves as a mechanism for preparing a trajectory of future actions that align with and are driven by the individual's personal biography. Life planning requires individuals to construct or reconstruct a comprehensive and fulfilling sense of identity. This process involves reflecting upon and understanding oneself in a reflexive manner, as discussed in the last section, with a particular emphasis on one's personal biography. As Giddens posited, an individual's identity is rooted in their ability to maintain a coherent narrative, and the autobiography created by the individual themselves is pivotal to their sense of self-identity within a contemporary society.

In the realm of personal life, individuals are now expected to take charge of their own life planning and to make subjective decisions about family and relationships based on their own desires. They bear the responsibility for their choices, as the concept of individualisation has made life planning an essential requirement for those seeking to be proactive and self-assured. This expectation is particularly significant for many Chinese women who strive to balance their careers and relationships. In today's society, as discussed in Chapter 1, the demand for dating experts and advice online in China has skyrocketed. These resources offer guidance not only on career development but also on intimate relationships. Gaining knowledge about love and marriage has become a prerequisite for individuals before they formulate their life plans. Failing to do so would have them labelled as part of a younger generation that lacks maturity in their

thoughts and emotions (Cheshire, 2019). This failure is not only detrimental to their personal lives but also poses a threat to social stability in China, where marriage is considered a cornerstone of development. Consequently, for Chinese women, engaging in future life planning and realising their own identities has become an obligatory process. Having a well-structured life plan has emerged as a social norm for single women in contemporary society.

Present-day women are already conscious of gender dynamics, partly due to advancements in equal opportunities within the education system and the influence of feminism (Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2007; Budgeon, 2016). Young women today play significant roles in education and employment, and are perceived as active and driven individuals, which grants them an identity as capable female subjects (McRobbie, 2007). However, individuals, particularly women, are now expected to lead well-planned and well-balanced lives, creating a social norm for these independent women in contemporary society. What is behind the notion of life planning is a neoliberal celebration of free choices and personal autonomy. While neoliberalist ideology promotes the ideals of a "well-planned life", an "enterprising self", and a "desiring self" (Yan, 2010b), which emphasise calculated, proactive, and self-disciplined traits, it is important to critically examine the neoliberal celebration of free will and the accompanying expectations of self-regulation and self-management.

Similar to Western societies, Chinese society has also experienced the influence of neoliberalism. Through a combination of market neoliberalism and political authoritarianism

in the post-reform era, China has established a distinct form of governmentality that exercises biopower to regulate and control individuals, particularly women (Foucault, 1976; Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005; Rofel, 2007). Unlike the impact of neoliberalism on women primarily through social media and consumerist culture in Western contexts, the Chinese state and government have also played a role in disciplining individuals through their power vested in social policies and laws. Guided by a neoliberal ideology, the state in China has sought to regulate women's bodies, reproductive rights, and social roles to promote economic growth and social stability, as discussed in Chapter 1. Chen (2012) argues that neoliberal subjects in China encompassed "a young generation of educated professional women" who possess greater material wealth and individualistic aspirations due to their educational and career experiences. Therefore, although the Chinese society and Western countries differ in the context of the dissemination of neoliberal ideologies among women, it remains important to explore the impact of these ideologies on women, especially single women with a strong educational and professional background. The extent to which single women's choices regarding marriage and family are genuinely free and voluntary remains a subject of scrutiny.

Singleness can encompass positive aspects such as independence and self-development (Reynolds and Taylor, 2005); however, the notion of freedom and multiple choices under the ideology of neoliberalism, when enforced in a compulsory manner, can actually impose limitations on women. As Strathern (1992) suggests, an abundance of choices can paradoxically lead to a sense of reduced agency. For many women, pursuing education and a career is

expected to be intertwined with the traditional nuclear family structure. Kim (2012) argues that the language of choice tends to conceal the persistent existence of gender inequalities and the exclusionary nature of the labour market, which shapes women's opportunities and identities. Even when women are educated and skilled, they may neither experience upward mobility in a deeply gendered labour market, nor achieve complete economic independence as freely autonomous individuals. Persistent inequalities within the labour market, particularly in relation to family and caregiving responsibilities, further hinder the possibilities of female individualisation. Kim (2012)'s research explores women's subject formation in Asian societies, revealing that higher levels of education create expectations and aspirations for independence and self-fulfilment that often remain unmet in an unequal labour market. While higher education can make a difference in women's lives, it does not automatically guarantee a corresponding socio-economic status, as power imbalances, gender ideologies, and structural constraints continue to shape women's lived experiences (Jayaweera, 1997). Moreover, in the context of China's rapid modernisation, political efforts to promote gender equality may face compromises (Yang, 2020), resulting in new forms of inequality, insecurity, and precarious selfhood (Kim, 2012) for women in Asia and China.

The notion of a "well-planned" life remains bound by social norms and traditional ideologies. As Gill (2008) suggests, perceiving women's plans, choices, and decisions as completely independent and autonomous disregards the pervasive influence of culture and society. It is crucial to examine the interplay between culture and subjectivity, and to grasp how culture

shapes subjectivity, identity, and the embodied experiences of an individual (Gill, 2008). In China, it appears that society prescribes a singular path for single women. If a single woman intends to pursue choices or plans that deviate from the traditional heterosexual family framework, her decisions will likely face scrutiny from society, as marriage and starting a family are consistently prioritised in Chinese culture (Kuo, 2014). Conversely, men usually do not face the same concerns but enjoy the freedom to choose when to marry and have children, all while focusing on their career (Gallagher, 2020). It has been observed that Chinese single women in their twenties or thirties often grapple with the dilemma of seeking a partner versus pursuing career development. The concept of "freedom" in plans and choices is contingent for single women upon their adherence to social norms dictated by heterosexual ideals and the prevailing family ideology.

Within the framework of heterosexual norms, single women, in particular, bear the weight of complete responsibility for their life journey, disregarding any limitations or constraints they may face (Walkerdine et al., 2001). As Taylor (2011) points out, single women are often depicted as figures of discourse that evoke simultaneous feelings of professional success and personal failure. These women are expected to achieve success across various aspects of life, including personal and sexual relationships. As Hofmeister (2015) states, we find ourselves susceptible to both the negative consequences of our own choices and the social stigma associated with them, as those who have supposedly made independent choices scrutinise the

decisions of others. In this context, selecting a different path, such as remaining single while others choose marriage and family, may be perceived as a failure and a "wrong choice".

Society continues to perpetuate marital pressure and stigmatisation of single women through social media discourse and government policies. Within the framework of consumerism and heterosexual norms, public discussions focused on "solving singleness problems" create pressure on young individuals, fostering the notion that being single is stigmatised while heterosexual couples enjoy the highest social status. According to Goffman (1963), individuals can be stigmatised based on their behaviour, attitudes, actions, or disapproved characteristics, leading to negative perceptions of their social identity. Page (1984) further argues that stigma can become a dominant trait, overshadowing all other aspects of an individual's character and reinforcing the assumption that their entire being revolves around this single aspect. The status of single women, or the derogatory term "leftover women", can remain concealed in daily life, but if discovered, it can be as disruptive as visible stigmas (Gregory, 2018). Moreover, stigma can give rise to feelings of shame, which involves a negative evaluation of oneself based on perceived societal expectations and a sense of powerlessness and inadequacy (Gregory, 2018). According to Gregory (2018), shame arises when individuals internalise a negative awareness of their perceived inability to change their circumstances.

Consequently, single women are expected and compelled to actively construct their own self-identity as a personal responsibility. Historically, women were obligated to establish their

identity through relationships, as they were primarily defined by their connection to a man rather than celebrating their autonomous identity (Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003). In modern society, women's responsibility in this regard has not been alleviated. By deviating from the culturally expected transition to partnership and not aligning their identity with gendered life course norms, unpartnered women frequently encounter scrutiny that necessitates them to explain their single status (Budgeon, 2016). The individual who seeks to be the author of their own life and shape their own identity has become the central figure of our time (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). The opportunities, threats, and ambivalence that were previously managed within a familial context must now be perceived, interpreted, and addressed by these individuals themselves (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Studies indicate that the label of "failure" lingers in women's negotiations, leaving them feeling conflicted and uncertain about their identity (Sharp and Ganong, 2007). In Byrne (2003, 2007)'s exploration of single women's self-identities, the awareness of how others perceive and interact with them in everyday communication can evoke feelings of shame and a diminished sense of personhood. In a recent research conducted by Liu and Kozinets (2022), it was revealed that Chinese single women had faced significant challenges due to the prevalent discourse surrounding "leftover women". This discourse has instilled a profound sense of guilt within their minds. These emotions become intertwined with their self-identity, which is also linked to their social identity as women. It can be seen that single women may feel flawed or incomplete about their own identity due to their single status, and sometimes this feeling would leave them feeling ambivalent and uncertain about their identity (Sharp and Ganong, 2007).Women's self-identity continues to be influenced

by a gendered and stigmatised social identity of being single, subjecting them to constant scrutiny, surveillance, and judgement.

Overall, the influence of neoliberal and individualistic ideologies has placed an additional burden on women, while simultaneously spreading anxiety and stigma towards those who deviate from mainstream lifestyles or social identities. While society appears to offer women a range of choices, these choices are often limited and regulated, leading to heightened social pressure and burdens for women. Furthermore, as McRobbie (2007) argues, some women may have clear plans for their future direction from a young age, often influenced by the support they receive from their parents, particularly their mother. The extent to which women today are truly making independent choices and decisions remains questionable, as suggestions and choices may still be influenced by institutions such as family and societal norms. Choices concerning women's personal lives are not entirely autonomous but rather subject to regulation and accountability shaped by prevailing gender relations and the hierarchical structure of key social institutions like the family. In the contexts of Confucian culture, family-centred ideology, and nationalist sentiments, individualism has been suppressed, leading to significant societal pressure on single women in China to conform in their personal lives.

2.2 Gender theory and single women

The phenomenon of leftover women reflects that women no longer regard marriage and family as their natural life path, and they may pursue more gender-equal relationships. In this section,

I discuss how gender theory can be applied to the discussion of Chinese single women. Firstly, I explore binary gender concepts and traditional gender norms including traditional gender expression and gender roles. It is important to find how traditional gender norms are still restricting women's lives in contemporary society, and how they are reflected in Chinese society. Secondly, I examine how singleness has been devalued under the heterosexual norms, even if there is an increasing number of single women. Thirdly, I focus on single women, and what social exclusions in terms of social resources and social rights they have experienced especially in Chinese society. Fourthly, age pressure and body anxiety is explored behind the phenomenon of leftover women, and how single women have been constrained by ageist and sexist discourses. Lastly, I analyse new femininities, post-feminism under the ideology of neoliberalism, and how single women are expected to have strategies to find a husband, balance their work and life, and adopt strategies to keep their sexual attractiveness in this patriarchal society.

2.2.1 Traditional gender roles and expression

"One is not born, but becomes a woman." This powerful statement by Simone de Beauvoir, a renowned French philosopher, is found in her influential work, *The Second Sex* (1949). Previous sociological studies traditionally define sex as the biological identity of an individual, distinguishing between males and females. Gender, on the other hand, is reconceptualised as "heterogender", encompassing socially acquired behaviours and expectations associated with the binary sexes (Anderson, 1999). These studies highlighted how the societal differentiation

of sex and gender became ingrained within sociology, perpetuating cultural values and beliefs steeped in essentialist ideology. However, the binary framework of gender offers limited possibilities for organising sexuality, gender expression, and gender roles (Rahman and Jackson, 2010). Within the confines of traditional binary gender concepts, numerous stereotypes have been established and normalised concerning men and women. Regarding sexuality, women's sexual identity has been portrayed as inherently passive, deeply rooted in their essential biological nature awaiting activation by men (Rahman and Jackson, 2010). Furthermore, binary gender definitions not only uphold the notion that masculinity and femininity exist as complementary and interconnected terms (Budgeon, 2016), but they also define traditional gender roles within heterosexual marriages. For instance, men are expected to be the breadwinner while women are assigned the role of homemaker.

The binary division of gender has close relationships with heterosexual familial structures (Budgeon, 2016). In Fox (2009)'s research on traditional family patterns, she found that the traditional nuclear family pattern is as follows: men go out to earn a living while women stay at home and take care of children. Individuals within traditional families are gendered and women are perceived as part of the reproductive labour force, as suggested by socialist feminist theories (Duffy, 2007). The gender ideology places the essence of manhood in the role of material provider, while women are defined as wives and mothers, economically dependent on men. Women's lives have been organised and regulated to a greater extent than men's by the dominant ideology and practice. Cherlin (2004) also agrees that the performance of gender roles

within the institution of the family is defined by men and women having different capacities and roles, with females primarily engaged in other-oriented caring and males in autonomous earning activity. Consequently, according to Oksala (2013), women's traditional role in the family has been to sacrifice their self-interest so that their husband and children can achieve their autonomous subjectivity.

In addition to the influence of the binary gender concepts, Jackson (1993) proposes that the traditional division of gender roles within families primarily arises from capitalist production relations, familial kinship, and patriarchal gender dynamics. These factors have historically compelled women to be confined to domestic responsibilities while being excluded from paid employment by men. According to Jackson, the power dynamics of the state and the structural inequalities of the socio-economic system contribute to gender disparities within marriage. Even when women have their own sources of income, their careers are often undervalued, while their roles as wives and mothers are highly esteemed within the household. As a result, women often choose marriage over remaining single due to financial considerations and the desire for a favourable social identity. Marriage not only provides them with financial security but also grants them a sense of pride and elevated social status.

This holds true within the Chinese context, where gender roles and traditional ideologies continue to be internalised by women in Chinese marriages and families. In Zuo and Bian (2001)'s study on the division of housework among dual-earner couples, they discovered that

even if they both have a career, the husband is still seen as the main provider while the wife takes on the primary role of homemaker. Successful male providers exchange their paid work for less housework, while family-oriented working wives may trade housework for a less prominent provider role. The research suggests that the culturally embedded and socially constructed gendered meaning of housework in traditional families perpetuates male privilege while maintaining the perception of fairness in the inequality. If both husband and wife could bring sufficient gendered resources to a marriage, then the latter would not view this unequal distribution of housework as unfair. Thus, in many Chinese marriage relationships, there are gendered expectations regarding the roles of men and women in the family. To (2015)'s research demonstrated that Chinese men with patriarchal views still tend to exert control over women's empowerment and autonomy in their life choices, expecting women to make greater sacrifices for the marital relationship. From To (2015)'s and Lake (2018)'s research, Chinese men prefer women who are easy to control and manage, enabling them to demand that their wives become more "home-centred", contribute more to housework, take care of children, and adhere to patrilocal rules.

In addition, traditionally, a fundamental distinction that shapes gender in many societies has been the assumption that men and women exhibit different gender expressions (Budgeon, 2016). Cancian (2018) argues that based on the binary understanding of gender, it has been widely accepted that love expression and emotional support are feminine traits, while men have been expected to be more responsible, powerful, and successful within the context of the traditional

gendered division of family roles. There has also been a prevalent belief that women desire marriage more than men due to financial dependence (Cancian, 2018). In traditional gender expressions, masculinity is associated with displaying courage, rationality, and disciplined assertiveness, while femininity is linked to qualities such as kindness, compassion, and cheerfulness (Illouz, 2007). In Jankowiak (1989)'s fieldwork in China, it was observed that Chinese men had been perceived as embodying attributes that contribute to worldly success, characterised as work-oriented, adventurous, ambitious, self-confident, knowledgeable, reserved, intelligent, assertive, emotionally reserved, dominant, and secure. Conversely, attributes or descriptions associated with Chinese women had been centred around being home-oriented, timid, gentle, passionate, anxious, meticulous, dependent, sentimental, and tender.

Numerous recent Chinese studies indicate that Chinese women are still expected to conform to traditional gender roles and expectations. In Hung et al. (2007)'s study on the portrayal of Chinese women in advertising, it was found that they had been expected to embody qualities such as gentleness, hard work, care, modesty, decorum, and a lack of demands. Andrews and Shen (2002) and Evans (2002) conducted research on evolving perceptions of modern Chinese women and discovered that even when they had achieved success in their careers, they were still expected to exhibit feminine traits like gentleness and dutifulness as wives and mothers. Liu (2014) revealed that Chinese traditions continue to hold significant influence, with Chinese women expected to adhere to these traditions rather than adopt individualistic, assertive, hedonistic, or defiant behaviours associated with Western women in the modern Chinese

context (Moeran, 2004). Some scholars in Chinese studies argue that alongside traditional feminine traits, there are also emerging societal expectations regarding the gender expression of Chinese women, which will be discussed in subsequent sections on the concept of new femininity. In summary, Chinese traditions persist in constraining women's gender expression, compelling them to project an image of traditional wives and mothers within contemporary society.

2.2.2 Heterosexual norms, coupledom, and single women

Returning to the discussion on the binary gender concepts from the previous section, it is important to highlight that by emphasising gender as reliant on the male–female binary, the heterosexual assumption remains unquestioned and unexamined (Ingraham, 1994). According to Ingraham (1994), heterosexuality functions as an organising institution that shapes gender, establishing the normative and prescriptive sociosexual arrangements and underpinning the ideology of marriage and family. The heterosexual gender relations between men and women originated within the nuclear family and subsequently became the standard or ideal for family structures, extending their influence to individuals outside the confines of marriage and family. This unacknowledged and assumed heterosexuality structures women's lives in terms of their femininity and sexuality, particularly within the roles of wife and mother, as discussed earlier. Simultaneously, heteronormative assumptions have marginalised homosexual women and unmarried women. Society categorises individuals based on their marital status and social identity, using labels such as married, divorced, separated, widowed, single, or unmarried.

These categories are presented as the only options, implying that the organisation of one's identity in relation to marriage is universally understood and does not require further explanation (Ingraham, 1994). However, in Reynolds and Wetherell (2003)'s research on the construction of single women's identity, they argue that singleness is a socially constructed category. Certain ways of living are considered acceptable and accounted for, while others remain unexceptional and taken for granted. Single individuals who deviate from mainstream lifestyles are compelled to define themselves in relation to compulsory heterosexuality as "unmarried" according to social norms.

As discussed in the previous chapter, institutions such as marriage and family are mechanisms of social control; they socialise their members and keep them in line, while singles may be perceived as unstable and promiscuous in society. Establishing a romantic relationship with another person has been regarded as a sign of adulthood in modern social culture (Gillis, 1997). In DePaulo and Morris (2005)'s study on single people in America, they found that under the ideology of marriage and family, single adults in contemporary society are targets of stereotype, prejudice, and discrimination. As Budgeon (2016) states, in societal conditions that prioritise heterosexual marriage and family as a widespread objective and indicator of successful life progression, individuals who do not fit into this category experience marginalisation and face detrimental consequences such as stereotype, discrimination, economic disadvantages, interpersonal rejection, and stigmatisation. According to DePaulo and Morris (2005), the ideology of marriage and coupledom in society is built upon several unquestioned assumptions:

that the majority of people desire a sexual relationship, that this specific relationship takes priority over others, and that individuals who have this singular, significant relationship at the core of their lives are considered more valuable, worthy, and important. Society tends to assume that everyone aspires to marry, viewing a sexual relationship as the fundamental bond among peers. However, individuals who deviate from the developmental milestones dictated by the social clock and heterosexual norms still face the risk of being harshly judged (DePaulo and Morris, 2005).

Although heterosexual family norms are central to regulating people's lifestyle and choices, it does not necessarily mean that married women are happier than single women. Under the influence of traditional gender norms in marriage and family relationships, the reality is that many married women have found themselves in difficult marriages. As previously discussed, due to traditional gender norms, married women are expected to be more submissive and compliant, take on more family responsibilities, and make more sacrifices for their families compared to married men. Studies on long-term marriages have revealed that married women experience poorer mental and physical health, not just in comparison to married men but also to single women (Carstensen et al., 1995; DePaulo and Morris, 2005). Therefore, although it has been widely believed that women desire marriage more than men for various reasons (Cancian, 2018), it is likely that women would be more hesitant to consider marriage compared to men. Between 2002 and 2018 in the UK, the number of single women over the age of 40 increased by half a million, and in the singles market for individuals aged 35 to 47, women

consistently outnumber men (ONS, 2018; John, 2021). Additionally, 61% of women in the UK are content with being single, in contrast to 49% of men (Mintel, 2017). In China, as discussed in Chapter 1, there is also a significant proportion of unmarried women in urban areas surpassing the number of unmarried men. Nonetheless, it remains challenging for women to remain single, particularly in a society where marriage is considered the normative life path for women.

As Budgeon (2008) states, individuals who do not conform to the traditional idea of being in a couple often face the pressure of explaining their single status as if it were a problem. This is especially true for women, as they are frequently rated as less likeable and less likely to be satisfied with their lives when they are being seen delaying in finding a partner. Moreover, they are often presumed to lead less fulfilling and less exciting lives compared to those who are in a relationship (DePaulo and Morris, 2005). In comparison to men, women face greater pressure to adhere to the ideals of marriage and family, as traditional gender constructs emphasise nurturing and dependence as integral aspects of femininity (DePaulo and Morris, 2005; Sharp and Ganong, 2007). In contrast, married women or those in long-term partnerships are seldom questioned about their social status (Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003). In the realm of heterosexual norms, women consistently bear a greater responsibility in establishing successful relationships and demonstrating to society that their partnership is happy and fulfilling. This expectation serves as a means of fulfilling women's identity within the framework of the traditional family structure. Consequently, single individuals, especially single women,

encounter a continuous stream of enquiries, blame, and prejudice within the confines of heterosexual norms.

2.2.3 Social exclusions on single women

Singleness, particularly for women, carries enduring negative associations, such as feelings of failure and rejection (Chasteen, 1994; Rosa, 1994; Gordon, 2016; Reynolds and Taylor, 2005). This is a result of the traditional belief that women require marriage more than men, leading to cultural portrayals of unmarried women as desperate and flawed (Sandfield and Percy, 2003). As Sandfield and Percy (2003) argue, unmarried women are often labelled as "failing to be chosen" and observers may be suspicious as to why they are "not good enough" to attract a spouse, based on the assumption that "a woman who cannot get a man must be a loser" (Waehler, 1996). Single women face penalties for challenging the notion that they should be dependent on a man (Rosa, 1994) and their experience of being single places them outside traditional expectations of a woman's role (Chasteen, 1994). In the studies by Maushart (2008), women are held responsible for the success or failure of their marriages and are assigned the emotional labour of nurturing the marital bond and associated relationships. Additionally, single women often encounter derogatory labels from society, such as "spinsters" or "Carrie Bradshaw" in Western contexts, "Christmas cake" in Japan, and "leftover women" in China (Fincher, 2016; Lake, 2018).

Reynolds and Taylor (2005) conducted research that revealed how some single women experience social exclusion in their daily lives. These women found it challenging to navigate the world as independent individuals, as a stark contrast is drawn between being single and being coupled up. These two states are depicted as separate and disconnected social worlds, with coupledom being portrayed as privileged while singleness is viewed as excluded, lacking, and disadvantaged (Reynolds and Taylor, 2005). The dominant focus on heterosexual couples in patterns of relationships renders single women invisible and prevents their experiences from being recognised and understood (Budgeon, 2016). In Simpson (2006)'s research, it was found that although single women maintained significant connections and relationships outside the boundaries of heteronormative conventions, these relationships often lacked social recognition and validation from others, as well as institutional support.

Baumberg et al. (2012) argue that the structures and implementation of policies can result in the social exclusion of marginalised groups. Heteronormativity, which normalises the regulation of sexuality through marriage and state domestic laws, plays a role in shaping these exclusionary policies. These laws, among others, determine the eligibility for benefits such as tax advantages, healthcare, and housing based on marital status. Marriage has historically been a key requirement for individuals to access social and economic benefits (Ingraham, 1994). Numerous social practices openly differentiate single women from those in partnerships in public settings (Budgeon, 2016). For instance, rituals associated with wedding ceremonies highlight this distinction, and processes like in vitro fertilisation and adoption tend to be more

challenging for single women compared to their married counterparts (Millbank, 1997).

Furthermore, higher estate taxes and membership fees often apply to singles (DePaulo and

Morris, 2005). Various social forces in the 21st century, including the influence of consumer

culture promoted by advertisers, propaganda from "experts", education system, media,

employer practices, and even urban development patterns, have had a significant impact on

gender relations. State policies have also contributed to and reinforced the nuclear family model

and the associated gender roles, ranging from assumptions underlying income tax and social

security laws to the lack of financial support for day-care facilities (Fox, 1993; Forestell and

Eichler, 1989).

When examining East Asian contexts, it becomes evident that certain social policies further

marginalise and exclude single women, particularly in urban areas, from accessing social

resources. For instance, in Ronald and Nakano (2013)'s study on housing policies and single

women, marriage continues to be a prerequisite for home ownership, which is closely tied to

the notions of having children and attaining economic security. Within the Japanese housing

system, unmarried women face limited choices, even among the middle class residing in major

cities. Similarly, in South Korea, only a small number of women manage to establish their own

household or purchase property without getting married (Song, 2010). In Chinese society, urban

policies and laws prioritise married couples while neglecting the needs of single individuals in

terms of social benefits and access to urban resources, as discussed in Chapter 1. In many ageing

societies in East Asia, where marriage has traditionally been seen as the prevailing lifestyle,

governments prioritise married couples in urban areas in order to increase fertility rates. As a result, single people, particularly single women, in these social contexts find themselves excluded from basic urban rights and resources.

2.2.4 Age, body, and single women

Portrayals of single women often depict them as time-constrained individuals (Negra, 2009). Ageist and patriarchal social scripts reinforce the notion that younger women possess advantages in terms of beauty and fertility compared to older women (Lahad, 2013). This creates an implication for women that as long as they hold onto their assets of youth, beauty, and reproductive ability, they should hurry to get married, or else they risk being deemed unwanted and destined for loneliness (Lahad, 2013). Present-day single women, while they are still young and considered fertile and sexually appealing, are still pressured to settle down before it is perceived as too late. Women who are deemed to be at an appropriate "marriageable" age, typically under 30 with the upper limit of around 35, face societal expectations driven by the ideology of marriage. Finding a partner and establishing a committed relationship is normatively prescribed as a key life goal during this stage (Kaiser and Kashy, 2005; Sharp and Ganong, 2007; Budgeon, 2016).

In studies investigating partner preferences among the Chinese population (Jankowiak, 1989; Xu and Li, 2004), it was observed that men had placed greater emphasis on women's physical appearance and age. This is further discussed by Steinfeld (2015) who highlights the importance

of a woman's presentation in contemporary China, reflecting the Chinese proverb, "A talented man matches a beautiful woman", as discussed in Chapter 1. The research by To (2015) on Chinese "leftover women" also discovered that men tend to prefer younger women who are less accomplished, as it satisfies their desire for dominance and control. In addition to more subjective reasons, one obvious factor influencing men's preference for "young and beautiful" women is their biological instinct to seek suitable partners to produce offspring (To, 2015). Consequently, women who surpass a certain "marriageable age" without being married are labelled as "leftover women" and may face difficulties in finding future partners.

According to Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1976, 1998; Taylor, 2016), the fact that medical authorities or governmental institutions define women over 35 as too old to have children or start their careers and pressure them to marry and have children is an exercise of discipline and administration over women's bodies and fertility through biopower. Biopower, as defined by Foucault (1998), refers to the power exerted by institutions to target women's bodies and regulate population reproduction. When Chinese women are informed that 35 is considered too old, these authorities and institutions primarily focus on biological factors while overlooking the numerous social factors that can influence women's choices and lifestyles. Research indicates that having children early in one'' career can have more negative impacts on career development and economic situations, particularly for women, while the impact on single women without children is significantly less (Popkin, 2015). Information regarding the age of 35, whether from social media, experts, public discourse, policies, or interpersonal interactions,

has managed to regulate single women's reproductive decisions and created new rules and social norms surrounding when women should marry or when Chinese individuals are considered too old for mainstream life. As a result, single women internalise this power and come to believe that they should conform to traditional roles within the family and the state (Foucault, 1976), as they are seen as "destined to be wives and mothers" (Beauvoir, 1949). This differs from what McRobbie (2007) argues in Western social contexts, where the influence of post-feminism and neoliberalism has encouraged women to pursue a middle-class respectable status and reject early motherhood. In China, however, early motherhood has been promoted in recent years by the state government to address ageing pressure and workforce shortages. The spread of post-feminism and neoliberalism in China will also be discussed later.

As a result of ageist discourses and age limits defined by laws and policies, society tends to harbour more prejudice and discrimination against single women as they grow older. It is believed that single women's lives are primarily governed by the passage of time, and their life stages are defined by feelings of time scarcity and panic (Negra, 2009). One consequence of age-based cultural norms surrounding marriage is that single women may face varying degrees of social pressure or stigma at different ages, with those who marry late often being subjected to harsh judgement (DePaulo and Morris, 2005). There is a sexist and ageist assumption that one's desirability diminishes as they age, which undermines their ability to be selective in choosing partners (Lahad, 2013). Furthermore, there exists a set of expectations linked to age that call on women to abandon their selective preferences and conform to a more essentialised

femininity focused on coupledom and motherhood (Lahad, 2013). Single women over a certain age are often advised to compromise due to concerns about time or to be more realistic (Lahad, 2013).

According to Lahad (2013), age becomes linked to specific life stages, and selectiveness is seen as a privilege reserved for certain types of single women who are considered more eligible and expected to marry and have children. Society expects that if a woman at a marriageable age is both beautiful and successful, she should be perfectly capable of managing her personal life (Lahad, 2013). However, as Budgeon (2016) argues, the state of being unpartnered may be acknowledged as a legitimate and empowering choice, but it is ultimately seen as temporary. The term "unmarried" rather than "single" suggests that the unmarried status is viewed as a temporary phase towards achieving marriage, often to alleviate a sense of failure (Budgeon, 2016). When women remain single beyond a certain point in their life course, they often face social stigma. These perspectives highlight the intersection of age with entitlement and privilege. Once women enter their thirties, they are no longer considered entitled to the privilege of being selective. Thus, while self-determination is promoted in the early stages of singlehood under neoliberalism, extended singlehood diminishes one's authoritative position. The only strategy for single women to maintain their privileged status is to take personal responsibility, which involves being aware of their age status and accepting the associated sociotemporal rules and norms (Lahad, 2013). Otherwise, they risk experiencing a loss of agency once they reach their thirties.

Beyond the discrimination and prejudice faced by single women, the phenomenon of "leftover women" is influenced by the increasing number of single women. In public discourse, the image of single women who are younger or have better economic situations tends to be associated less with deficits, derogation, or discrimination, and more with selectiveness and empowerment. Numerous studies have explored the choices of single women and discussed the discourses of subjectivity, autonomy, and self-development that are closely tied to their lives (Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003; Byrne, 2003; Sharp and Ganong, 2007; Lahad, 2013). In these studies, many single women have actively constructed a positive sense of identity as single individuals, connecting independence and self-care to their self-identity. However, the notions of autonomy, choice, and self-improvement are accompanied by surveillance, discipline, and regulation, which expect women to be proactive in planning and making choices (Budgeon, 2016; Gill, 2008). In the following chapter, the issues surrounding the discourse of independence and autonomy for single women will be discussed.

2.2.5 New femininity and strategies for single women

Heterosexual romance and marriage have long been considered integral to achieving femininity and successful transitions in life, while independence and autonomy, particularly among single women, have been viewed as incongruent with the traditional feminine trajectory (Budgeon, 2016). Marriage is closely intertwined with women's identities and self-perception (Sharp and Ganong, 2007), and conventional discourses on women's life paths depict heterosexual

romance and marriage as the ultimate measure of success (Greer, 2014). This narrative obscures women's agency and individuality beyond romantic relationships with men (Gilbert and Walker, 1999), creating barriers for single women to accept their own lifestyles as valid (Sandfield and Percy, 2003). It also disregards the possibility that women may actively choose to form a family outside traditional family structures. As Reynolds and Taylor (2005) argue, deviating from the trajectory traditionally associated with heterosexual couples and families poses challenges when narrating a single life history. The sequence of love, courtship, marriage, parenthood, and ongoing coupledom continues to prevail as the dominant narrative of Western adult life, despite the fact that it may not reflect the lives of many, if not most, individuals.

Women find themselves subjected to harsh judgement based on societal norms and standards rooted in heterosexual expectations. Simultaneously, there is a greater expectation for women to exhibit independence and autonomy in their daily life. Lahad (2013) argues that, for women in particular, self-governance and self-responsibility are seen as necessary not only for survival in the workforce but also for succeeding in personal relationships and meeting the societal expectation of heterosexual marriage and parenthood. Crompton (2002)'s research reveals that women returning to work shortly after having children is a social compromise that demands heterosexual women play a dual role: being active in the workplace while primarily responsible for children and domestic life. Although neoliberalism has encouraged women to excel in both careers and family life, it has placed a significant social burden on women, forcing them to juggle both goals simultaneously. Budgeon (2016) adds that women are encouraged to prioritise

men's needs as part of a strategic approach to managing their lives. Furthermore, women are expected to take charge of reshaping their internal lives to cultivate a desirable sense of self. This transformation aims to empower women to actively and confidently engage in their own sexual experiences. In today's society, a young woman's success often hinges on her enthusiasm for work and having a career, while she simultaneously is expected to enter into a stable relationship as quickly as possible to ensure personal success. Consequently, women seem to showcase their autonomous identity by making choices that align with their values and preferences. However, they still face the dual burden of pressure and responsibility to achieve success in both their careers and personal relationships.

Based on the recent discussions on post-feminism (Probyn, 1997; Atkins, 2004) in Western contexts, McRobbie (2004, 2007) has highlighted the resurgence of traditional feminine norms that women are expected to conform to, despite advancements towards gender equality. Women are now expected to embody both progressiveness and femininity simultaneously. In order to succeed, women must navigate a delicate balance between maintaining their femininity in their career and personal lives. In the workplace, women are often required to wear a mask of femininity to downplay their competitiveness with men, concealing any signs of aggression and ensuring their continued sexual attractiveness. Similarly, in relationships, they are expected to adhere to a mask of feminine submissiveness to uphold heteronormative and masculine hegemonic standards (McRobbie, 2007). These unspoken social rules place the burden on women to prioritise the needs and desires of their male partners, suppressing their own voices

and agency, thereby reinforcing patriarchal laws, heterosexual norms, and masculine dominance. These norms frequently push women back into traditional gender hierarchies, where they are expected to excel not only in their professional lives but also in their roles as caregivers. This perpetuates the belief that a woman's value is tied to her ability to balance work and family responsibilities. Consequently, women may feel compelled to adopt submissive behaviours to avoid being perceived as too powerful or intimidating, which can hinder their prospects of forming romantic relationships or starting a family. This pressure leads women to downplay their strengths and abilities. Although women today are increasingly recognised as autonomous individuals, they continue to face norms and regulations that reinforce gender hegemony (Budgeon, 2016).

Several authors (Macdonald, 1995; Marchin and Thornborrow, 2003; Arthurs, 2004; Lazar, 2004) have identified a new archetype of women in Western societies. These women are not only associated with success and competence but also embody youth, attractiveness, and a deliberate engagement with their sexual power. As Budgeon (2016) argues, these empowered career women are encouraged to skilfully manage their relationships and prioritise pleasing men as part of their relationship strategies. They are advised to take personal responsibility for cultivating a desirable subjectivity that allows them to be active and attractive sexual agents. This reflects a contemporary version of femininity characterised by confidence, power, and sexual appeal, transforming women from objectified figures into active, desiring, and sexually autonomous subjects (Gill, 2008). Women are encouraged to prioritise their own pleasure rather

than seeking validation from men, and be empowered by their knowledge of their own sexual attractiveness. However, Gill and Scharf (Gill, 2008, 2007; Gill and Scharff, 2011) raise questions about this post-feminist culture, suggesting that it intensifies the scrutiny, self-surveillance, self-monitoring, and self-discipline of women's bodies and lifestyles. Women are made to believe that their lives are somehow lacking or flawed, and that by following the advice of relationship and lifestyle experts, they can become the successful versions of themselves. This is particularly evident in the realms of dating, intimate relationships, and women's concerns about their attractiveness. In China, it has been observed that men often seek women who possess greater physical attractiveness and youth (Blair and Madigan, 2016). Consequently, when women fail to find a partner in a timely manner or when they remain single, they are often blamed for being lazy and not investing enough effort into maintaining their attractiveness and youthfulness, especially if they are successful in their careers.

Regardless of the type of social relationship women choose, in Chinese society, it is widely assumed that women should prioritise their femininity and take action to find an ideal partner. In To (2015)'s research on leftover women, it was found that most single women have their own goals and strategies for seeking a partner, and they actively take steps to achieve those goals within a certain timeframe. Some may be willing to compromise and seek someone who can fulfil the traditional role of the main breadwinner, while others prefer a more egalitarian marital relationship. However, these expectations rooted in post-feminist ideologies impose a double standard that places blame on women themselves for being single and not conforming

to heterosexual norms. Women are often held responsible for their single status and are expected to employ strategies to find a partner. Budgeon (2008, 2016) points out that successfully performing femininity requires single women to justify their single status and take responsibility for being labelled as "leftover"" The ability to date, establish relationships with men, find a suitable partner for marriage, and balance work and family has become the primary responsibility for women seeking independence and autonomy.

The combination of the one-child policy and modernisation in contemporary China, as discussed in Chapter 1, has brought about changing images and new ideas regarding Chinese women. For instance, Liu (2006, 2014)'s research on the generation of only daughters reveals a departure from traditional femininity as these women adopt masculine traits, blurring the boundaries between femininity and masculinity. This shift is driven by parental expectations for their single child to thrive in a competitive and predominantly male society. However, these women are still pressured by their parents and society to marry at an early age. Furthermore, Chinese official discourse achieved a balance between the "modern" and the "Chinese" when defining ideals of gender expression for women (Johansson, 2001). Chinese women are now expected not only to conform to traditional roles, as previously discussed, but also to be independent, autonomous, and successful. They invest in cultivating their inner selves while making smart choices in terms of their appearance and beauty, aligning with the social context of modernity in China (Andrews and Shen, 2002; Evans, 2002; Liu, 2014).

In the context of post-feminism in Western contexts, the emphasis has shifted from objectifying women to portraying them as active and desiring heterosexual subjects (Gill, 2008). Contemporary discourses highlight playfulness, freedom, and choice for women. Alongside this shift, individualisation and neoliberalism have taken precedence over feminism, with a focus on values such as independence and autonomy as defining features of modern womanhood. This influence of neoliberalism is also observed in Chinese society, where educated and career-oriented women demonstrate greater independence and autonomy in their life decisions and plans. However, critics argue that the discourse of empowerment, independence, and autonomy of women can still be regulated by patriarchal and heterosexual norms. They point out that Chinese women's single status, choices, and responsibilities are organised within the framework of hegemonic gender relations. Thus, the extent to which Chinese women have fully detached themselves from traditional values and ideologies remains a question worth exploring. As discussed, traditional femininity and gender roles continue to impose restrictions on Chinese women's choices and lifestyles. Therefore, understanding the interaction between traditional femininity and post-femininity in women's daily lives is a topic of significance.

2.3 Summary

I presented a diagram of my theoretical framework on page 163. It primarily explores the theories of reflexive modernisation and individualisation, detraditionalisation, pure love relationships, choices, self-identity, and neoliberalism in the first section, followed by feminist

and gender theory in the second section. The main focus of this theoretical framework is to critically examine the application of these theories within the Chinese context, to explore different elements, concepts, and arguments in relation to the topic of Chinese "leftover women", and to structure these concepts and theories into a cohesive framework.

In the first section (please see the yellow boxes), the impact of reflexive modernisation and individualisation on women in both Western and Chinese contexts is discussed, as well as their relationship with the state and family within the Chinese context. In the initial part of the first section, driven by the power of the party state, Chinese individuals underwent a process of detaching from family traditions and relying on the state during Mao era, which was summarised as a "collective type of individualisation" by Yan (2010b, 2020). Different from the individualisation theory in the West, the party state has suppressed liberal notions of individual rights and autonomy, sacrificing individual freedom for the sake of national interests. Then, influenced by the marketisation reforms in post-Mao era, individuals began reattaching to family tradition, relying more on families and less on the state. This shift was due to dominant discourses of familism, the lack of a welfare system, and the impact of neoliberal ideology. The primary social safety net, consisting of family and personal networks, was re-established as institutions for individuals to mitigate their risks. However, individuals' rights continue to be regulated by the power of the state.

In terms of detachment from marriage traditions, theories of detraditionalisation, pure love relationships, are included in the second part to explain the shift from obligatory and lifelong decisions to flexible, optional and changeable choices. This is particularly evident when considering the phenomenon of "leftover women", which reflected that women's dating and relationships preferences have become more egalitarian. Intimate relationships focus more on mutual love, trust, respect and gender equality. Traditional marriage relationships and gender roles are undergoing instability. In modern society, women's identity has become more independent and autonomous, and the sense of self is valued beyond traditional family structures. Women have been pressured to create their own life plans, make their own choices, and take responsible for their future in terms of marriage and family. Nevertheless, the influence of individualisation and neoliberalism on choices and self-identity is examined critically. Individuals cannot exist in isolation from their social environment, and gender inequality and power dynamics continue to be shaped by the broader social context.

In the second section (please see the purple boxes), I discuss gender theory. In the first part, I focus on gender inequality and traditional norms, including five relevant concepts. Firstly, I analyse traditional gender roles and expressions, examining how these roles and traditional ideologies continue to be internalised by women in Chinese marriages and families. Secondly, I explore the devaluation of singleness despite the increasing number of single women and the influence of heterosexual norms. Due to the binary gender concepts, heterosexual norms remain unquestioned and unexamined. In the Chinese context, essentialist gender ideologies

emphasising on biological between males and females have strengthened the heterosexual family and marriage ideology, where heterosexual couples are regarded as having the highest social status. Thirdly, I address the social exclusions experienced by single women in terms of resources and rights. Particularly in Chinese society, social policies, laws, resources and support has excluded single women, resulting in them not having the same rights as others. Fourthly, age pressure and body anxiety as factors contributing to the phenomenon of "leftover women" and the impact of ageism and sexism on single women is discussed. Theories of biopower, body, aging and selectiveness are explored to discuss women's marital pressure with dominant public discourses.

In the second part of the second section, I focus on feminist theories and the images of modern women influenced by neoliberalism. I explore new femininities, post-feminism, and the expectations placed on single women to find a husband, balance work and life, and maintain their sexual attractiveness within a patriarchal society. Dominant discourses of independence and autonomy, influenced by neoliberalism, have pressured women to possess strong self-governance and self-responsibility abilities, balancing successful careers and family while also being sexually active in dating. This double burden still expects women to prioritise men's needs and adhere patriarchal rules, reinforcing gender hegemony. In the Chinese society, especially among highly educated and successful career women, discourses of "strategies", "choices" continue to pressure women to strategically take actions to find a husband and avoid

being derogated. Only by doing so can women build a regulated and successful identity under social expectation and norms.

In both sections, the first part has discusses various theories to explain traditional ideology and institutional regulation, including state control, familism, heterosexual norms and gender hegemony. The second part focuses on individuals' choices, planning, strategies and neoliberalist ideologies, representing modernist ideas. These two parts are interconnected and interrelated, reflecting what Jackson and Ho (2020) argued: modernity encompasses tradition (please see the green and blue boxes), so women having independent income and careers do not disturb gendered and familial obligations. I've added more ideas into this relationship, which I conclude as modernity and neoliberalism encompassing traditions and state control in the Chinese context. Chinese individuals are experiencing modern and neoliberalist everyday living, yet they also conform to family and marriage traditions while being controlled by the state power.
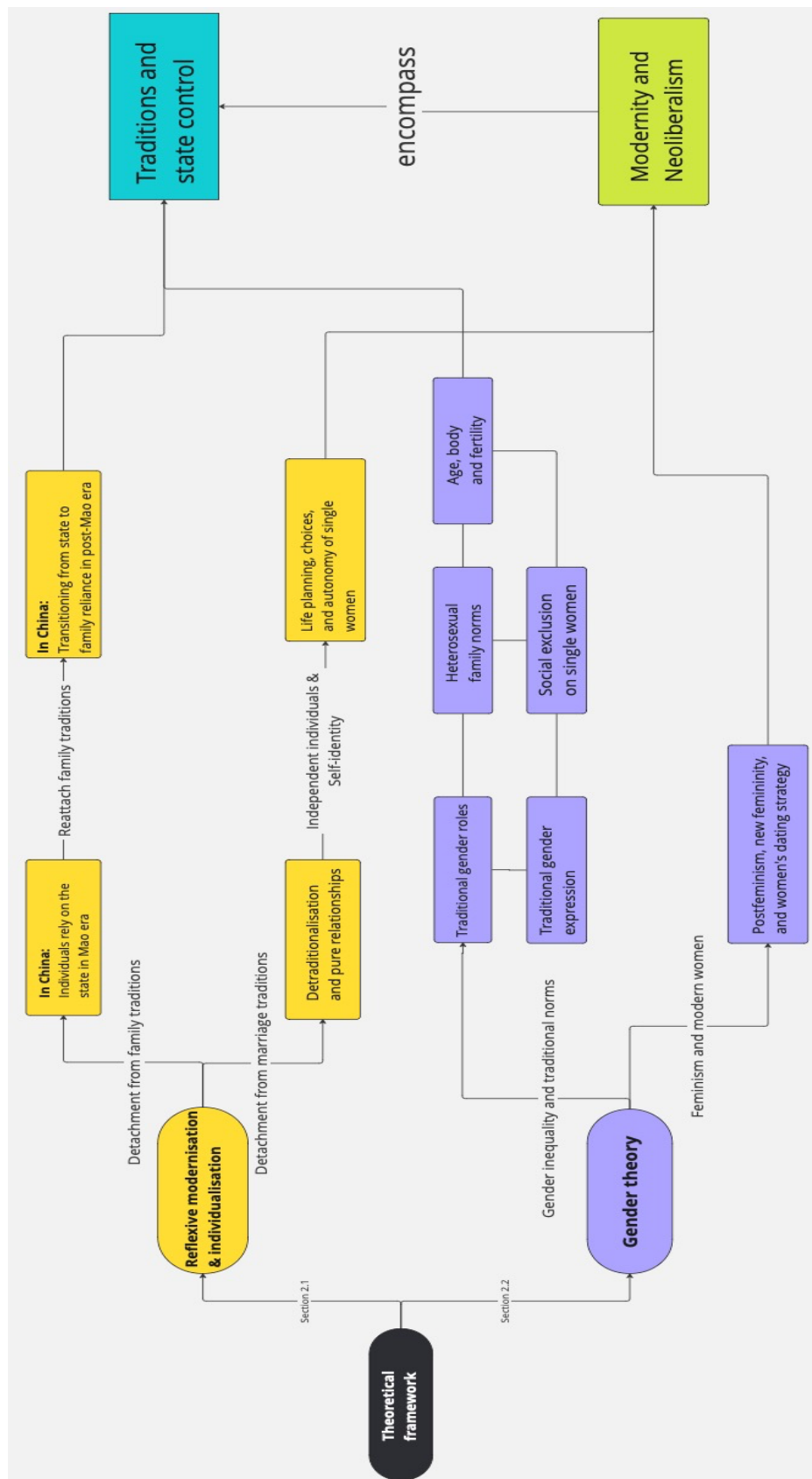
Diagram 1 Theoretical Framework

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I discuss the research methods, data collection process, analysis methods, and ethical considerations for the study. The objective of this research is to investigate how Chinese single women made choices and shaped their self-identity within the context of the Chinese social and political environment, as well as their social, cultural, and familial surroundings. The research delves into the experiences and stories of "leftover women" concerning their dating and intimate relationships, formative education, career journeys, daily social interactions, and their engagement with men, family, and society. To allow participants to share their own narratives, qualitative narrative interviews were employed as the primary research method. Thematic analysis was then applied to analyse the women's stories based on different themes and topics. It is important to note that the purpose of this research is not to present definitive facts or truths about social problems or inequalities in Chinese society. Rather, the aim is to provide an interpretation of the experiences, choices, and self-identities of these single women within the Chinese social context, as conveyed through their narratives.

The chapter commences with a discussion on the methodological philosophy, wherein a constructionist approach is presented as the ontology, while materialism and interpretivism are proposed as the epistemological foundations for the methodology. Subsequently, sampling techniques are explained, focusing on purposive sampling, and providing an overview of the participants' characteristics. The recruitment process and methods are also outlined, and the narrative interviewing method is described. Additionally, the feminist narrative approach is

introduced, emphasising the centrality of these participants in both data collection and analysis, with the goal of amplifying the voices of marginalised groups. Due to the pandemic, online interviews were conducted, and the advantages and challenges encountered during the fieldwork is discussed. Research ethics are addressed, along with the strategies employed to mitigate potential risks for the participants. Thematic analysis is presented as the chosen method to analyse the narrative data, and the emerging themes are used to structure the subsequent analysis chapters. The chapter critically examines the researcher's reflexivity and her relationship with the participants, the research topic, and the interpretation and analysis of the data. Finally, recommendations for future research are provided.

3.1 Philosophy: ontology and epistemology

In view of the research aim, the research approach requires both participants' construction of their own life stories and the researcher's interpretation of data. The philosophy of methodology is discussed here.

According to Ritchie et al. (2013), social research grapples with fundamental questions about the existence of social reality independently of human conceptions and interpretations. The chosen ontology for this research is social constructionism, which asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually shaped by social actors (Bryman, 2016). Adopting a social constructionist approach, this study utilises qualitative interviews to explore how single women construct and give meaning to their lives. The aim is to investigate various aspects such as

education, career, and dating by capturing the participants' narratives, revealing multiple constructed realities within specific contexts (Ritchie et al., 2013). Throughout this process, narratives emerge as social products influenced by the social, historical, and cultural contexts in which individuals are situated (Lawler, 2002). In the case of this research, women shared their stories within the urban areas of contemporary Chinese society. By situating themselves or being situated within different stories, these women actively constructed identities and developed a sense of self.

Furthermore, the ontology of this research encompasses materialism as well. According to Ritchie et al. (2013), materialism asserts the existence of an external reality that is independent of our beliefs or understanding, and it posits that people's beliefs, values, and emotions emerge from the material world. This study aims to explore how social policies, laws, family traditions, and gender inequality within Chinese society have influenced participants' lives and choices. Additionally, it aims to discuss the experiences of discrimination and social exclusion that they encountered as a result of these social relations and realities. Therefore, it is crucial to integrate both materialist and social constructionist perspectives in order to comprehend these women's beliefs, values, choices, and self-identities that they constructed through their daily interactions with the Chinese political, social, and cultural environment. Moreover, it is important to understand the material realities, which encompass social contexts, social relations, and the broader environment of Chinese society, and consider the impact of modernisation and social transformation.

The field of epistemology explores different ways of understanding and acquiring knowledge about the social world, addressing questions such as how we can gain insights into reality (Ritchie et al., 2013). In the context of this research, the epistemological stance adopted is interpretivism, which recognises the reciprocal influence between the researcher and the social world. It acknowledges that facts and values are inevitably shaped by the researcher's perspective and values. Moreover, knowledge is acquired through an inductive process, whereby the researcher endeavours to comprehend and explore the social world by considering both the participant's and the researcher's understanding (Bryman, 2012). It is acknowledged that participants are influenced by the act of being studied, establishing an interactive relationship between the researcher and the social phenomena (Ritchie et al., 2013). Within this research, the findings were either run through by the researcher's for mediation or negotiated and agreed upon between the researcher and the participants. Recognising that the researcher could not be completely devoid of values, the reflexivity of the researcher, which is discussed in later sections, could also impact the data collection and data analysis processes.

Participants construct their narratives by incorporating factual events and life experiences, while also allowing space for personal expression and interpretation of these "remembered facts" (Lieblich et al., 1998, p.8). These personal narratives serve as meaningful vehicles of communication, enabling individuals to interpret their pasts through storytelling rather than merely recounting them as they happened (Riessman, 2002). Additionally, it is important to

note that narratives are not solely a product of individual creation; they are influenced by cultural circulation, offering individuals a range of narratives to draw from when crafting their own stories (Lawler, 2002). In this research, all meanings derived from this research stemmed from the women's narratives and life stories, with the researcher interpreting the data during analysis. As a result, understanding reality becomes contingent upon subjective interpretation. Throughout the process of data collection and analysis, the researcher needed to provide open questions and prompts to encourage participants to share their narratives. Furthermore, the researcher's own perspective and standpoint is included in data analysis, rendering the entire interaction interpretive and subjective. The initial interactive analysis and the subsequent analysis stages is elaborated upon in the later sections.

3.2 Sampling

This qualitative study employed a purposive sampling approach to identify participants who were categorised as "leftover women". This sampling method combines elements of both snowball sampling and purposive sampling. Purposive sampling involves the process of selecting sample units based on specific attributes or characteristics that allow for a thorough exploration and understanding of the primary themes and problems that the researcher wishes to investigate (Ritchie et al., 2013). Thus, in order to explore Chinese leftover women's life stories, the sample in this research were chosen with a purpose.

The definition of "leftover women" for this research has been shaped by contributions from various sources. For instance, the ACWF and Xinhua News Agency defined "leftover" as unmarried women aged over 27 (Fincher, 2016). To (2015) defined "leftover women" as urban, professional females in their late twenties or older who remained unmarried, selecting participants between the ages of 27 and 35 with a strong educational and career background in urban areas of China. However, in this research, the age range has been expanded to include participants up to 40 years old, based on newer sources like the documentary *Leftover Women* made by Shlam and Medalia in 2020 and a short video on Leftover Women made by SK-II in 2016, where women who aged over 35 were also included (PBS, 2020; Usher, 2016). Furthermore, it is important to consider the recent increase in the average age of first marriage in certain provinces of China. For example, as discussed in Chapter 1, in Jiangsu, there has been a rise from 29 to 34 between 2012 and 2017, and in Hubei, it has increased from 29 to 35 between 2017 and 2022 (Sohu News, 2018; Hu, 2019; Beijing News, 2022). Previous research before 2018 had not extensively explored the stories and experiences of women aged over 35 years old. Hence, extending the age range for defining "leftover women" becomes crucial in order to incorporate various perspectives and narratives of women in this age group. Moreover, the ages of 30 and 35 are often considered significant turning points in women's lives, which is referred to as the "golden marriageable age" and "golden fertility age" (Zhao, 2019; iResearch, 2021). Women within this age range are likely to share similar or diverse stories and experiences. As such, the focus of this research is on women within this specific age range, and therefore those over the age of 40 were not included in the participant recruitment for this study.

To ensure a diverse sample, participants' ages were spread across the range of 27 to 40 years old.

This research specifically targets heterosexual women who are unmarried and have no children. Previous studies have shown that many "leftover women" perceived marriage as their ultimate goal (To, 2015). Therefore, in this research, women who had been in a relationship but legally single were also considered eligible for recruitment. However, women who had been in long-term relationships with the intention of getting married were not included. The participants in this study came from both one-child families and non-one-child families. The research focuses on women with a strong educational background, holding at least a bachelor's degree from a top 100 university, and with good income in professions such as engineering and government officials (i.e., above the average urban income based on the government's statistical report (NBS, 2020)). Since the 1980s, many Chinese women have started studying or working overseas, experiencing Western cultural influence that may conflict with Chinese traditional ideologies, as previously discussed. Thus, women with overseas education or work experience were included in this study.

This selection criterion aligns with previous literature, which emphasises the inclusion of "professional urban women". It is important to note that women living in urban areas include those who migrated from small towns or rural villages, as well as those who grew up in urban areas. As discussed in Chapter 1, in the Chinese context, due to national development policies,

there has been a significant economic and income gap between urban and rural areas over the past 40 years (Bao, 2015). Over the past 20 years, the marriage age among women in urban areas has also significantly increased (Sohu News, 2018). On one hand, compared to women with limited opportunities in small towns or rural villages, urban women tend to have more career opportunities and an independent lifestyle. However, they also face conflicts in balancing their career and family plans. On the other hand, these women, who came from a privileged social background, are often considered too selective or not conforming to traditional marital expectations (To, 2015). Thus, in this research, participants were recruited from nine cities of tier 1 and tier 2[1] including Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, Ningbo, Wuhan, Chengdu, Xiamen, Nanjing, and Guangzhou, according to government's criteria in 2014 (CN gov, 2014; Hotbak, 2020).

Purposive sampling requires some diversity so that impact of each of the characteristics concerned can be explored (Ritchie et al., 2013). To achieve this, participants who of different ages, educational backgrounds, careers, living locations, and who had diverse past life experiences in their family and intimate relationships were sought. To generate the desired sample, two approaches were utilised. Firstly, contact was established with NGOs and feminist social groups operating in major cities that provided social support for single women. These organisations had already conducted feminist activities and formed social networks with single women. Permission and support were sought from the staff working in these NGOs and social

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[1] The terms "Tier 1" and "Tier 2" are employed to classify cities based on factors such as population size, economic development, infrastructure, and the level of urbanisation. These classifications serve administrative, economic, and planning purposes.

groups. Additionally, advertisements and letters were posted in single women's groups and communities on social media. These announcements were displayed in online chat groups, while letters were sent through email or other personal contact methods. Secondly, snowball sampling method was employed. During the interview process, participants' networks were used as a sampling strategy. This involved contacting additional potential participants within their networks in the later stages of fieldwork to expand the sample size.

In order to prioritise the collection of participants' stories and personal experiences, a small sample size was deemed necessary for this qualitative and narrative study, as the goal is not to generalise. As Crouch and McKenzie (2006) argue, a sample size of fewer than 20 allows for closer involvement with participants in interview-based studies and facilitates the generation of detailed data. Therefore, for this research, 15 participants were planned to be recruited. Data collection continued through narrative interviews until data saturation was reached. Data saturation occurs when new data no longer generate new themes or relevant categories, as argued by Bryman (2016) and Charmaz (2006). The process of data collection is iterative, involving a back-and-forth movement between sampling and theoretical reflection, until the researcher determines that saturation has been achieved (Bryman, 2016). In this study, it was found that 15 participants were sufficient to reach data saturation by the end of the data collection phase.

Thus, this research primarily focuses on a specific group of educated and career-oriented "leftover women" between the ages of 27 and 40, who identified as heterosexual and had never been married or had children. I ensured that their ages were evenly distributed within this age group, and their careers span various fields to avoid similar experience in the data. These women resided in major cities across different regions of China. Participants with diverse hometown background, family background and relationship experience were selected for comparison. Some were raised in urban areas, while others had migrated from small towns and rural regions. They came from diverse family backgrounds, with some being the only child and two participants having siblings. Some of them grew up with two parents, while one grew up in a single parent family, and the other with their grandparents. These highly educated women possessed impressive education qualifications and successful careers, with eleven participants having studied or worked abroad. Within this group, some had been in romantic relationships, while two participants had never been involved in any romantic partnerships (see Appendix 1 and the table below for participants' information).

Name	Age	Location	Hometown	Education background	Job	Family background	Relationship experience
Summer	29	Chengdu	urban	Master's (overseas)	School language teacher	Single child, lived with her single mother	No
Wendy	34	Hangzhou	urban	Master's (overseas)	Publishing editor	Single child	Yes
Cai	29	Xiamen	urban	Master's (overseas)	NGO	Single child	No
Ming	30	Shanghai	urban	Master's (overseas exchange experience)	Government official	Single child	Yes
Jenny	31	Shanghai	small town	Master's (overseas exchange experience)	Lawyer	Single child	Yes
Sulin	33	Shanghai	small town	Master's	Lawyer	Single child	Yes
Hua	35	Wuhan	urban	Master's	Teacher, influencer	Single child	Yes
Guan	38	Beijing	urban	Master's (overseas)	Artist	Single child	Yes
Betty	32	Beijing	small town	Bachelor's	Finance analyst	Single child	Yes
Fang	36	Ningbo	urban	Bachelor's	Marketing	Single child, grew up with her grandparents	Yes
Maluo	37	Guangzhou	rural	Bachelor's (overseas)	Marketing	Has a younger brother	Yes
Lily	30	Nanjing	urban	PhD (overseas)	University lecturer	Single child	Yes
Heather	32	Guangzhou	small town	Master's (overseas)	Advertising	Single child	Yes
Daisy	31	Hangzhou	urban	PhD (overseas)	Engineer	Single child	No
Tiana	28	Beijing	rural	Master's (overseas)	Reporter	Has two brothers	Yes

3.3 Narrative interviewing method

This research aims to explore leftover women's past experience, and to collect their stories in their dating, intimate relationships, educational, and career experiences, and their communication with family and society, thus narrative interview was the best option for this research.

Human beings are inherently storytellers, and one of the most effective means of understanding their inner world is through the verbal accounts and narratives individuals share about their lives and lived experiences (Lieblich et al., 1998). As *narrative* is defined as a discourse designed to represent a connected sequence of events in Webster's (1966), the life story interview method in narrative research was employed to explore the successive life stories and experiences of single women in this research. Social research utilises narrative to portray the character and lifestyle of specific subgroups within society (Lieblich et al., 1998). From a social and cultural perspective, these social groups often comprise marginalised minorities whose narratives give voice to their unheard experiences (Lieblich et al., 1998). As discussed in the Introduction and Chapter 1, the term "leftover women" has been derogatorily assigned to single women by the government, pressuring young Chinese women into marrying. Single women have consequently been confined to this social group that has endured stigma, prejudice, and discrimination within Chinese society for a considerable period (Fincher, 2016). However, beneath this derogatory label lies the unexplored narrative of how "leftover women" perceive themselves and their own lives. Single women's lives should not be reduced to being labelled as "leftover". Instead, their relationships with society and their daily experiences, as seen from

their own perspectives, are far more diverse and vibrant than the confines of the derogatory term. This research seeks to investigate the disparity between the "facts" (i.e., women being labelled as "leftover") and the "truths" (i.e., their genuine personal lives) (Matthews and Ross, 2014). Therefore, it is crucial to provide women with the opportunity to narrate their own stories in their own unique ways.

Narratives grant us insights into people's identity and character. Individuals shape their own identity by creating, sharing, revising, and retelling stories throughout their lives (Lieblich et al., 1998). According to Lawler (2002), identity, as depicted in narratives, cannot be simply deduced from externally imposed labels like "well educated", "single", or "women", which represent socially assigned identities. Instead, through narratives, women are able to construct more intricate, fragmented, diverse, and context-dependent identities. By narrating their experiences, they can express their values, attitudes, and emotions; develop their own understanding of self and identity within specific contexts; and make sense of their choices and decisions. As Ward (2012) argues, narrative research acknowledges the diverse histories, needs, and behaviours of individuals within the broader framework of social differentiation, and explores the interplay between personal biographies, historical factors, and societal influences (Riessman, 2002). Therefore, employing a narrative methodology in this study allows for an investigation of the connection between leftover women and Chinese societal values, as well as a deeper exploration of the social implications arising from social policies, norms, and traditional values in Chinese society.

When examining the perceptions of leftover women regarding their present identity, status, and future life plans, it is valuable to delve into their past narratives and establish a link between their past experiences and their current situation. As Lawler (2002) argues, individuals continuously create and retell life stories based on their memories, interpreting the past through social perspectives and utilising this understanding to shape their present and future narratives. In this research, by exploring the stories of leftover women in areas such as dating, intimate relationships, family dynamics, and career history, the researcher is able to establish connections between the past and present, gaining insights into how they perceived their current single status, constructed their self-identity, and made decisions about their future within the context of Chinese society.

Above all, this research employed narrative interviewing as a means to investigate how women articulated their stories, constructed their identities, and made life choices. To ensure participants could convey their narratives comprehensively and consistently, narrative interviews were conducted with the interrupting technique (Matthews and Ross, 2014). In these narrative interviews, participants needed to tell stories in their own way, rather by answering a set of interview questions. Unlike non-interrupting interview methods that require the researcher to not disturb the storytelling during interviews, the interrupting technique requires the researcher to ask questions for clarification or further details, or to initiate a return to the original research topic (Matthews and Ross, 2014), thus pushing the participant to constantly

restructure their story using the researcher's questions and comments as prompts. In this study, narrative interviews commenced by providing participants with an overview of the research focus, followed by an opening question (see Appendix 2 Interview Topic Guide) such as "Could you please tell me about your dating history?" This enabled data collection to begin. The interview followed a narrative interview topic guide, with initial questions tailored to sub-topics such as "intimate relationships", "career", and "family". Subsequently, follow-up questions were framed around "events", "characters", and "impact", adhering to the narrative approach (Czarniawska, 2004; Labov and Waletzky, 1997; McAdams, 1989; Polkinghorne, 1995). Throughout the interview, I actively listened as participants recounted their stories. I used prompts and follow-up questions such as "What happened next?", "What did they say to you?", and "How did it impact you?" These questions encouraged participants to continue narrating, provide clarification, offer additional details, or return to the main topic.

3.4 Feminist narrative approach

Qualitative interviewing, particularly narrative and in-depth interviewing, has gained significant prominence as data gathering methods within a feminist research framework (Bryman, 2016). Given that this research is grounded in feminist and gender theories, and its objective is to explore the life stories of leftover women from their own perspectives, fieldwork was conducted accordingly. The aim of this research is to shed light on a group of women who have been overlooked in mainstream discourse and have faced discrimination and exclusion

due to dominant social norms in the Chinese context. Therefore, this study has embraced a feminist research approach, which can also be referred to as an interviewee-centred approach.

Oakley (1981, 1998, 2000) has highlighted certain issues in social research that lacks a feminist perspective. To address these concerns, this research has adapted the feminist approach to ensure participant autonomy and avoid any power imbalances. Oakley argues that some social research places interviewers in a position of authority, implicitly asserting their right to ask questions while put interviewees as subordinate or inferior positions. In this study, I have taken a different approach by firstly asking opening questions and providing prompts that encouraged participants to share their own stories. The interviewees were portrayed as the protagonists of their narratives, taking on the main role in providing information for this research. Unlike structured interviews where the researcher's questions and interaction with participants may influence their responses (Oakley, 1998) this research aims to minimise any potential impact of follow-up questions on participants' attitudes, opinions, and how they choose to share their personal stories.

In line with the feminist approach, establishing a non-hierarchical relationship and incorporating the perspectives of the women being interviewed is crucial. To prevent the interviews from being one-sided or exploitive, I conducted interviews twice with each participant, informed by both the feminist approach (Oakley, 1981) and the multisession method (Wengraf, 2001). Conducting multiple interviews is inherent to life story interviewing,

as the process of eliciting stories naturally requires a considerable amount of time (Miller, 2000). In this research, each interview was planned to last from one to two hours, allowing for flexibility if participants needed more time to fully share their narratives. The first interview focused on facilitating a smooth flow of storytelling and gathering comprehensive life stories. I employed follow-up questions to encourage participants to provide explanations for certain words and phrases, ensuring a thorough narrative. The second interview took place after the transcription and initial interpretation stage. During this session, I presented participants with the preliminary analysis and interpretation of their stories and invited their feedback and comments. This stage aimed to foster participant engagement in the analysis process, allowing for further exploration and clarification of details as required. By involving participants in the analysis, their perspectives were integrated into the research process, promoting a more inclusive and collaborative approach.

To ensure accuracy, participants were also given the opportunity to review the transcripts in the second interview. This allowed them to validate the transcripts, provide further insights, clarify points, or even request the removal of certain materials if they deemed it necessary. Moreover, participants were actively involved in the interpretation process during analysis, enabling me to verify the validity of the analysis. In narrative interviews, the creation and interpretation of a story are collaborative efforts between the researcher and the participant. Oakley (1981, 1998) and Bryman (2016) highlight a common oversight in qualitative research, where interviews are often treated as a one-way process solely for extracting information. However, in this research,

narrative interviews provided a space for participants to share their stories from their own perspectives. The researcher's role was primarily to support and encourage participants in constructing coherent and detailed narratives. Furthermore, two interviews were conducted to ensure participant involvement in the initial stages of research analysis. This approach aimed to guarantee that the researcher had interpreted the data accurately. Additionally, the final version of the research outcomes was shared with the participants to minimise any potential misinterpretations. By adopting these practices, the research process was characterised by mutual exchange, collaboration, and a focus on participant perspectives.

3.5 Online interviewing method

Due to the practical limitations imposed by the pandemic and time constraints, I made the decision to conduct online interviews instead of face-to-face interviews. These online interviews took place between March and August 2021, utilising video or audio platforms based on the preferences of the participants. Due to the pandemic, my original fieldwork plan had to be revised. Initially, I intended to visit various large cities over a few months to conduct in-person narrative interviews with the 15 participants. My original plan was to establish rapport with participants, introduce the research project, and obtain consent forms through face-to-face meetings prior to conducting the formal interviews. The interviews were planned to take place in quiet public settings such as cafes, ensuring that participants felt comfortable and safe according to their preferences. Additionally, I had planned to attend group matchmaking events in public and observe the interactions and behaviours of single women in the dating scene. This

ethnographic approach aimed to explore how these women engaged with men within the context of heterosexual blind dating. I had also considered employing visual ethnography to document and present the dynamics of matchmaking events in China. Regrettably, all these initial fieldwork plans had to be cancelled due to the pandemic. The restrictions and safety concerns surrounding in-person interactions and travel made it impractical and risky to carry out the intended activities. Consequently, I had to alter my research methods and utilise online interviews and other remote data collection techniques.

While the decision of conducting research online was primarily motivated by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, I discovered several advantages in conducting interviews online. Firstly, conducting online interviews allowed me to overcome geographical barriers and efficiently reach participants in China from my location in England, without incurring additional time and travel expenses. Additionally, considering the self-isolation policies in China, I would have been required to self-isolate for a minimum of seven days each time I visited a different city. By opting for online narrative interviews, I had the flexibility to schedule interviews with participants residing in various cities within the same week. This approach also enabled me to access participants with various background, as I had not been constrained by geographical limitations (Lefever et al., 2007; van Eeden-Moorefield et al., 2008). Furthermore, online interviews facilitated the inclusion of participants who may feel more comfortable sharing their experiences and stories anonymously or without revealing their identity. As van Eeden-Moorefield et al. (2008) suggest, the Internet can provide a safe and largely anonymous

context, particularly for marginalised groups. In this research, participants who chose telephone interviews experienced fewer concerns about appearing on camera or being recognised in any given situation. The online environment reassured participants about the protection of their privacy, thereby increasing their confidence in sharing their narratives. Lastly, during a global pandemic, the online environment provided an additional layer of security for both the participants and myself. By communicating online, we minimised the potential health risks associated with in-person interactions and we could adhered to safety precautions.

For this research, the choice of communication method, either Zoom video or audio calls, was determined based on the participants' preferences. To ensure compliance with the University's ethical committee, I sought confirmation regarding suitable software options. Zoom was the only approved and secure option available for use in China (see Li, 2022 and Appendix 8 Published work). However, during the recruitment process, it became apparent that participants had limited familiarity with Zoom and instead preferred to use other local software. It is worth noting that advanced technology and software, as noted by Botha et al. (2010), can create a power dynamic between the researcher and participant. To address this, I took steps to ensure participants were comfortable with the software. I provided instructions on downloading and using the software, which were sent alongside the consent forms. Prior to the interview, participants were able to download the video conferencing software. Subsequently, I shared the virtual room code and password via email. At the start of the interview, I obtained participants' permission to record and reiterated all details outlined in the consent form. As narrative

interviews aim to delve into participants' personal life stories, the privacy and safety of their data were particularly safeguarded when compared to traditional interview methods.

Various challenges were encountered before conducting the online interviews. Establishing rapport in an online setting was proven more difficult compared to face-to-face interactions. The researcher must carefully consider how to create a comfortable and trustworthy virtual environment that encourages participants to open up. As highlighted by Chiumento et al. (2018) , the existence of prior relationships between the researcher and participant significantly impacts rapport-building during qualitative interviews. Therefore, it becomes crucial for the researcher to establish connections in advance with the participants to address this issue effectively. In this research, I employed multiple tools such as messages, emails, telephone calls, and video chats to foster rapport with the participants, always with their permission. The research details were shared with the participants, where they were encouraged to raise any questions or concerns prior to the interview. The section on Research Ethics will delve further into ethical considerations associated with the study.

Due to the nature of the narrative methods, there were some potential problems during the online narrative interviews. Narrative interviews usually require participants to tell coherent stories in their own structured way, but technical problems like connection or environmental issues like noise can affect the coherence of narratives and the length and depth of narrative. Deakin and Wakefield (2014) suggest that encouraging participants to move to a location free

from distractions is important in online interviews. In order to minimise the effect of technical problems, I told participants to choose a quiet venue where it had a good internet connection and to confirm that their device and software setting were prepared for a long interview; during the interviews, I asked the participants to narrate their stories again if possible when the signal got cut; after the interview, I also sent the transcripts to participants to cooperate with them in the interpretation of the interview data to avoid any problems that were present in the online interviews.

Another notable challenge arose when participants opted for telephone interviews without video, as it became difficult for me to gauge their emotional state (Ritchie et al., 2013). Without the ability to observe their facial expressions or body language, it was challenging to assess their comfort level in answering questions, determine if there were deeper insights to uncover, or ascertain their willingness to continue with the interview. Even in video interviews, the limited framing of participants' head and shoulders by the webcam constrained the availability of visual cues (Whale, 2017). When compared with other interviewing methods, narrative approaches with two interviews at a different time have a higher likelihood of causing emotional distress to participants as they share their personal stories. To mitigate these effects, participants were explicitly informed that they were free to express their feelings about the interview questions or their mood during the interview. Additionally, I made a conscious effort to attentively listen to their tone of voice and enquire about their well-being to ensure they felt comfortable enough to continue. To ensure ethical considerations were upheld, participants were informed before

each interview that they had the option to pause whenever necessary, decline further discussion, or withdraw from the interview completely. Additionally, during interview breaks, I took the opportunity to reconfirm their willingness to continue participating.

3.6 Research ethics

Prior to commencing the research, I utilised a participant information sheet and a consent form to provide participants with comprehensive details about the study, including their rights as participants. A verbal overview was also given to ensure a thorough understanding of all aspects of the project. Participants were presented with information about the study's nature, emphasising that their participation was entirely voluntary and that confidentiality would be strictly maintained. To formalise their agreement to participate, they were requested to sign both the information sheet and consent form virtually or to scan the signed documents and return them to the researcher before the interview process began (see Appendix 4,5,6,7). Acknowledging the online format of the interviews, the participants' consent to partake in the research was reaffirmed at the beginning of each interview through a recorded statement. Additionally, their consent was periodically reconfirmed during the interviews. Furthermore, after the interview concluded, explicit permission was sought once again to reaffirm the participants' consent to take part in the research. All recordings were carried out only with the participants' explicit consent.

The researcher was flexible for interview venues and time, so the participants were able to decide whenever and wherever they found comfortable. The participants could also choose not to answer one or more of the questions during the interview. They did not need to give reasons when they decided to not to answer specific questions or withdraw from this research. They were informed of their rights to withdraw from the project: any time before the interview, during the interview, and within one month since the last day of the second interview; this information was provided verbally by the researcher, participant information sheet, and the consent form. There was no consequence for withdrawing from the study. When the participants withdrew from this project, all of their information and data was deleted immediately. After participants agreed to take part in this project, at the later stage of the research, the interpretation of the research data was sent to the participant to avoid any misinterpretation, and the researcher sent the research report to the participants once data analysing process was finished.

The participants had also been informed that all information they were to provide, their name, and personal information that might reveal their identity would be kept confidential, and stored securely at all times, according to ethics procedures of University of Birmingham. With the participants' consent, all interviews were recorded on password-protected computer and phone. After each interview, the recording was saved into a password-protected folder on the computer and the University's BEAR Cloud. The data from the interview was then transcribed and analysed which formed a part of the final research report. In the final research report, and any other publications, all data was anonymised, and pseudonyms were used to minimise the

possibility that the participants or their locations be identified. Only the researcher and the participants have access to the participant's own interview data; when necessary, the data might also be shared with two supervisors to help with data analysis in the later stage of the research. At the later stage of the research, when the analysis report was finished, the researcher sent the participants the findings of the thesis and report of their part. All data was used in the PhD thesis, and would be in other academic publications, if the participants agree.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the research, certain guidelines needed to be adhered to. During the rapport-building stage, I intended to establish credibility and trust with participants by asking relevant questions that held meaning for them and were grounded in an understanding of the research subject. However, it is essential for the researcher to refrain from using this opportunity to showcase their own knowledge or extensively share their own experiences (Ritchie et al., 2013). While sharing the researcher's experiences may foster intimacy, the focus remained on the participants' experiences. At the beginning of the interview, I made a point to inform participants that there would not be any right or wrong answers and no stories considered good or boring. Throughout the interview, it was crucial to maintain a non-judgemental approach, refraining from correcting mistakes. The fieldwork only commenced when participants felt comfortable and prepared for it.

Prior to and during the interviewing process, it was necessary for the researcher to exhibit genuine interest and respect for the participant's perspective and individuality while

maintaining their own identity. Understanding and empathising with the participant's emotions

and feelings during their narrative process was paramount. Rubin and Rubin (2011) state the

importance of achieving empathy in qualitative research without becoming overly involved.

This implies avoiding both overly positive or negative comments and maintaining the role of

an independent listener rather than a counsellor or advisor. Similarly, it was crucial for the

researcher to remain detached and composed when participants used language or became

emotionally expressive in ways that might be shocking or distressing (Ritchie et al., 2013).

As Miller (2000) argues, the conclusion of an interview signifies the end of all contact between

the interviewer and interviewee, potentially resulting in a one-sided and exploitative

relationship between the researcher and the participants. To address this concern, I maintained

ongoing contact with certain participants based on their individual needs. This allowed them to

freely ask any questions pertaining to the research project or make requests for data and further

analysis.

3.7 Thematic analysis

This research utilised the thematic analysis method to examine the narratives collected. In the

realm of narrative data, it is essential to consider not only how women express their stories but

also the content of what they convey (Ward, 2012). According to Riessman (2008), an analysis

of narrative interview data can be conducted using either thematic or structural approach. In

this study, the focus was on exploring the life stories, experiences, choices, and self-identity

constructed by single women through their storytelling. The analysis did not solely emphasise the manner in which these stories were told or the narrative structures employed. It is worth emphasising that this research viewed these single women not only as individuals sharing their personal narratives but also within the broader context of the Chinese political, social, and cultural environment. Understanding these women's stories encompasses exploring various aspects, including education, career, lifestyles, relationships, family, choices, and self-identity. To comprehensively analyse the interview data and uncover insights related to these different themes and topics, the thematic analysis method was employed. This approach allows for the identification and examination of recurring patterns, topics, and themes that emerged from the women's narratives, so that a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances of their experiences can be gained.

In order to start the thematic analysis, as Braun and Clarke (2013) suggest, the first step was to get immersed in the data. The researcher should become familiarised with the dataset and notice things that might be relevant to research questions. As Matthews and Ross (2014) state, the beginning of a thematic analysis should describe the data and explore the data for meaning. In this research, after reading and re-reading the interview data, I wrote down many **notes and initial interpretations**, e.g., "spent most of her time on housework when living with boyfriend" and "felt shamed when asked about her own single status" (see Appendix 3 Codes, Themes and Categories Table). These notes and initial interpretations were also written down based on both the participants' explanation and interpretation in the second interview, and the researcher's

understanding during reading, which is regarded as an initial cooperative analysis stage. Then, for the second stage, I created some **codes**, based on my notes and initial interpretations. These codes were shorter than notes, which are usually brief phrases that captured the essence of why I thought a particular bit of data might be useful, e.g., "unequal contribution to housework" and "being blamed for being single". Then I created **themes**, which I also called subheadings, to simplify and conclude the meaning of codes, so it would be convenient for me to consider subheadings, structure, and themes for my analysis. These categories were created based on codes and also some concepts from the literature review and research questions, e.g., "gender division of housework" and "social stigma". The last step for my analysis was to create **categories**, which I also called sub-themes, based on the previous steps. The categories were all created through looking for relationships and links between different data sections and themes, and identifying similarities and differences between different data sections, which helped me to find how themes related to each other, e.g, "self-identity" and "social and political environment". This also helped me to decide the analysis content structure and think about how to answer my research questions.

Thus, from the thematic analysis, I sorted out the data and decided on the structure of my analysis chapters. In order to answer research questions based on the data, these women's choices and self-identity that emerged from the data is the main topic of my thesis. The analysis is divided into three chapters to cover political and social environment, family and cultural environment, and gender relationships. These three chapters analyse the women's self-identity

and choices based on their interaction with the environment, and the subheadings are based on the themes from the analysis.

3.8 Reflexivity

As this research adopted an interpretivist approach, it recognises that the data collection and analysis stages involve acknowledging the subjective perspectives of the study participants, which reflect their own views of the social world. Moreover, it acknowledges that researchers themselves bring their own subjective influences to the research process (Hennink et al., 2011). In this study, there are elements of reflexivity that arose due to the researcher's own identity as a Chinese woman in her late twenties and from a Chinese only-child family with similar experiences as the participants. The researcher shared commonalities with the participants in terms of age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, as well as cultural, social, and family background. It is natural for both the researcher and the participants to establish a sense of connection from the outset of the research. Additionally, employing narrative interviews and multisessional interview methods aided the analysis process by fostering a collaborative approach. Both the researcher and the participants contributed to the co-construction of reality throughout the interview and analysis process (Finlay and Gouch, 2003). This mutual engagement allows for a deeper understanding and interpretation of the research data.

As the researcher, I acknowledge the potential influence of my own experiences, values, self-identity, and ideologies on this research. Therefore, it is crucial to discuss the concept of

reflexivity in relation to my role in this study. As a Chinese woman who grew up in urban areas as an only-child in China, I have personally experienced the dynamics of parental support in education. Similarly, like many Chinese women, I have also encountered societal pressures related to marriage and the associated sense of shame. Additionally, through conversations with women in my social circle, I have been exposed to numerous stories and experiences that resonate with these themes. It was at the age of 23, immediately after completing my undergraduate degree, that I began developing the initial idea of conducting a study focused on the narratives of single women in China. My intention was to explore the life stories of this particular generation of Chinese single women, including my own, and investigate how they construct their sense of self and make life choices within specific social contexts. Although the research questions and design eventually took shape after extensive reading and research on similar topics, such as studies on Chinese "leftover women" and single women in various social contexts, it was inevitable that my subjective perspective as a Chinese female researcher influenced the research design, questions, research methods, and data analysis. Hence, it is important to acknowledge that some elements of reflexivity were present in this research, given my personal background and experiences.

I am aware that my own social background and assumptions have the potential to influence the research process (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007). Throughout the data collection phase, I noticed a warm reception from many participants when I shared my similar background with them. This connection and trust were evident as they shared their personal stories, including

details about their family background, upbringing, and dating or relationship experiences, from the perspective of a Chinese single woman that we both understood. This reflected what Hennink et al. (2011) argue, where it is more likely for participants to tell their own personal stories with the researcher who is from a similar background and share similar stories. During the data interpretation stage, I was mindful that my own background and cultural perspective might influence how I interpreted the data. There was a likelihood that certain aspects of the data might appear more significant to me based on my own experiences and life stories. For example, the participants' narratives about their interactions with their parents and other family members might resonate with my own experiences and memories of interacting with mine. These personal connections shaped my interpretation of the data.

Due to this close connection, the practice of reflexivity should be careful of becoming overly self-indulgent and potentially paralysing the research process (Hennink et al., 2011). I was committed to approaching reflexivity with care by critically reflecting on how my own experiences might influence my interpretations. I strove to keep an open mind and consider alternative perspectives to ensure a comprehensive and unbiased analysis of the data. To mitigate any potential privilege associated with my position and minimise the negative impact of my own perspective, I have incorporated various research methods. Narrative interviews, along with follow-up questions that avoid preset assumptions, were employed to provide participants with a platform to express their voices. I refrained from introducing my academic knowledge, opinions, or any judgemental language during data collection to avoid creating an

unequal power dynamic between myself as the researcher and the participants. This approach is crucial in preserving the validity and credibility of the data. During data collection, I encountered instances where participants expressed curiosity about my "views" or "opinions". I had chosen to share such information only after the data collection phase was completed. However, I did find it necessary to establish trust by briefly sharing some of my personal stories or experiences with participants before the interviews commenced. During data analysis, I remained loyal to the participants' initial interpretations and strove to conduct my analysis based on the data itself. By doing so, I aimed to maintain the integrity and accuracy of the findings.

3.9 Future research

This section aims to highlight the limitations of my research and offer valuable insights for future researchers to enhance their study design. The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the conducting of online fieldwork for this research. Due to the time constraints of my doctoral study, I had to transition from my original plan of conducting fieldwork in person to an online format. While there are advantages to conducting interviews online, if given the opportunity to redo this research, I would consider incorporating additional research methods.

Personally, I believe that meeting and conversing with women in person as a social researcher would be beneficial for this research topic. It would allow for a deeper exploration of their living environment, while also providing the opportunity to experience different cultural

nuances across various cities in China. Methods such as visual methods or ethnography, which involve recording and displaying daily life and life stories through photographs or immersive observations, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of women's backgrounds, environments, and daily lives. Ethnographic approaches, for instance, could involve attending group matchmaking events in public to observe the interactions and behaviours of single women in the dating scene, and exploring how these women engage with men within the context of heterosexual blind dating. Visual ethnography could also be considered to document and present the dynamics of matchmaking events in China. In post-pandemic times, conducting fieldwork locally would facilitate the use of these methods, making the research outcomes more vivid and multidimensional.

Furthermore, the adoption of focus groups could provide insights into how women perceive singleness or heterosexual norms in Chinese society. Unlike individual interviews, focus groups offer a platform for women to explore and challenge the experiences and opinions of others while reflecting on their own perspectives (Matthews and Ross, 2014). By introducing a different method, the researcher would bring diverse focus and perspectives to the research topic.

CHAPTER 4 STATE, SOCIAL POLICY, AND SOCIAL EXCLUSIONS:

SINGLE WOMEN IN THE CHINESE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

This chapter explores the challenges faced by the single women in this study within the Chinese social and political landscape. It investigates how my participants comprehended the meaning of marriage, made life choices, and constructed their sense of self. By examining their experiences in light of the current social policies and laws, this chapter argues that state regulations and societal norms continue to significantly influence women's life decisions and self-perception. The single women in this research still tended to rely heavily on the state, family, and marriage to access social benefits. Despite the process of individualisation and societal transformation in China reducing dependence on the state, my participants were still expected to navigate their marriage choices within the prevailing political and social contexts.

Amidst societal pressures related to ageing and economic growth, my participants were expected to marry and bear children as a means of contributing to society. Conversely, they found themselves excluded from accessing resources and attaining equal social status. Consequently, it is contended that although women have become somewhat detached from the state's allocation system due to the impact of individualisation, they are still facing significant pressure to conform to mainstream expectations of early marriage and childbearing in order to secure their basic rights and social resources.

In this chapter, I delve into four key themes: women as career professionals within the context of women's employment policies and welfare; women as urban residents in light of urbanisation and household policies; women as family caregivers in an ageing society with family care responsibilities; and women as single individuals navigating family ideology and marriage policies. The table 1 below shows the structure and themes of this chapter.

Table 1: chapter 4 themes

Sections	Themes
4.1 Being career women: women's employment and welfare policies	4.1.1 Lacking maternity welfare and gender equality rights
	4.1.2 Lacking labour rights and personal freedom
	4.1.3 Marriage as the institutions for women's career risks
4.2 Being urban women: urbanisation and household policy	4.2.1 Urban policies and rights
	4.2.2 Family institution and urban resources
	4.2.3 Marriage as an economic contract
4.3 Being family carers: aging society and family care responsibility	4.3.1 Family care responsibility
	4.3.2 Marriage as a care system
4.4 Being single women: family ideology and marriage policy	4.4.1 Marriage policy and matchmaking events
	4.4.2 Singleness accountability
	4.4.3 Social exclusions

In Section 4.1, I explore the impact of employment and welfare policies on women. This section delves into the career challenges faced by my participants and analyse how these challenges had influenced their decisions and choices concerning their careers and marriages. Moving on to Section 4.2, I examine the impact of urban policies and available resources on women. Specifically, I focus on the experiences of my participants residing in large cities, their exclusion from urban resources, and the decisions they made to rely on marriage and family as

a means of accessing greater economic and urban benefits. Section 4.3 addresses the pressing issues of ageing and family care. Within the context of an incomplete welfare system, I investigate how marriage and family have been viewed as caregiving systems, providing women with a means to alleviate their family burdens and responsibilities. Finally, Section 4.4 delves into family ideology and marriage policies. Through exploring the experiences of my participants, I analyse their understanding of the meaning of marriage and the choices these single women made within the prevailing marriage ideology and policy framework.

By delving into these topics, this chapter provides an in-depth understanding of how employment policies, urbanisation, ageing, and family ideology impact single women. It sheds light on their decision-making processes and their interpretations of marriage within the broader social and policy contexts.

4.1 Being career women: women's employment and welfare policies

Different from their mothers' generation, my participants had got more educational opportunities and career options, as well as greater freedom to choose their ideal university, career, and lifestyle, which they had worked hard to pursue. However, they still faced challenges in making their own choices regarding marriage and having children, as reported by these women themselves. This was due to the lack of social welfare and to the persistent gender inequality in the workplace. Some participants working in private companies often reported a lack of labour rights and maternity welfare, which hindered their ability to have equal career

opportunities. Even the others employed in the state system experienced pressure to marry while being single in their work environment. Under the current social policies and welfare system, single women in this research tended to perceive the state system, marriage, and family as more stable institutions than their careers, of which perception arose from the need to mitigate life risks.

4.1.1 Lacking maternity welfare and gender equality rights

My participants reported that they had experienced gender inequality in their career development due to relevant social policies in China. With a good educational background, these participants were able to own more specialised careers that had previously been dominated by men in Chinese society, such as lawyers, doctors, lecturers, media reporters, and finance analysts, among others, and they also expressed a strong sense of satisfaction with their careers. However, they still reported having been unfairly treated and a lack of social welfare in their employment.

Some participants reported having experienced sexist questions and treatment from employers during the job recruitment process. Daisy, for example, reported that when she joined her company, she discovered that she and her female colleagues had better educational backgrounds and higher job interview and test scores compared with their male colleagues. However, the company continued to exhibit gender prejudice by favouring the hiring of more male employees, based on the perception that they were more *chi ku nai lao* (perseverant and hard-working).

Furthermore, some participants reported having encountered inappropriate personal questions during job interviews, such as enquiries about their marital status, plans for having children, or the number of children they intended to have in the future. For these single women, they would often face detailed questioning about their future plans. Some participants mentioned that they felt compelled to lie to employers about their family plans in order to secure their dream job. For instance, Cai stated that she lied to her employer, claiming that she had no immediate plans for marriage, and even after getting married, she would plan to adopt a DINK (Double Income, No Kids) lifestyle. These single women's potential value for jobs had been evaluated based on their life choices and family plans. Consequently, they had to devise their own "strategies" to increase their chances of securing opportunities. Due to the lack of social welfare and policy support, companies were reported to even prefer less competitive male employees in order to reduce costs.

Maternity leave served as another significant factor hindering these women from making their choices freely. Fang, an interviewee from a small private company, shared that women in her workplace were prohibited from taking maternity leave within the first two years of their employment. If they became pregnant during this period, the company might illegally terminate their employment. Even if they attempted to take legal action against the company, the compensation they would receive often failed to cover the legal expenses. Fang highlighted that many new female employees, including herself, felt apprehensive about the decision to start a

family. They carried a sense of guilt if they were to become pregnant after securing a new job. As she said,

> Fang: If I plan to have children soon after I joined this company, I will definitely be pressured to resign...Even if I plan to have children much later, they would still be unhappy and try to find another employee to replace me.

In Fang's experience, achieving a balance between career and children had been challenging due to a lack of welfare support. As discussed in Chapter 1, paid maternity leave policies have not been effectively implemented in reality. Consequently, when private companies lack government support and have to bear the welfare costs themselves, they often lose the incentive to provide adequate maternity benefits to their female employees. Under the current maternity policies, my participants bore the burdens and responsibilities of balancing between work and family without sufficient social support. Even for these career-oriented women, contemplating marriage and childbearing often meant making sacrifices in terms of their future career development.

Although participants faced a difficult dilemma between their current careers and their future family plans, they still expressed a willingness to prioritise having children and a family due to the "glass ceiling" in their field. They encountered numerous challenges in advancing to senior positions. Sulin, a lawyer with significant accomplishments in her field, shared that her

company displayed a preference for men in senior positions, while female employees, including herself, were relegated to junior roles:

> Sulin: I have been doing junior work for a few years, like sorting out documents or writing reports...When I saw all male colleagues got promoted...I asked my boss whether I could be possibly promoted, and he said women were more patient and careful so I was better for this junior job, but that was not my personality at all.

Liu's (2016) study, discussed in Chapter 1, revealed the presence of gender hegemony and bias in the Chinese work environment, underscoring the issue of sexual harassment within the workplace. However, this research reveals that women's unequal experiences had been further exacerbated by a lack of social support. This was particularly evident in the experiences of Sulin and Maluo, where female employees in their company faced challenges in competing with their male counterparts for career advancement, especially after reaching the age of 35. At this stage, women were often burdened with increased family responsibilities, further hindering their career progress. Maluo recounted her manager's "kind" reminder that if she planned to have children, she would be transferred to a department with reduced workload (and lower salary).

From these participants' experience, motherhood was not only perceived as a natural life path for them but it was also seen as a factor that inherently reduced their competitiveness in a workplace, while allowing them to focus on family and childcare. This created an endless cycle

for the women in this research – without comprehensive social welfare systems in place, they were expected by society to have children around the age of 35, resulting in their exclusion from important work assignments to mitigate the burden on companies. Consequently, they found it nearly impossible to secure promotions or assert their rights through legal support, leading many to forgo potential career opportunities. Thus, for these participants, choosing the path of motherhood rather than pursuing a successful career often appeared to be a more practical choice.

4.1.2 Lacking labour rights and personal freedom

Participants within the SES shared a distinct narrative compared with those from other sectors. In contrast to the private sector or overseas companies, the SES, as discussed in Chapter 1, heavily relies on state and party power. It provides employees with enhanced social welfare benefits and greater stability. Women in this research recognised the advantages of remaining within the SES, where they could rely on the state for improved social welfare support and protection of individual rights. Consequently, the SES was identified as a favourable career choice for them in recent years.

My participants employed within the SES had reported more positive experiences in terms of working conditions and social welfare. For instance, Ming, who worked in a government-owned company, shared that her company strictly adhered to a nine-to-five working schedule without any unpaid extra work, which differed from Jenny's schedule in a private company that

was from 9am to 10pm. Ming's company also offered extensive social benefits, including medical care, maternity welfare, and pensions, surpassing what many Chinese private companies would provide. However, it is worth noting that most employees within the SES were members of the CCP and were subject to stricter control and the Party disciplines, requiring them to disclose detailed family information to the Party, as reported by Ming.

However, the participants employed within the SES expressed satisfaction with their benefits and the stability of their positions. These jobs were still widely regarded as *tie fan wan* in Chinese society, ensuring that employment would remain secure until the employee's retirement without the risk of being made redundant. Ming, for instance, shared that the SES had provided her with a guaranteed work–life balance, enabling her to effectively manage both her career and family responsibilities, regardless of her decision to have children. This stands in contrast to Sulin's future plan, as she intended to switch to a less demanding job after getting married, so as to allow her to dedicate more time to her family and children. Betty, who worked in a central SOE, also highlighted the helpfulness of the state employment system in enabling women to balance their work and family lives, particularly if they wished to start a family:

> Betty: I saw my boss left work at around 4pm because she needed to pick her daughter up from nursery...it is fine for my company, we are not like those 996[2] companies.

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[2] The term "996" in China, as discussed in Chapter 1, is used to describe employees being exploited with a heavy workload and illegal work schedule, which is usually from 9am to 9pm, six days a week.

While another interviewee Jenny from a private company said:

> Jenny: It is impossible for women in my company to consider having children... I
> work till 8–9pm every day, and it is 10pm when I arrive home, I sometimes also
> work on Saturday...work has become my main lifestyle.

Unlike Betty and Ming, women such as Jenny and Sulin faced a different reality where their
employee rights had not been legally protected. If they wished to marry and have children, they
were compelled to seek less demanding jobs, which might limit their career advancement
prospects. Therefore, when comparing the state employment system with the private sector that
lacked legal protection or support from labour unions, participants unanimously agreed that the
SES enabled a superior career choice, despite the potential need to compromise certain political
freedoms.

However, despite Ming's satisfaction with the benefits of being within the SES, she also
highlighted the marital pressure she had experienced within this system. As a part of the SES
under the rule of the party, party members, including state employees, were reported to be
encouraged to "lead by example" and adhere to current policies by getting married and having
children promptly. Lily shared her mother's story within the same system, where Chinese party
members were always expected to comply with state policies, including the previous One-Child
Policy; disobeying these rules could result in job loss and the loss of the Party membership.

Even with the updated policy allowing three children, the pressure remained the same. Ming revealed that her company had held a high regard for married employees, providing them with more career opportunities and welfare support. In Ming's experience, this preference was based on the belief that married individuals have "greater family responsibilities and a more stable life status", while single individuals were perceived as "risky and unstable". Consequently, the SES was inclined to offer more support and benefits to married individuals in order to improve the marriage rate under the current policy. Ming mentioned that her company had previously provided short-term overseas job opportunities exclusively to married employees and she was denied this opportunity due to her single status:

Ming: Married people are regarded as loyal, reliable, and responsible...while single people, especially women, are regarded as "too risky to give important tasks to"; without family here, they are afraid that you might not want to come back once you go overseas.

Therefore, Ming remained determined to get married in the future, as one of the reasons was that being married while working in the SES could provide her with additional family benefits such as education and medical care. Betty also pointed out that employees, particularly those in the SES, were often encouraged to embrace a mainstream lifestyle, making it challenging to have a different status or lifestyle than others. Being single in her company had drawn attention from her manager, who enquired about her relationship status and whether she wanted to be

introduced to potential partners. Even for participants employed in the SES that offered more social welfare, they still needed to rely on marriage and family to "unlock" access to their own social benefits and career opportunities.

4.1.3 Marriage as institution for women's career risks

As discussed, these participants' opportunities in careers had always been influenced by family policies and a lack of social welfare. Due to gender discrimination and limited employment rights, these single women were often seen as future wives and mothers who will eventually leave their jobs, rather than independent career-oriented individuals capable of making their own life choices. My participants were faced with the decision to either rely on the state system and its policies to obtain more social support or depend on marriage and their husband as a crucial institution to mitigate individual risks. Consequently, when the state fell short in providing adequate resources, they still considered marriage as a more reliable choice than to pursue a successful career. They found solace in adopting the roles of wife and mother, which offered a greater sense of security, rather than solely identifying themselves as career-oriented individuals. This perception even influenced how women in this research interpreted the meaning of marriage and make decisions about their lives.

It has been reported that when these participants encountered institutional gender discrimination in their work environments and careers, marriage, for some of them, represented men's commitment and responsibility within a romantic relationship. They agreed that it should be

the man's role to propose and expected men to make promises and assume more responsibilities

to safeguard the relationship. Participants expressed that men generally face less discrimination

in their careers and have fewer obligations related to childbirth, so they should bear the

responsibility of protecting women from career risks. According to Summer, if a man only

wished to be together without getting married, he would be deemed "irresponsible" in her eyes.

Drawing from Summer's personal experience of living with her single mother, she always

perceived her father as an irresponsible individual who decided to divorce her mother and

"abandon" them. Fang mentioned that a man's marriage proposal signified a promise of loyalty

and established a binding trust, as men, being the breadwinners with greater economic power,

were more likely to engage in extramarital affairs. Heather also concurred that women were

often compelled to sacrifice their own careers and devote more time and effort to their children

and family. Consequently, in these women's opinions, women were considered more vulnerable

if their husband chose to end the relationship during pregnancy or motherhood. As Heather said,

> Heather: If I had already lost my opportunity to get promoted and chosen to focus
>
> more time on my family and children, and if my husband was not loyal to me, then
>
> I would have had nothing...so I feel that marriage is to protect women by
>
> emphasising men's loyalty and duty.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the implementation of the recent Anti-Domestic Violence Law

continues to face various challenges. Nevertheless, Sulin held a positive outlook regarding

women's rights within the institution of marriage and viewed it as a means to protect their rights. My participants believed that marriage and family instead of work could provide a more comprehensive safeguard for their rights. As she said,

> Sulin: New laws keep being revised to improve women's status, married women' rights have been getting much better than before, society has given more attention to those domestic violence issues nowadays...but you see, there are no laws protecting women in a work environment when they experience sexual harassment.

They reported experiencing significant gender discrimination in their careers, leading them to perceive marriage as an institution that provided a safety net against job loss and sexual harassment. These participants, who often faced prejudice in their career and societal pressure to marry and have children, viewed marriage with legal protection as having a more positive impact on their social status and self-identity. This suggested that the meaning attributed to marriage in terms of justice and protection might diminish as gender relations within marriage became more equal, the division of chores became more negotiable between spouses, and women gained greater rights and equality in their careers. Based on their experiences, my participants found it challenging to mitigate the risks of job loss and gender discrimination in their careers and fulfil their roles in the family without the legal recognition provided by marriage.

4.2 Being urban women: urbanisation and household policy

This section explores the opportunities and challenges faced by my participants who had relocated to urban areas within the context of modernisation and urbanisation. Against this social backdrop, they reported being encouraged to migrate from rural or small towns and settle in major cities across China. However, this transition entailed bidding farewell to familiar home environments and family networks, requiring them to establish new social connections in their new urban settings. For these women, becoming urban residents typically involved securing satisfying employment, forging new friendships, pursuing romantic relationships, and potentially purchasing their own home. Concurrently, they encountered new challenges related to adapting to urban policies and finding their place as a single woman in a bustling metropolis. Constructing a sense of identity as an urban single woman had proven to be a daunting task. Consequently, they planned to rely on marriage and family as means to access urban resources and improve their economic standing.

4.2.1 Urban policies and rights

Many participants had expressed that migrating to or residing in larger urban areas offers greater life opportunities. This encompassed not only education and job prospects but also dating and lifestyle possibilities. Consequently, they viewed living in urban areas as a pivotal life choice. In this research, which focused on urban career women with strong educational backgrounds, some participants were raised in major cities and continued to reside there, while others came

from smaller towns but have since settled in larger urban centres, establishing their "urban identity".

However, they had encountered various difficulties in accessing social resources as single individuals. As discussed in Chapter 1, China's urban *hukou* system, housing policies, and other pertinent urban regulations often prioritise or exclusively grant certain privileges to married urban citizens. This created challenges for my participants in urban areas who struggled to obtain an urban *hukou* and enjoy the same rights and benefits as married couples. Sulin and Jenny obtained their urban *hukou* through their master's degrees from prestigious universities, while Betty acquired hers by working in major cities for a minimum of 10 years. Sulin, who migrated from a small town in northern China, went to the city for pursuing higher education and greater career prospects. She expressed that achieving a successful career or renting a house in urban areas did not fully provide her with a sense of belonging; rather, it was the recognition from the government and the rights of being a "true urban citizen" that she was seeking. To expedite the acquisition of her urban *hukou*, Sulin opted for further education as a strategy to accumulate more points within the point-based system.

These participants relied on state social policies and government institutions to pursue a higher-quality urban life, even though the process can be time-consuming and demanding. For these urban migrants, obtaining a degree could help them access more resources and secure fundamental rights for genuine urban living. In contrast to women who were born in major

cities, these individuals faced an additional policy pressure: obtaining an urban *hukou* to fully integrate into their new city.

In comparison to other participants who obtained their *hukou* through academic achievements or long-term employment in major cities, Wendy faced more challenges. After completing her bachelor's degree in 2016, she intended to settle down in a large city without a local *hukou* and referred to herself as a "sojourner". Without an urban *hukou*, Wendy experienced limited job and social opportunities, as well as a lack of social rights. She thus never felt fully integrated into the city, as both the local culture and social policies favoured native residents or those with an urban *hukou*. Without a master's degree or a high-income job to accumulate more points for *hukou* application, many people around her suggested that she "get married soon or even marry someone from the local area". As discussed in Chapter 1, in some large cities, a married couple can accumulate additional points for their *hukou* application if one of them obtained their *hukou* ahead of the other. Wendy, unlike other women, expressed feeling pressure from her urban identity and the institution of marriage, which, for her, and her rights as an urban resident were interconnected.

As discussed in Chapter 1, to stabilise the housing market and discourage excessive real estate investment, the Chinese government has imposed restrictions, limiting property purchases in urban areas to individuals with an urban *hukou*. In this research, participants emphasised that buying a house held significant value for them as an investment and acquiring a well-located

property at a young age provided a sense of stability and the potential for wealth accumulation. Moreover, having been closely tied to their urban identity, many of them expressed that owning a house in a major city would offer them a genuine feeling of "home". It was through property ownership that they could truly experience a sense of belonging to their chosen city. Beyond providing a secure residence in these metropolises, owning a house served as evidence to themselves and others that they possessed the capability to establish a stable life as an educated and career-oriented individual in a thriving urban environment. Consequently, they aspired to purchase their own homes rather than renting in big cities. For instance, Betty, who graduated from a prestigious university and had been working in a prominent company in Beijing for over a decade, obtained her urban *hukou* and bought a house in 2019. For her, owning a house signified a permanent settlement in Beijing and she even identified herself as a true "Beijinger" by virtue of having her own property:

> Betty: Although I have been living here for over ten years, where I have a satisfying job, many friends...only until last year I bought my own house, I feel more secure, I'm a real Beijinger now, I'm not 'homeless' anymore.

In line with urbanisation, many participants had experienced an improvement in their quality of life by migrating to major cities and becoming homeowners. According to their accounts, the transition to an urban lifestyle had granted them increased freedom and a broader range of

choices, liberating them from the constraints of traditional culture and family norms prevalent in their hometowns.

Nevertheless, some participants shared that they continued to face new restrictions and limitations. Wendy, for instance, belonged to the group of urban women who lacked a prestigious university education or a successful career like Betty. Consequently, she encountered difficulties in acquiring her own property. As discussed in Chapter 1, unmarried women without an urban *hukou* like Wendy are required to pay income tax for an additional five to 10 years before becoming eligible to purchase their first house. This policy poses significant challenges for single individuals aspiring to become homeowners. Another interviewee, Maluo, shared her experience of attempting to purchase a house through the lottery system:

> Maluo: I have been moving to different cities and renting houses for many years, but I still haven't met the requirements of buying a house in any of these cities... Even in those 'lottery houses' where the prices are lower, whenever I applied and joined the buyers' queue, married couples with more savings are always at the front of the queue.

Maluo discovered an unspoken rule whereby individuals with stronger financial capacities, such as investors or married couples, were still given higher chances of winning in the lottery.

This exclusion of single people living in urban areas from social policies indicates that society continues to encourage or pressure individuals to conform to a conventional married lifestyle. Married couples held the highest social status, while these single women found themselves in a disadvantaged position. In these women's understanding, the Chinese concept of *jia* ("home") still primarily referred to a married couple, often with children, residing in their own property. These single women were viewed as individuals who do not urgently required a house. If they wished to purchase a property, they were compelled to consider marriage as a strategy to expedite their qualification or gain quicker access to their basic right of homeownership.

In addition to purchasing a house, owning a car was also seen as essential in bustling Chinese cities. Some participants had expressed that possessing a car, along with a house, symbolised an urban "middle-class identity" (Maluo). Particularly for these women with successful careers, having a car offered convenience for commuting, socialising with friends, and expanding their networks across different locations in large cities. Some had also shared that owning a car had given them a "sense of success and independence" (Guan). However, taking up the opportunity to drive their own car had been a challenging journey, similar to obtaining a *hukou* and buying a house. Guan revealed that she had been on the waiting list for over three years to obtain a Beijing license plate. Some participants had shared their experiences of having to wait several years or contemplate marriage as a means to expedite the process. They realised that marriage had transformed into something akin to a "passport" (Heather), as it significantly eased life within the current government and social policy landscape.

4.2.2 Family institution and urban resources

For these participants, obtaining their urban *hukou*, purchasing a house, and owning a car was beyond mere symbols of autonomy and success. These milestones were intertwined with marriage and family requirements. While urban policies prioritised married couples, there existed an unspoken rule for these single women that emphasised the importance of acquiring their own house and car as a means of improving their choices and status when selecting a partner and entering into marriage. As participants had reported, possessing an urban *hukou*, a car, and a house could ensure a higher-quality family life in urban settings.

Cai shared her experiences within the realm of matchmaking in large cities, where both men and women placed importance on whether their potential partner had an urban *hukou*, a car, or a house; those who could obtain these assets were perceived as more "valuable" in the marriage market. Betty, who diligently worked in Beijing for over a decade to purchase her own house, exuded confidence and a sense of security when discussing their pursuit of an ideal partner:

> Betty: I am capable of buying my own house so I hope my future husband will have
> a similar level of financial capability...even if he hasn't purchased a house yet, it is
> important that he possesses a comparable income or savings. As you know, living
> in Beijing is incredibly expensive.

As discussed in Chapter 1, purchasing a house can possibly reduce a single woman's desire and need for marriage, as the house provides a greater sense of security compared to marriage (Meng, 2021). However, in this study, even participants like Betty who had already bought their own house expressed a longing for marriage and even expected their partner to have similar financial capabilities. For Betty, owning a house served as her "marital capital", granting her increased confidence and expanding her options to find a more affluent partner. These well-educated participants not only strived to establish themselves in urban areas but also actively seek a partner, a marriage, and the associated social benefits and elevated social standing. Given China's blend of individualised (Yan, 2010b) and neoliberal characteristics (Harvey, 2007), these participants with strong career backgrounds must exert their own efforts and embrace mainstream lifestyles to enhance their social status and access greater social resources.

In contrast, there were other participants who continued to reside in large cities as new urban migrants, grappling with the dual burden of being unmarried and not having a house of their own. However, they shared that their parents had given them assurance that they would assist them in purchasing a house once they were married. Given that housing had emerged as a crucial economic foundation for couples embarking on their journey of family life, participants' parents were found to be willing to provide support for their daughters' *hun Hua* ("marital house"). As Lily said,

Lily: My parents have told me they could support me to buy my own *hun Hua*, so I

hope to find a partner then we can buy our own house...being single is not

impossible, but it is very hard, I think two people will make life easier.

From Lily's perspective, her urban life goal was to purchase a house alongside her future

husband (with support from his parents), while also receiving financial assistance from her own

parents to embark on married life. This well-thought-out life trajectory had made participants

realise the needed to depend on their own family for additional financial support in order to

commence wealth accumulation in large cities. Simultaneously, they tended to rely on their

husband and their marital family to sustain and complete this accumulation process. Given that

housing has been the most crucial investment for Chinese individuals over the past three

decades, these participants believed that relying on the institution of family can yield greater

benefits. Having been unmarried, they perceived themselves as being socially excluded from

accessing additional social resources and benefits. Consequently, they believed that by

perpetuating family and marital relationships, they could attain a more fulfilling life in these

large cities.

This sentiment was echoed by other participants hailing from small towns whose parents were

unable to offer financial support and whose current savings fell short of the requirements to

purchase their first house in large cities. In contrast to the aforementioned participants, these

women were more inclined to rely on marriage and family life as a means to establish

themselves in urban areas. They firmly believed that they could not attain a comfortable life in the city on their own and instead sought to find a husband with better economic means to provide them with a better life. For instance, Maluo expressed her aspiration to find a man capable of buying a house for their married life, while Cai even referred to the idea of her future husband purchasing a house as a form of *cai li* ("bride price"). My research further indicates that participants originating from traditional small towns or villages were more inclined to adhere to this tradition. In her experiences with matchmaking, Cai ensured that her dates possessed the means and willingness to acquire a house, as she strongly believed that her objective in pursuing marriage was to access greater social benefits.

4.2.3 Marriage as an economic contract

In the midst of their pursuit for greater urban and social resources, some participants viewed marriage as a legally binding contract and an economic partnership. They believed that marriage could offer women enhanced financial support and economic advantages. Their aspiration was to find a husband with a strong economic and financial background, relying on them to access more urban and social resources. For instance, Cai considered romance and love to be of lesser importance in a marriage, prioritising instead the economic condition as the foundation for a successful union. She had relinquished the hope of falling in love again and focused rather on selecting a partner with a sound economic background for marriage. Additionally, as she shared, her mother had emphasised that a wealthy husband and a valuable bride gift from his family would hold greater significance than anything else in a marriage. Influenced by these traditional

family values, Cai perceived marriage as a "card" or a tool to acquire additional social benefits. Betty, drawing from her parents' experiences, suggested that she might be inclined to maintain a marriage even in the face of infidelity. This was because the institution of marriage provided individuals with stable material benefits and social capital, allowing them to mitigate potential economic risks, even in the absence of love and romance.

According to Cherlin (2004), marriage serves as a means for individuals to make long-term financial investments together, particularly in acquiring homes and automobiles. This is especially relevant when couples anticipate the responsibilities and expenses associated with raising children, which demand significant time and effort. In this context, some participants perceived love and marriage as a more advantageous union compared to a relationship based solely on love or emotional connections. This perspective diverges from Giddens' (1992) argument on the primacy of pure love and modern intimate relationships.

Furthermore, despite having successful careers and stable incomes, some participants still expressed the expectation that their future husband would be the primary breadwinner for their family. Betty, for example, described her preferences for a potential partner. While she used to prioritise men with a similar educational background, she acknowledged that economic status underlies educational qualifications. She agreed that income and savings are more important than education background when considering an ideal partner. In her view, having a good

education and a well-paid job with a steady income meant her future husband possesses a similar or even a superior background.

Fang, was promoted to a managerial position in her company, yet she still desired a partner who was wealthier than herself, one who could cover all her shopping expenses. From her perspective, true love was demonstrated by a man's willingness to provide her with a higher quality of life. According to Fang, being financially well-off was more important than being kind to her. She argued that money held significance in a marriage, particularly when considering the future education of her children, which might involve private or overseas education. In her opinion, as women often bore more responsibility for childbirth and childcare, men should be responsible for earning more than women within the household.

Despite their strong educational and career backgrounds, these participants as new urban migrants did not enjoy a privileged status. As discussed, the current urban household policies consistently prioritise married couples, while Chinese marriage culture tend to favour individuals who own their own properties. As a result, these participants tended to perceive marriage and social resources as closely intertwined. For them, marriage and urban rights had become an intricate puzzle of cause and effect. The question of whether to marry a man with a solid economic background to easily access urban resources, or to invest significant efforts into obtaining urban living rights before finding an ideal partner, had posed a challenging dilemma for these single women in large cities.

4.3 Being family carers: ageing society and family care responsibility

In China, where a comprehensive welfare system is lacking and filial piety exerts significant pressure, women in this research expressed a sense of obligation to assume the primary responsibility for taking care of their elderly family members at home. Regardless of being the only child or having siblings, these participants often found themselves expected to fulfil the role of caregiver in their family, which had implications for their choices regarding where to live, their future lifestyle, as well as their plans for marriage and family. These women and their parents were reported to tend to rely on marriage and family as a means of providing care and welfare support.

4.3.1 Family care responsibility

As highlighted in Chapter 1, in cases where the state fails to provide comprehensive social and healthcare services for the elderly and private care options prove costly, families emerge as the primary welfare providers for older individuals. It has been reported that when these participants' parents could not afford private nursing homes and were unwilling to rely on unreliable public facilities, the responsibility of caring for their parents would fall upon these women. Lily, who identified herself as a filial person, shared the belief that placing elderly family members in public nursing homes would be irresponsible. Instead, she considered it her filial duty to personally care for her parents. Lily recounted her personal experience of visiting her grandfather in a local nursing home, which further solidified her conviction that it would

still be necessary for her to assume the role of caregiver rather than resorting to public nursing facilities:

> Lily: I saw an old man in a wheelchair, one nurse was really impatient to him, even shouted at him, while he was unable to talk back...I guess he didn't have his own family to take care of him... he looked miserable, I can't imagine my parents being treated like this... I don't have brothers or sisters, so only I can take care of them, I know it is a lot of pressure, but if I don't do it, I would feel bad as a filial person for being selfish.

As highlighted in Chapter 1, existing laws and policies place an expectation on family members to assume the responsibility of caring for the elderly, effectively substituting the role of the state. This is particularly challenging for the current generation of only children who lack siblings to share the caregiving burden. As discussed in Chapter 1, for the only-child generation, parents often have higher expectations of their children due to the significant investments made in their education. Consequently, these only children may experience a heightened sense of shame or guilt and may be unfairly labelled as "selfish or careless" if they are unable to meet these expectations. My participants reported experiencing heightened pressure as the sole individuals responsible for their parents' care, especially when compared with previous generations that benefited from larger families due to the baby boom. Lily's statement, "only I

can take care of them", exemplified her belief that she was the sole person capable of shouldering this responsibility.

Furthermore, in the previous section, I discussed the challenges faced by these participants who worked and resided in major cities far from their hometowns. One additional concern they had was the distance that might hinder frequent visits to their parents or their ability to respond promptly to urgent needs. Consequently, these women, having been burdened by these challenges, contemplated their own "strategies", and considered relying on marriage as a means of fulfilling their family care responsibilities. Daisy, for instance, expressed her intention to alleviate the burden of taking care of her parents by depending on her family and future husband. She believed that her husband could assist her when she was occupied with work. Daisy disclosed her plans to get married, as it would make problem-solving easier alongside her husband due to the weight of her family obligations. Ming also acknowledged the immense pressure she faced as the sole caregiver for her parents. However, she believed that if she married someone with a better financial situation, she could potentially afford higher quality nursing home facilities and more expensive health insurance for her parents in the future. Unfortunately, as a single woman with personal savings, this seemed nearly impossible for her to achieve. The absence of a comprehensive welfare system further amplified the pressure on these women to be the primary caretakers at home and drives them to consider marriage and family as a source of care and welfare, thereby alleviating their individual burdens. Even if these participants who were the only child in their own family, would eventually have to care

for four elderly parents after getting married, marriage and family still remained the foremost institutions for them to mitigate potential life risks.

However, it is worth noting that not only participants who were the only child experienced increased pressure regarding caregiving, other participants in this study, hailing from small towns and having siblings, also reported having been expected to assume the primary caregiving role within their families. As Fong (2002) found in her studies that compared with sons, daughters from previous generations were assumed not being able to support their parents once they got married. However, the women in this study shared that they were expected to shoulder more responsibilities than their brothers when it came to caring for their parents in the future. For instance, Maluo, as the eldest sister in her household, always bore the responsibility of assisting her parents in covering her younger brother's tuition fees and living expenses. Another participant, Tiana, had two brothers, one of whom had a disability. Despite the presence of her brothers, Tiana was still expected to contribute significantly to the family's welfare and alleviate her parents' burden. According to her, her family received limited support from the local government for her disabled brother, resulting in her parents and herself making considerable sacrifices to afford the costly treatment and care. This situation forced Tiana to experience tremendous pressure and burden due to her family circumstances. She even had to forsake her dream job abroad and end her relationship with a foreign partner in order to reside closer to her family and provide assistance. The weight of familial expectations made Tiana realise that she had limited autonomy in making choices for her own life. She understood that

her decisions were heavily influenced by the need to assume greater family responsibilities due to societal and familial pressures.

Moreover, both Tiana and Maluo expressed that they consistently faced higher expectations to reside in close proximity to their parents and care for the family, while their brothers were encouraged to freely pursue their careers and begin their lives in major cities. As discussed in Chapter 1, since the government permitted rural couples with only daughters to have the second child (Greenhalgh, 2008), rural daughters like Tiana and Maluo conveyed that they were not treated on an equal footing with their brothers, and they continued to experience gender inequality within their households. The participants originating from rural areas or small towns were still anticipated to shoulder the primary family responsibilities, irrespective of their achievements in their careers. They even sacrificed their own life plans and choices in order to fulfil the role of caregivers for their families, driven by the expectations rooted in traditional gender roles. In Tiana's case, she relinquished the opportunity to explore various possibilities in her career and relationships, and as a consequence, it had become increasingly challenging for her to secure an ideal job or enter into a satisfying marriage. These participants' choices had been constrained by societal expectations and compromised in light of their caregiving responsibilities.

4.3.2 Marriage as a care system

In the previous section, notwithstanding the pressure these participants faced as primary caregivers and in assuming family responsibilities, they did not opt to distance themselves from traditional family structures or customs. Instead, they felt compelled to continue relying on marriage and family to alleviate their familial burden. Due to the absence of a comprehensive welfare system in Chinese society, family has remained the principal institution for these women to mitigate individual burden and risks. Even though they acknowledged the pressure of assuming sole responsibility for family care, they expressed a preference for adhering to the same path in their later years. As the Chinese old idiom goes, *yang er fang lao* (raise their own children for their old age), some participants stated that, given the lack of alternative options, this had become their sole strategy for their elderly future. Betty revealed her plan of having her parents reside closer to her in Beijing when they grow older, enabling her to care for them more conveniently. Considering this as the customary practice of family care in Chinese society, Betty also expressed her desire to have her own children, as she wished to receive care in her own old age. Summer supported this notion and acknowledged that the age gap between parents and children put pressure on her to have children at an earlier stage. As she said,

> Summer: My mum was 30 years older than me, and she used to say she should have had me much earlier so that I could take care of her sooner...now I also feel I should have children sooner; otherwise, when I am 60, my children may have just started their first job.

Summer's statement highlighted how the pressures of ageing had translated into pressure to reproduce. She sensed an obligation to have children at the earliest opportunity in order to mitigate the risks associated with getting older. Furthermore, Summer expressed her wish for her children to exhibit filial piety and responsibility by personally taking care of her, rather than relying on public nursing homes. This sentiment underscored the fears and concerns these women had regarding the prospect of being placed in nursing homes, emphasising their strong determination to have their own families who would provide care for them.

Marriage held a similar significance for these women, as they expressed a willingness to find a stable and lifelong marital partner who could offer companionship and support in their old age. The notion of "care" within a marriage was frequently emphasised by these participants. Jenny, for instance, mentioned that getting married meant finding someone who would "care for you and also take care of you". Similarly, Ming associated the meaning of marriage with the concept of care, which even influenced her definition of a suitable partner. As she said,

> Ming: To judge whether he is a good person to be married to, you need to see whether he respects his parents, whether he is kind, careful, and can take care of people well.

Ming believed that if her prospective husband possessed strong caregiving capabilities, he would be considered a suitable partner capable of shouldering family responsibilities and

providing care. In this context, the meaning of marriage, family, and care intertwined, placing less emphasis on pure love and greater importance on companionship and support. Some particiapnts also expressed their apprehension about remaining single for the rest of their lives. According to their understanding, being single in later life would result in feelings of "loneliness, depression, and misery", aligning with societal and governmental perceptions of these single women. However, Maluo redefined the term "leftover women", asserting that being single in one's thirties is not as hopeless as the term implies; instead, she believed that being single in one's seventies would be more distressing, as "no one is willing to take care of them".

Moreover, amidst the pressures of ageing and government propaganda, some participants revealed that they were consistently encouraged to view themselves as part of a collective entity, encompassing family, society, and the state. They were urged to consider their contributions to these entities, rather than solely focusing on individualistic choices or personal desires. For instance, Ming believed that the success of the country was closely intertwined with personal achievements, echoing the sentiments expressed by China's leader, Xi Jinping, as discussed in Chapter 1. The destiny of both the family and the nation was reported to be closely connected. Consequently, they were encouraged by social media platforms to contemplate their personal role in society and contribute towards addressing the challenges associated with ageing.

Some women also expressed an essentialist perspective on marriage and the institution of family, viewing it as a natural system and an innate choice for individuals. Here, "natural"

implied that it was perceived as a normal and intrinsic choice for humans, particularly when a family had children. It is intriguing to observe that these participants connected their understanding of human history and social progress to their decisions regarding family and childbirth. They illuminated the social significance of reproduction as their contribution to Chinese society, thereby revealing the moral weight placed on their decisions regarding giving birth. Under the influence of heterosexual norms, Sulin expressed an essentialist viewpoint, emphasising the normalcy of heterosexual women assuming the societal responsibility of childbearing and contributing to societal development. As she said,

Sulin: I think human beings' ultimate goal is to reproduce...only by having the next generation, the whole society can develop...so marriage for me is a very natural path, I like children and family. If you are homosexual, or do not want to force yourself into this lifestyle, it is fine, but for heterosexual women like me, family and children are important.

In this ageing society, where the government fell short of basic welfare provision and social support for the elderly, a young woman found herself shouldering the heavy burden of caring for her parents; the sole institution she could rely on for assistance was her own husband and family. As she grew older, she also held the expectation that her own children would care for her. Family had assumed the role of the state in supporting individuals and offering them a

refuge from risks, of which the only requirement was to enter into a marriage and have their own children.

4.4 Being single women: family ideology and marriage policy

This section explores the current family ideology and marriage policies in China, within the context of numerous matchmaking events organised by authorities. my participants had reported a growing awareness of the importance of registering their heterosexual relationships through marriage, primarily due to the benefits associated with marriage and family. They expressed the necessity for laws and regulations to provide legal protection for love and marital relationships, as discussed in previous sections. Consequently, getting married was seen as a favourable choice for women in this research.

Furthermore, they had shared their experiences of shame, prejudice, and social stigma in their daily interactions as single individuals, and of institutional exclusions from social resources and benefits. Consequently, even if they were not currently prepared for a relationship or to marry someone suitable in the immediate future, they tended to believe that getting married would always be more advantageous to a woman's life than remaining single.

4.4.1 Marriage policy and matchmaking events

Some participants had expressed their views on marriage and the advantages it could bring, consistently agreeing that marital status was highly preferred in China. According to Jenny,

obtaining a marriage certificate would not have been important to her if she resided in a different country. However, she acknowledged the necessity of marriage in Chinese society to access social benefits. As she stated,

> Jenny: Getting married doesn't necessarily grant you additional benefits; it's more about not being single and not being excluded from certain fundamental rights.

For Jenny, getting married in China was not merely a choice but rather a compulsory act. This sentiment has been discussed in previous sections, as Sulin highlighted the benefits of marriage such as purchasing a car, buying a house, obtaining an urban *hukou*, and even securing concessional and prioritised access to quality education for children supported by the government. These advantages were inaccessible to single individuals. Guan's experience further illustrated the usefulness of marriage in the realm of children's education: a two-parent family background left a positive impression on elite private schools. Therefore, from these women's perspectives, getting married would not only provide them with tangible social resources but also enhance their social status and leave a more favourable impression on others in social settings.

As explored in Chapter 1, Chinese civil law has included a new regulation known as the "cooling-off period" which aimed at discouraging divorces. It is intriguing to examine how the particiapnts perceived these policies and how they might influence their decisions regarding

marriage. Sulin, who viewed marriage as a legal safeguard for romantic relationships, supported this policy. She believed it would "encourage individuals to carefully consider their decision before finalising a divorce", which she saw as beneficial for sustaining a relationship. These women also concurred that marriage carried more societal significance than just being a manifestation of love. They regarded marriage as a "rational and well-designed" institution that promoted the maintenance and stability of a loving partnership. In Sulin's perspective, the "cooling-off period" served as a valuable "stabiliser" or a "lock" for a romantic relationship, preventing hasty breakups commonly witnessed in purely romantic relationships. Sulin's own family experience had seen marriage saving her parents' relationship on multiple occasions, solidifying her belief that only marriage could ensure a long-term commitment in a legally recognised manner. Similarly, Tiana shared the viewpoint that if the institution of marriage had persisted throughout history, it must have been a "successful and secure system for protecting romantic relationships". This is different from what Giddens (1992) argues where pure love is based on voluntariness and free wills. Furthermore, aside from the legal protection it offers, the strength of marriage in maintaining a relationship lies in the power of public commitment in secular terms (Cherlin, 2004). When a marriage is endowed with positive social connotations while divorce is met with prejudice and stigma, the concept of marriage becomes distanced from the notions of pure love and trust.

According to these particiapnts' accounts, certain Chinese companies and local communities had been observed to organise group dating events with the aim of helping employees and

residents find potential marriage partners. However, these participants expressed negative opinions about such matchmaking events. Cai shared her experience participating in a group dating event organised by her company. During the event, individuals took turns conversing with each other for a limited amount of time and exchanged their dating profiles. Cai found that in such organised dating events, the experience felt more like a job interview. Everyone was focused on showcasing their success or future wealth, as these were seen as necessary criteria for a potentially successful marriage. She found it challenging to find a suitable partner in these events because she valued personality and genuine interaction more in a relationship. She expressed that these marriage markets aimed to manufacture as many couples as possible rather than allowing individuals to genuinely get to know their dates. As marriage transitioned from a personal and private love relationship to a publicly supported institution influenced by state ideology and policy, these participants' opinions and values regarding marriage had become more materialistic and practical. Cai believed that marriage carried a more practical significance, such as social status, income, background, and tangible benefits. Another interviewee, Daisy, shared her dating experience of meeting three different men over a weekend through social networks. However, after the meetings, she struggled to remember their faces and she did not have any satisfying interaction. Daisy felt that the pressure to marry quickly had led to a strong sense of self-doubt. She perceived herself as trying hard to "advertise" herself and felt objectified as a commodity in the marriage market:

Daisy: Every time I went on a date, I felt I was like a cabbage, with a price tag on

me, if they think the price is good, and that I also look good in their eyes, then they

will buy me.

Lily and Fang both shared that their company had received sponsorship from the local

government to offer courses exclusively for single individuals. These courses aimed to provide

guidance on enhancing skills and attractiveness, not only in terms of appearance and fashion

choices but also communication style. They compared the modern dating scene to a business

transaction, requiring them to possess proficient management, leadership, and communication

skills. The courses, training sessions, and advice provided to women all conveyed the message

that it was imperative for them to adopt strategies and address their "single problem" or to bear

the responsibility of being excluded by society as a whole. As Fang said,

Fang: Those experts always tell you if you fail your dating, it means this man might

be too good for you, so you'll need compromise and get married to a 'lower-level'

guy.

According to these women's experiences, the prevailing circumstances required these women

to actively employ strategies to secure marriage and form their own families, often necessitating

a lowering of expectations when it came to potential partners. With the prevailing family

ideology and adherence to traditional gender roles, the focus had shifted away from relationship

satisfaction; instead, a strong emphasis was placed on increasing marriage rates. These participants were expected to exert effort in maintaining family and societal harmony, even if their partner might not be ideal. Existing marriage policies expect women to contribute to the overall development of society, often at the expense of individual preferences, interests, or choices. Consequently, these particiapnts were encouraged to take action and adopt strategies to find suitable partners, actively participating in matchmaking events, and potentially compromising their own preferences in order to conform to the norms of mainstream family life.

4.4.2 Singleness accountability

According to these participants, they faced questions and blame for their single status. In their experience, society scrutinised and held single women accountable for leading what was perceived as an "unfortunate" single life, placing the burden on women to constantly explain and justify their personal choices. Betty, for instance, had encountered persistent enquiries about her relationship status, constantly been pushed to provide justification for her perceived deficit identity. Hua, on the other hand, wished there were more care, patience, and understanding from society, as she felt that her single status had negatively impacted how her friends and colleagues perceived her. Hua found it challenging to be treated with equality and respect in her daily life, often having to offer unnecessary explanations to counter societal biases:

Hua: They questioned you and asked you why, I was thinking I should give a good answer, but actually they didn't really care about your answer at all...no matter what answers I give, they would just say "you must be picky". Nobody would be like you (the researcher) right now, listening to me telling my life stories for a few hours.

Hua strongly believed that she shouldn't have borne the blame for her single status. She pointed out that the marriage market in China did not treat women equally, and the societal expectations placed on women to enter into a marriage and start a family at an early stage further compounded the issue. These women faced accusations of being "too picky" or are stigmatised with terms like "leftover" or "princess sickness". They were burdened with the social responsibility of constructing successful heterosexual relationships in their personal lives.

Some participants provided diverse perspectives when it came to being labelled as "picky". Heather, for example, had faced criticism for being single for an extended period of time, yet she remained resolute in her decision not to settle for an unsatisfactory marriage. She firmly believed that she deserved a partner who is better suited for her and placed great importance on her own efforts in finding a relationship that brings genuine fulfilment. Fang rejected the idea that being "picky" was the cause of her single status, emphasising that personal choice should not to be blamed. The participants encountered increasing challenges in finding fulfilling relationships because they prioritised their own emotions and needed more than ever before.

Regardless of whether they accepted the "picky" label or not, these women demonstrated a strong sense of self-belief, expressing their own choices, preferences, and self-worth:

> Heather: Why can't I be picky? I mean, I studied hard, worked hard to finally get to my position now, if I do want a better man, why do I bother compromising?

> Fang: Actually I'm not picky at all, I just want to find a normal man who can have a real communication with me, and whom I enjoy talking to, but there is no man like this...nowadays many men are very disappointing.

In addition to facing judgment and blame, they have shared that deviating from the mainstream lifestyle had led to derogatory labels such as "losers" or "leftover", placing the burden on them to resolve their "singleness problem". From a young age, these participants had been expected to pursue education and careers, manage their personal relationships, and view marriage and family as obligatory choices. They were required to diligently balance work and personal life, cultivate a strong sense of independence and autonomy, and carefully plan for their future marriage and partner selection. For instance, Tiana acknowledged self-blame for not having a boyfriend, attributing it to her excessive focus on her career over the past decade. Betty, as a successful career woman, had set goals for herself to find a boyfriend. She aimed to avoid feelings of failure by not having successful relationships or missing her optimal time to marry.

She also believed that she had achieved significant accomplishments in her career, and she held herself accountable to avoid "mistakes or failures" in her personal life as well:

> Betty: I recently started to lose weight again trying to look better not only for men but also for myself...also I plan to go out more and social with people more to increase my chances of meeting better people...I should try harder...I was a bit shy.

These empowered career women had been encouraged to skilfully navigate relationships and advised to take personal responsibility for being more proactive. Betty, in particular, tended to view her inability to find a boyfriend as her own problem. Consequently, she implemented strategies for self-management, considering it her own responsibility. She also attributed her failure to find suitable partners to not socialise enough and to her reserved personality. In taking on all the blame from society, Betty planned to shoulder the pressure and make herself more active and confident in order to attract men.

As discussed in Chapter 2, both Western and Chinese societies had employed slogans such as "self-improvement" to pressure these empowered women into self-regulation and self-discipline, encouraging them to be perfect sexual agents solely for themselves. However, this notion of autonomy, choice, and self-improvement coexisted with surveillance, discipline, and regulation. Women in this research were expected to become active planners and make the "right choice"; they would otherwise be questioned and blamed. On one hand, these self-

improvement strategies were designed within the framework of heteronormativity and patriarchal rules. On the other hand, heteronormativity perceived being single as single women's own fault, even though it should not have been regarded as anyone's "fault" or "responsibility".

4.4.3 Social exclusions

The pressure on these single women to take personal responsibility for finding a suitable partner, as discussed in the last section, was rooted in post-feminist and neoliberal ideologies, which demanded that women be self-reliant in their pursuit of relationships. However, these participants had also shared their experiences of marginalisation, prejudice, and stigma. They found themselves engaged in conversations centred around their marital status. The local government's encouragement for young people to marry early and start a family had transformed marriage and family into public topics that are difficult to avoid. Singleness, within the Chinese public discourse, is treated as a "problem", causing discussions about marriage to be seen as acts of "help, care, and support" rather than an invasion of privacy.

My participants expressed a sense of inadequacy or incompleteness in their identity due to their unmarried status, leading to ambivalence and uncertainty about who they were. Singleness had become the dominant identity for these participants, carrying connotations of shame, stigma, and a loss of prestige. Betty shared her anxiety when being questioned about her marital status, feeling that avoiding the question would create an awkward situation, while admitting to being

single perceived as shameful. Her family, friends, colleagues, and supervisors had enquired about her relationship status at some point. Fang also experienced being pressured by her sister-in-law to participate in dating events, even when she was not interested. These women's narratives revealed how they constructed their identities in relation to heterosexual norms and the ways in which they have been marginalised by these norms. Gender inequalities compelled these women to define their "complete" social identity by relying on men and the institution of family, pressuring them to seek fulfilment through romantic relationships and marriage. Consequently, these participants had experienced a conflict between their autonomous sense of self and their perceived "incomplete" self within their social connections, leading to a heightened sense of isolation from the mainstream coupled group.

Another concern that these participants faced was the feeling of being excluded from the social circle of their coupled or married friends. During the interviews, Betty and Lily both expressed the difficulty they encountered in connecting with their coupled friends as single women. Betty found it challenging to meet up with friends who had boyfriends or were married because they were always preoccupied with dating, family responsibilities, or socialising with other couples. Consequently, Betty felt a growing distance between herself and her old friends. Similarly, Lily noticed that some of her close friends had become more focused on establishing new relationships with other couples. These friends seemed to prioritise befriending women who were wives or mothers and often engaged in discussions about relationships or married life, making Lily feel unwelcome in those settings. While Lily acknowledged that this change was

inevitable and understood the importance of forming friendships based on shared interests and lifestyles, she found it intriguing that she had developed a strong independent identity through this experience. She agreed that individuals should have their own separate lives, distinct from their family or romantic relationships:

> Lily: I have never really thought that being a singleton would be a problem until my friends reminded me of this...I don't really like it when all my friends keep talking about their story as a wife or mother...doing house chores, taking care of babies, arguing with their husband blah blah... I cannot join in their topic...I feel that career, friendships, or other lifestyles are not in their life anymore.

The point at which these participants' female friends began to shape their identity as wives or mothers could lead to feelings of increased isolation, often characterised by the derogatory term "leftover". In a patriarchal society, gender inequality had placed pressure on these women to define their social identity as being dependent on men and family. Society often encouraged or even compelled these women to seek validation and self-discovery primarily through sexual relationships and marriage.

Social exclusion was not solely confined to personal and social spheres, but could also be manifested at an institutional level. Due to the limited access to information available to these participants online, only a small proportion had come to recognise their fundamental human

rights as single women or single mothers. In an effort to promote marriage and traditional family structures, the Internet has censored information concerning egg freezing and lifestyle choices for single women. This lack of institutional support had also left Summer disheartened, as she had contemplated the prospect of becoming a single mother. Having grown up in a single-parent household since the age of five, Summer primarily spent time with her mother and her mother's friends. Influenced by her mother's experiences, she no longer viewed reliance on men as a prerequisite for starting a family; she believed that she too could become a single mother if she failed to find a suitable partner. For her, the essence of family laid in the bond between a mother and her children. Moreover, her time living abroad had exposed her to more liberal attitudes regarding women's lifestyles. Having resided in Germany for seven years, Summer realised that single women could lead fulfilling lives rather than enduring a lifetime of unhappiness. Her experiences in Western countries bolstered her confidence in finding happiness without the need for marriage. However, upon returning to China, she discovered that the prevailing social environment would hinder her pursuit of the ideal lifestyle she desired. Similar to her mother's generation, the local government still failed to provide welfare and insurance coverage for single women and mothers; only married mothers were eligible to receive social benefits for themselves and their children. This experience prompted Summer to reassess her rights and choices as a single woman in China:

Summer: If I couldn't find a partner here or be a single mother in the end, I might go back (immigrate) to Germany, and think about another life possibility.

It was highlighted in Chapter 1 that women face restrictions in accessing in vitro fertilisation and egg freezing. Consequently, these participants expressed a sense of hopelessness as they saw their family planning options being limited to getting married. Some had heard that travelling to other countries could enable them to freeze their eggs, and they actively began making relevant plans. Despite the associated expenses of travel, accommodation, and medical costs, they still expressed a preference for having more choices. Fang and Summer mentioned the potential of freezing eggs or acquiring sperm from overseas sources in order to avoid feeling pressured into marriage or rushed family planning. However, it should be noted that only educated women or those who have lived abroad were able to access such information, and only women with sufficient income had the luxury of considering various options. For less educated women or those with lower incomes, realising their basic rights within the Chinese society becomes a challenging endeavour.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the Chinese government has reinforced the ideology of heterosexual families and traditional gender roles in order to exert pressure on women to enter into marriage at an early stage. With an inadequate welfare and support system in place, women in this research bore the heavy burden of managing and regulating their life choices and lifestyles. Furthermore, the incomplete legal framework posed challenges for single women in asserting their individual rights. In Chinese society, getting married has become the predominant means for many women to access additional social resources.

4.5 Conclusion

To summarise, this chapter has delved into how single women navigate the significance of marriage, make life choices, and construct their sense of self within the existing social policies and welfare system in China. The chapter explored my participants' perspectives and choices across four key areas: employment and career support for women, urbanisation and household policies, the challenges of an ageing society and family care responsibilities, and the influence of family ideology and marriage policies. It also examined how they perceive themselves in various roles, including career professionals, urban dwellers, family caregivers, and single individuals.

Given the current social policies and legal framework, where a comprehensive welfare system for women is lacking, marriage and family have emerged as more dependable and stable institutions for mitigating personal risks. The state's emphasis on family and marriage policies has placed additional pressure on women to prioritise domestic responsibilities over their careers. The chapter has argued that state regulations and societal norms continue to significantly influence single women's life decisions and self-perception. The single women in this research still heavily tended to rely on the state, family, and marriage to access social benefits. These single women perceiving marriage as a pragmatic and materialistic concept diverges from Giddens's (1992) notion of pure love; in their eyes, marriage offers practical

benefits and access to a wider range of social resources in Chinese society, making it a desirable

path to pursue and focus on.

CHAPTER 5 FAMILY, CULTURE, AND PARENTAL PRESSURE:

SINGLE WOMEN IN THE CHINESE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

This chapter explores the ways in which the single women in this study navigated their self-identity and life choices within the context of their families and the broader Chinese social and cultural environment. By examining my participants interactions with their families, I can gain insights into how they confronted, responded to, and negotiated the conflicts arising from their surroundings. Through an analysis of their interactions with their parents and extended family, this chapter argues that family ideology and parental pressure continue to limit these single women's decisions regarding marriage, partners, and self-identity.

The women in this research reported having received support from their parents in terms of education and career development. However, they had also received traditional notions of love and sexuality education from their parents, leading them to perceive marriage as the ultimate goal in their relationships. Having been carrying the burden of parental expectations, these women experienced a profound sense of failure when remaining unmarried. As a result, they tended to heed their parents' advice and make compromises to expedite marriage. Despite having gained more resources and opportunities through their education and career pursuits, these participants found themselves relying on the institution of family rather than making independent decisions.

Thus, this chapter argues that while China's modernisation granted women greater autonomy in education and career development, the influence of family ideology and filial traditions has filled the void left by the state. Ultimately, these factors continued to exert a significant traditional impact on the life choices of the women in this research, underscoring the enduring power of family dynamics in shaping their decisions.

In this chapter, I delve into five key themes: parental support, the lack of love education, the identity of being an unmarried daughter, parental expectations, and parental interference. In Section 5.1, I explore how my participants benefited from privileged educational resources and yet were simultaneously pressured by their parents to translate their educational background into a competitive advantage in the marriage market. In Section 5.2, I delve into the expectations placed on women to conform to the traditional notion of "good girls" and how this regulation of their morality within the context of marriage ideology limited their opportunities to explore love and dating, consequently influencing their perceptions and understanding of love and marriage later in life. Moving on to Section 5.3, I examine how these accomplished women were often perceived as "failed daughters" due to their unmarried status in the eyes of their parents. I will explore how they navigated the complexities of constructing a conflicted sense of self within the framework of familial ideology. In Section 5.4, I delve into the expectations imposed upon my participants as filial daughters, where they were expected to fulfil the roles as wives and mothers based on their parents' aspirations. I discuss how they either complied, compromised, or negotiated with their parents' opinions, as well as the significant influence of

parental expectations and family ideology on their choices and decisions regarding family life. Finally, in Section 5.5, I focus on the ways in which parents interfered with women's choices in terms of partners and marriage. I examine how women in this research navigated these conflicts and made "suitable" choices shouldering the weight of parental expectations. The table 2 below shows the structure and themes of this chapter.

Table 2: chapter 5 themes

Sections	Themes
5.1 Being "privileged daughters": women's educational background as marital capital	5.1.1 Parental investment in education
	5.1.2 Transition from education to marriage
	5.1.3 Education as marital capital
5.2 Being "good girls": the lack of love or sex education from traditional family	5.2.1 Precocious love in early years
	5.2.2 Lacking love experience
	5.2.3 Women's premarital chastity
5.3 Being "failed daughters": succeeding in career but remaining "unmarried"	5.3.1 Flawed identity as an unmarried daughter
	5.3.2 Duality of self in extended family
	5.3.3 Self-identity in wider community
5.4 Being "filial daughters": choosing marriage under parental expectation	5.4.1 Parental pressure
	5.4.2 Natural choices for women
	5.4.3 Connection with mother
	5.4.4 Marriage without children
5.5 Making suitable choices: parents' interference in selection of partner	5.5.1 Matchmaking with parental help
	5.5.2 Interference in partner selection
	5.5.3 Interference in relationship decision

5.1 Being "privileged daughters": women's educational background as marital capital

This section discusses that in the context of modernisation and social transformation, my participants reported that they had gained more equal education and career opportunities compared with the previous generation. However, parents were reported to have viewed

education as a means of social advancement for the entire family, as well as the primary way for their daughters to acquire "marital capital" when seeking a husband. Although many participants were reported to have focused solely on their studies during their early years, they were not expected to pursue higher degrees in their twenties but to find a partner and marry at an early age. Their parents placed excessive emphasis on the practicality of women's education in the marriage market, which had had an impact on how these women perceived the value of their education in the marriage market and how they would choose an ideal partner later in life.

5.1.1 Parental investment in education

In Chapter 1, it has been discussed that Chinese women of this one-child generation experience a privileged status in their education due to significant parental investments and government-funded schooling. As the sole daughters in their families, women shoulder the responsibility of improving their family's quality of life through study diligently. In this research, participants' early lives were meticulously structured with numerous extracurricular activities, supported by financial assistance for studying abroad. These efforts aimed to seize new opportunities in this transformative era.

My participants received financial support from their parents and were expected to attend prestigious universities and pursue advanced degrees. Heather, Daisy, and Lily received substantial financial assistance from an early age, allowing them to attend private schools and pursue higher education abroad for a master's or doctoral degree. Lily, for example, credited

her parents' significant financial support for her successful educational and career progression after obtaining a doctoral degree. Other participants like Jenny, Wendy, and Summer couldn't afford private schools but relied on social connections to enrol in top local public schools. They were encouraged to pursue higher education in affordable public universities in China or Western countries. Wendy's parents supported her extracurricular modules, leading to academic achievements and pride in piano and swimming competitions.

Furthermore, as mentioned in Chapter 1, there is a significant correlation emerged between the participants' parents' experience of redundancy during the 1990s and the substantial investment made in their daughters' education. Wendy and Jenny, both hailing from north-eastern cities, recalled their parents enduring job layoffs resulting from the reforms in state-owned enterprises during their childhood. Consequently, their families underwent a period of financial hardship, compelling their parents to place tremendous emphasis on prioritising education as the paramount aspect of their lives. This phenomenon also reflected the parents' desire, stemming from their own encounter with redundancy, to transmit their cultural capital and assist their children in accumulating additional resources to secure and enhance the family's social standing. As a result, irrespective of gender, their parents made significant investment in the education of their only child. As Jenny said,

> Jenny: My parents didn't want me to repeat their mistakes, they said they had been "abandoned" because they didn't have a good degree...They said education was the

only way for me to have a good future...I understand that, because they only have

one daughter, I'm the only hope for them.

Even among these participants who were born in small towns and had brothers, some managed to secure opportunities to study or work overseas through hard work in their early years. Take Maluo and Tiana as examples, despite their families' inability to afford overseas education, Maluo shared that her family preferred her to earn money to support her younger brother's education. Although Chapter 1 argues that Chinese women born into rural families with brothers are not treated equally compared to their urban counterparts, whose parents would invest heavily in their education, the women in this research still received support from their parents for their education and careers to alleviate the family's financial burdens. Their commendable academic performance earned them opportunities to receive public school education and government funding to pursue studies or work abroad, which, in turn, opened doors to potentially rewarding career prospects.

5.1.2 Transition from education to marriage

In addition to desiring a stable career and a promising future, my participants reported that their parents also had expected them to find an ideal partner through their education. In some cases, education in Chinese culture serves as a form of cultural or "marital capital" (To, 2015), enhancing a woman's attractiveness in the marriage market. Interestingly, this research reveals that the women in this research experienced a conflict between education and marriage later in

life. In this research, despite the encouragement for women to study diligently during their early years, there had been a discouragement towards their pursuit of further education for research degrees, particularly from parents who have daughters rather than sons, education held more weight as marital capital than as a guarantee for a successful career. The traditional Chinese saying "Marrying well is better than studying well" reflects the notion that highly educated women may not be appealing to potential suitors because they are expected to conform to traditional gender roles within a marriage. It is important to note that a woman's social status and quality of life are still largely determined by her marital relationship rather than her educational or career accomplishments.

Cai shared her conflicting experience regarding her education journey. While her parents initially encouraged her to study hard in her early years for a better future, they later pressured her in her twenties to prioritise marriage preparation over the pursuit of higher degrees. Similar to Cai, Guan also faced a comparable situation. Both were not supported by their parents to pursue a doctoral degree overseas as their parents believed it wouldn't help them find a spouse. Cai expressed confusion and doubt about her effort put into studying in the past due to this sudden change in her parents' attitude. She felt that her life choices became more influenced by gender expectations in her twenties, which caused anxiety about meeting her parents' expectations. As Cai said,

Cai: when I was at school, my parents said if I got good grades and a degree, I would have a happier and more successful life...but a few years ago, I wanted to study a doctoral degree, they told me that there was no need to study so hard as a woman...it seems having a husband is regarded more as 'happier and successful life' in their eyes, but this is not what I'm pursuing.

To these participants, the early support from their parents in their education journey had been a strong motivation for them to pursue their educational aspirations. However, they later discovered that their parents' aspirations for a "successful future" and a "happier life" encompassed not only a thriving career but also a spouse with a similar educational background. It was reported that parents had hoped the educational accomplishments of their daughters would enhance their chances of attracting more desirable partners.

Despite their parents' hope, these participants in their twenties struggled to smoothly transition into the "next stage" or to promptly leverage their educational background as marital capital as their parents had expected. Balancing the opportunities offered by the modernisation of Chinese society and parental expectations for educational achievements, these "privileged women" had gained autonomy in their career paths but still felt confined by their identity as daughters who have received substantial parental investment and are expected to marry soon. They revealed that they dedicated their youth to academic pursuits, considering education as the central aspect of their lives. However, they witnessed a sudden shift in their parents' attitudes, which

demanded them to alter their dreams, goals, and the overall lifestyle. Cai showed resistance towards her parents' opinions.

Ming, like Cai, underwent a sudden shift of experiencing the pressures of education and career to the pressure to marry, influenced by her parents. After receiving university funding for studying her master's degree in the US, she found herself being urged by her parents to find a partner once she started working. Despite not having entered any relationships during her twenties as she prioritised education, Ming now saw marriage as her primary task. Interestingly, unlike Cai's frustration, Ming felt confident that her educational background would help her find a suitable partner. Her goal was to marry a man with a similar background. Similarly, Heather shared this optimistic attitude, believing that her chances of finding an ideal partner had increased. These participants had responded positively to their parents' expectations and had chosen to follow the life path set for them. They had completed the first stage of their lives focused on education and career, and now their second task was to leverage their educational background as marital capital and marry as their parents had expected. Their privileged backgrounds continued to provide them advantages in the marriage market.

5.1.3 Education as marital capital

These participants' early education experiences within their families had significantly shaped their understanding of partner selection and their perceptions of a successful marriage. They shared the belief that individuals with a good educational and family background deserved a

satisfying partner and a fulfilling marital life. They aspired to find partners who shared similar backgrounds. This perspective aligned with the traditional Chinese saying: *men dang hu dui* (compatible family backgrounds), which emphasises the importance of marrying someone of equal social status. Some participants, such as Daisy, might face challenges entering into a relationship due to a lack of love and relationship experience. However, other participants, such as Ming and Heather, adopted a positive and proud attitude. They believed that their effort put into years of education and the valuable educational background they had would yield favourable outcomes in the Chinese marriage market.

This research suggests that a person's educational background (supported by their family background), career, and income plays a significant role in determining their potential as a suitable partner. According to some participants, an ideal partner was typically expected to possess a good educational background, a favourable family background, and a stable job. This preference is not unique to this research but can also be observed in other Asian countries like Japan during the 1980s' economic boom, where women sought partners with the "three high" qualities (Ogura, 2003): high educational level, high income, and tall stature. In China, there has been a popular term in the past decade defining an attractive and desirable man as *gao fu shuai* ("tall, rich, and handsome"), representing the ideal partner image for many Chinese women. This image reflects a value placed on material and social benefits derived from a marital relationship, rather than love, trust, and equality in a modern intimate partnership. It also shed light on how some participants perceived their ideal relationships. Having

accumulated significant resources and prioritised their studies and career achievements, some

participants reported having agreed with their parents' views that placed importance on finding

a partner with a similar background and social status:

Sulin: After I got my offer from this top [name] university, my mum kept asking

me to find a boyfriend from the same university...I also felt that I shouldn't have

missed this best opportunity, there is no other platform better than this.

Betty: I mean, I have a good income, so my partner should at least earn more than

me, if he doesn't have a good income, he should own a house...he should have

similar family and educational backgrounds from 211 or 985[3].

Some participants agreed that having a good educational and career background was crucial for

finding an ideal partner and achieving an ideal life. They believed that their long-term

dedication to their studies should be rewarded, and that only men with similar or superior

backgrounds would make a suitable match for them. For example, Betty, a migrant resident of

Beijing who hailed from a small town, graduated from a prestigious university in Beijing and

recently purchased her own house in the city. She hoped to find someone who has achieved a

similar level of success. Both education and marriage were seen as important means to attain

higher social status, with education being viewed as the initial step towards achieving these

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[3] "211" and "985" are both a list of high-level universities according to the education projects initiated by the Ministry of Education of China, with the intent of raising research standards of high-level universities. Similar to the Russell Group in the UK.

goals. Based on the experiences shared by Betty and Sulin, they both agreed that their educational background had provided them with a platform to potentially find an ideal partner.

After having devoted significant time and effort to their studies supported heavily by their parents, my participants anticipated the arrival of a suitable partner in their lives. As they had reached a turning point where their focus shifted from education and career to marriage and family, some participants expressed concerns, anxiety, or pressure, while others displayed more positive attitudes due to their privileged background. Those who lacked dating experience during their youth due to the demands of their studies found themselves thrust into a competitive marriage market as they had reached a certain age. It is noteworthy that they placed greater emphasis on what they desired in a marriage rather than how they felt in relationships. On one hand, they took pride in their accomplishments and a sense of self stemming from their strong educational backgrounds. On the other hand, with limited dating experience, they simply defined a "good partner" as someone with a similar educational and financial background.

In line with the expectations of both these participants and their parents, the culmination of their efforts in acquiring a good education and building successful careers was believed to be the transition into the second stage of life, where they sought to leverage their educational background for a good marriage. However, it remains uncertain whether these participants were truly prepared for this next phase. The heavy academic workload and the immense pressure to meet their parents' expectations during their formative years had led them to prioritise fulfilling

their parents' desires rather than focusing on their own feelings and preferences. Throughout their youth, their personal emotions in romantic relationships had been overlooked by their parents, and their understanding of marriage had been influenced by traditional values and familial ideologies.

5.2 Being "good girls": the lack of love or sex education from traditional family

Despite having been encouraged by their parents to pursue a good education in anticipation of finding a suitable partner, the participants lacked sufficient support from schools and parents when it comes to love and sex education during their formative years. It was revealed that they had limited opportunities to explore romantic relationships and dating, which resulted in confusion regarding their understanding of love and marriage later in life. Through an examination of these participants' early experiences within their families, this research highlights the enduring influence of traditional values and family ideology, which shaped these single women's behaviours, perspectives, and values regarding love and relationships.

5.2.1 Precocious love in early years

According to the accounts of some participants, both schools and parents had failed to provide them with adequate sex and love education during their early years. They reported that love experiences were strictly discouraged by their parents and schools, where any form of romantic involvement was deemed taboo in the eyes of parents and teachers. Western societies may refer

to teenage love as "puppy love", but in China, it is labelled as *zao lian* (precocious love relationships), carrying a negative connotation of an inappropriate and immature relationship. Precocious love is considered abnormal, incorrect, and immature in the eyes of parents; it was even reported that parents and schools might have imposed punishment if the participants' behaviour was deemed to have crossed certain boundaries. For instance, Hua shared that her parents believed that engaging in precocious love would negatively impact her academic performance, prompting them to instruct her to avoid close friendships or relationships with boys during her school years. As she remembered,

Hua: The boy I liked in my middle school...we sent messages to each other a lot...but my mum was angry when she found out, she asked me not to talk to him too much, or develop "something further"...she also took my phone away, because I should focus on my study...looking back, I just feel that she had destroyed many of my friendships...for a long time, I had been confused about how to make friends with boys, or even date them.

According to Hua, the prohibition on love and relationships during her teenage years only resulted in feelings of shame and possibly contributed to an unhealthy perspective on love and sexuality in her future relationships. She also mentioned that this early experience had made it challenging for her to interact naturally with boys or to go on a date during her time at university. Lily shared a similar experience, where she had a secret romantic relationship in high school,

which was later discovered by school teachers, leading to criticism and punishment from her parents. Consequently, she internalised the belief that love and relationships were sources of shame and even deemed them criminal acts. As Gregory (2018) states, shame involves a negative evaluation of one's core identity based on perceived societal expectations, causing the shamed individual to feel inadequate. For an extended period, Lily had been struggling to develop a normal and healthy perspective on dating and relationships, which subsequently posed numerous difficulties in her romantic endeavours later on.

Heather, had a somewhat different experience compared to Hua and Lily. She shared that she had been involved in a romantic relationship with a boy during high school, and although her parents and teachers were aware of it, they did not criticise her due to her consistently excellent academic performance. Instead, her parents actually encouraged her to study with her boyfriend, hoping that they could both achieve high grades in the university entrance exam. Heather recalled that their dates mainly took place in the library or classroom, where they would study together and aim to attend the same university. From what she remembered, this relationship revolved primarily around studying, with little emphasis placed on physical intimacy. For a long time, even into her university years, Heather believed that love relationships should primarily involve working together to create better educational and career opportunities, without a significant focus on sexual or intimate interactions. However, upon reflecting on this experience, she acknowledged that she had "misunderstood love relationships and lacked a genuine one" during her early twenties. This was also described by Liu (2014) as "utilitarian

individualists", which suggests that women's romantic relationships are closely tied to their educational and career achievements. Interestingly, this research finds that this cultural perspective had also influenced how women in this research perceived ideal partners and relationships in a utilitarian manner during the later stages of their lives, as discussed in the previous section.

5.2.2 Lacking love experience

According to these participants, some of their parents used the term "good girl" to emphasise the importance of excelling both academically and morally, in order to compel their daughters to prioritise their studies. Influenced by Confucianism and traditional culture, this term imposes expectations of obedience and femininity onto women, serving as a means for parents to regulate and discipline their daughters' romantic desires and behaviours. The ideology conveyed by their parents restricted the thoughts and actions of these participants from a young age, significantly shaping their understanding of love and sexual relationships.

In contrast to Hua and Lily, who had negative experiences with their parents, Ming had a more harmonious relationship with her parents. As she had never violated the rules against early romantic relationships, her parents viewed her as a "good girl". Since childhood, Ming had been taught that only "bad girls" engage freely in love without prioritising their school grades. She made great efforts to fit into her parents' image of a "good girl" and consequently refrained from falling in love with anyone during her school and university years. She described herself

as obedient and submissive in front of her parents. For years, she had happily positioned herself as a "good daughter" and a "good student" in the eyes of her parents and teachers, satisfying their expectations without truly exploring or nurturing her own desires and mindset. These early experiences had influenced her to adopt a more conservative and disciplined attitude towards love and relationships, requiring years for her to transition from inexperience to acknowledging and embracing her true desires.

Ming's prolonged suppression of her desire for dating left her perplexed when it came to the concept of an ideal relationship. With limited experience, she was unsure of how to initiate a healthy relationship and who would be the right partner for her. Having missed out on the opportunity to independently explore love and relationships during her youth, Ming expressed mixed emotions. On one hand, she still felt a sense of pride in being regarded as a good daughter in her parents' eyes. However, she also regretted for not having been true to herself in the past:

> Ming: I feel that I tried to make my parents happy in the past, but I had been ignoring my own feelings, so I missed many opportunities to explore dating and love...now I feel confused sometimes and am not sure what kind of man is a good partner...even sometimes when everyone told me my ex was a bad partner, I still couldn't judge it myself.

Ming's story highlights the influence of traditional family ideology and parental pressure in shaping these women's understanding of love. As a result, they often internalised values of obedience, conservatism, and conformity. This had a lasting impact on their self-perception within romantic relationships and influences how they evaluated their relationships later in life. Jenny echoed similar sentiments, sharing that she had never been encouraged by her parents to pursue romantic relationships during her formative years. However, she experienced sudden pressure to enter into a marital union, which left her feeling confused about the connection between love and marriage for an extended period of time. As she said,

> Jenny: I used to think love is more sexual, liberal, and open...while marriage is more about traditional relationship where there is no love...good girls should only aim for marriage rather than love...now I've changed my mind, but I still think love and marriage are a bit different.

Jenny's perspective on love and marriage highlights the societal pressures and gendered expectations placed upon women. According to her, women who explore precocious love relationships may face moral criticism and be labelled as "bad girls" for being too "liberal" during their early years. This reflects the traditional view that marriage, as a more traditional and stable relationship, should be the primary life path for women as they enter the later stages of life, which is in line with conventional family and heterosexual marriage norms. Furthermore, the differentiation between love and marriage observed by Jenny suggests that although these

participants might have developed a more liberal understanding of love relationships, marriage continued to hold a significant place in their mindset. Despite this liberalisation, these participants still prioritised marriage as a social expectation, often at the expense of pursuing their own personal desires or love relationships.

5.2.3 Women's premarital chastity

As mentioned previously, the parents of these women prioritised their daughters' education while neglecting their education on love, primarily due to the dominant societal ideology that values heterosexual marriage above all other forms of romantic relationships. This ideology aligns with the prevailing norms in Chinese society, where there is a preference for female virginity under the framework of heterosexual norms, as discussed in Chapter 1. From a young age, Wendy have been taught by her mother that being a virgin was the ultimate gift for her future husband and that chastity was a woman's most valuable asset. Consequently, Wendy and others believed they should approach relationships cautiously in their twenties. Research conducted by Miedema et al. (2020) on early marriage in South Asia and West Africa supports these findings, as it reveals that young women's chastity is associated with notions of honour and shame, which are significant factors leading parents to expect their daughters to marry at a young age. My participants reported an implicit rule imposed by their parents, which dictated to them how they were not expected to engage in sexual activity or live with their boyfriend before marriage. This reflects the societal expectations and norms surrounding premarital sexual behaviour and cohabitation for women.

My participants shared their challenging experiences with the traditional ideology surrounding premarital sex. Lily, for instance, revealed that her mother had placed immense pressure on her to abstain from any sexual activity, even within the context of a committed relationship. However, she had chosen to secretly defy this rule, while her mother remained unaware of her actions, believing that her daughter was still a virgin. Lily acknowledged that had she continued adhering to her mother's unreasonable expectations, she would have never had the opportunity to experience or understand genuine love relationships. As she said,

> Lily: My mum just wanted me to find a husband immediately, but with no love or sex before marriage? Isn't it impossible?...She only cared about women's value, or marriage as a result, but didn't value my love experience with this man, or consider whether he is a good man to get married to.

Lily expressed her frustration with her mother's contradictory stance, as she was urged to find a partner quickly despite having been discouraged from engaging in real relationships. This inconsistency added to Lily's confusion and made it challenging for her to navigate her own romantic journey. In the context where these women were objectified within relationships and marriage was predominantly seen as the sole valuable relationship, any other love relationships that lacked a formal marriage certificate was often regarded as unworthy for these women or simply viewed as a precursor to marriage.

Similar experiences to Lily's were also shared by other participants, such as Hua and Maluo. They admitted having lied to their mothers in the past, but when discussing these experiences, they displayed conflicting attitudes. On one hand, they believed they should be allowed to challenge and break traditional rules without seeking permission; they broke their parents' rules because they wanted to satisfy their own true desire, explore love and relationships, and find out what they want from an ideal relationship. On the other hand, they expressed a sense of guilt for not being a "good daughter" and failing to meet their mother's expectations. This highlights the tendency among these Chinese participants to associate shame and guilt with their actions that are considered wrong or deviating from societal norms, particularly in relation to close family members, which may differ from cultural norms in other societies (Li et al., 2004). Women in this research also believed that, as "good daughters", it was their responsibility to satisfy parents by abiding by their rules and traditional family ideology. Their feeling of guilt shows that these participants still tended to maintain family harmony by meeting parental expectations, rather than constructing their independent sense of self.

Tiana, another participant from a small town, had a different experience regarding traditional values compared to Lily. She strongly believed that she had been prohibited from engaging in premarital sex. Tiana explained that her parents and the culture in her hometown placed great importance on traditions and morals, and the societal emphasis on female virginity remained prevalent. Despite having assumed that many men would prefer to date her as a virgin, Tiana

confessed that her traditional upbringing had left her uncertain about how to respond to men's intimate advances. Consequently, she had never been in a long-term relationship with any man. She believed that losing her virginity to a boyfriend would be unfair to her future husband. Tiana viewed premarital sex as a commitment to men rather than an expression of her own desires.

These narratives revealed a persistent objectification that stems from the emphasis placed on their virginity. Within the framework of patriarchal norms and the existence of a double gender standard, some participants inclined towards submissive behaviour and were willing to take moral risks in pursuit of a relationship. The influence of traditional notions of marriage and the enforcement of moral values by parents impacted these women, leading them to view marriage as the ultimate goal in relationships, rendering a relationship without marriage as meaningless. The constraints placed on these women's values and identities compelled them to make cautious and weighty decisions regarding relationships, which has been cited as one of the reasons for their current single status.

Despite reports of ample parental support for their education, it is evident that the choices made by these participants in love relationships were greatly restricted by traditional Chinese ideology. The absence of comprehensive love and sex education during their formative years has left them inexperienced in dating and romantic relationships. Instead, their decisions and behaviours in relationships were predominantly influenced by traditional Chinese morals, as

well as the societal ideals of marriage and family that were imposed by their parents. While some of them adhered strictly to their parents' rules and refrained from engaging in early romantic or sexual experiences, others took it upon themselves to explore love relationships without parental consent. Nevertheless, all of them felt obliged to maintain the image of a "good girl" in their parents' eyes; getting married, even if compelled by their parents, remained their primary objective. The excessive emphasis on education and the traditional views of marriage and family had not only led to heightened conflicts between parents and daughters regarding marriage and life choices but also significantly shaped these single women's perceptions and understanding of an ideal romantic relationship.

5.3 Being "failed daughters": succeeding in career but remaining "unmarried"

As explored in the previous section, the participants under discussion, who dedicated their early years and twenties to realising their career aspirations, encountered sudden pressure from their parents to prioritise marriage over their careers. These abrupt shifts in attitude had left them conflicted about their life choices and plans. Despite being provided with increased educational resources and career opportunities in modern China, these participants still found their life goals and choices constrained by traditional family ideologies and the values associated with marriage. To gain a deeper understanding of the conflicting self-values and identity experienced by these participants in their late twenties and thirties, it is crucial to examine their daily interactions within their social and cultural environments, with their parents, extended family, and even the wider community.

5.3.1 Flawed identity as an unmarried daughter

According to these participants, some had developed a strong sense of self based on their success and competence as an individual. Their dedication, commitment, and satisfaction in their professional lives were fundamental to their high self-worth. For instance, during the interview, Lily, a university lecturer, expressed immense pride in her current career. Becoming a lecturer was her dream job, and it granted her independence and autonomy. Her parents provided her with the opportunity to attend the best local school and supported her studies in the UK, which eventually led to her becoming a lecturer. However, she shared that she had recently experienced frustration due to the sudden pressure from her parents to marry and start a family simply because she was nearing 30. She felt that her achievements in her career had not been valued by her parents as she would have expected. She expressed sadness that her parents' expectations shifted from acknowledging her professional accomplishments to solely focusing on her marital life, and she perceived this change to be influenced by gender norms once she reached a certain age.

In her day-to-day interactions with her parents, Lily experienced the profound impact of their pressure, causing internal conflict regarding her sense of self. Being the sole daughter who received substantial investment in her education, Lily interpreted the pressure to marry from her parents as a reflection of her being a "failed daughter". Instead of building her self-worth on her career achievements, she felt devalued and incomplete in her parents' eyes due to the

influence of heterosexual familism. Having been influenced by her parents' aspirations for her to become a successful career-oriented woman from a young age, Lily had internalised their expectations. However, when her parents set a new life goal for her, she experienced a loss of her own sense of self while attempting to please them. As Lily said,

> Lily: My parents have supported me a lot in the past...they also expected me to be successful as a lecturer…now they have set a new life goal for me, I started to feel that everything I have done was to please them. They make me feel like a failed daughter if I am unmarried even when I have reached my career goal.

The participants' stories centre around their dependence on their parents' investments for pursuing higher education abroad, which consequently led to the emergence of expectations and demands from their parents. This dynamic of support, characterised by gratitude and referred to as "*en*" in Chinese, established an understanding that these daughters were obliged to reciprocate their parents' love as a demonstration of filial piety. Lily's life choices and decisions were intricately linked to her parents, and she would harbour intense feelings of moral guilt if she were to defy their wishes, deeming herself a "failed daughter".

Hua, another participant, had recently completed a master's degree at a local university. Currently, she was employed as a teacher at a school while simultaneously making her mark as a social media influencer. Despite not having been granted the same educational opportunities

abroad as some other families, Hua found immense satisfaction in her dual roles, which instilled in her a strong sense of confidence and accomplishment. However, the conversation with her mother had a profound impact on Hua's sense of self. She revealed that her mother had made her "singleness" out to be someone's "fault". Hua believed that her mother was attempting to interfere with her personal life and hold her responsible for not being in a relationship. The notion of being single was depicted by her mother as a flawed aspect of her identity, causing Hua to resist and question her own sense of self. She had proudly embraced her identity as a professional woman with two jobs, but her mother's indirect blame on her personal life seemed to undermine her accomplishments as a successful woman. This, in turn, led Hua feel a deep sense of failure and shame, which continued to linger in her thoughts.

> Hua: My mum kept telling me that she should have given me more relationship advice when I was in my early twenties, so that I could find a boyfriend earlier...she kept saying it was her fault that I couldn't get married early, this only makes me feel like I have failed my life.

However, the experiences of these women differed somewhat from those of Daisy and Ming. Similar to Lily, Daisy received her parents' support in pursuing a doctoral degree overseas. Despite occasional disagreements, she ultimately heeded their advice and promptly began dating men. Daisy acknowledged experiencing heightened pressure as she had made an agreement with her parents to enter "the second stage" of her life, which involved getting

married, with the aim of not disappointing them. Ming, another participant, reported having never felt any shame or blame from her parents. One of the reasons behind this was her obedient nature, where she always conformed to her parents' wishes. When these daughters adhered to family traditions and strive to meet parental expectations, it is noted that they shared a "common goal" with their parents, resulting in less shame or guilt. However, Ming still experienced anxiety due to her unmarried status while feeling the filial duty to please her parents. Ming expressed,

> Ming: They didn't pressure me...but I don't want my parents to be worried anymore.
>
> I hope I can have my own family soon rather than just being their little girl.

Despite having a more positive interaction with her parents, Ming acknowledged that her sense of self still felt incomplete because she had only been seen as their "little girl". According to her, familial ideology dictated that she could only achieve a complete sense of self in her parents' eyes by getting married, becoming a wife, and starting her own family. These participants consistently carried the dual responsibility of excelling in their careers and fulfilling their parents' expectations of them as married daughters.

5.3.2 Duality of self in extended family

In Chinese culture, there exists a strong sense of interconnectedness within traditional family relationships. These participants faced immense familial pressure not only due to the close

bonds formed when they were growing up but also because of the deep-rooted traditions and cultural values of the Chinese extended family, known as *da jia ting*, which includes grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins. Guan, a talented photographer based in Beijing, achieved great success in her career by the age of 31. However, her relatives perceived her as overly focused on her professional life, neglecting her personal relationships.

Similar to HuaHu's mother, as mentioned earlier, Guan's family members felt compelled to take care of and support each other. Consequently, the older generations tended to believe that they had the responsibility to offer advice to their children and grandchildren, and at times, exerted greater control over their personal lives. Guan encountered a sexist and ageist judgment from her relatives regarding her career success and single status. Her traditional extended family expected her to conform to societal norms by marrying at an appropriate age, deeming any other personal achievements during that phase of life to be abnormal or unnecessary for a woman.

In Guan's own words, she felt burdened by the constant criticism and humiliation from her relatives, which instilled a sense of guilt within her. The source of her guilt lay in the expectation that, as an accomplished daughter and granddaughter, she had a duty to fulfil the wishes of her entire extended family and carry forward the legacy of this familial bond to the next generation:

> Guan: I was very successful in my career when I was 31…but all my relatives including my aunts, uncles and grandparents started to criticise me. They said I was

selfish, I was too old to get married, I should consider more for this extended family,

I should make my grandparents happy.

Guan's family had never embraced individualism as a Western ideology. In accordance with traditional Chinese Confucianism, as discussed in Chapter 1, there exists a belief in the duality of self, which emphasises the expectation for individuals to contribute to both their family and society, rather than solely focusing on themselves. This perspective is exemplified in Wendy's story, where her aunt consistently used her own daughter's marriage as a means to pressure Wendy into getting married soon. The aunt sought to avoid having Wendy be perceived as the sole "selfish" child in their large family.

Similar interference from extended family in women's personal lives can be observed in various cultures. For instance, Smart and Shipman (2004)'s study revealed that certain transnational families within the British, Indian, Pakistani, and Irish communities have preserved their family traditions. Despite residing in industrialised countries, these extended families and their traditional cultures continue to exert a significant influence on women's choices regarding marriage. Thus, even within a modernised social context, family traditions remain central to a women' decision-making processes.

In this research, it was evident that when these educated women pursued personal goals and aspirations in their careers, they often faced criticism from their extended family, being labelled

as "selfish and irresponsible". Their self-identity the became closely intertwined with the comments and expectations of their extended families, thereby shaping their choices and actions.

5.3.3 Self-identity in wider community

The pressure to marry was not solely confined to the family but extended to the broader community, as reported by these women participants. Tiana, hailing from a small town, expressed feeling constrained by both her family and the cultural traditions of her hometown, which hindered her ability to freely make choices regarding marriage. In Tiana's case, her personal values were influenced not only by family comments but also by the neighbourhood and the local culture of her hometown, which sought to regulate and dictate her choices.

Given the significant income disparity between urban and rural residents in China, Tiana perceived her hometown as a "conservative and traditional place". In comparison to women born in urban areas, Tiana believed that small towns fostered closer relationships among individuals and had fewer boundaries when it came to private lives. She harboured concerns that remaining unmarried would bring trouble to her parents' social standing within the small town, potentially leading to stigmatisation or exclusion by the local communities. It was also reported by participants that, in traditional Chinese culture, parents often experienced feelings of shame if they had an unmarried daughter who is over the age of 25. Research conducted by Miedema et al. (2020) on early marriage in South Asia and West Africa highlights the strong association between the sense of shame and honour within a family and a woman's marital

status. The presence of an unmarried daughter in the household brings shame upon the entire family in the eyes of the community. Women who grew up in small towns or villages often experience marital pressure that is not primarily driven by their parents' expectations resulting from investing in their education. Instead, the pressure stems from the collective family image within the wider community:

As Tiana shared, her marriage was perceived as more of an honour to her family rather than a pursuit of her own happiness. Consequently, Tiana's personal life and self-perception are intricately tied to and influenced by her parents' expectations and the traditional norms prevalent within her community:

> Tiana: I feel responsible for my family…I should listen to my parents…If I don't get married, my parents may feel that they have 'lost face', and their friends, neighbours, and relatives will laugh at them by having a "lao gu niang" at home.

Women who reach a certain age without being married may be derogatorily referred to as *lao gu niang* ("old maids"). In traditional Chinese culture, the prioritisation of family and societal expectations is deeply ingrained. As Higgins et al. (2002) argue, Chinese culture emphasises familial and collective values, which stress the importance of being highly attuned and responsive to the needs of others. It is noteworthy that in China, shame is not just an individual concern but a collective one. The shame or honour of an individual's achievements or failures

is shared not only by their immediate family but also by the broader community of friends and relatives (Li et al., 2004).

Even when these women achieved autonomy and success in their careers, their personal lives could still be stigmatised. They might be labelled as "losers" in their personal relationships or perceived as failed daughters, failing to display filial piety towards their family. These perceptions could bring shame not only to these participants themselves but also to their parents within the extended family or the wider community. In traditional Chinese culture, marriage, rather than career success, is often regarded as the primary source of a woman's higher self-value.

5.4 Being "filial daughters": choosing marriage under parental expectation

Within the framework of traditional heterosexual family ideology, according to these participants, marriage held a significant meaning for these participants. It not only signified the formation of a "complete" nuclear family but also served as a marker of a "complete" woman. Women's career achievements alone could not provide them with a sense of fulfilment. Instead, societal expectations consistently pressured them to establish their self-identity by assuming the roles of a wife and mother. This pressure was particularly prominent under parental influence, as these women's own marriage and family were seen as acts of filial devotion aimed to please and satisfy their parents.

Despite feeling unhappy due to being questioned, shamed, and pressured by their families, the participants expressed a desire to have their own family and children in the future. Some mentioned that their parents' expectations exerted pressure on them, and fulfilling those expectations by becoming a filial daughter and establishing their own family would bring joy to their parents and provide them with the opportunity to experience happiness with their grandchildren. Others agreed that, influenced by their own family's experiences and observing their mother's journeys, becoming a wife and mother was considered a natural course of life, even if it meant diverting their focus from a successful career to prioritise their family and children.

5.4.1 Parental pressure

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the Chinese idiom *tian lun zhi le* symbolises the notion of joyful and harmonious relationships between grandparents and grandchildren. It has been noted that parents often pressure their daughters to marry early due to their longing for grandchildren. Additionally, these participants also felt compelled to comply with their parents' wishes in order to bring satisfaction and happiness to them by fulfilling their desire to become grandparents.

Ming, who studied in the United States for a year and graduated from a prestigious university in Shanghai with a master's degree in law, embarked on a career in the government. Her professional journey had just begun, and she aimed to reach the highest level within her department. Interestingly, when discussing her future plans, Ming expressed that she would

consider starting a family and having children soon if it would bring happiness to her parents, even if it meant taking a break from her promising career:

> Ming: My parents have provided me with lots of support…I listened to them because I'm filial… If they want me to get married and have children soon, I will do it...but I won't give up my job, I just need to spend more time on my family, do less work for a few years...I want them to see their grandchildren soon.

In Ming's narrative, the priorities of family, children, and meeting her parents' expectations took precedence, potentially at the expense of her own career path. She expressed that her education and professional journey had been substantially supported by her parents, leading her to believe that reciprocating their love meant adhering to their opinions as a dutiful daughter. While Ming mentioned that it was not necessary for her to give up her job and become a housewife, she acknowledged the expectation to prioritise her family and children over her career.

Ming had made efforts to navigate the dual requirements imposed by her parents, striving for success in her career while also focusing on her future family. She aimed to avoid conflicts or disagreements with her parents and sought to embody the role of a filial daughter by establishing her own family. This pattern is also reflected in Daisy's story, where participants who had received financial support from their parents for their education often adopted an

obedient and submissive attitude towards their parents' expectations regarding marriage and family.

In this context, Ming identified herself as a "filial daughter" and constructed her sense of self based on family ideology. She consistently aligned herself with her parents' expectations but might lack the opportunity to express her authentic desires and wishes regarding her life choices.

5.4.2 Natural choices for women

Some women also agreed starting a family was a natural life path for women. Another participant, Sulin, graduated from a prestigious university in Shanghai and currently worked as a lawyer. Despite her numerous achievements and accolades in her legal career, she had made plans to have children at a certain age and transition to a less demanding job, enabling her to prioritise her family. Sulin perceived this shift from career to family as a *zi ran* ("natural") progression due to her upbringing in a nuclear family. She felt compelled to follow this "tradition" set by her parents, drawing from her own positive family experiences.

Sulin justified her choice based on the satisfaction she derived from her parents' happy marriage and the fulfilling family life they had provided her. She wished to continue this path and replicate their life choices. Like Ming, Sulin placed great value on the parent–child and grandparent–grandchild relationships, which are integral to traditional family ideologies. She believed that getting married and having her own children would not only bring satisfaction to

her parents but also to herself, reinforcing the bonds within the family. It is worth noting that unlike Ming, Sulin did not feel pressured by her parents to make these life choices. Instead, she willingly embraced the role of a future wife and mother, influenced by her parents' successful and contented marriage:

> Sulin: By the time I turn 35 years old, I think I will have my own kids…I will change my job to a less busy one, because I'm not that workaholic…I want to focus more on my family and kids, it is a natural thing right?...I mean I grew up in a two-parent family, I feel I was happy, my parents were happy, so both they and I will feel happy about my having children...I'm different from some women who have had bad family experience, like parents arguing a lot or getting divorced.

Sulin distinguished herself from other women who had had negative family experiences, implying that their choices beyond marriage and family were unfortunate and unsatisfactory. She even referred to women who prioritise their careers over family as "workaholics". This sentiment echoed Betty's story, as her parents urged her to marry and prioritise family life to alleviate career pressure and attain a more "relaxing" lifestyle as a wife and mother. It appears that within the framework of heterosexual familial ideology, there was only one path to happiness and contentment for these women: marriage, having children, and prioritising family. Any alternative choices were often perceived as work-centric, exhausting, unnatural, or abnormal.

Although Sulin never intended to give up her job, she also did not aspire to advance in her career or achieve further accomplishments. She strongly adhered to familial ideology and believed that becoming a wife and mother would provide her with a stronger sense of self. Despite having acquired more education, work opportunities, and career achievements, Sulin shared a similar goal with her parents' generation, emphasising the importance of family. This differs from the notion of individualisation, which suggests divergent life goals between generations. Like Ming, Sulin's decision-making process had been deeply influenced by her family and personal experiences. For her, family, rather than career, seemed to offer a greater sense of fulfilment, achievement, and reinforce her belief as a heterosexual woman.

5.4.3 Connection with mother

As explored in Chapter 4, these participants as single women often faced heightened social exclusion. In the previous sections, it was noted that my participants tended to view having children and getting married as interconnected, considering a complete nuclear family with a father as the ideal situation rather than being a single mother. However, there were also differing viewpoints. Some participants' choices were influenced by their own family structure and early-life experiences. Take Summer, who grew up as a single-parent child, for instance. She exhibited a more open attitude towards different family arrangements. From her perspective, being a single mother was a viable option within her family context. She believed that the bond

between a mother and her children was inherently stronger than any other relationships, drawing upon the close connection she felt with her own mother:

> Summer: I feel that my mum has contributed a lot to our family, she needs to take care of me by herself for the last 30 years...she was busy in work, but she always had time for me......I used to have no preference as to whether to start a family, but I always listened to my mum's opinion, and I value this bond between a mother and her child, because your husband may leave you, but your child never will.

Similar to other participants, Summer also felt the expectation from her mother to have children of her own. She acknowledged that her mother, who played both the roles of a caregiver and a provider, dedicated a significant amount of time and effort to her education. As a result, Summer felt a sense of gratitude towards her mother's efforts and wanted to fulfil her mother's expectations. Additionally, she placed greater emphasis on the bond between a mother and child, considering it the most important relationship from her perspective, while expressing less trust in husbands or marital relationships. Although she valued a complete nuclear family less strongly than some other participants, Summer was still influenced by familial ideology and her intergenerational connection with her mother. Consequently, she aspired to have her own children based on her mother's desires. Summer shared that she used to have no strong inclination towards having children, but her mother's expectations helped her rationalise how she should make choices and shape her own identity.

In contrast to Summer, another participant Hua came from a two-parent family. She shared that she used to have uncertainties about whether or not to have children. Her hesitation stemmed from her memories of her mother sacrificing her own career and making significant contributions to their family. Initially, Hua had plans to prioritise her own career without much distraction. However, her perspective shifted when her mother expressed her desire to have grandchildren and even offered support and assistance with childcare, including the idea of being a single mother if necessary. This newfound openness from her mother gave Hua more confidence and reassurance about the prospect of having children:

Hua: I want to focus more on work but my mum wants grandchildren, I was not sure...she even mentioned the idea of being a single mother, she just said a woman should have her own kids... she said she could take care of my children while I'm busy in work, I guess with her help everything will be easier...I think she likes taking care of grandchildren.

Similar to Summer, Hua's story highlights the influence of mothers on daughters' perceptions of motherhood and family. In Hua's case, being a mother was associated with significant sacrifices and compromises in terms of one's career, which made her concern about the impact on her own professional aspirations. Although Chapter 1 discusses how Chinese parents, particularly mothers, are willing to provide childcare support to married couples to alleviate

their burdens, the description of Hua's mother as someone who "likes taking care of children" suggests that the caregiving role is still primarily attributed to women in their family. This is also argued by Evans (2010) that communication between mothers and daughters in Chinese families often reinforces gendered notions of women's attributes and associated familial responsibilities. Through her interactions with her mother, Hua internalised the traditional gender roles and believed that the mother–child relationship held significance for women beyond marriage. Unlike other participants, Hua's mother placed greater value on intergenerational familial relationships rather than Hua's romantic relationships. In order to be a dutiful and obedient daughter, Hua felt that she, as a woman, should assume the caregiving role just as her mother did, with her mother's assistance. However, her personal feelings and desires were not explicitly addressed in her story. While these participatns were becoming more individualised and placing greater emphasis on their careers, as argued by Yan (2009); at the same time, they were still expected to fulfil traditional gender roles within the family structure.

5.4.4 Marriage without children

In contrast to the perspectives shared by the previous participants, Wendy and Heather presented a different viewpoint on starting a family and having children. Both participants expressed a preference for getting married without the intention of having children. Wendy's perspective was shaped by her belief that raising children was an exhausting responsibility for women. When discussing her future plans with her parents, it is noted that they felt disappointed

but ultimately accepted her decision not to have children. Wendy firmly stated that she would never give birth solely for the sake of filial piety.

Similarly, Heather emphasised her career as her life goal and expressed her desire not to have children. Her parents were reported to have respected her decision, despite their initial expectations and preference for grandchildren. In contrast to the experiences of other participants, both Wendy and Heather emphasised their autonomy in deciding whether or not to become mothers in the future. While Davis and Friedman (2014) argue that marriage and childbearing are closely linked in Asian societies, these participants provided insights into their preference for a childless lifestyle, demonstrating a diversity of perspectives within the context of the study.

It appears that these participants had achieved greater individual autonomy in making their life choices. Moreover, regarding marriage, both Wendy and Heather emphasised the importance of having a long-term partner, irrespective of whether or not they choose to marry. A marriage for them entailed having a stable and committed relationship without the inclusion of children. However, they also acknowledged that if their parents expressed a desire for them to have a marriage certificate, they would consider registering their partnership. As Wendy expressed,

> Wendy: I guess I need my parents' good wishes for my relationship... having no
>
> children already made them feel that I'm a bit 'unfilial', but at least a marriage

certificate would please them...this (getting married) is not a big deal for me, I'm

ok with marriage but not a family.

Wendy made a clear distinction between the concepts of "marriage" and "family". From her perspective, she believed that marriage referred to a romantic relationship, whereas family entailed the presence of children. While she expressed her refusal to become a "filial daughter" by having children solely to please her parents, she acknowledged that she would still heed her parents' advice to obtain a marriage certificate in the future. Despite possessing greater reproductive autonomy compared to other participants, Wendy anticipated her parents' approval and well wishes for her chosen life path. Although these participants possessed more agency in reproductive decisions, they still valued the importance of a stable partner and a relationship that aligned with their parents' expectations. They found fulfilment in satisfying their parents through their marriage. Hence, these participants' decisions regarding marriage continued to be influenced by parental expectations.

It is intriguing to examine whether the participants presented an individualistic perspective when understanding the meaning of marriage. As DePaulo and Morris (2005) state, getting married in modern society serves as a personal milestone, signifying the development of one's self-identity in adulthood. In a society where the ideology of marriage and family institutions stigmatises single individuals, marriage is also considered a personal triumph and accomplishment. For instance, Betty, a successful businesswoman, viewed marriage as a

personal goal. She expressed that in China, where marriage is the mainstream choice, the feeling of being unmarried could be likened to feeling like an outsider. From her perspective, marriage was a significant relationship that helped her realise her personal worth. Heather shared a similar viewpoint, stating that marriage would serve as a turning point in her life, providing her with a sense of achievement and a new identity and lifestyle. She firmly believed that through "living and growing together" with a future partner, she would become a better person. In the current Chinese society, getting married and having children for these participants were seen as primary pathways for transitioning to the next stage of life and gaining a heightened sense of self-value and self-realisation. Although, as Cherlin (2004) indicates, the notion of women developing their own sense of self within marriage contradicts the satisfaction they derive from building a family and assuming the roles of spouse or parent. Still, given the influence of traditional culture and family pressure, it is challenging to conclude whether the women in this study had genuinely entered an individualised stage of marriage or had simply found a compromised position within the marital relationship.

In summary, the life choices of these participants had been strongly influenced by their family structure, early family experiences, and parental pressure. They expressed a desire to have their own family, to become wives, or to become mothers, but not as single women. Within the context of traditional familial ideology and the Chinese cultural environment, being a filial daughter implied following parental advice and maintaining close family bonds by forming their own families. Alternatively, these women may choose not to be filial daughters but still

aspire to enter a happy married family life. However, influenced by the prevailing heterosexual familism, they would never opt for a "miserable" life as a single woman.

5.5 Making suitable choices: parents' interference in selection of partner

This section explores the influence of parents on women's partner selection and how women navigated their parents' preferences in their own relationships. According to the participants, love was a connection between two individuals, while marriage was a union involving two families: the woman, her parents, her partner, and his parents. It was common for these women to face not only scrutiny from relatives regarding their single status but also interference from their parents with their choices of marriage and partners. Despite the legal recognition of free-choice relationships and marriage in China, the influence of Confucianism remains deeply ingrained in society. As a result, some participants feared potential gossip, loss of dignity, and disrespect that may arise from choosing a partner deemed "wrong" by their family. This is also found in Smart and Shipman (2004)'s research on minority ethnic communities in Britain, where the decision of whom to marry was not simply a "free choice" made independently of parental wishes and desires. This phenomenon is not only rooted in traditional culture and customs, where Chinese people place great value on family, but it is also influenced by the absence of a comprehensive welfare system for the elderly, as discussed in Chapter 4. Parents were reported to rely on their children's families to provide care for them in old age. Consequently, as reported, these women's parents considered a dependable and responsible daughter-in-law as a suitable choice on whom they could rely.

5.5.1 Matchmaking with parental help

According to a few participants, their parents actively assisted them in finding potential partners through their familial or social networks. For example, Daisy's mother reached out to numerous friends and relatives to enquire if there were any eligible men of a similar age for her daughter. Lily's parents engaged in "advertising" their daughter's information to their acquaintances and colleagues, hoping that a suitable candidate would emerge. Heather shared her experience when her parents attempted to introduce a man to her. Despite her lack of interest in dating after meeting him, her parents persisted in persuading her to consider him solely because the man's parents were close friends of Heather's parents. As Heather expressed,

> Heather: My parents think if they know my partner's parents well, if my husband and I have an argument, it would be easier for them to help solve the problem together with my partner's parents, to help maintain our marriage.

Within the Chinese marriage culture, participants' parents continued to heavily rely on familial social networks when seeking partners for their daughters, emphasising the importance of maintaining traditional family bonds. However, Daisy shared a different experience, stating that her parents introduced her to men from their social networks but always sought her permission before sharing her information. Her parents would ask if she was interested in that man and if she wanted to meet him, reassuring her that it was acceptable if she chose not to meet him.

Daisy expressed that she was open to matchmaking through their networks because her parents respected her feelings and opinions. This allowed her to negotiate her own preferences with her parents. This phenomenon of matchmaking through familial networks represented a new aspect of individualisation, rather than a simple return to traditional practices. It reflects parental interference in women's choices rather than direct control. However, it is important to note that their choices were still influenced by parental expectations.

In addition to familial networks, the participants also mentioned that their parents sought assistance from matchmaking agencies. For example, Cai shared that her parents directly contacted a matchmaking agency and provided her information without seeking her permission. Initially, she felt unhappy about it, but eventually accepted their decision. It was reported that some participants allowed their parents to take this approach to ease the pressure of finding a partner and ensure that any potential partners would have got their parents' approval. This is also discussed in Agrawal (2015)'s research on Indian marriages, where families also utilised familial social networks and posted matchmaking ads online to find suitable partners for their sons, daughters, brothers, or sisters.

5.5.2 Interference in partner selection

According to the participants, their parents not only played an active role in assisting them in finding partners but also exerted a significant influence on their selection process. Reflecting traditional patriarchal norms, it is observed that these parents often rejected potential partners

who held lower social or economic status, particularly those who were not deemed suitable as the family's primary breadwinner or head. In order to honour their parents' decisions, some women made the difficult choice to end their relationships based on their ex-partner's perceived unsatisfactory economic status.

Wendy's parents' expectations exemplified the acceptance of hypergamy norms. Despite both Wendy and her boyfriend being migrant workers without a *hukou* in Shanghai, Wendy's mother contacted her boyfriend and emphasised the importance of him obtaining *hukou* first. This was done with the intention that her daughter could potentially rely on him as a husband to secure her own Shanghai *hukou*. In this situation, Wendy's mother not only interfered in her daughter's relationship but also reinforced traditional gender roles, placing greater emphasis on a man's economic and social responsibilities. Furthermore, her mother also scrutinised the man's family background, specifically his single-parent family, which is often stigmatised as "incomplete and unhealthy" in Chinese society within the ideology of heterosexual family. The prevailing norm of the heterosexual two-parent family was upheld, while other family structures were deemed problematic. As a result of these entrenched traditional family ideologies and gender expectations, Wendy's love relationship and choice of partner were constantly judged and influenced by her parents throughout their five-year relationship, ultimately leading to their break-up.

Parents' concerns regarding future care from family members often influenced their preferences for their daughters' prospective husbands, ideally someone who lived nearby or hailed from a nearby hometown. As noted in the research conducted by Smart and Shipman (2004), individuals may consider their parents' feelings and opt to marry someone of the same nationality, ethnicity, or religion. The participants in this study reported that relationships with partners from distant cities were generally disapproved by their parents. Lily shared her experience when she first informed her mother about her boyfriend from northeastern China. Upon learning that he was from a distant city, Lily's mother exerted pressure on her to reconsider the relationship. Lily expressed that her own feelings were completely disregarded and disrespected during that conversation. Similarly, Tiana ended her relationship with her American ex-boyfriend because her parents opposed the idea of her living overseas, even though it had been her lifelong dream. The subsequent break-up left Tiana in a state of profound depression, torn between her genuine aspirations and her parents' expectations.

The women participating in this research conveyed that they bore a considerable responsibility for taking care of their families, even if it meant sacrificing their own relationship goals and personal choices. These findings showed that these participants' family still prioritised convenience over love when it comes to marriage, and traditional Confucian values continued to overshadow the culture of romantic love. Despite the research conducted by Zheng (2017) indicating that Chinese women value love and emotions, it is evident here that family pressure and obligations exerted a significant influence on participants' decisions regarding relationships.

Within the framework of family customs and traditions, participants' choices were never entirely free or independent; instead, they were shaped by relational and contextual factors. Relationships that were perceived as "suitable and ideal" were often those that bring practical advantages to the family, while relationships based solely on love might not meet the realistic expectations of parents in terms of practical benefits.

5.5.3 Interference in relationship decision

Some participants also shared instances where their parents disagreed with their decision to break up with their partners. These women reported that their parents attempted to interfere in order to preserve the relationship, fearing that their daughter might not find another suitable partner in the future. It was common for these participants' parents to encourage their daughters to "settle for" a man whom they deemed suitable, even if their daughters had no interest in such a person. Jenny had planned to end her relationship with her boyfriend, but her parents tried to make her change her mind:

Jenny: I always hope that I could exercise outdoors together with my boyfriend...but my ex didn't like sports at all, he also had some other traits of personality that I don't like...but my parents kept saying "he is an honest man", they thought he was good enough for me, and they tried to persuade me...all the problems in my relationship were not a big deal in their eyes, I feel that my parents were more

worried and anxious than me about the fact that I might be considered 'leftover' in

the marriage market.

Although Jenny eventually disregarded her parents' opinions, their influence on her decision-making process had a significant impact for a considerable period of time. This was also evident in the case of Betty, whose parents urged her to reconsider her previous relationship despite her ex-boyfriend's verbal abuse. According to Betty, her parents showed little concern for her feelings or the issues within her dating experiences. Their sole focus was to ensure their daughter's marriage has a "happy ending". Having an unsatisfying relationship was never viewed as a serious problem by her parents, as their main desire for women was to enter into a loyal, secure, and responsible relationship that culminated in marriage.

Numerous stories have illustrated how some parents attempted to interfere with these participants' choices, leading to situations where women either compromised or rejected their parents' interference. The institution of marriage, deeply rooted in traditional family ideologies, has further reinforced the closeness between parents and their children. However, these parents often failed to provide their daughters with adequate support and respect in making these life choices. The influence of Confucianism and the traditions of large families had restricted these participants' options in relationships and partners, prioritising the fulfilment of parental desires. Consequently, under the influence of family ideology and heterosexual norms, my participants

faced significant challenges in achieving autonomy in their decision-making processes concerning relationships and partners.

5.6 Conclusion

In summary, this chapter has discussed how single women in this study constructed their sense of self and made life choices through their interaction with family and Chinese traditional culture. The participants' early life stories showed that this generation of women who own a "privileged" status have received much support from parents to pursue further education in order to gain more social resources and opportunities for their future, yet had still been influenced by traditional love and sex education from parents, which had left an impact on how these women perceived their marriage and partner choices in later life stages. By looking at how the participants interacted with their parents, this chapter has shown that women felt a strong sense of failure as an unmarried daughter and made their life choices in a conflicting and compromising way. It was still challenging for them to autonomously make their own life choices without considering parents' preference. Under family culture and marriage traditions, these participants had been expected by parents to make traditional choices on their marriage and family. The family ideology and heterosexual marriage norms still significantly impacted these single women's choices and values on marriage and family. Despite having gained more resources and opportunities through their education and career pursuits, these women found themselves relying on the institution of the family rather than making independent decisions.

CHAPTER 6 BODY, FEMININITY, AND GENDER RELATIONS:

SINGLE WOMEN IN HETEROSEXUAL AND PATRIARCHAL CONTEXT

This chapter delves into the challenges faced by single women in the study within a society marked by gender inequality and a patriarchal framework. It explores their experiences in past relationships and how they shaped their sense of identity. By examining instances of gender discrimination and inequality in dating and relationships, the chapter argues that prevailing heterosexual norms and patriarchal rules pose significant obstacles for the single women in this study seeking to establish an equal partnership with their ideal partner. These norms also influenced the construction of these participants' self-perception and identity as heterosexual single individuals in Chinese society. Despite the social transformation and modernisation in China and the increased educational and career opportunities available to these single women, traditional gender relations continued to regulate their choices and behaviours in personal relationships. Consequently, this study contends that by applying gender theory and the concept of individualisation to the phenomenon of "leftover women", it is found that the participants had gradually distanced themselves from the state's central allocation system and actively pursued love relationships with independence, where they aspired to attain an equal marital relationship. However, their body, choices, and self-identity remained constrained by prevailing heterosexual norms and gender hegemony in Chinese society.

In this chapter, I examine three key aspects related to participants' bodies and gender dynamics in their past relationships. Firstly, I analyse the regulation and discipline of participants' bodies

according to essentialist gender norms. This includes exploring the impact of age on the life choices of these single women, as well as the ageist and sexist experiences they encountered in dating and relationships, shaped by ageism and the prevailing standards of beauty within heterosexual and patriarchal norms. Additionally, I investigate the strategies employed by these single women to manage their youth and attractiveness in order to find an ideal partner for marriage. Moving on to Section 7.2, I delve into the expectations placed upon single women to exhibit feminine behaviour within the context of binary gender divisions. I explore how these women constructed their sense of self by adopting various expressions of gender as women. Finally, in Section 7.3, I examine the patriarchal rules and traditional gender roles experienced by these single women. I explore the challenges they faced in establishing gender-equal relationships within the existing social rules and gender norms prevalent in Chinese society. The table 3 below shows the structure and themes of this chapter.

Table 3: chapter 6 themes

Sections	Themes
6.1 Being an old and unattractive woman?: regulated and disciplined body	*6.1.1 Age pressure on family life path*
	6.1.2 Experience of ageism in matchmaking
	6.1.3 Mainstream heterosexual beauty standard
	6.1.4 Strategies on body management
6.2 Being a feminine woman?: gender expression as women	*6.2.1 Traditional femininity*
	6.2.2 To be manly or feminine?
	6.2.3 Empowered femininity
6.3 Being a traditional married woman? patriarchal norms and gender roles	*6.3.1 Patrilocal residence and patriarchal rules*
	6.3.2 Resisting traditional gender roles

6.1 Being an old and unattractive woman?: regulated and disciplined body

This section explores the manner in which these participants' bodies were regulated and disciplined within the framework of traditional values and heterosexual norms. The imposition of social expectations, such as the social clock and age limits, placed restrictions on participants' life choices and instils a sense of anxiety, compelling them to hastily make decisions regarding their work and family life. Furthermore, these women had been subjected to ageist comments, which emphasised the significance of fertility within traditional heterosexual marriages and patriarchal societies. The enforcement of traditional values and norms also subjected these women to body shaming, pressuring them to conform to a standardised notion of beauty in order to secure an ideal husband. In the case of these participants, who faced both age-related pressures and body discipline, they no longer passively awaited the attention of men; instead, they felt compelled to adopt self-improvement strategies, all in the pursuit of achieving a socially acceptable life.

6.1.1 Age pressure on family life path

These participants had expressed encountering numerous challenges when deviating from mainstream values and attempting to make choices and plans that differ from the norm, particularly when approaching the age of 30. As they neared this milestone, commonly referred to as the socially expected "marriageable age" for starting a family, their aspirations for better career prospects and educational opportunities were often met with scepticism or discouragement. The burden of societal expectations and the prospect of starting a family exerted immense pressure on these women, making the age of 30 appear as a deadline for

seeking an ideal relationship. They were expected to capitalise on their youthfulness, ensuring that they would not miss the window of opportunity commonly referred to as the "golden marriageable age" or the "golden fertility age", and conform to society's expectations by entering into marriage and starting a family.

As previously discussed, these women dedicated themselves to pursuing their educational goals from a young age, with some aspiring to achieve a doctoral degree and establish a career in research institutions. In Cai's case, her aspiration was to obtain a doctoral degree around the age of 30. However, she encountered scepticism from friends and family who questioned whether she would be "too old" to actively seek a partner and get married after completing her studies. Women's attainment of a higher education degree has regrettably been subjected to stigma, lacking the recognition they deserve. Conversely, societal expectations placed greater emphasis on these women getting married and starting a family within a specific age range, portraying these as the sole esteemed choices for them:

> Cai: Pursuing a doctoral degree has been my dream…but nobody encourages me to do this, they said I was just wasting my time, and I should instead spend time looking for a partner, getting married, earning money for my future family, and having children before 35…otherwise I would be too old for all of these.

According to Cai, a prescribed life trajectory existed for women, which entails securing a stable job, finding a partner, getting married, and starting a family; any alternative life plans that deviated from this heterosexual family paradigm would often be met with scrutiny, perceived as posing a threat to the conventional and secure path in life, and deemed a "waste of time". This societal pressure based on age further emphasised how these participants' bodies and fertility were regulated and disciplined by social expectations embedded within the heterosexual family ideology. Guan reported that she had experienced a lot of criticism when she decided to break up with her ex-boyfriend and applied for a master's degree in the UK when she was 34. As she said, she was not satisfied with her relationship and wanted to also study further for her career opportunities in a different country. However, she reported that many people around had questioned her or even tried to stop her just because she would be too old to find another partner and have children in their eyes. Guan's story shows that choosing to study further or consider living in another country would be against the ideology of maintaining stability of marriage and family, and regarded as a risky individualist lifestyle.

A few other participants had encountered similar experiences, where the pressure exerted by their families regarding age became increasingly heavy once they had surpassed a certain age threshold. Maluo shared her experience of being pressured at the age of 36 to give up her career in Europe and return to China as a single woman. The purpose was to prepare for matchmaking events as it was considered as her "last chance to be chosen" and establish a traditional Chinese family. Similarly, Lily also faced a comparable situation: despite having been discouraged by

those around her, she remained determined to pursue her doctoral degree and ultimately secured her dream job as a university lecturer after graduation. However, she was criticised for being single, as she had surpassed the perceived "golden marriageable age" by focusing primarily on her education and career development. Consequently, there was a concern that she might miss the opportunity to conceive within the designated "golden fertility age", typically considered to be before the age of 35. Therefore, not getting married before the age of 30 meant that the window of opportunity for these women to establish a family had supposedly closed.

As mentioned earlier, these participants have encountered similar inquiries regarding how their education and career plans deviate from societal expectations centered around marriage and family. These women's life trajectory was often perceived as time-bound and connected to their fertility capabilities. The pressure to prioritise family planning over pursuing a doctoral degree implied that these participants were expected to regulate their bodies by adhering to predetermined timelines and societal priorities. Consequently, while some participants may enjoyed temporary "freedom" and a brief advantage in their twenties, granting them the opportunity to make choices regarding higher education or career prospects abroad, once they entered their thirties, they found themselves compelled to sacrifice their freedom by conforming to traditions and prevailing norms or face blame and judgment for supposedly "misusing" or "wasting" their earlier freedom during the appropriate age. The amalgamation of traditional marriage ideals, family expectations, and neoliberal influences had presented these participants with a predicament: either relinquished their career aspirations at the appropriate age to adhere

to marriage and family customs, or deftly juggled multiple responsibilities by seeking a partner while concurrently pursuing their career objectives within a restricted timeframe.

In contrast to the aforementioned participants, Hua's story entails greater struggles and conflicts regarding her self-identity when she reached the age of 30. Having been influenced by societal expectations, Hua believed that 30 years old was the time to prepare for her future marriage and family life. Unfortunately, this belief resulted in her being involved in a long-term relationship with the wrong person. At the age of 29, Hua discovered that her fiancé had been dishonest with her since the beginning of their relationship. She felt angry and regretful, realising that she had wasted several years on a deceitful man. This realisation made it even more challenging for her to start anew in her thirties and find another suitable partner. Hua expressed her desire to end the relationship, but she also harboured concerns about being too old to find another suitable man. As a result, she attempted to compromise and accept the circumstances, continuing the relationship for the following two years. However, during this time, they had rarely been communicating or spending time together, and Hua acknowledged that there was no love between them. This created immense pressure and emotional pain for her:

> Hua: I still remember during that time, every time he called me, I saw his name on the screen, I just felt disgusted, I couldn't trust him anymore, but I wasn't brave enough to break up with him...what should I do? Can a 30-year-old woman still be able to find a new boyfriend? Do I still have time to have my children?

Ageing pushed some participants to make decisions quickly and sometimes caused them to make insensible choice. Hua's narrative highlights the internal struggles faced by these women who grappled with societal expectations, fear of being perceived as too old, and the difficulties of navigating relationships. Her experience underscored the emotional toll and challenges that could arise when individuals compromised their own happiness and desires due to external pressures and fears about their age and prospects for finding love. Betty shared a contrasting experience to Hua, revealing that she promptly ended her relationship upon discovering her boyfriend's infidelity. However, what's intriguing is that when Betty reminisced about this, her predominant sentiment was regret for not having broken up with him earlier. She believed that ending the relationship earlier would have allowed her to have more dating options at a younger age. These participants had expressed the perception that youth corresponded to fertility and attractiveness. For these participants, their anxiety and concerns stemmed from an unspoken societal norm that associated youth and beauty with greater desirability and popularity in the context of the marriage market. In other words, these women's anxiety about their age was intertwined with concerns about their sexual attractiveness and fertility capabilities.

6.1.2 Experience of ageism in matchmaking

Within the marriage market, participants noted that women aged 30 or older were commonly labelled as "old women". Remarkably, even as early as 25 years old, these women felt a decline in their popularity among men and received numerous age-related derogatory remarks. With

advancing age, they were more frequently perceived as "less attractive" and "less fertile". The participants navigating this marriage market reported instances of objectification by men and matchmaking agencies, where their value was primarily determined by their youthfulness, physical appearance, and reproductive capacity. Unfortunately, their personal feelings, thoughts, interests, and preferences were often overlooked and disregarded during the matchmaking and dating processes. These stories demonstrate how societal expectations influenced by traditional and patriarchal ideologies contributed to age-based discrimination against these women in dating and reinforced gender imbalances in relationships.

The participants shared their encounters with ageism when dealing with matchmaking agencies. One such account comes from Cai, who narrated her experience of reaching out to a dating agency in the hope of finding a suitable match. Cai anticipated that the agency would assist her in connecting with men who shared similar age, education, and income backgrounds. Furthermore, she expected the agency to arrange dates for them. However, Cai's anger towards the marriage market was ignited during a conversation with the matchmaking agent. The agent stated that, at 28 years old, Cai was considered too old to be matched with a man of similar age. Instead, she was introduced to men who were 35 years old or older, which was not in line with her preferences or expectations:

> Cai: I said I wanted a man who was under 30, then that agent just suddenly closed
> her notebook, hid these younger men's profiles from me, and told me that those

young men were for women who were below 25 years old, she thought I should

date men who are at least over 33 because I'm too old. I was very angry to hear that.

Cai's experience shed light on the prevalence of ageism and gender disparities within the dating sphere. These participants encountered stricter age restrictions and possessed less autonomy compared to their male counterparts. Once they exceeded the age of 25, they were commonly perceived as less competitive in comparison to younger women. This perspective stemmed from traditional and patriarchal beliefs that prioritised younger women with higher fertility as more desirable to men. For instance, Maluo, at 38 years old and deemed to have surpassed her perceived "golden reproductive age", faced numerous rejections in her pursuit of potential matches. She shared that men frequently cited her age as a reason for their lack of interest, expressing a preference for younger women due to their aspirations of starting a family and having children. This exemplified how societal expectations, influenced by traditional and patriarchal norms, prioritised youth and fertility as determining factors in the desirability of women within the dating landscape.

Additionally, traditional Confucian values reinforced the expectation that these women should be younger than their male partner. This is seen as promoting harmony within the marital relationship. Younger women are expected to exhibit submissiveness and obedience towards their older counterparts. For instance, Fang shared her experience of being rejected by a younger man when she was 33 years old. The man politely cited their age difference of four years as a

reason for potential disagreements or arguments due to her perceived maturity. In traditional marriage relationships, younger women are presumed to be more easily controlled and submissive to their husbands.

Several participants shared their experiences at public dating corners in public parks, highlighting instances of ageism and sexism. Guan, for instance, encountered numerous derogatory comments based on her age. While she provided her education, job, and property details on a piece of paper, she purposely omitted her age. However, she was repeatedly asked about her age and why it had not been included. When she finally disclosed her age as 36, someone loudly exclaimed, *"36! No wonder you didn't write your age down! That is your weakness!"* Some men went even further, comparing a 36-year-old woman in the marriage market to a "second-hand house in the suburb area". This analogy was intended to diminish her value, suggesting that she was considered cheap, unpopular, and somehow flawed, all due to her age. Guan also received advice to compromise and consider dating men with a lower income or lesser education, as it was deemed "impossible" for her to get married otherwise. These demeaning experiences had a profound impact on Guan. She made the decision to refrain from visiting these matchmaking places, and it took her a considerable amount of time to rebuild her self-confidence. These accounts underlined the presence of ageist and sexist attitudes prevalent in certain dating environments, which could significantly affect a person's self-worth and emotional well-being.

These participants' dating experiences extended beyond traditional matchmaking agencies and public dating corners, as many also used dating apps. According to them, these apps facilitated more direct interactions between men and women compared to traditional methods. However, they also brought about uncomfortable and impolite ageist remarks. Sulin shared her personal experience with dating apps. According to participants, these platforms allowed users to view each other's profile, including details such as age, education, occupation, salary, homeownership, and *hukou* status. Surprisingly, Sulin noticed that many of the men who matched with her were either over 40 years old or divorced with children. Initially, she felt disheartened by these matches. However, she eventually came to terms with the possibility that a 30-year-old woman might only be able to date much older men. Consequently, she decided to meet a 40-year-old man. Unfortunately, this man was divorced and had a child. Furthermore, he expressed his disinterest in having more children and assumed that Sulin, due to her age, was no longer capable of bearing children. Sulin was deeply offended and frustrated by the man's remark. She felt that he had belittled her when he remarked that she was no longer young enough to have children, implying that her options were limited. While Sulin responded,

> Sulin: I haven't even decided whether to have children or not, this is my body, only I have the right to decide how to use it...but those men, they only care about my body, my fertility, they want to use my body for their own benefits...they don't care about your personality, hobbies.

Sulin's stories reveal her unwavering belief in the ownership of her own body, displaying a strong sense of bodily autonomy and personal agency. This indicates her conviction that decisions regarding her body should be solely hers, unaffected by the opinions of men. It also highlights her perception of being objectified and exploited through the male gaze.

During a time when society expected women to give birth around the age of 35, these women's value was seemingly determined solely by their age. As they engaged in matchmaking, they encountered numerous ageist comments. Moreover, they were pressured to compromise and date men who fell short of their ideals in order to conform to the expectations of marriage and family life. Under the influence of heterosexual family ideology and patriarchal norms, a woman's "dateability" seemed to hinge solely on her age and body. As the participants entered their 30s, they gradually lost their perceived value in the marriage market due to diminishing fertility, and they eventually felt compelled to exit the market altogether. Even if women in their thirties were still searching for a partner, they would encounter discrimination, prejudice and regulations on their age and body. They were casually denigrated as "leftovers", as men in this market were commonly reported to prefer younger women.

6.1.3 Mainstream heterosexual beauty standard

In addition to facing ageism, these participants also shared instances of pressure regarding their appearance and body shape. They not only encountered ageist remarks during matchmaking, but also experienced numerous sexist judgments related to their bodies. They were expected to

conform to the prevailing beauty standards in order to attract an ideal partner, and if they remained single, they would often be unfairly criticised as "not beautiful enough" to captivate men. This section delves into these women's encounters with sexist judgments concerning their appearance and body shape, as well as explores the impact of the patriarchal marriage market and its adherence to the mainstream beauty standards on women.

These participants had reported having received numerous comments from men regarding their body shape, having often been criticised as "too chubby" or not meeting the ideal standards. This pressure to maintain a certain physique had led some women to go to extreme lengths, sometimes even risking their health, to attempt to maintain a weight below the healthy range. These single women, in particular, who were actively seeking their ideal partner, were frequently blamed for not being "fit enough" to attract men.

In the pursuit of conforming to the beauty standards dictated by the male gaze, Fang have suffered from eating disorders by engaging in dangerous weight loss practices. Fang, who had previously faced sexist comments from her male colleagues, such as remarks about the fat on her cheek correlating with her inability to find a boyfriend, resorted to following strategies promoted on social media. These strategies included drinking weight-loss tea, severely restricting calories, and skipping meals. She believed that shedding weight would increase her chances of finding a suitable partner, as suggested by those men. However, her prolonged period of extreme calorie restriction eventually led to discomfort and a diagnosis of an eating

disorder and anorexia. Reflecting on that time, she described it as a "disaster" that nearly destroyed her life, leaving her devoid of self-confidence. According to Chen et al. (2018), a significant proportion (90%) of patients in China with eating disorders are young women, who are often driven by body anxiety. Betty, also shared her experience of receiving similar comments from male friends, even when her weight was within the healthy range. When describing her feelings about these comments, she expressed a belief that they were not intended to be hurtful and that she agreed with their assessment of her being "chubby". She added, "when men said this, it's also good to know what kind of women they like." This highlights how women have internalised these sexist comments, attributing their struggles to their own shortcomings in finding an ideal partner. They strongly believed that in order to enter heterosexual marriage relationships, they must understand men's gaze and preferences, and strive to meet their demands.

These single women not only faced pressure regarding their body shape but also endured numerous sexist comments about their appearance. Within a patriarchal culture influenced by mainstream beauty standards perpetuated by social media and business advertisements, these participants' personal style was often constrained. They were expected to possess traits such as "big eyes, bright skin, a tall nose, and a small frame". When they failed to meet these beauty standards and find their ideal partner, they would be unfairly blamed. Tiana, for instance, shared that one of the reasons she lacked confidence in herself was due to having been labelled as "ugly" by people. Since she was only 8 years old, her neighbours in her hometown would

comment on her appearance, making remarks such as "girls with single eyelids like her will struggle to find a husband" or "she isn't an attractive girl". These hurtful comments had deeply affected Tiana, leading her to doubt her ability to have a happy marriage and family in the future. She constantly attributed her failed dating experiences and relationships to her eyes and overall appearance, causing long-lasting frustration. As she said,

> Tiana: I don't think I will find a husband, I just don't think I can...I feel not being able to look pretty as a woman in China is a crime. Every time I failed a dating, I would question myself: "Is that because I do not look pretty?" I don't understand...I tried my best to be kind and friendly to everyone.

In Tiana's mind, whether a woman could have a successful marriage largely depended on whether she had a pretty face. The prevalence of such rude and derogatory comments made it challenging for these women to believe in their own worth and prospects for fulfilling relationships. The impact of societal beauty standards and the perpetuation of these ideals within a patriarchal framework contributed to their ongoing struggles and self-doubt. Lily, also shared that she had faced criticism for not having "fair skin and a prominent nose", which were deemed necessary attributes for being in a relationship. According to her, she felt compelled to compromise her own preferences when it came to choosing a partner due to her perceived lack of attractiveness. The issue of these women's singleness had been transformed into a personal problem, resulting in blame, scrutiny, and pressure to conform if they desired to marry. Within

the context of heterosexual norms, these single women continued to be objectified, subjected to scrutiny from a male perspective, and pressured to conform to conventional beauty standards in order to participate in mainstream married life.

These single women were blamed for their unmarried status, primarily because they did not conform to the dominant standards of beauty dictated by heterosexual norms and patriarchal culture. My participants were often perceived as having limited options and freedom within the marriage market and were constantly expected to make compromises in their partner preferences in order to secure a marriage. It is remarkable, albeit concerning, to observe that some participants had internalised these mainstream values, resulting in a sense of confusion and lack of confidence in themselves. They continued to be subjected to passive objectification based on the prevailing beauty standards within this patriarchal society. Consequently, they might feel compelled to compromise their own choices or actively employ strategies to conceal their perceived "flaws", which will be further discussed in the subsequent section.

6.1.4 Strategies on body management

As the women in this research reached their late twenties or thirties and faced difficulties in finding an ideal partner, they came to realise that it was their own responsibility to employ various strategies – they felt compelled to take action in order to break free from their single status. In line with the post-feminist and neoliberal ideologies, they perceived activities such as applying makeup, losing weight, undergoing facial surgeries, and visiting anti-ageing clinics as

forms of self-management and self-discipline. These practices were seen as strategies employed by "self-regulated women" to attract an ideal partner. Some participants firmly believed that "beauty lies within effort", and thus they no longer passively waited to be chosen by men. Instead, they actively strived to enhance their attractiveness within the marriage market. Numerous participants reported having invested significant efforts in managing their bodies, aiming to stand out and be prepared for the moment when they encounter someone ideal.

As previously discussed, these participants had been subjected to numerous sexist comments regarding their body shape, resulting in negative impacts on their lifestyle and self-identity formation. It was observed that they felt obligated to manage their body shape, fearing that a lack of control in this area would lead to blame and judgment. An example is Betty, who shared her experience of intentionally losing weight, even when she was already at a healthy weight. She believed that shedding 10kg would allow her to easily conform to the beauty standards and attract an ideal boyfriend. This experience was perceived as a means of self-improvement and self-control, with the expectation that she would become a "happier me" and a more confident individual once she attained a better body shape in the eyes of men. Despite her successful career, Betty felt compelled to spend money on luxury gyms and private classes due to having been labelled as "chubby". Her decision to regularly go to the gym was driven by a strong belief that she needed to improve herself to be more attractive to men. The post-feminist ideology promoted the notion that these successful women should manage their body weight in order to be sexually appealing. However, this ideology also perpetuated the internalisation of socially

constructed ideals of beauty and sexiness by these participants. They believed that conforming to these standards would help them shed their passive image of waiting to be chosen and gain more power, autonomy, and choices within the marriage market. In reality, they were being coerced into pleasing men by first "pleasing themselves" under the scrutiny of hostile surveillance and adherence to heterosexual norms.

Some participants had taken their quest for attractiveness to even greater lengths. Heather, a participant who successfully started her own company in recent years, revealed that she had spent over £10,000 on cosmetic and anti-ageing surgeries at beauty clinics to maintain her youth and beauty. Her goal was to appear as if she were 25 even when she reached the age of 40. Heather acknowledged that she would feel pressured if she were to give up her efforts to enhance her beauty and sexiness. Despite having attracted numerous men who were interested in dating her, she was yet to meet someone she genuinely liked. Similar to Betty's experience, Heather was influenced by the neoliberal ideology, believing that she must take full responsibility for her life in order to find a suitable partner. She had internalised the socially constructed ideals of beauty and sexiness, leading her to feel that the pressure she experienced did not come from external sources or society but rather from her own personal standards. These women were portrayed as seeking personal fulfilment rather than seeking men's approval, with men's admiration being a by-product of their self-pleasure (Gill, 2008). However, this ideology only intensified the scrutiny of women's bodies and regulated their choices and decisions by emphasising self-surveillance and self-monitoring. Ultimately, the underlying objective of this

self-management was still to appear younger and more attractive in the eyes of men, within the confines of patriarchal norms.

The participants not only invested significant amounts of money in beauty and body management but some had also expressed their intention to freeze their eggs overseas. As discussed in Chapter 1, local policies and limited internet access have restricted women from considering egg freezing as an option for their single lives. However, in this research, some women had expressed their desire to freeze their eggs overseas in order to extend their decision-making period and expand their options. These educated women, with international education backgrounds and living experiences, had gained access to more information regarding the rights and policies concerning single women outside of China. Summer shared her intention to freeze her eggs in Europe, allowing herself more time to contemplate the decision of having children, while Cai considered doing this in Southeast Asia. It is crucial to recognise that these participants were striving to prolong their single period as much as possible in order to have more agency in making decisions. However, the extent to which they can extend this period was still limited. For these single women who anticipated having children in the future, egg freezing served as one method to extend their temporary stage as single individuals. Furthermore, the costs associated with freezing eggs, including travel, accommodation, and medical fees, according to some participants, could not be easily afforded. Even among these educated women who had achieved success in their careers and gained access to information,

only a small number of them had the capability for bearing the high costs in pursuit of having more "choices" as a single woman.

Some participants who possessed greater agency in managing their age, body, and appearance, inadvertently reinforces the prevailing beauty standards and age-related anxieties perpetuated by the media and the marriage market in the patriarchal society. This, in turn, exerted pressure on other women with fewer resources and limited self-management capabilities to expend their savings avoiding being labelled as "leftover" or being "left behind". Wendy expressed her concerns about not appearing as youthful as she used to in the past, as she found it increasingly challenging to attract men as she entered her thirties. As she said,

> Wendy: One man commented under my photo on social media saying "you don't look young and cute as before in university", I was very panicky about it...I used to be popular among guys when I was younger...I'm planning for Thermage...it is expensive, each treatment cost around £3000, but I'm saving money for it.

In comparison to the other participants, Wendy faced greater financial pressure when it came to affording the costs of anti-ageing treatments. However, in her pursuit of remaining attractive to find an ideal partner, she reported to have been willing to invest money in such treatments. Unlike other participants who emphasised the concept of self-management, Wendy placed importance on the comments and opinions of men. Following the prevailing trend of undergoing

cosmetic surgery or seeking anti-ageing treatments, these single women would allocate a significant portion of their savings to preserve their youthfulness and beauty, with the aim of being appealing in the marriage market.

In the face of traditional cultural influences, gender inequality, and modernisation from the West, these participants had encountered various challenges in conforming to the prevailing beauty standards in order to integrate into mainstream society and find a partner quickly. Some participants, who possessed greater financial means and access to information, believed that their efforts to enhance their appearance and maintain self-discipline were signs of autonomy and empowerment. While there were other participants who felt pressured and compelled to follow the trend, fearing being left behind or labelled as "leftover" in the marriage market. Within the frameworks of neoliberalism and post-feminism, some women had chosen to present themselves as confident, proactive, and desiring heterosexual individuals, while others strived to catch up with this trend. Despite their differing approaches, these participants shared a common goal: to find an ideal partner, establish a conventional family life, and conform to the norms of heterosexuality. These women had been encouraged by the notion of "can-do" girl power, pushing them to invest money and effort in shaping and controlling their own bodies. However, in this patriarchal society, their bodies are still strongly objectified and sexualised (Gill, 2008). Despite the illusion of increased freedom and choice for these participants, these choices remained constrained, gendered, and regulated.

6.2 Being a feminine woman?: gender expression as women

The structure of gender, based on a binary relation, has laid the groundwork for the social construction of gender differences, shaping concepts of masculinity and femininity. It has been observed that traditional femininity had demanded these participants to be obedient and docile. Consequently, the participants encountered limitations on their behaviour and personality, imposed by the norms of traditional femininity within their relationships. Simultaneously, these highly educated women faced the challenge of navigating the expectations of being successful and independent, aligning with the notion of "empowered" femininity. Furthermore, the social construction of gender differences complicated these women's ability to establish fulfilling interactions and relationships with men, as they grappled with societal expectations surrounding their gender expression. This section delves into the experiences of women who had been negatively affected by the social construction of gender differences in their daily lives. It explores how these differences influenced their understanding of self-identity and their expression of gender.

6.2.1 Traditional femininity

According to the women in this research, they encountered expectations to exhibit humility and docility, as these traits were deemed appropriate for women. Traditional femininity had dictated that these women should display less assertiveness, speak less, and conform to their future husband's opinions within marriage. These women's worth was often tied to their relationships with men, leading to the expectation of cultivating an obedient personality in order to please

men and adhere to family traditions. Consequently, the more feminine women were perceived to be, the greater the likelihood that they would satisfy their future husbands and meet the expectations of traditional Chinese marriage.

Several women shared their experiences of conforming to traditional femininity expectations. Under the influence of heterosexual norms, their behaviours were subjected to discipline and regulation. They were discouraged from voicing their thoughts and opinions, while their true feelings and preferences were disregarded. The prescribed personality for these women was one of quietude and submission, aiming to please men and potentially become a gentle wife and mother capable of providing emotional and mental support for the entire family. They found it challenging to get rid of traditional expectations and express their true sense of self.

Wendy, for instance, recounted having been repeatedly advised to be gentle, docile, and submissive to attract men. Reflecting on her past romantic relationships, Wendy described herself as a quintessentially "*wen rou* (feminine and gentle) woman". She had never made decisions independently but refrained from expressing her own strong opinions, and obediently followed the guidance of others, even within her romantic partnerships. Wendy found that her feminine demeanour made her popular among men in the dating realm. Throughout her previous relationships, she had had five long-term partners, all of whom expressed appreciation for her docile personality. Due to her popularity among men, Wendy believed that maintaining her adherence to traditional gender traits was crucial for eventually getting married and settling

down. However, as Wendy approached her thirties, she began to develop stronger preferences and opinions regarding relationships and partners, prompting her to consider making changes. As Wendy tried to express her own preference more in a relationship, she started to feel more confused about her sense of self and femininity:

> Wendy: I used to be proud of my personality, everyone told me I should be feminine and every man told me they liked it... but now I don't want to be like this anymore...I want to say 'no' to men sometimes, because I feel I need more respect and equal communication...now I feel I'm stuck, I feel I have to keep my docility so that I can find a boyfriend, but I don't want to please anyone anymore.

The catalyst for Wendy's desire to initiate change was her realisation that she had not been respected in her past relationships. While conforming to traditional femininity norms had garnered attention from men, it conflicted with her strong sense of self. Presently, she yearned for respect and equality in relationships. Wendy acknowledged that she no longer wished to adhere to the societal expectation of traditional femininity; instead, she sought to explore her authentic self rather than simply pleasing men submissively. Jenny shared a similar experience, recalling how her ex-boyfriend had fallen in love with her when she displayed vulnerability by crying in his presence, as it aligned with the perception that a woman needed protection. However, Jenny felt frustrated by the fact that her ex-boyfriend only valued her for her feminine image. She refused to identify herself as an obedient woman as depicted by traditional values,

and instead took pride in her role as a lawyer, participating in outdoor activities, and viewing herself as an "energetic, strong, decisive, and ambitious" individual. Consequently, both Wendy's and Jenny's experiences underscored the tendency for men to place greater emphasis on and value traditional feminine traits over a woman's authentic self, regardless of how they construct their sense of identity.

Other women shared similar experiences of having conflicting senses of self as they were expected to conform to traditional femininity while simultaneously pursuing education and career goals. Lily, for instance, encountered numerous prejudices regarding her image while pursuing her doctoral degree. As discussed in Chapter 1, society often perceives a female PhD as "too smart", "aggressive", and unattractive to men. This perception resonates with the old Chinese saying, "Ignorance is women's virtue", which reflects the traditional ideology that expects women to prioritise their roles within the home and family, discouraging further education or ambitious career aspirations. As Lily said,

> Lily: My friends said women being a PhD sounds too aggressive, no men would like me or want me to be their wife, they would only be scared away.

Traditional femininity created a conflict for these women who strived for success and ambition in their education and careers. The expectations placed on these women's education and career goals were judged within the confines of a heterosexual norm, emphasising the traditional role

of being a good wife and mother. Sulin's experience during her undergraduate years illustrates this conflict. She aspired to be an "independent woman who can make a living" and worked hard to become a lawyer, and was proud of her identity as an "independent and hard-working" individual. However, her ex-boyfriend often argued with her, claiming that hard-working women lacked sexual attractiveness and likening them to "iron women". Despite feeling empowered by the increased opportunities and new femininity that allowed for autonomy, Sulin found herself pressured to conform to traditional femininity in order to maintain a loving and caring girlfriend role within the confines of a heterosexual relationship. This pressure led to concerns about being judged as single because she had prioritised her work or been deemed too ambitious, resulting in no suitors. As a response, Sulin planned to get married and transition to a less demanding career, such as consulting, by the time she turned 35. Following her break-up, Sulin gradually adjusted her work schedule to align with these expectations. As Sulin described herself,

> Sulin: I don't want to become an 'iron woman' or a 'manly woman', that's too exhausting, I'm not a workaholic...and I have some feminine personalities...because I want to find a partner, I guess I shouldn't show a very aggressive image to people.

Similar to Sulin, Betty also shared similar aspirations for her personality. She believed in maintaining a balance between ambition in her career and displaying femininity when interacting with men. Initially, Betty thought it was important to highlight her job and career

achievements during dating conversations. However, she received negative comments from men, such as being perceived as "arrogant" or "aggressive". Consequently, she made the decision to no longer mention her career accomplishments.

It is noteworthy that successful career women like Sulin and Betty have felt the need to conceal their ambition. Under the constraints of the heterosexual norms, the participants who were ambitious in their careers were often subjected to derogatory judgements and biases. The identity of being a successful career woman was undervalued, as it contradicted traditional feminine expectations that men associated with an ideal wife and mother. In this societal context, the participants still found themselves compelled to compromise and withdraw from the job market competition, which continued to be predominantly governed by men with stereotypically "manly traits".

6.2.2 To be manly or feminine?

In contrast to those participants who had been grappling with their traditional feminine traits, some had actively resisted conforming to feminine gender expression, often facing judgements for not fitting in with the image of heterosexual women. Diverging from the path taken by Wendy and Sulin, who faced internal conflicts over their self-identity but eventually embraced their traditional feminine traits, these women firmly rejected the societal pressures to conform to traditional femininity. Instead, they actively sought to construct their own unique ways of

expressing gender. Nevertheless, they still encountered numerous questions and doubts regarding their own identity.

Due to the impact of One-Child policy, as discussed in Chapter 1, some women who were born in only-daughter families had been encouraged with heavy parental support to pursue their education and career goals regardless of their gender. Cai, being the only daughter in her family, was consistently perceived by her parents as their "son" and was expected to embody qualities of bravery and strength typically associated with men. Throughout her upbringing, Cai had been encouraged by her parents to engage in sports activities, participate in competitions, and even consider joining the military. These experiences instilled in her a positive mindset, enabling her to freely choose her own path regardless of gender norms. In fact, Cai believed she could match men in actions and achievements by embracing certain "masculine" qualities and cultivating aspects of masculinity. She took pride in being able to compete alongside men and was even referred to as a *jia xiao zi* ("tomboy") by her peers.

Nevertheless, as Cai entered her twenties and began interacting and dating men, she discovered that her "manly traits" were not always embraced by potential partners, making it difficult for her to find a boyfriend. She frequently encountered questions from others such as "Why do you enjoy activities typically associated with boys?" or "Why do you behave like a boy?" These enquiries had led her to question her self-identity and her "manly" traits for an extended period of time. During one of her dates, a man even suggested that she grow longer hair, believing it

would make her appear more feminine and increase her chances of finding a boyfriend. However, Cai responded with anger, adamantly refusing to conform to his request. As she reported,

> Cai: I really like my short hair, it is convenient and it also showed my personality of being confident and decisive...I will never grow long hair just as men said – to become feminine to please men? Impossible...I believe I will eventually find a man who likes my short hair.

Within the confines of heterosexual norms, these women were limited to a single choice in their gender expression, which dictated that they should be gentle, obedient, and subservient. This was believed to increase their chances of securing a potential marriage and being chosen as a wife in the future. In contrast, those who exhibited gender expressions similar to men faced scrutiny and criticism. While many participants grappled with the conflicts of not being feminine enough, Cai boldly embraced her preference for a more masculine gender expression, firmly believing that she would eventually find a suitable partner. However, she also showed disdain for women who adhered to traditional femininity solely to conform to heterosexual norms or attract a boyfriend. She saw them as merely seeking to please men. According to her, women should follow her lead, behave more like men, and compete with them instead of allowing them to dictate the rules for women.

Although being encouraged to be "strong and brave like a man" had brought Cai numerous achievements in her career, her choice to embrace masculine traits within the binary framework of gender further reinforced the dominance of masculinity and the hierarchical relationship between masculinity and femininity in this patriarchal society. She also internalised the power of patriarchy within her self-identity. This trend was especially prevalent among the generation of only-child daughters who faced high parental expectations to achieve the same level of success as men, while working environments predominantly governed by men demand assertiveness and the authority associated with masculinity (Liu, 2014). By rejecting and critiquing feminine qualities, Cai inadvertently adopted patriarchal norms to construct her self-identity and gender expression. She believed that embracing masculine traits and competitiveness would bring women success "as men". However, this approach failed to grant Cai the true freedom to live her ideal lifestyle and make choices aligned with her desires. Despite her aspirations of finding a husband and getting married like other women, she continued to face societal scrutiny as a "leftover woman" due to her unique gender expression within the confines of heterosexual norms.

Summer, another participant, shared a unique experience of striving to break free from traditional femininity. Unlike other women, Summer explained that she had never exhibited overtly feminine or masculine traits in her personality. However, recently she began to feel more perplexed about her identity due to certain comments she had received. Summer often spent her free time engaging in games and sports alongside her male friends, hoping to find a

boyfriend who shared similar interests. However, her male friends would describe her as "being like a boy" who participated in activities such as basketball, suggesting that she might be more appealing to girls. During her undergraduate years, classmates and even teachers perceived her as a lesbian simply because she did not conform to traditional femininity. Summer also had a conversation with her family about her single status, which she vividly recalled:

> Summer: My mum apprehensively asked me why I was still single, she even asked, "Do you like women?" I said I don't, I like men, then she was relieved and said "Thank God you are not a lesbian!"...Do I behave like a boy? I just don't have those girls' hobbies...I do feel I need to find a boyfriend soon otherwise I will look too "abnormal" in their eyes.

Summer's conversations with her mother and friends shed light on the expectations imposed by the heterosexual norm. According to these societal expectations, women must exhibit feminine traits or even enter into relationships to validate their adherence to the image of heterosexual women. Failure to conform to these expectations often implied that being single or identifying as LGBT+ would be perceived as undesirable or problematic. These heterosexual single women found themselves in a position where they must prove their self-identity by showcasing hobbies and interests traditionally associated with other women. Simultaneously, they felt pressured to shed their single status by demonstrating their sexual attractiveness. The heterosexual norm compelled these women to take action in pursuit of finding a boyfriend to

validate their "normalcy" and align with mainstream sexuality. Some participants who did not fit the idealised image prescribed by society might face questions and doubts regarding their sexuality. Consequently, these heterosexual single women perceived that the only path available to them was to display more feminine behaviour and enter into relationships in order to prove their conformity to societal expectations.

6.2.3 Empowered femininity

In contrast to the aforementioned findings, it has also been observed that some participants were often perceived as privileged agents of social change. They were encouraged to pursue their own interests and aspirations with the support of empowered and confident female role models. These women were expected to attain higher educational qualifications and position themselves as competent and capable individuals within the workforce. Consequently, they developed an identity as women with a sense of capacity and ability. This shift had given rise to new and independent sexual identities, as well as a redefined notion of femininity that emphasised female autonomy.

However, it is worth noting that this new direction of femininity placed these participants under a dual burden of pressure. They were not only expected to pursue their career goals and achieve success to prove their independence as modern women, but they were also required to showcase their sexual attractiveness and actively engage in dating to demonstrate their capability of managing personal relationships. Meeting this added expectation would ensure that they were

not labelled as "losers" or "leftovers" within the marriage market. As a result, these women faced a unique challenge of balancing professional ambitions with societal expectations surrounding their personal lives.

The participants had shared their experiences of being caught in a dilemma, constantly navigating between different gender expressions in their work and personal lives. Jenny recounted her story within her work environment, where she felt compelled to exhibit "careful, cautious, and unaggressive" traits typically associated with femininity. This was done to prove her efficiency in completing tasks while also downplaying her ambition to compete with men for higher positions. Another participant, Sulin, described how her colleagues labelled their 45-year-old female manager as "never smile, manly, lonely, and miserable". Fearful of receiving similar comments, Sulin resisted conforming to that image. Ming also shared that her ex-boyfriend had expected her not only to excel in her career but also to present herself with impeccable makeup and fashionable attire to enhance her attractiveness.

As successful career women, they faced the pressure of adopting a mask of feminine submissiveness, even in professional settings, if they intended to pursue marriage. In the workplace, these women were expected to display professionalism, showcasing the notion that "girls can do it". However, they also needed to suppress their competitive instincts and downplay any rivalry with men to maintain their sexual desirability. This double standard placed a burden on these women, demanding that they project a professional yet feminine and

submissive attitude even in work-related contexts. Deviating from these expectations could make them appear unattractive and unpopular. This reveals the complex expectations and challenges faced by these women as they navigated between societal demands for professionalism and femininity. The pressure to conform to gender norms in both their career and personal life added an additional layer of complexity and potential judgement.

Furthermore, it has been reported that these women, upon finishing their work, were compelled to engage in active and enthusiastic efforts to dress up, apply make-up, and actively pursue dating opportunities in a smart and efficient manner. Jenny shared her experience of frequently scheduling dates during her lunch breaks, as her work often extended until late evening hours, and she even had to work on weekends at times. In one particular instance, she found herself rushing to apply make-up, taking the metro for just two stops, and running in her high heels to meet a man at a cafe before swiftly returning to her workplace. Jenny believed she should be capable of managing this demanding schedule, as it reflected her identity as a modern urban woman who can skilfully balance work and personal life. In regard to this hectic schedule, Jenny expressed a mixed attitude. On one hand, she understood the necessity of actively pursuing personal relationships and making time for dating. On the other hand, she also conveyed a sense of burden and pressure, as it required her to juggle various responsibilities and engagements within a limited timeframe:

Jenny: It is quite a lot of pressure for me, I have to squeeze different activities into every hour of my time...but you know, that's all women in Shanghai do...I enjoy this, because this makes me feel like I'm a Shanghainese woman, and I feel I'm trying hard for my personal life and relationships, I'm making efforts for my future happiness.

According to Jenny, she believed that successful and independent women should actively make efforts and take responsibility for their personal relationships. This suggests that these women themselves were held accountable for pursuing marriage and family life, and if they remained single, it was often perceived as their own fault, particularly for those who were independent and accomplished in their career. Empowered femininity placed expectations on these women to not only excel in their professional lives but also conceal their ambition to maintain their sexual attractiveness. Additionally, they were obligated to flawlessly manage their personal lives within their busy schedule to demonstrate success in both areas. This highlights the complex pressures faced by these women, where they were not only expected to achieve professional success but also bear the burden of ensuring a fulfilling personal life. The notion of empowered femininity placed a heavy emphasis on these women's ability to balance multiple roles and maintain societal ideals of success, often leaving them vulnerable to self-blame and scrutiny if they did not meet these expectations.

These single women were not only expected to make time for dating in their daily schedule but also acquire the skills necessary to choose a suitable partner and successfully transition into a relationship. Heather, had a unique perspective as a successful media company owner who had spent five years overseas and gained exposure to dating cultures in Western countries. When discussing her dating experiences, she exuded confidence in her dating skills and the ability to discern whether a man was suitable for a long-term relationship. She enthusiastically shared insights on how clothing choices and hairstyles could enhance attractiveness on a date. Additionally, she touched upon the importance of adopting certain attitudes towards sexual topics, as they were perceived as more "appropriate" and attractive for women. As she explained, women should exhibit certain behaviours and beliefs to enhance their appeal in the dating realm:

Heather: So you should not be too open, but not too reserved about sex, to prove that you are not traditional but also not too experienced...I prefer to show I'm sexy with some revealing clothes, I wear what I want...I think I'm very feminist and liberal, I don't like those traditional rules.

It is intriguing to note that Heather, in this context, identified herself as a feminist by emphasising her sexual attractiveness to men in the dating realm. Rather than conforming to traditional notions of femininity that promote submissiveness and obedience, she actively embraced a self-image as a sexy and appealing woman who skilfully navigated the dating scene.

By being attractive and proactive in her dating endeavours, Heather felt a sense of empowerment as a modern, confident woman who asserted her agency within the framework of heterosexual norms. However, it is important to recognise that despite their claims of empowerment and feminism, these women's ultimate objective remained entering into a marriage and forming a family, adhering to the established rules of heterosexual dating.

These accomplished career women faced the dual burden of establishing themselves as successful professionals and female subjects of competence while also conforming to societal expectations of desirable heterosexuality. In addition to their professional achievements, they were compelled to present themselves as sexually appealing to men and maintain fulfilling romantic relationships. These highly educated single women had redefined a new form of empowered femininity. They not only strived for independence, autonomy, and personal success, but they also sought to cultivate their attractiveness in order to find their ideal partners, nurture their love relationships, and expedite the path to marriage and motherhood. These women navigated the complexities of contemporary gender expectations, as they endeavoured to balance their professional aspirations with the pursuit of fulfilling personal lives within the confines of societal norms and expectations.

6.3 Being a traditional married woman?: patriarchal norms and gender roles

The dominance of gender roles, heterosexual norms, and patriarchal residence rules within heterosexual relationships and marriage traditions posed significant challenges for these

participants in their search for an ideal partner. Traditional expectations dictated that these women adhere to patriarchal and patrilocal residence rules in their past relationships, and conform to traditional gender roles within the context of marriage and family. These societal norms, as explored in Chapter 4, have led some women to internalise patriarchal ideologies, ultimately expecting to enter into traditional marriages with men fulfilling the role of the sole breadwinner.

However, these educated career women desired to be respected for their career and their life by their partner, rather than being relegated to the role of a housewife. In reality, they encountered numerous obstacles and biases in their relationships, making it challenging to find an ideal partner who genuinely values their emotions and sense of self in this traditional society. These women faced the dilemma of navigating their aspirations for personal fulfilment and professional success within a cultural framework that often undermined their autonomy and agency.

6.3.1 Patrilocal residence and patriarchal rules

As discussed in Chapter 1, the Chinese proverb of "spilt water" characterises married daughters who are expected to adhere to patrilocal rules, relocating to their husband's city or town and becoming part of his family. This expectation remains prevalent within traditional marriages, irrespective of factors such as the woman owning a house or having a higher income than her partner. Following the husband and assimilating into his family has become an implicit norm

in these marriages. These women participants had shared their observations and personal experiences of patrilocal residence rules within their own family or relationships, shaping their expectations for their future marriages.

They had also shared their experiences of patrilocal residence norms through their parents' lives, leading them to harbour pessimistic views about their future partner and married life. For instance, Summer grew up in a single-mother family and witnessed her mother remarrying when she was 22 years old. She noticed that her mother often prioritised spending important family festival time with her husband's family rather than with Summer and her own parents. Curious about this, Summer asked her mother why she had consistently chosen to be with her husband's family, to which her mother simply replied, "This is Chinese tradition, you will understand when you have a husband." This interaction left a lasting impression on Summer, shaping her perception of marriage as an unequal and unpleasant arrangement, one where she would risk losing her autonomy. While she still hoped to find a suitable partner, she was determined not to follow in her mother's footsteps and felt powerless to challenge the traditional patrilocality. She believed that it would be challenging to find a husband who shared her views against patrilocal norms in such a traditional society.

In addition to the influence of patrilocal residence rules on women's perceptions of marriage in their childhood, some participants experienced the implications of these norms in their past relationships. It is observed that within the framework of patrilocal residence, men often had

better job opportunities in more developed cities or countries, while women were expected to follow them, potentially giving up their current career and starting anew in the place where their partner was. Ming's story illustrates this dynamic. She used to reside in Shanghai with her ex-boyfriend and had plans to marry, but her ex-boyfriend suddenly decided to pursue further studies in the UK as a doctoral student. Ming had a stable career as a government official in Shanghai and was content with her current situation. Being frustrated by her ex-boyfriend's unilateral decision, she questioned him why he hadn't discussed it with her beforehand. He revealed that he had assumed she would give up her career and join him in the UK, starting afresh with a similar job. When Ming shared her predicament with friends and family, they all urged her to go to the UK, citing opportunities for career development and the chance to be with someone she loved in a Western country. However, Ming did not want to sacrifice her career in Shanghai or her identity as an independent working woman. Consequently, they ended their relationship. Ming believed that following her ex-boyfriend's plans would result in an unequal relationship where she would rely on him for her livelihood for an extended period, which was not aligned with her aspirations. Throughout this experience, Ming felt that she was expected by those around her to unquestioningly follow her potential husband without any agency or autonomy to make her own choices regarding where to live and work. She perceived that being in a relationship often entailed surrendering her personal autonomy.

Fang had a comparable experience to share. Working as a full-time employee in a trading company, she often had to put in extra hours and occasionally had to travel abroad for business

purposes. In the past, she used to have a boyfriend who had a similarly demanding work schedule but lived in a different city, which meant they could only meet once a month. Despite being content with most aspects of their relationship, their busy schedules posed a challenge. Eventually, the man suggested that Fang work in his company as his employee, where it would allow them to spend more time together in the future. However, Fang declined the offer and decided to end the relationship. According to Fang,

> Fang: I wanted him to come to my city, because my parents and grandparents are all here... but he told me he was in a lead position in his company, and his job had better future compared to mine... but I was also a manager in my company, I felt my career was not respected...it would not be very fair if I had become his employee and been far away from my family.

Fang prioritised having an independent career rather than relying on men for professional opportunities. She made a clear distinction between her personal life and her career aspirations. In Fang's narrative, the man she was involved with held a higher social status and had a greater income than her. When he offered her a job in his company, it signified that he valued his own career more than hers, which led to an imbalance in their relationship. Fang firmly believed that she would never sacrifice her own career for a relationship governed by the patrilocal residence norm.

In these heterosexual relationships, there existed a prevalent expectation for these women to adhere to patrilocal norms and make sacrifices, often at the expense of their own career development and personal aspirations. Their lives, careers, and families were not always given the same level of respect as their partners'. These participants were often required to relocate, compromise, and make sacrifices in order to sustain the relationship. The significant contributions they had made in past relationships led these single women to believe that achieving an equal partnership without the need for constant compromise would always be a challenge. On the other hand, men, as reported by these women, appeared to be less inclined to give up their career or current lifestyle for the sake of the relationship, instead they expected women to contribute more. It fell upon women to uphold the relationship and shoulder the responsibility of making sacrifices, regardless of their success in their careers or satisfaction with their current life.

6.3.2 Resisting traditional gender roles

These women's narratives not only highlighted the pressure to conform to patrilocal residence rules but also shed light on the persistence of traditional gender roles within the household. The traditional division of housework based on gender continued to be a prevalent expectation in many heterosexual relationships, as reported by several participants. Both Ming and Guan shared their experiences of living with their boyfriends and both described it as "unequal and uncomfortable". In Ming's case, her ex-boyfriend adhered to traditional gender norms, expecting her to take on all the cooking and housework responsibilities. Sometimes, he even

demanded that she clean the house before his went home. Ming found herself perplexed by this dynamic. Despite both having graduated from reputable universities and having stable full-time jobs, she had been expected to shoulder the entire burden of household chores simply because she was a woman. She possessed a strong sense of self and firmly believed that the traditional notions of family and marriage did not align with her desires and aspirations:

> Ming: I know he is a smart person, and he is successful in his career, but I also have a master's degree and I'm also successful in my job, I have lots of love from my parents, I do not aim to become a housewife to take care of him...but he always asked me to cook, do the dishes, laundry...why do I need to stay in a relationship to take care of another man and do all housework for him?

When these educated and career-oriented women, who grew up as the only child in their family, entered into traditional relationships, they often encountered disagreements and conflicts regarding traditional gender roles. These women aspired to have more gender-equal relationships, yet men were still reported to impose traditional ideologies within the context of marriage.

Guan had a similar but contrasting experience compared to Ming. She used to believe that she should assume a traditional role within her own family and viewed it as a way to express her love for her partner. Guan's mindset was influenced by her upbringing in Northeastern China,

where traditional gender roles and the lower status of women were prevalent. She believed that being a good wife meant taking care of her husband and willingly taking on all the household responsibilities, as her mother and grandmother had done. Initially, Guan embraced this traditional housewife role and found satisfaction in it. However, as their relationship progressed and as Guan envisioned a happy future together as a married couple, her boyfriend began to criticise her and blamed her for not fulfilling her expected duties in the household. Reflecting on this, Guan realised her naivety during that time, describing herself as an "unmarried housewife" who experienced the negative aspects of married life. Since then, she had changed her perspective to try and find a husband who respected her career, valued her feelings, and did not impose traditional rules on their relationship.

According to these women, many men were still adhering to the traditional belief that "men work outside and women handle household chores", expecting their girlfriend or wife to shoulder all the responsibilities of housework while they focus on being the breadwinner. Chapter 1 has highlighted the increasing trend of cohabitation before marriage among young people, which provides them with a glimpse into married life. Consequently, these participants had more opportunities to understand what they could anticipate in a genuine marital relationship. Despite the encouragement for women to pursue a career, these participants who had been focusing on their profession continued to be constrained by traditional gender ideologies, which confined them to domestic roles.

Apart from the traditional gendered division of housework, some participants were also expected by men to become mothers, as discussed previously. This expectation was regarded as a natural path for these women, even if they did not want to have children. As discussed in Chapter 5, Heather and Wendy expressed that they did not plan to have children after marriage due to personal reasons. However, they both agreed that finding a man who could accept a childless marriage was very difficult for them. They had both experienced break-ups because of disagreements with their partners regarding the decision to have children. Wendy mentioned that her previous partner emphasized the Chinese family tradition of *chuan zong jie dai* (passing on the family name and lineage), and they could not accept adoption or not having children. Heather had been prepared to marry her previous partner, but they could not agree on whether to have children or not. She believed that the expectation for women to become mothers imposed by men was a form of gender inequality.

> Heather: Men care about whether their genes and family name can be passed down to the next generation, but we, as women, bear the risks of pregnancy and take on the primary responsibility for taking care of the baby. This is not equal. I do not want to be a part of an unequal relationship.

The traditional family ideology of continuing one's family and ancestral traditions remained deeply ingrained in Chinese society, making it difficult for women with different thoughts and choices to have fulfilling, equal relationships in this environment. The ability of these single

women to have equal relationships was still limited by traditional family ideology and the traditional expectations placed on gender roles.

In addition to their past relationship experiences, many women had also faced pressure to conform to traditional gender roles even in the early stages of dating. Some women reported that men expected them to embrace the role of a traditional wife and mother immediately after marriage. For instance, Sulin shared that one man she met the first time asked her to quit her job as a lawyer so she could become a housewife. Jenny recounted how a man on their first date enquired about her job's busyness and salary, expressing his desire to find a woman with a stable but less demanding job to solely focus on family rather than her career. Hua mentioned a man who attempted to use his financial support for her career as a bargaining chip for marriage, assuming that women always desired financial support from men. Lily shared that on their first date, a man informed her that he wanted them to have two children if they got married. Men were observed to have these expectations for women to assume traditional roles as a wife and a mother, leaving their job and taking on domestic responsibilities while men acted as the sole breadwinner. These experiences had left them feeling disappointed with men and the dating scene, where traditional marriage and traditional gender roles have taken precedence over love as the primary goal of dating. As Jenny mentioned,

> Jenny: I had expected my dating experiences to involve more chemistry and
> excitement when interacting with these men, but instead, I felt that those men were

more focused on material possessions rather than genuine emotions. Even on the first date, conversations revolved around property, children, and economic backgrounds. It seemed like many people lacked an understanding of love.

Although some participants, like Jenny, placed a higher value on love rather than practical benefits in a marriage, the women in this research presented conflicting opinions. These participants desired both love and emotional fulfilment from their relationships, while also expressing concerns about materialistic benefits. They aimed to have a more gender-equal relationship and resist the traditional gender roles, yet they also had expectations for their partners to fulfil the traditional breadwinner role. As discussed in Chapter 4, it was noted that many women had more practical thoughts and desired a future husband who would be the primary breadwinner. Although they still valued the idea of the husband making a greater financial contribution, they did not adhere strictly to traditional gender roles of a breadwinner and a housewife. Instead, these women expressed a preference for balancing family responsibilities while maintaining their own careers and sources of income. They expected men to contribute more financially in order to create a balance with their own caregiving contributions. However, their stories revealed that if men insisted on them becoming housewives, abandoning their careers without any negotiation or input, and if they were unable to make decisions or maintain autonomy within the relationship, feelings of inequality would persist, as discussed earlier. Therefore, the women in this research demonstrated resistance to fully adopting traditional gender divisions of housework. They aspired to embrace the roles of

wife and mother, and take on increased family care responsibilities, while simultaneously preserving their identity as a career woman.

There were also other participants who made an effort to break free from traditional constraints and hoped to find a man they genuinely love without considering his economic background. However, it is reported that establishing modern relationships devoid of any traditional gender practices had been proved to be nearly impossible. Hua, for instance, recently found herself falling in love with a young man who happened to be six years younger than her. Despite his status as a freelancer without an urban *hukou*, Hua was captivated by his manner of speaking and his personality. Nevertheless, many of her friends tried to dissuade her from pursuing a relationship with him. Hua expressed her deep affection for this man and emphasised that she was unconcerned about whether he earned more or less than her. She firmly believed that through her own hard work, they could build a better life together in the future. Unfortunately, their relationship eventually came to an end because her ex-partner reportedly felt uneasy in this unconventional dynamic:

> Hua: I told him I did not care about his salary, or where he was from, but he said he cared about it, he told me that my having much higher income than him had made him feel like a loser in this relationship...I don't know why men always wanted to become a breadwinner to feel good about themselves?

These women exhibited some notable differences compared to the previous generations. They were born into an era characterised by greater freedom in the matter of love and increased gender equality. Many of these educated women, having been raised as the only daughter, had received abundant love and support from their parents and have found success in their own careers. Consequently, it became challenging for them to fully conform to traditional gender roles in their relationships. Furthermore, having experienced negative encounters in traditional relationships, some participants had come to believe that their ideal marriage and family life should embody greater gender equality. They might experience conflicting emotions as they reconciled their past experiences with their aspirations for an equal partnership. However, these women genuinely hoped to find a man who can both respect and love them. The only hurdle they faced was that they had yet to encounter a man who was capable of and willing to build an equitable relationship with them.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed how single women in this study faced challenges in a gender-unequal social environment and patriarchal society, and discussed what they had experienced in their past relationships and how they constructed their own sense of identity. Firstly, in their dating and relationship experience, they had received ageist and sexist comments from men and social expectations for them to become preserve their youthfulness and beauty in this dating market. Secondly, these educated career women were also required to manage their youth and beauty in a neoliberal way by employing strategies and spending money. They were also expected to

follow traditional gender expression to be obedient and feminine in their relationships, while also being independent, autonomous, having strategies to balance their work and relationships. Thirdly, these women also experienced patrilocal residence and patriarchal rules in their past relationships, and were required to take on gendered roles in their marriage. These participants expressed that they wanted a more gender-equal relationship, but they still found it challenging to find an ideal man who respected their career, their life choices, and their sense of self.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of "leftover women" demonstrates that in Chinese society, women have gained greater access to education and career opportunities over the past 30 years due to marketisation and modernisation reforms. As a result, they have started actively planning and choosing their personal lifestyles, gradually relying less on traditional paths of marriage and family life. However, this derogatory term also highlights that traditional institutions such as marriage and family still persist in China, and society continues to expect single women in their late twenties or early thirties to marry soon.

This study utilised qualitative narrative interviews with a feminist perspective and online methods due to the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The objective was to investigate the experiences and narratives of "leftover women" across various aspects of their lives, encompassing areas such as dating, intimate relationships, early education experiences, career journeys, daily social interactions, and their interactions with men, family, and society. This research specifically focused on educated, career-driven "leftover women" aged between 27 and 40, who identified as heterosexual, had never been married, had no children, and resided in different major cities in China. Among these urban women, some were born and raised in urban areas, while others had migrated from rural regions to cities. Moreover, there were variations in family dynamics, with some being the sole child in their families while others had siblings. These highly educated women came from privileged backgrounds, boasting successful careers, with some even having studied or worked overseas. Additionally, a portion of the

participants had previous relationship experiences, whereas others had never been in a romantic partnership. Thematic analysis was applied as the research methodology, where the analysis chapters were organised based on the emergent themes derived from the qualitative data.

I analysed data from three perspectives: the social and political environment in China; the social, cultural, and family environment in China; and the gender environment. The objective was to examine how the participants navigated decision-making and shaped their self-identity against this societal backdrop. Drawing from the findings of the data analysis and subsequent discussions, my main contention is that within the context of modernisation and individualisation in China, these "leftover women" had experienced increased educational opportunities and career advancement. Nevertheless, they still relied on state institutions and systems to secure stable employment and pursue an urban lifestyle. They depended on social policies to access social benefits and resources, while adhering to traditional marriage and family customs to meet societal expectations and attain social standing. These single women encountered ongoing challenges in their pursuit of an independent and self-directed lifestyle, often having to compromise with their parents or conform to traditional heterosexual family norms when making choices and shaping their identity.

My central argument is as follows: Despite the Chinese society offering a more egalitarian landscape for women to pursue education and career prospects, the institutions of marriage and

family persist as crucial dependencies for these women to access social resources and fundamental rights. Even though these unmarried women had experienced advancements in education and career opportunities, their choices and self-identity within relationships and marriage continued to face substantial constraints imposed by traditional family and marital ideologies, gender disparities, patriarchal structures, and heterosexual norms. I posit that although women had attained greater autonomy and freedom in their public lives through improved educational and professional avenues, the choices and formation of self-identity among these single women in their personal lives remained closely intertwined with the economic, social, political, and cultural aspects of the Chinese environment.

Revisiting the research questions

At the outset of this thesis, I have developed a research inquiry with three sub-sections that has served as the foundation for the core content of my study. In this section, I re-examine the question and provide a concise overview of how this thesis has addressed and assessed it.

- How do Chinese single women make choices and construct their self-identity in the Chinese environment?

This question aims to focus on the women's choices, and explored their decision regarding their personal lives. I investigate whether their choices are influenced by their living environment, or have been questioned or challenged by the mainstream lifestyle discourse. Secondly, I aim

to focus on the self-identity of these women, exploring how they construct their sense of self as single women, and whether their self-identity is also influenced by their environment. More importantly, through women's narrative experience, I plan to seek how they agree, negotiate, conflict, argue or even compromise with others regarding their choices or self-identity. Additionally, I aim to understand their experiences, feelings, thoughts, attitudes, values towards this process of choice-making and self-identity construction.

The research has been divided into three main sections: **State, Family, and Gender**. The first section on State focused on the impact of current social policies and laws on the lives of these single women. The second section on Family focused on the impact of Chinese family culture and traditions on the lives of these single women, including the interaction between these women and their parents, extended family, and the broader family network. The third section on Gender focused on gender and sexual relations through these women's dating and relationship experiences with men in the Chinese context.

My research question is divided into three sub-sections focusing on Chinese contexts, which collectively form the foundation of the entire study:

- In the Chinese social and political environment

This section aims to delve into the everyday experiences of women living in Chinese society, focusing on how they perceive and respond to the effects of current social policies and laws on the lives of single women. By addressing this question, the objective is to uncover the constraints and limitations that single women encounter in their daily lives, investigate the interplay between Chinese social and political institutions and the choices made by single women regarding their careers and marriages, and examine how they constructed their self-identity within the social and political context of China.

To explore these aspects, I have examined the narratives of single women living within the Chinese social and political landscape through four distinct lenses: the social and political context, employment and welfare policies, urbanisation and household policies, and the implications of an ageing society and family care responsibilities. Additionally, I have explored these women's experiences from four identity perspectives: career women, urban women, family carers, and single women. The analysis revealed that within the Chinese social and political context, single women faced challenges in accessing basic rights and social resources from the state system without being married. Their stories also indicated that these women experienced social exclusion within Chinese society due to their single status. Consequently, women continued to perceive the state, marriage, and family as the institutions on which they must rely to obtain rights, social status, and resources.

In Chapter 4, I examined the challenges faced by women in attaining equal career opportunities and making autonomous choices in marriage and family, given the absence of comprehensive maternity welfare, gender equality, and labour rights in their work environments. It became evident that single women still had to depend on the state employment system to access social benefits. Regardless of whether the interviewees had been employed in the state sector or private companies, they consistently experienced pressure to marry quickly and prioritise family over career advancement in order to attain higher social status and access more societal resources. Consequently, marriage functioned as the institution upon which these single women relied to mitigate the risks of losing career opportunities or social resources, as having a husband and marital status served as a means of security. As a result, these women chose to sacrifice their identity as a "successful career woman" in favour of adopting the identity of a married woman.

Within the framework of urbanisation and urban policies, these urban single women who either reside in or have migrated to large cities in search of enhanced career prospects continued to face marginalisation due to their unmarried status. The restrictions imposed by the *hukou* system, housing regulations, and property laws mean that these women still perceived marriage as a means to access additional urban social resources. For them, marriage served as an economic arrangement, affording them the ability to rely on their spouse and marital status to meet the qualifications necessary to purchase a property and attain greater economic stability within these metropolitan areas.

Within the context of an ageing society and the absence of a comprehensive care system in China, the women in this study had expressed a sense of obligation to assume the primary responsibility for caring for their families. Additionally, they often planned to rely on their own marriage and family to receive care in return. Due to the lack of a complete state care system, women had been expected to fulfil the caregiver role within their own family. As a result, family and marriage had been perceived as a form of welfare system, where family members take on caregiving responsibilities for one another. For these women, getting married was also seen as a means to mitigate potential risks and uncertainties associated with ageing.

Within the framework of prevailing family ideology and marriage policies in China, which emphasises higher marriage and childbirth rates, my participants had encountered feelings of shame, prejudice, and stigmatisation due to their single status. They had also experienced social exclusion, being deprived of access to social resources. These women faced blame and were held responsible for their single status, leading them to adopt strategies aimed at finding a partner and getting married quickly. Consequently, these women perceived marriage and family as the gateway to being accepted within mainstream society.

Engaging with the Chinese political and social environment posed challenges for single women in establishing a strong sense of confident and autonomous self. They continued to view

marriage and family as the institutions upon which they relied to access social resources and conform to social norms. Despite the Chinese society offering a more equitable atmosphere for women to pursue education and career opportunities, marriage and family persisted as the safety nets these women depended on to mitigate life risks. While individualisation and social transformation in Chinese society have reduced individual's reliance on the state, these women still faced expectations to make their own decisions within this political and social context. Moreover, societal pressures related to ageing and economic growth in China have reinforced the expectation for women to marry and have children in order to contribute to society, resulting in single women experiencing exclusion from accessing resources and attaining equal social status.

- In the Chinese cultural and family environment

This section aims to examine how women navigated their daily interactions with their parents and family regarding their personal lives and single status, specifically exploring the ways in which they expressed disagreement, negotiate, or compromise within the context of traditional Chinese family culture. The focus of this question lies in investigating the relationship between Chinese parents and their daughters through an exploration of their daughters' life narratives, particularly from early childhood. Through this exploration, the objective is to understand how these women's self-identity and choices were shaped under the influence of parental pressures and expectations. By addressing this question, I seek to shed light on how these women

navigated decision-making processes influenced by traditional familial and cultural pressures and how they constructed their sense of self within the framework of family storytelling.

I have examined the life narratives of single women within the Chinese social, cultural, and family environment, focusing on five key themes: parental support in education, the absence of love or sex education, conflicting identity in the presence of parents, parental expectations regarding marriage, and parental interference in partner selection. Within these discussions, I explored the participants' identities as "privileged daughters", "good girls", "failed daughters", and "filial daughters", as well as their compromises in making "suitable choices". My primary argument is that, due to the support received from parents in their education and the influence of traditional love education, these women were still expected to conform to and meet their parents' expectations. They were pressured to marry quickly, establish their own families, and fulfil their filial responsibilities. Additionally, they often compromised with their parents' opinions in the process of finding a suitable partner. Influenced by family ideology and parental pressures, these women perceived marrying and starting a family in line with parental expectations as the most effective way to reciprocate their parents' love and demonstrate filial piety.

In Chapter 5, I delved into a comprehensive analysis of my participants' narratives and interactions with their parents and families to address this question. As a result of the One-Child

Policy and educational reforms in China, these single women had received significant support from their parents to pursue educational and career opportunities, with the expectation that their educational background would serve as an asset to finding a suitable husband. Despite the increased educational opportunities facilitated by China's modernisation and individualisation, the participants expressed a lack of comprehensive love and sex education, while traditional family and marriage ideologies continued to shape their perspectives of and behaviours in dating and relationship formation. These women took pride in their identity as women, yet also experienced a profound sense of failure due to their single status in the eyes of their parents. Having been guided by parental expectations and influenced by family ideology, they felt compelled to marry in order to establish a strong sense of self. As a result of family influences and prevailing ideologies, they reported having chosen to marry and embraced family life as anticipated by their parents, viewing family and marriage as a natural path for heterosexual women. Moreover, their parents were reported to meddle in their choices, intervening in matchmaking events, partner selection, and relationship decisions. In response, these single women often compromised with their parents in order to fulfil the role of a dutiful and filial daughter in their parents' eyes.

In the midst of Chinese social, cultural, and family dynamics, these single women faced difficulties in freely making choices regarding their marital and family life, and establishing a firm sense of confidence and autonomy in the presence of their parents. Despite receiving support and pressure from their parents, these women tended to perceive marriage and family

as the expected path and often compromise with parental expectations when selecting a partner. Consequently, although single women may have attained greater education and career independence, their decisions and self-identity within the realm of marriage and family remained constrained by family ideology and the pressures exerted by their families within Chinese society.

- With their male partners or dates in their past relationships or dating

The objective of this section is to investigate women's past dating experience and romantic relationships, with a particular focus on the gender bias, discrimination, and inequality they had encountered in their interactions with men. By addressing this question, my aim is to understand how women perceived and shaped their own bodies, images, and self-identities while being heterosexual women in Chinese society. Additionally, I seek to explore how women navigated the expectations and norms imposed by the heterosexual and patriarchal framework when making choices regarding their relationships.

I have examined the experiences of single women in China regarding dating and relationships, focusing on three key themes: the regulation and discipline of their bodies, gender expression within relationships, and the influence of patriarchal norms and gender roles. Through these discussions, I have explored how these women made choices and established their sense of self through their interactions with men in the context of dating and relationships. My main

contention is that these single women's choices and self-identities were constrained by societal norms surrounding gender and heterosexuality. These women had encountered ageist and sexist remarks regarding their age, body, and appearance in the marriage market. Moreover, they had felt pressured to conform to feminine behaviours, adhere to patriarchal expectations, and assume traditional gender roles within their relationships. Consequently, these societal constraints made it challenging for these women to find equitable and fulfilling partnerships.

In Chapter 6, I delved into the intricate dynamics of single women's decision-making processes and self-identity formation within their interactions with male partners or dates, specifically within the realm of dating and relationships. These women faced various challenges and constraints related to their education, career, and lifestyle choices, primarily driven by societal pressure surrounding age. Additionally, they encountered ageist remarks during matchmaking events, adding to the complexity of their experiences. Moreover, these single women were compelled to conform to societal beauty standards that are rooted in the male gaze, perpetuating an unhealthy emphasis on appearance. Furthermore, they were expected by men to embody not only traditional femininity but also empowered femininity within their relationships, thereby aligning with the image of an ideal wife and a successful career woman. The influence of patrilocal residence and patriarchal norms further compounded the challenges faced by these single women. They were often pressured to make compromises, conform to traditional gender roles, relocate to their partner's city of residence, and assume primary responsibility for household duties, even when they had established their own careers. Given the prevalence of

patriarchal and heterosexual norms, finding a relationship that embodied gender equality became a formidable task for these single women. They navigated a complex landscape, where societal expectations and restrictions hindered the establishment of equitable partnerships.

The dating and relationship experiences of these single women have revealed the restrictive nature of heterosexual norms and patriarchal rules, which limited their choices and influenced their perceptions of self; whereas their interactions with men have presented challenges, as ageist and sexist comments and behaviours had undermined their confidence and sense of self. Despite the educational and career advancements these women have achieved, their decision-making and self-identity within relationships and marriage continued to be significantly constrained by prevailing gender inequality, patriarchy, and societal expectations associated with heterosexual norms.

Contributions

This thesis has made contributions to various academic disciplines, including sociology, social policy, gender and sexuality studies, and cultural studies, by examining the phenomenon of "leftover women" in Chinese society. In this section, I will discuss how the research findings highlight both similarities and limitations when applying Western theoretical frameworks to Chinese social contexts. Moreover, this study offers a unique perspective by incorporating Chinese Confucian and family values into the analysis of single women, bridging the gap

between previous studies on gender, feminism, and single women. Additionally, I emphasise the existing restrictions within current Chinese social policies and welfare systems, which place an emphasis on marriage and family as opposed to individual lifestyle choices for single women.

By applying the individualisation theory (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Beck et al., 2003; Yan, 2009, 2010b, 2020), the theories of pure love and detraditionalisation (Giddens, 1991, 1992; Jamieson, 1998; Cherlin, 2004) to the study of "leftover women", this thesis has examined how these theories can be utilised to understand the dynamics of marriage and family relationships in China. It has explored how Chinese women navigated the tensions between their individual desires and societal expectations within the context of marriage and family. While the Chinese context shares similarities with Western countries in terms of the collapse of the central state system and the need for individuals to take charge of their careers and relationships, there are limitations to applying the theories in this particular context.

This research reveals that single women in China still relied on institutions and traditions rather than making completely independent and autonomous choices, as suggested by the individualisation and detraditionalisation thesis. The theories overlook the continued influence of traditions, institutions, the state, and cultural norms in some countries, which individuals still rely on for decision-making. It fails to consider the significant and ongoing impact of these institutions on personal lives and relationships. Even in situations where social welfare plays a

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lesser role in individuals' lives, other social and cultural institutions, such as family structures and Chinese traditional cultural norms, continue to exert influence on individuals' choices. This has proved what Yan, (2009, 2010, 2020) argued: that Chinese individuals are compelled to turn to their families and personal networks in search of a new safety net or to re-establish stability. When Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) extended the concept of individualisation to China, they ignored the fact that the party and state control has still been regulating individuals even if the central state system collapsed. The findings in this research are different from what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) argued that women are no longer solely confined to familial responsibilities; they now build their own unique lifestyles and life paths that may diverge from those of their parents. In this research, these women still conform to family traditions and feel pressured to make choices and decisions that fulfil their filial obligations. The research findings are also different from what Beck et al. (1994) argued. They suggested that individualisation has compelled women to establish and sustain their own education development and professional career, as failure to do so can lead to continued dependence on their husband's financial support within marriage. In this research, even though these women have achieved a good education and career background through their own efforts, they still tend to rely on their future husbands and the institution of marriage for additional resources and benefits. Thus, this research will contribute to the research on individualisation and detraditionalisation thesis in various contexts, especially in China and East Asia.

This research reveals that dating, long-term relationships, and marriage in modern China are still influenced by gender hegemony and sexist ideologies. Traditional gender roles and expression continue to impact interactions and dynamics in dating and relationships for Chinese individuals, and marriage is still perceived as the most stable and safe relationship for heterosexual couples. In this research, parents' opinions continue to significantly influence young people's relationship choices and decisions. This contrasts with Giddens's theory of "pure relationships" (Giddens, 1991, 1992), where he argued that the influence of social norms in family life is diminishing while the significance of personal choice is increasing. He also stated that traditional gender roles are eroding, allowing for a more equitable distribution of sexual and emotional responsibilities, and promoting mutual understanding, love, trust and knowledge between partners. However, this is different from what this research has found. Although Cherlin (2004) argued that in many Western countries, marriage has been undergoing a process of deinstitutionalisation, leading to an increasing number of cohabiting unions, non-marital childbearing, and the emergence of same-sex marriage, and individuals strive for personal growth and deeper intimacy through open communication and shared emotional expressions with their partners. Still, the findings in this research are similar to what Chang and Song (2010) found, many women in East Asia stay single to reduce the risks associated with family life by extending or returning to individualised stages in their lives. The women in this research reported that they were still expected by men to focus more on family than career, undertake more house chores, and take care of children while having a successful career. Marriage, for these women, is still viewed as an obligatory institution they feel compelled to

pursue as their life path. This perspective differs from what Jamieson (1998) argued: that women having the freedom to choose a partner based on love potentially undermined the commitment to a long-term partnership. The findings in this research reflected what Jackson and Ho (2020) argued, while tradition and modernity are often posited as polar opposites, in actuality they are not mutually exclusive. Modernity does not do away with tradition but is shaped by it and reshapes it. This research showed that these single women's choices and lifestyle are always a mix of modern ideas and traditional ideologies. Thus, this research will contribute to future studies applying theories of pure relationships in various social contexts especially in China and East Asia. It will also encourage future researchers to consider traditions and gender hegemony within specific research contexts.

The theories of life-planning, self-identity, and neoliberalism (Giddens, 1991, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), although useful in understanding certain aspects of the "leftover women" phenomenon, have their limitations and require critical examination when applied to this context. Giddens argued that in modern relationships, the process of self-exploration and self-expression has empowered women to attain higher levels of autonomy and confidence. While women had indeed gained more freedom in the process of modernisation, facilitated by improved education and career opportunities, they were simultaneously expected to adhere to a well-planned life trajectory and maintain a regulated sense of self. In this research, women were expected to make their life plans at the "correct" age, finish their education, own a successful career, get married with a man and have children by age 35. These expectations place

additional burdens on women to excel not only in their professional lives but also in their personal relationships, and having a well-structured life plan has emerged as a social norm for single women in Chinese society. Many scholars (Gill, 2007, 2008; McRobbie, 2004, 2007; Budgeon, 2011) argue that women face greater pressures than men when it comes to managing their personal relationships. They contend that gender hegemony imposes a gendered double standard, demanding women to balance work and family responsibilities. Single women, in this research, are often held responsible for their unmarried status and face blame for their perceived failure to enter into marriage. This research reveals that these women's self-identity and personal narratives were not seamlessly constructed within the frameworks of self-management or neoliberalism. Instead, many women experienced feelings of guilt or shame in their life stories. These single women continued to struggle in achieving a sense of autonomy in the face of societal expectations and familial pressures. The concept of freedom in plans and choices is contingent for single women upon their adherence to social norms dictated by heterosexual ideals and the prevailing family ideology. Thus, when applying these theories, it is essential to consider the specific social status and class of women within their particular contexts.

This thesis has also employed feminist and gender theories to examine the experiences of "leftover women" in China. This research argues that Western gender and feminist theories (Jackson, 1993; Ingraham, 1994; Foucault, 1976, 1998; Duffy, 2007; Fox, 2009; Budgeon, 2001; DePaulo and Morris, 2005; Budgeon, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2016; Cancian, 2018) can be applied in the Chinese context due to the presence of similar gender inequalities in both settings. It

sheds light on the intricate dynamics of gender relations in China and challenges traditional gender roles that perpetuate discrimination and prejudice against single women in their dating and relationship experiences. These single women faced various forms of social stigma, discrimination, age-related anxieties, and body image pressures within the framework of patriarchal and heterosexual family norms. They were also confronted with the expectation to conform to traditional gender expressions and roles by marrying at an early age. By amplifying the voices and stories of these women, the thesis challenges dominant discourses that depict single women as deviant or incomplete. It contributes to a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of gender and sexuality in the Chinese context. Through the application of gender and feminist theories to Chinese social contexts, this research enriches current gender studies and prompts a consideration of how Western gender theories can be effectively employed to understand the phenomenon of single women in China.

In addition, the thesis contributes to the emerging field of single women's and singlehood studies by offering a comprehensive examination of the experiences, identities, and societal implications of being a "leftover woman" in China. While previous studies on singlehood and single women have predominantly focused on the experiences of Western women and their decision-making processes within Western contexts (Chasteen, 1994; Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003; Sandfield and Percy, 2003; Reynolds and Taylor, 2005; Simpson, 2006; Reynolds, 2006; Byrne, 2007; Taylor, 2011b; Sharp and Ganong, 2007; Lahad, 2013; Budgeon, 2016), this thesis has delved into the intricacies of navigating societal expectations, making life choices, and

constructing a sense of identity among Chinese women. By shedding light on the multifaceted

ways in which these women navigated singlehood, the thesis enhances our understanding of the

diverse experiences and coping mechanisms employed in Chinese contexts. It has offered

valuable insights into the sociocultural dynamics of singlehood in China and provided a

foundation for future research to explore the nuances and disparities between studies on single

women in China and Western contexts. Through this exploration, the thesis broadens our

comprehension of how heterosexual norms are reinforced by institutional forces and deepens

our understanding of the ways in which singlehood is experienced within different cultural

contexts.

Moreover, the thesis has offered a distinctive and valuable lens through which the intricate

dynamics of family, society, and culture in China and East Asia can be examined. By centring

on the experiences of "leftover women", the thesis has unveiled valuable insights into how

Confucian family values and cultural norms, such as collective values, filial piety, and

patrilineal traditions, shape gender relations, marriage patterns, family dynamics, and even the

interactions between individuals and the state within China. This expanded perspective enriches

our comparative understanding of family and social dynamics across diverse cultural contexts

and contributes to a more refined comprehension of gender relations and cultural practices.

Regarding the methodology, the thesis presents a comprehensive and in-depth examination of the experiences, emotions, and viewpoints of "leftover women" in China. Through the utilisation of qualitative narrative interviews, the thesis has given prominence to the voices and stories of these women, thereby offering a nuanced exploration of the interconnections among personal narratives, cultural discourses, and social frameworks. This methodological approach not only contributes to the existing body of narrative interview studies but also yields fresh insights into how personal narratives intertwine with and are influenced by broader social and cultural contexts. By delving into the ways in which these Chinese single women made meaning of their lives, constructed their self-identities through storytelling, and navigated their life experiences within the encompassing social and cultural landscapes, a deeper comprehension of their lived realities can be attained.

Lastly, this research has made contributions to informing social policies and social welfare systems in China. The study sheds light on the challenges faced by single women, who had encountered discrimination, stigma, and social exclusion, resulting in limited access to resources and basic rights. The existing family policies and social welfare programmes have marginalised single women and failed to provide adequate support for both single and married women to make informed choices regarding marriage and fertility plans. Urban policies have prioritised married couples while neglecting the needs of single women, denying them equal access to urban resources and opportunities. Gender inequalities in employment laws and incomplete social care policies have placed expectations on Chinese individuals, particularly

women, to rely solely on marriage and family for support. The research findings indicate that the absence of comprehensive welfare systems and the exclusion from current social policies have compelled women to view marriage and family as the only viable path, as it offers higher social status and better access to essential rights and resources. Therefore, it is crucial for Chinese policies to be more inclusive and consider the rights of marginalised groups, such as granting single women the right to freeze their eggs, facilitating their property purchase, and allowing them to claim social support as single individuals. Such measures will help alleviate the pressures associated with ageing, enhance gender equality, and foster a more diverse and inclusive society in China.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Participants' information

Name	Age	Location	Hometown	Education background	Job	Family background	Relationship experience
Summer	29	Chengdu	urban	Master's (overseas)	School language teacher	Single child, lived with her single mother	No
Wendy	34	Hangzhou	urban	Master's (overseas)	Publishing editor	Single child	Yes
Cai	29	Xiamen	urban	Master's (overseas)	NGO	Single child	No
Ming	30	Shanghai	urban	Master's (overseas exchange experience)	Government official	Single child	Yes
Jenny	31	Shanghai	small town	Master's (overseas exchange experience)	Lawyer	Single child	Yes
Sulin	33	Shanghai	small town	Master's	Lawyer	Single child	Yes
Hua	35	Wuhan	urban	Master's	Teacher, influencer	Single child	Yes
Guan	38	Beijing	urban	Master's (overseas)	Artist	Single child	Yes
Betty	32	Beijing	small town	Bachelor's	Finance analyst	Single child	Yes
Fang	36	Ningbo	urban	Bachelor's	Marketing	Single child, grew up with her grandparents	Yes
Maluo	37	Guangzhou	rural	Bachelor's (overseas)	Marketing	Has a younger brother	Yes
Lily	30	Nanjing	urban	PhD (overseas)	University lecturer	Single child	Yes
Heather	32	Guangzhou	small town	Master's (overseas)	Advertising	Single child	Yes
Daisy	31	Hangzhou	urban	PhD (overseas)	Engineer	Single child	No
Tiana	28	Beijing	rural	Master's (overseas)	Reporter	Has two brothers	Yes

Appendix 2 Interview topic guide

Interview 1
Opening questions
Tell me about your story in choosing your lifestyle, living location, education, career, and social relationships.
Tell me about your story in choosing your lifestyle in Chinese political and social environment (policies, laws, political, social, cultural environment).
Tell me about how you and your family discuss about your choices and lifestyle.
Tell me about your story in (blind) dating, intimate relationships in the past.
Tell me how you make/plan to make choices and how you perceive yourself/sense of self through this process.

Follow-up questions
Events
What was the most significant moment/ episode or a memory that you remember from that time.
What happened (later)? / What did you do (next)?
At what point did you realise [situation]?
What circumstances led you to this [event]?
How did you react to it?/What did you do when this happened? / How did you feel about it/What was your attitude to it?
Were you ever in a situation where you did what you didn't want to do?/didn't do what you wanted to do?
What was the reason for you to say/do/choose this?
Tell me as much about it as you can?

Characters
Who were significant people for you around that time?
What did they say or do (to you) at that time?
How did you interact with them about it?
Were you ever in a situation where you had disagreement/conflicts with them?
What kind of person were you during that stage?
In what way are you a different person today because of [event]?

Impact
How did you make the choice/decisions during that stage?
How did this impact on you/your attitude/your opinions/your choices/plans/decisions to personal life?
How did you understand it at that time?/ How have you developed different understanding about it from that experience?
How will make choices and plans in the future based on this impact?

Interview 2
In the second interview, the researcher will ask for more details based on the previous transcripts of the first interview. Two types of questions will be asked:
1. May ask for explanation of some words, phrases or details that seem confusing in the first interview;
2. May ask for more detailed stories in some parts based on previous interviews, interviewing method is the same as the one in interview 1.

Appendix 3 Codes, themes and categories table

	Some data examples (and notes)	Codes	Themes	Categories
A1 education: <u>modernization and westernization on Chinese society</u>	*[Chinese text notes]*	1.Parents' attach importance to education; 2.Parents as role models to pursue education and career opportunities; 3.Parents' proud attitudes to daughters' personal achievements; 4.Their own success thanks to parents' support	Parents' material and mental support on education; Close connection built with parents on personal success	parents' support connection with parents education success
A2 career: <u>modernization and westernization on Chinese society</u>	*[Chinese text notes]*	1.pursue career opportunities in this modern and global context; 2. prioritize career development over personal relationships 3. go to different cities and countries to achieve dreams 4. Gaining more choices, self-confidence and subjectivity from career	Pursue career opportunities and goals in a new social environment Gaining success and choices in their career Building a strong and independent self through career	migration career success self-identity
A3 individuals and society: <u>individualization and Chinese social structures</u>	*[Chinese text notes]*	1. personal choices still limited and restricted by the state system; 2. following mainstream choices and trend for career and marriage in China 3. Conflicts and pressure between career and marriage 4. choose safer choices over risky choices (in career and relationships) to satisfy parents 5. have conflicted and compromised self in the current context	women's choices under Chinese social and political environment; women's choices under Chinese culture and parents' expectation Conflicted and compromised self between restriction and freedom	social political environment restriction culture environment restriction self-identity
A4 women and regulated choices: <u>individualization and Chinese social structures</u>	*[Chinese text notes]*	1. anxiety for time schedule and aging as a Chinese woman 2. compulsory planning and efforts for a perfect and correct life path (marriage) 3. self-blame/being blamed for prioritizing career over relationships 4. prefer to "encounter" rather than "look for" a partner 5. only by taking efforts can find an ideal partner 6. admit being picky for a partner 7. never want to compromise for a unsatisfied relationship 8. try to put their "unnormal" self into this society 9. feel hopeless of taking efforts to achieve a satisfying relationship	Aging pressure for women's life path regulated choices and compulsory life planning social blame on women's singleness modern love understanding sense of self as a single woman	social identity as single liberal life choices liberal relationship choices traditional life choices age compulsory life plannning
B1 individualised choices and career plan: <u>individuals and individualization</u>	*[Chinese text notes]*	1. impact from parents' arguments on women's understanding of marriage 2. women needs better education and financial independence 3. only career success can give women strong sense of self 4. have more confidence and sense of control in career than relationships 5. sacrifice personal relationships for a career development	choose career development and success over personal relationships feminist and modern opinions on women's life choices Building a strong and independent self through career	career success education success liberal life choices self-identity
B2 individualized choices and single living plan: <u>individuals and individualization</u>	*[Chinese text notes]*	1. dream to move to bigger cities, or overseas and change living environment due to social and family pressure 2. try to live out of social pressure and social clock 3. transition from marriage anxiety to relaxing attitude as time passes	Think and live out of traditional time and space restriction transition to a positive attitudes to their singleness when close to 30s	career success liberal life choices liberal relationship choices migration age

Theme	Chinese quotes	Codes	Categories	Highlighted labels
		4. self-discipline single life can give more motivation to become a better person		life planning
B3 individualized choices and modern relationships: _individualization and modern love_	*（Chinese text, illegible）*	1. value trust more than traditions in a relationship 2. Love involves intimacy, mutual trust, happiness, long-term, respect, mutual attractiveness. 3. love should be naturally encounterred rather than look for it 4. love relationship, marriage and family can be very conflicting with career plan 5. single life is more peaceful but less happy than a couple life 6. love and marriage is not a must or necessity 7. living together before marriage is necessary "trial marriage" 8. personality, interaction, hobbies, interests, two people getting along well, are more important than partner's social background 9. love is more important than a marriage, value love feeling than tradition 10. partner needs to respect my career and work schedule 11. it would be better if partner could help with my career development 12. choose partner out of traditional gender expectation (age, career, background...) 13. love needs two people independent in career rather than rely on each other 14. online dating thoughts 15. actively express her feelings rather than passively wait 16. do not prefer traditional gender roles 17. have some negative opinions on stable and long-term relationships	**want a modern love relationship over a traditional marriage** **have more liberal opinions on partner choices** **love, long-term relationship or marriage is never a must** **women independence is important in a relationship** **gender stereotypes or roles should be avoided** **actively practice online dating**	liberal life choices liberal relationship choices self-identity gender equality dating and relationships
B4 individualized choices and modern family form: _individualization and modern love_	*（Chinese text, illegible）*	1. being a single mother can be accepted 2. prefer to have a long-term relationship without children 3. value love and dating more than a traditional marriage 4. marriage is not men's "promise" 5. without marriage registration can be accepted 6. it is okay to be a single woman as a family	**have positive opinions on various family forms rather than nuclear family**	liberal life choices liberal relationship choices gender equality social identity self-identity
C1 Large family tradition: _traditional family and Chinese culture_	*（Chinese text, illegible）*	1. patrilocal and patriarchal family traditions 2. large family intervention on personal choices 3. confucius traditions (grandparents and grandchildren make the whole family complete) 4. marriage needs the whole large family to be involved 5. feel conflicted in large family	**patriarchy and traditional gender roles** **Chinese family culture and marriage traditions** **large family intervention on marriage** **have conflicted attitudes with large family traditions**	gender equality culture environment restriction self-identity
C2 Parental pressure: _traditional family and Chinese culture_	*（Chinese text, illegible）*	1. return love to parents (filial piety) 2. responsibility to take care of parents (social policies) 3. parents intervene partner choice 4. compromise with/agree with parents' preference and expectation 5. parents' network for blind dating 6. nuclear family traditions 7. parents relation too close	**filial piety and responsibility for parents' preference** **Chinese social welfare system issues** **traditional family culture** **compromise with parents' expectation**	culture environment restriction social and political environment restriction traditional life choices traditional relationships choices self-identity
C3 marriage traditions: _traditional family and Chinese culture_	*（Chinese text, illegible）*	1. online dating and blind dating 2. lack dating and relationship experience 3. dating/relationship is for getting married not for love 4. compromise in order to get married 5. gender stereotypes and discrimination in dating	**lack love and relationship experience and education** **heterosexual marriage traditions** **gender inequality in relationships**	lacking love education heterosexual norms marriage norms gender equality

Code	Source data	Codes	Themes	Keywords
	TJW 不喜欢相亲这种明码标价的方式，不应为了适应社会找对象，自然也太别，压力有点大，被催还要装逼 … YL 现在也觉得年龄大时代的感觉相比较明显，而且人社会之后，变得大家要没有随化。看到 大家公里都有考察逼，在社会起初和认识同学之时，大家都要比刀。比谁 … YY 他也不懂得这关系。不懂相亲很累对，他一直太以独立，过自己的人生活。而我要想要找是感情，他也我太家庭比较现实，很现实现实水平 … *(Chinese source quotes, illegible)*	6. have conflicted attitudes towards a relationship	**have conflicted attitudes towards marriage**	traditional relationship choices / liberal relationship choices
C4 social morals and ideology: traditional family and Chinese culture	*(Chinese source quotes, illegible)*	1. being afraid to be unique; feel safe to join mainstream 2. being afraid to be selfish; feel good to sacrifice self for family 3. social morals restrict people's real feelings and emotions 4. social expectation on personal choices 5. contribution and sacrifice is needed for family 6. marriage can provide people with higher social status	**marriage means sacrifice, compromise and contribution in China** **getting married is the mainstream correct choice (heterosexual norms)** **lacking individualized personal life and free choices**	traditional relationship choices / liberal relationship choices / heterosexual norms / marriage norms / culture environment restriction
D1 social policies and system: social institutions and environment	*(Chinese source quotes, illegible)*	1.three-child policy and negative impact on women's employment 2. lacking maternity leave system 3.lacking welfare for old people life 4.marriage registration policy not friendly to divorce 5.gender prejudice on women 6.lacking complete policy for single women for living and having children 7. family as an insitution to mitigate risks from lacking welfare 8. lacking basic employment rights outside of state system 9. family house as a main investment and social status guarantee	**lacking complete social welfare for individuals** **social exclusion on single women** **relying on family and state employment system to mitigate risks** **gender prejudice on women in career**	social and political environment restriction social identity / gender equality
D2 one-child policy and impact: social institutions and environment	*(Chinese source quotes, illegible)*	1. family pressure as the only child to take care of the whole family 2 privileges from being one-child 3. only child has aging pressure	**chinese society structural pressure : aging and workforce** **personal pressure as a only child** **privilege as a only child**	social and political environment restriction liberal life choices / traditional life choices
E1 compromised marriage choice: individual choice and Chinese society	*(Chinese source quotes, illegible)*	1. being single women is not ideal choice 2. marriage means responsibility, promise, and protection 3. marriage is the best life choice 4. marriage is a natural choice for nuclear and heterosexual family 5. marriage is a "it's time to do" choice 6. marriage is a contract relationship 7. love is different from marriage 8. marriage is the final goal for love 9. marriage is a relationship involves parents and traditions 10. marriage is a suitable choice for Chinese society 11. marriage needs women to sacrifice their career and life 12. men should be the breadwinner in a marriage 13. bride price is needed 14. marriage require two people have healthy background	**women still choose marriage as their ideal and primary life path** **women regard marriage as a traditional relationship**	traditional relationship choices / marriage norms
F1 discrimination on single women in career: single and gender identity	*(Chinese source quotes, illegible)*	1.gender and single status discrimination when look for jobs 2.gender discrimination in career development 3. family can be a plus for career development	**gender and single discrimination in career** **lacking welfare laws for female employees**	gender inequality in career / gender equality / social political environment restriction
F2 social exclusion and single identity: single and gender identity	*(Chinese source quotes, illegible)*	1. rejected to be called as "leftover", and strong sense of self-affirmation 2. admit being picky/ rejected to be called "picky" 3. hide her identity of being single 4. perceive 30-year-old single woman miserable 5. being blamed for not preparing for relationships or being picky 6. being single as unnormal 7.have to explain for their status 8.feel shamed for being a single woman 9. being told to compromise	**social stigma/shame** **strong sense of self-identity** **responsibility/accountability for being single**	social identity / self-identity
F3 conflicts between privileges and	*(Chinese source quotes, illegible)*	1. better background women less likely to be chosen 2. double standard and expectation on different gender	**double standard for gender**	gender equality / gender expression / age

stigma on single women: single and gender identity	[Chinese text]	3. traditional gender stereotypes and gender roles 4. accountability for being single, have to work harder to find partner 5. double standard for aging 6. traditional femininity expectation on women 7. women being picky is due to lacking welfare 8. more educated women leftover than men	**traditional gender roles and stereotypes** **traditional femininity requirement on women** **aging discrimination on women**	
G1 lacking sex education: body autonomy and gender	[Chinese text]	1. premarital sex is not allowed by parents 2. experience sexual violence 3. lacking sex education 4. lacking understanding of love, sex and dating 5. lacking dating culture in China 6. feel shamed for not being "virgin" 7. missed her time/chance exploring dating and relationships	**Chinese society lacking sex education** **Chinese society lacking dating culture** **traditional social rules on women's body** **unhealthy attitudes to relationships**	lacking love education lacking dating culture self-identity
G2 body and appearance anxiety: body autonomy and gender	[Chinese text]	1. double standard for women's body shape, makeup, outfit etc. 2. women need to fit mainstream beauty standard 3. beauty standard is closely related to traditional femininity 4. reject to follow mainstream beauty standard 5. experience harrassment on appearance 6. women needs to balance both career and attractiveness 7. body anxiety and pressure, unconfidence 8. unhealthy life habits due to body shame 9. beauty standard with aging	**double standard on women's appearance and body** **women's pressure in keeping both career and attractiveness** **sexual harrassment on women's body** **conflicted sense of self in terms of body**	body gender equality self-identity
G3 traditional birth giving choice: body autonomy and gender	[Chinese text]	1. birth giving choice closely related to husband and family 2. young women are preferred due to birth giving 3. aging anxiety due to birth giving ability	**young women are preferred because of birth giving** **aging and body anxiety** **cannot freely make choices in birth giving** **conflicted sense of self**	age body traditional life chocies self-identity
G4 aging pressure and discrimination: body autonomy and gender	[Chinese text]	1. aging pressure in birth giving and career development (35 years old) 2. unified beauty standard perceive old women as unattractive 3. double pressure require women to have children and be successful at early age 4. gender stereotypes require women younger in relationships 5. aging pressure in dating and keep attractive 6. not having children is regarded as unnormal 7. aging require women to compromise in a relationship 8. "do correct thing and have correct style at a right age" 9. birth giving ability as the only standard to judge women's age 10. being objectified as a 30-year-old woman in dating market 11. anxiety and depression due to aging	**aging pressure and discrimination on women** **aging is closely related to birth giving** **aging is closely related to beauty standard** **life choices closely related to aging** **double standard on older women**	age traditional life choices gender inequality
H1 traditional gender roles and division of work: gender inequality	[Chinese text]	1. emotional support and relationship maintenance is women's job 2. housework is women's job 3. women have to go back to family due to lacking social welfare and support 4. unequal job opportunities for women push women back home 5. patriarchal society objectify women as birth givers 6. double pressure for women in family and career 7. unfair and unequal life focus for men and women 8. men should be the breadwinner for the household	**unequal career opportunities for men and women** **gender division of housework** **women as the housework provider**	gender inequality in career gender roles

Category	Data	Codes	Themes	Categories
H2 patriarchal and patrilocal rules: gender inequality		1. patrilocal rules 2. patriarchal rules	**patriarchal and patrilocal rules**	gender inequality
H3 domestic violence and disrespect: gender inequality		1. verbal abuse 2. sexual harrassment and rape 3. men's controlling 4. gaslighting 5. emotional and mental violence 6. cheating and trust 7. disrespect in dating experience	**domestic violence** **harassment in relationships** **gender inequality in relationships**	gender expression gender inequality
I1: traditional femininity: gender expression		1. being obedient and docile is right for women 2. "act or talk like a boy" is not encouraged 3. feminine beauty standard 4. women's high talent or good education is not welcome 5. women should be careful, gentle, less competitive in career and family 6. gender stereotypes and expectation in career 7. women should be less dominant in a relationship	**traditional femininity traits** **education and career success make women look less feminine** **women should focus on household rather than career**	gender expression gender inequality
I2: postfeminist and empowered femininity: gender expression		1. double standard for women to be successful in family and career 2. hard to win respect as older successful woman 3. women need to be attractive and sexually active to gain popularity 4. different feminine images in career and family 5. women need to be perfect in many different occasion 6. looking for a partner require women to take endless efforts	**new femininity for career women** **empowered femininity require women to be perfect in body, career, family**	gender expression gender inequality
I3: traditional masculine traits: gender expression		1. fail to provide emotional support and expression 2. good in jobs, strong and brave 3. toxic masculinity 4. men's success are welcome by women 5. older men are regarded as successful and reliable 6. ignore outfit and appearance	**toxic masculinity** **good in career bad in family** **women have conflicted opinion on men's role**	gender expression traditional life choices
J1: couple as the dominant relationship: heterosexual norms		1. being single is unnormal 2. being excluded from couple friends 3. social media regard couple as happy and successful relation 4. feel shamed as single women among peers	**singleness being excluded** **heterosexual norms**	social identity heterosexual norms
J2: marriage norms: heterosexual norms		1. marriage as the only legal and social recognized relationship for a couple 2. all dating and relationship's final goal is marriage 3. lacking experience for casual dating relationships 4. lacking love and sex education for a relationship 5. expectation on men based on expectation on husband 6. divorce or breakup as failure or shame	**heterosexual norms** **marriage norms** **lacking dating and relationship experience**	lacking love education lacking dating culture heterosexual norms marriage norms

Blue highlighted categories: Family and culture topics
Yellow highlighted categories: Political, social and state environment
Red highlighted categories: Gender, sexuality, body topics
Green highlighted categories: choices and self-identity

Appendix 4 Participant information sheet

My name is Yaqi Li, a doctoral student at the University of Birmingham. I am carrying out a narrative research on Leftover women in China. I would like to invite you to take part in my research. Before you decide whether to be a participant, you should understand how the research is being done and what it would involve. Please read the following information carefully. Ask questions if anything you read is not clear to you or if you would like more information. Please take time to decide whether or not to take part.

The purpose of the study and why you have been invited
This research seeks to understand past stories and experience of women who are single in China. You have been selected to take part in this research because you are a single woman aged between 27 and 40 years old, not married, childless; live in urban areas and have a good education (bachelor's degree or above) and professional career background (above average urban income). I believe your experience will be beneficial to this research. But if you don't think you meet this criteria or do not wish to reveal personal information above, be free to not to take part in this research without giving any reasons. (3.2)

Before you take part in this research
It would be suggested that you carefully read this participant information sheet and consent form to understand the details and your own rights in this project. Please express any concerns or ask any questions about the project if you have before you agree to take part in this research. If you agree to participate in this research, please provide your formal consent by completing the form, to indicate that you have received and understand the information provided and the aims of the research. You can choose to do virtual signing or scan the signed document and return it back to the researcher. At the beginning of the interview, the researcher will ask the your consent again and record this conversation.

What will happen if you take part in
If you agree to participate, your involvement will consist of two one-to-one online interviews, each about 1 to 2 hours, but it is welcomed that you are willing to tell more than 2 hours, either via Zoom, Tencent meeting or audio calling depends on participants' need. All of these video or audio talking software need password to join the conversation, so encrypted connection will be used to do interviews.Interview time and venue is flexible depends on your need, it would better to be at the location where the internet connection is good, and the environment is comfortable for you. Interviews will be done twice, the first interview will ask you to tell the researcher your story from your past; the second interview will be based on the first one, to ask for more explanation and exploration from you in some details of your story. The first interview will be arranged on a date that both you and the researcher agree; the time of second interview will also be discussed, but it will be at least two weeks after the first one so that researcher can have enough time to be familiar with the first interview data.(1.1) With your consent, all interviews will be recorded with recorder in computer and phone with password protected, and saved into password protected folder before uploading into the computer and the drive. The data from the interview will then be transcribed and analysed and will form part of the final research report.

Interview topic
Interview topic will include your past stories in your dating, intimate relationship, family relations, education and career, and how you made personal choices and decisions on these in the past. Different from traditional interviews with question-and-answer mode, in this research, the researcher will only start the interview with an opening question, followed up by a few prompt questions to provide participants with a comfortable space to tell their own stories in their own structured way. It may include some details in real events, your interaction with other people, your reaction to it, your feelings, your actions and your opinions. Please make sure that you only tell the stories and details you feel comfortable to tell to the researcher.

Do you have to take part?
You are under no obligation to take part in this research project, and you may withdraw from the project anytime before the interview, during the interview, and within one month since the last day of the second interview. You may also choose not to answer one or more of the questions during the interview. You do

not need to give reasons if you decide to not to answer specific questions or withdraw from this research. There is no consequence for you of withdrawing from the study. If you withdraw from this project, all of your information and data will be deleted immediately.

What will happen to all the information you provide?
Everytime after each interviewing, the researcher will upload the data to the computer, cloud system and University's data storage BEAR system with password protected, and the recording file in the device will be immediately deleted. All information you provide, your name and any personal information that may reveal your identity will be kept confidential, and stored securely at all times with password protected computer and in University's data storage BEAR system,(2.5) according to University of Birmingham ethics procedures. In the final research report, and any other publications, all data will be anonymized, and pseudonyms will be used(1.2) to minimise the possibility of you, or your location being identified.

At the early stage of the research, before the second interview, the researcher will send the interpretation of your first interview data to you for comments, you have the right to ask for some revision on the data based on discussing with the researcher if you are not satisfied with some of it. Before the interview starts and till within one month since the last day of the second interview, you can also tell the researcher if there is anything that you are willing to remove from this research without giving a reason, then the researcher will remove the content from the data. Only the researcher and the individual participant will have access to the participant's own interview data; when necessary, the data may also be shared with my two supervisors to help with data analysis in the later stage of the research.(1.3)

At the later stage of the research, when the analysis report gets finished, the researcher will send you the findings of the thesis and report of your part.(1.4) All data will be used in the final PhD thesis report, and in other academic publications, if you agree.(2.5)

Contact for further information
If you have any questions at any time before, during or after the interview, please contact me Yaqi Li
██████████████████████, or my academic supervisor Dr Shelley Budgeon (███████████████████),
and Dr Nicki Ward (████████████████).
University contact:
University of Birmingham School of Social Policy: 44 (0) 1214145030
University of Birmingham Research Ethics Office: ethics-queries@contacts.bham.ac.uk
For more information about the researcher and her research page:
https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/social-policy/research/doctoral-researchers/profiles/li-yaqi.aspx
For more information about Leftover Women:
Leta Hong Fincher (2016)- *Leftover Women*
Sandy To (2015)- China's Leftover women - *Late Marriage among Professional Women and its Consequences*
Shosh Shlam, Hilla Medalia (2019) *Leftover Women*
For social support:
China Women Association: women.org.cn
Women's Studies Institute of China: wsic.ac.cn
NGO : Women's Voice: http://www.womenvoice.cn/
        Women of China http://www.womenofchina.com/
Please feel free to contact us if you have questions or concerns about this research project.
I would be really appreciated for your help and support for this research!

Yaqi Li
PhD Social Policy, Sociology and Criminology
University of Birmingham
October 2020

Appendix 5 Recruitment email/advert

To [Participant's name],

My name is Yaqi Li, a doctoral student at the University of Birmingham. I am carrying out a narrative research on Leftover women in China. I would like to invite you to take part in my research. You have been selected to take part in this research because you are a single woman aged between 27 and 40 years old, not married, childless; live in urban areas and have a good education (bachelor's degree or above) and professional career background (above average urban income). I believe your experience will be beneficial to this research. But if you don't think you meet this criteria or do not wish to reveal personal information above, be free to not to take part in this research without giving any reasons. (3.2)

Interview topic will include your past stories in your dating, intimate relationship, family relations, education and career, and how you made personal choices and decisions on these in the past. Different from traditional interviews with question-and-answer mode, in this research, the researcher will only start the interview with an opening question, followed up by a few prompt questions to provide participants with a comfortable space to tell their own stories in their own structured way.

Before you decide to take part in this research, you will receive participant information sheet and consent form to inform more details about the project and your own rights in it. Please express any concerns or ask any questions about the project if you have before you agree to take part in this research.

If you agree to participate, your involvement will consist of two one-to-one online interviews, each about 1 to 2 hours, but it is welcomed that you are willing to tell more than 2 hours, either via Zoom, Tencent meeting or audio calling depends on participants' need. All of these video or audio talking software need password to join the conversation, so encrypted connection will be used to do interviews. Interview time and venue is flexible depends on your need, it would better to be at the location where the internet connection is good, and the environment is comfortable for you. The first interview will be arranged on a date that both you and the researcher agree; the time of second interview will also be discussed, but it will be at least two weeks after the first one so that researcher can have enough time to be familiar with the first interview data.(1.1) With your consent, all interviews will be recorded with recorder in computer and phone with password protected, and saved into password protected folder before uploading into the computer and the drive.

Everytime after each interviewing, the researcher will upload the data to the computer, cloud system and University's data storage BEAR system with password protected, and the recording file in the device will be immediately deleted. All information you provide, your name and any personal information that may reveal your identity will be kept confidential, and stored securely at all times, according to University of Birmingham ethics procedures. In the final research report, and any other publications, all data will be anonymized, and pseudonyms will be used(1.2) to minimise the possibility of you, or your location being identified. Only the researcher and the individual participant will have access to the participant's own interview data; when necessary, the data may also be shared with my two supervisors to help with data analysis in the later stage of the research. (1.3) At the later stage of the research, when the analysis report gets finished, the researcher will send the findings of the thesis and report of your part.(1.4) All data will be used in the final PhD thesis report, and in other academic publications, if you agree.(2.5)

If you would like to participant in this research study or have any questions, or if you know anyone who might be interested in this study, please email Yaqi Li (   ). I would be really appreciated for your help and support for this research!
Yaqi Li
PhD Social Policy, Sociology and Criminology
University of Birmingham
August 2020

Appendix 6 Email/message to gatekeeper

To [Gatekeeper's name],

My name is Yaqi Li, a doctoral student at the University of Birmingham. I am carrying out a narrative research on Leftover women in China. I would like to ask for some support from you to help me to get access to potential participants in your [organization]. If possible, I'd like to post adverts or send emails to potential participants, and recruit participants with their agreement and consent. I'd like to get your permission to allow me to contact them.

I contact you for help because members in your organisations may be helpful for my research. In this research, single women aged between 27 and 40 years old, not married, childless; live in urban areas and have a good education and professional career background will be recruited. I believe their experience will be beneficial to this research.

Interview topic will include their past stories in your dating, intimate relationship, family relations, education and career, and how they made personal choices and decisions on these in the past. Different from traditional interviews with question-and-answer mode, in this research, the researcher will only start the interview with an opening question, followed up by a few prompt questions to provide participants with a comfortable space to tell their own stories in their own structured way.

Before they decide to take part in this research, they will receive participant information sheet and consent form to inform more details about the project and your own rights in it. The are free to express any concerns or ask any questions about the project if they have before they agree to take part in this research.

If participants agree to participate, their involvement will consist of two one-to-one online interviews, each about 1 to 2 hours, but it is welcomed that they are willing to tell more than 2 hours, either via Zoom, Tencent meeting or audio calling depends on participants' need. All of these video or audio talking software need password to join the conversation, so encrypted connection will be used to do interviews. Interview time and venue is flexible depends on need, it would better to be at the location where the internet connection is good, and the environment is comfortable for participants. The first interview will be arranged on a date that both you and the researcher agree; the time of second interview will also be discussed, but it will be at least two weeks after the first one so that researcher can have enough time to be familiar with the first interview data.(1.1) With their consent, all interviews will be recorded with recorder in computer and phone with password protected, and saved into password protected folder before uploading into the computer and the drive.

Everytime after each interviewing, the researcher will upload the data to the computer, cloud system and University's data storage BEAR system with password protected, and the recording file in the device will be immediately deleted.All information participants provide, name and any personal information that may reveal their identity will be kept confidential, and stored securely at all times, according to University of Birmingham ethics procedures. In the final research report, and any other publications, all data will be anonymized, and pseudonyms will be used(1.2) to minimise the possibility of participants, or your location being identified. Only the researcher and the individual participant will have access to the participant's own interview data; when necessary, the data may also be shared with my two supervisors to help with data analysis in the later stage of the research. (1.3) At the later stage of the research, when the analysis report gets finished, the researcher will send the participants the findings of the thesis and report of their own part.(1.4) All data will be used in the final PhD thesis report, and in other academic publications, if you agree.(2.5)

If have any questions or concerns, or if you know anyone who might be interested in this study, please email Yaqi Li (   ). I would be really appreciated for your help and support for this research!

University contact:
University of Birmingham School of Social Policy: 44 (0) 1214145030
University of Birmingham Research Ethics Office: ethics-queries@contacts.bham.ac.uk
For more information about the researcher and her research page:
https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/social-policy/research/doctoral-researchers/profiles/li-yaqi.aspx
For more information about Leftover Women:
Leta Hong Fincher (2016)- *Leftover Women*
Sandy To (2015)- China's Leftover women - *Late Marriage among Professional Women and its Consequences*
Shosh Shlam, Hilla Medalia (2019) *Leftover Women*
For social support:
China Women Association: women.org.cn
Women's Studies Institute of China: wsic.ac.cn
NGO : Women's Voice: http://www.womenvoice.cn/
    Women of China http://www.womenofchina.com/

Yaqi Li
PhD Social Policy, Sociology and Criminology
University of Birmingham
August 2020

Appendix 7 Participant consent form

Have you read the information sheet?

Have you had an opportunity to ask questions about the project?

Have you received enough information about the project?

Do you understand that you have been selected to take part in this research because you are a single woman aged between 27 and 40 years old, not married, childless; live in urban areas and have a good education (bachelor's degree or above) and professional career background (above average urban income).But if you don't think you meet this criteria or do not wish to reveal personal information above, be free to not to take part in this research without giving any reasons. (3.2)

Do you understand that you do not have to answer any questions they do not wish to, and you can decide what to tell and what details should be included in this research ?(2.3)

Do you understand that that your participation is voluntary(2.1), and you are free to withdraw from the project anytime before the interview, during the interview, and within one month since the last day of the second interview without giving a reason?

Do you understand that you are required to take part in two interviews, the first interview will be arranged on a date that both you and the researcher agree; the time of second interview will also be discussed, but it will be at least two weeks after the first one; and each interview may last about 1 to 2 hours. (2.2)

Do you agree to participate in the two interviews with online interviews with encrypted connection and audio recording with recorder in computer and phone with password protected?(2.2)

Do you agree to allow anonymised quotes and pseudonyms(1.2) to be used in the reporting of this study, and in other academic publications?

Do you agree that the researcher, academic supervisors and the participant will have access to the participant's own interview data; at the later stage of the research, when the analysis report gets finished, the researcher will send you the findings of the thesis and report of your part. (2.4)

Do you understand that your data will be stored securely at all times with password protected computer and in University's data storage BEAR system, and all data will be used in the final PhD thesis report, and in other academic publications.(2.5)

_____   _____   _____

Name of participant   date   signature

_____   _____   _____

Name of person taking consent   date   signature

Contact for further information

If you have any questions at any time before, during or after the interview, please contact me Yaqi Li
███████████████████ , or my academic supervisors Dr Shelley Budgeon
███████████████████ , and Dr Nicki Ward ████████████████

Thank you for your involvement.

Yaqi Li
PhD Social Policy, Sociology and Criminology
University of Birmingham
October 2020

Appendix 8 Published work

(Please see the file *Part2YaqiLi2023PhD*)

SSAGE researchmethods
cases

Conducting Interviews Online: A Narrative Study With "Leftover Women" in China

Abstract

This case study describes a research project involving online interviews with single women, otherwise known as "leftover women," in urban areas of China. While research suggests that synchronous online interviewing can be a useful supplement to or replacement for face-to-face interviews in the modern day, this study demonstrates that online interviewing can still be challenging. There are some advantages of conducting online fieldwork, particularly during the pandemic, including the ability to guarantee the safety of both the researcher and participants, sample a wider range of subjects, and avoid travel costs and COVID-19 quarantine protocols. This case study also discusses the practical challenges that the researcher faced during data collection, such as technical issues, network security, and rapport-building. Unlike structured or semistructured interview methods, unstructured narrative interviews conducted online present unique difficulties. Participants were asked to share their life stories coherently without external interruptions and distractions, thus creating a comfortable and trustworthy online environment to ensure that participants' meanings and intentions were clearly represented in their story. Finally, this case highlights the challenges of online narrative interviews as well as strategies to mitigate their potential negative impact.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to:

- Identify the ethical and practical issues that software and technology may introduce in online qualitative research projects
- Discuss potential challenges of conducting narrative interviews online and interpreting participants' emotions and meaning during the storytelling
- Develop strategies to mitigate these issues when designing and conducting their own narrative research projects online

Project Overview and Context

This case study discusses a doctoral project involving narrative research with Chinese leftover women conducted online. Since the collapse of China's centralized and state-sponsored system following the economic reform in 1978, Chinese women have enjoyed greater autonomy with more equal working opportunities. Nevertheless, women are pressured to get married and form a family, reflecting the Chinese government's objective of maintaining social stability and population control. In China, the derogatory term "leftover women" (shengnv: 剩女) is used to describe an urban and professional female in their late 20s or older who is still single. Being unmarried in contemporary China is perceived as "leftover," precarious and abnormal (i.e., not conforming to Confucian values), and such women are

considered to have no future. While the balance between career and family is already difficult for women in China, single women may face even greater challenges with the discrimination and stigmatization they experience within China's patriarchal society.

The research presented here also has a special relevance to me and my identity. As a Chinese woman and a feminist, I was interested in exploring women's life stories with regard to their education, career, family, and intimate relationships. Therefore, with the theories of gender and individualization in mind, I planned to explore how individuals in China actively and independently make choices, and how these choices are impacted and shaped by social structures and norms. As Holloway and Biley (2011) state, researchers with personal experience on the topic area being investigated might be better able to understand the language used by participants, as well as the thoughts, feelings, and meaning they have ascribed to certain situations. Thus, having gone through a similar experience myself, I wanted to uncover how Chinese women make decisions at turning points in their lives, how they interact with their families and the social environment of China in general, and how women's personal lives are impacted by gender and sexuality norms.

Previous studies on single women have used a variety of research methods, such as semi-structured interviews (Sandfield & Percy, 2003), discourse methods (Lahad, 2013), and narrative approaches (Reynolds & Taylor, 2005; Simpson, 2006). However, studies on Chinese leftover women, in particular (Gaetano, 2014; Ji, 2015; To, 2015) have not, to date, used a narrative approach to explore single women's life stories. When compared to traditional interviews aiming to discover how participants perceive a social phenomenon or why they experience it in a particular way, my research used narrative interviews to find out how women understand their own personal stories from childhood to the present. The narrative method was chosen for this research for the following reasons:

1. When compared to traditional interviews, which focus on collecting facts and information from participants' experiences, narrative interviews focus on how participants explain and understand events, how they make sense of their past behaviors and decisions, and how they organize their storytelling process. This research aimed to explore how single women made choices in their personal life, and how they rationalize their current status, rather than investigate what choices they made; thus, narrative method was adopted.
2. A narrative approach was considered the most appropriate method here, as it offers a valuable opportunity to address inequalities or feelings of powerlessness among vulnerable or marginalized participants whose voices are less likely to be heard (Aldridge, 2014). When compared to traditional interviews, the ratio of talk is weighted more heavily toward the participant in narrative interviews, thus enabling them to tell their full story for the first time. Given that Chinese society is prejudiced toward single women, this felt particularly important within my research.
3. In narrative interviews, Lawler (2002) argues that people construct their own identities through the process of telling their life stories. Furthermore, the identities constructed in these narratives are able to transcend pervasive stereotypes surrounding the population under

investigation. Through voicing their own narratives, however, these women are able to build more complicated and nuanced identities within their particular social and historical context.

4. As Ward (2012) states, narrative research is used to acknowledge the diversity of individual history, needs, and behavior within patterns of social differentiation, and to find the intersection among biography, history, and society. In this way, the narrative method I employed in this research helped me examine both the individual and the context. More specifically, it helped me explore the uniqueness of leftover women's stories, the relationships between leftover women and Chinese social values, and the broader impact on women from social policies, social norms, and traditional values in Chinese society.

Due to the outbreak of the global pandemic as well as time constraints on data collection, I conducted interviews online. Conducting interviews online offered significant advantages by reducing the time and money needed to perform the study, but it also introduced several challenges during the data collection stage. These challenges will be explored in depth later on.

Section Summary

- This case study is based on a narrative research project exploring Chinese leftover women's life stories within a Chinese cultural and historical context.
- With a similar identity and experience, this research caused the researcher to reflect on their own identity that made them keen to explore Chinese leftover women's stories.
- The research intends to fill the gap in the literature by conducting narrative interviews—a method that has not yet been used in studies on leftover women.

<center>**Research Design**</center>

Sampling

Because the research was focused on "leftover women," 15 heterosexual, unmarried, and childless women were recruited as participants. In 2007, China's national feminist agency, the All-China Women's Federation, defined the term "leftover women" as well-educated and well-paid urban single women above the age of 27 years (Fincher, 2016). Hence, my research recruited participants aged 27–40 years, with a Bachelor's degrees or higher from top 100 universities in China, earning high salaries in careers such as engineering and government positions, and living in major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. The recruiting process for these online interviews followed the same protocol as those of face-to-face interviews. That is, I posted advertisements in online chat groups and sent letters by email or other online contact.

Narrative Interviews

To ensure that participants were able to tell their stories in the most complete and consistent way, I conducted narrative interviews using an unstructured approach with the interrupting technique (Matthews & Ross, 2014). In unstructured interviews, participants need to tell stories in their own way, rather than by answering a set of interview questions. I used the interrupting technique sparingly, such as when I told my participants what the research was about, or when I opened the conversation with a question like, "Could you please tell me about your dating history?" Unlike non-interrupting interview methods that require the researcher to not disturb the storytelling during interviews, the interrupting technique requires the researcher to ask questions for clarification or further details, or to initiate a return to the original research topic (Matthews & Ross, 2014), thus pushing the participant to constantly restructure their story using the researcher's questions and comments as prompts. Although the interviews were unstructured, my opening questions were tailored to a few sub-topics, including "intimate relationships," "career," and "family." Then, the follow-up questions were constructed around "events," "characters," and "impact," which followed from the narrative approach (Czarniawska, 2004; Labov & Waletzky, 1997; McAdams, 1989; Polkinghorne, 1995). I listened as participants told their stories. During the interview, I gave prompts or asked follow-up questions like "What happened next?," "What did they say to you?," and "How did it impact you?" These questions encouraged participants to continue narrating, provide clarification, or additional details or get back on topic.

To prevent the interviews from being one-sided or exploitive, I conducted interviews twice, informed by both the feminist method (Oakley, 1981) and the multi-session method (Wengraf, 2001). Oakley (1981) argued that, in some social research, researchers arrogate to themselves the right to ask questions, implicitly placing interviewees in a position of subservience or inferiority. In feminist research, a non-hierarchical relationship should be built and the perspective of women interviewed should be included. In this research with unstructured questions, the participant was the protagonist of their story and the primary source of information for this research; the second interview was arranged to let the participant explain, clarify, or add more details to their story. This way, participants could return to the interpretation process later and improve the accuracy and validity of their statements. In narrative interviews, the story is neither created by the participant alone nor interpreted by the researcher independently; instead, it is co-constructed by both the researcher and participant. The first interview focused on obtaining a smooth narrative and general life story, during which I asked for explanation of certain words and phrases and used follow-up questions to encourage the participant to narrate their full story. During the second interview, I presented an interpretation of what I had heard thus far, asked the participant for comments, and selected particular parts of the story to ask for further details to continue to encourage the participant's involvement. The length of each interview lasted between 1 and 2 hr, but I also allowed the interview to go beyond 2 hr to allow participants to finish narrating.

Online Interviews

Due to the pandemic as well as practical time constraints on data collection, I opted for online over faceto-face interviews. These online interviews were conducted via video or audio, according to the participants' preferences. The decision to conduct interviews in this way represented something of a compromise and was due primarily to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, I found that there were a number of benefits to doing interviews online. For instance, because I am located in England, I could reach participants in China without spending extra time and money. Furthermore, due to the self-isolation policy in China, I would have had to self-isolate for at least 7 days each time I visited a different city. Opting for online narrative interviews gave me the flexibility to arrange interviews with participants located in different cities within the same week. It also enabled me to sample a wider variety of participants, as I was not limited by the geography of my participants (Lefever et al., 2007; van Eeden-Moorefield et al., 2008). Finally, the online environment may have afforded my participants an additional layer of security, especially during a global pandemic, both my participants and I felt safer communicating online and avoiding any potential health risks.

Section Summary

- This study adopted purposive sampling for those who fit the profile being explored. Recruitment was conducted by sending emails and posting adverts.
- Unstructured interviews with the interrupting technique were used in narrative interviews to ensure that participants could tell more complete and consistent stories. Interviews were planned to be conducted twice so that participants could join the interpretation process later and ensure the accuracy and validity of their stories.
- Due to the pandemic and constraints on time and money, online interviews were used rather than face-to-face interviews. Online methods ensured that the research project was finished on time and did not exceed the researcher's budget.

<div align="center">

Research Practicalities and Methods in Action

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This section discusses three challenges that I faced before and during data collection. First, I dealt with several limitations related to using Zoom as a video conferencing software, particularly with regard to building rapport with participants before interviews. I also encountered challenges due to internet connection issues and external distractions, which occasionally meant not being able to clearly hear what participants said. Challenges of not being able to interpret participants' emotion and meanings accurately without seeing their facial expressions and gestures were also discussed.

Software Selection for Online Interviewing

When compared to face-to-face interviews, online interviewing largely relies on the researcher's and participant's internet connection and software usage habits. Chiumento et al. (2018) found in their fieldwork in countries with recent histories of conflict and disaster that the internet, electricity, and infrastructures were poor, particularly in rural sites, primarily citing issues with bandwidth limitations and unpredictable power cuts. In this research, the research context was urban areas in China, where reliable high-speed internet and electricity infrastructure exist, so that software for online video conferencing was assumed to be easily accessible. Participants recruited for this research all came from good educational backgrounds, lived in urban areas, and likely had easy access to new technologies.

However, some widely used software was not available as expected in China due to government internet policies, and popular Chinese software could not be approved by the university's ethics committee due to online security and privacy concerns. Therefore, I confirmed the software options with the ethics committee. The University's ethical committee informed me that only Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or Skype could be used in online interviews because they are secure and provide an encrypted connection. This differed from my original plan of using Tencent or WeChat, both of which are popular in China. However, I realized that these applications could introduce safety concerns, such as the risk of conversations being accessed or stored by government agencies. Changing my original plan proved difficult, as most of the software suggested by the University had been banned by the Chinese government. For instance, Skype is not allowed to be downloaded in China, and Microsoft Teams requires people to register with a Gmail or Microsoft Outlook email account, both of which are banned in China. As a result, the only viable option was to use Zoom.

During the recruiting process, I discovered that only two participants had experience with Zoom. They explained that Zoom has not been widely adopted in China and local companies tend to use other software instead. To ensure that my participants were familiar enough with the software, I wrote instructions on how to download and use the software and sent these instructions along with the consent forms. Prior to the interview, participants downloaded the video conferencing software. Then, I sent them an email with the virtual room code and password. At the beginning of the interview, I asked for the participants' permission to record the interview and reconfirmed all details on the consent form. When compared to traditional interview methods, narrative interviews aim to explore participants' personal life stories, so privacy and safety of data should be particularly protected.

Despite providing the guidance, participants may feel embarrassed or uncomfortable when they are required to obtain new software. Being unfamiliar with software can negatively affect rapport-building and the quality of the interview (Hay-Gibson, 2009). More than half of the participants still asked if we could use WeChat instead, and many were concerned with Zoom's level of safety. I took these comments very seriously, as Botha et al. (2010) maintain that having more advanced technology and software can place the researcher in a more powerful position, which can subsequently affect the dynamics between researcher and participant. Lefever et al. (2007) argue that technical problems in online research may make participants hesitant to use new technology and dissuade them from

participating in online research in general. Because this research has shifted online due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, participants who were unfamiliar with the used software became less likely to participate in online interviews. Two participants withdrew before the interview started because they lost patience after reading the software setup guide, and six participants delayed or rescheduled the interview on short notice because they needed more time to read the guide carefully and install the software for the interview. Therefore, if I noticed that participants were nervous or hesitant due to the new software, I proactively explained why I chose this software and how we used it to ensure the safety and privacy of the data.

Collecting Stories Online From a Different Space

While internet connectivity has been well developed in both the UK and China, it was inevitable that the connection would sometimes cut out in online interviews. When compared to traditional interviews, connection issues presented a serious challenge to data collection in narrative interviews, as missing even one word in a narrative could affect the coherence of the full story. I also found it challenging to offer reactions or prompts in a timely and natural manner to participants due to the video and audio delay; this is particularly important in narrative interviews when the participant is narrating emotional moments in their story, the researcher's reaction can help show that they are still engaged in the participant's story. There were also technical issues such as one participant's phone running out of battery and needing to reschedule the interview; one participant accidently turned off our conversation because they were unfamiliar with the software. Whale (2017) reported that audio problems such as sound quality and volume are also likely to be experienced in online interviews. To reduce the negative impact from Internet connection and technologies, I made sure that participants were in a location where there high-speed internet was provided, and confirmed that their device and software setting were prepared for a long-time interview.

Deakin and Wakefield (2014) suggest that encouraging participants to move to locations free from distractions is important in online interviews, I found this hard to achieve in practice. Although I emphasized the importance of choosing a comfortable and quiet location for the interview, participants would usually choose a random location that was more convenient for them. There were times when participants insisted on doing the interview in an unidentifiable location. When the interviewee chooses a public or noisy environment, it can derail the interview process. For instance, the noises masked the participant's voices when they were outdoors, which made it hard to understand what they were saying. There were other interruptions as well, including one participant stopping the call when they entered a lift and forgetting what story they planned to tell me, or when family entered their room during interviews. When participants' locations were too interruptive, I sometimes had to schedule an interview for a different time to adequately ensure participants' safety and the ability for them to provide sufficiently detailed stories. Online interviews largely rely upon the interviewee choosing a suitable location, as the researcher cannot control the surrounding environment (Deakin & Wakefield,

2014), the only way for me to guarantee the quality and privacy of interviews is to arrange interviews when participants were in a relatively private and safe location.

Overall, when compared to other traditional interviews, narrative interviews require participants to tell their coherent stories in their own structured way without distractions, but the online environment can pose critical risks to achieving a sufficient length and depth of the narrative. When interviews were interrupted, important words, phrases, or story structures could be missing, including story details, turning points, and shifts in cognition, emotion, or action, which may affect the researcher's ability to comprehend the full story. This would lead me to ask the participant to repeat what they said, or to confirm with them whether my interpretation was correct. However, I would find that the participant would rephrase or delete certain aspects of the story during this retelling, because, when compared to traditional interviews, participants in narrative interviews have more freedom to decide which episodes of stories they want to tell instead of answering questions. Although interruptions would not affect the validity of the interview data when the retelling was requested, the retelling has led to a different story, and it became challenging for me to interpret the data and find the connections between different episodes of stories later.

Collecting Stories Without Meeting in Person

As mentioned, participants had the option to do interviews with audio only. In such scenarios, it was hard for me to know the participants' states of mind. Because I could not look at their facial expressions or body language, it was hard to judge whether they were comfortable answering certain questions, whether there was more depth to be found, or whether they were willing to continue the interview (Ritchie et al., 2013). Even in video interviews, visual cues were limited by the webcam's limited framing of the participants' faces or head and shoulders (Whale, 2017). In one of my interviews, the participant suddenly slowed down their speech and kept pausing with "hmm," or "so, uhh." This led me to believe that the participant might not feel comfortable with the conversation, though I later found out they were in the middle of replying to a friend's message. Another participant's tone of voice changed when they told me about their breakup experience, but I could not tell whether or not they were crying. When compared to other methods of interviewing, narrative methods are more likely to make participants emotionally distressed. Conducting such research online made it more difficult to quickly identify participants' emotions when compared to face-to-face interviews, where the researcher can tell whether participants feel confused, hesitant, or unhappy to discuss stories based on their nonverbal cues and body language. In an online environment, the researcher lacks the chance to interpret participants' emotion accurately and ultimately fails to provide emotional support in-time. Novick (2008) suggested that the researcher can cultivate awareness of auditory cues such as anger, sarcasm, curt responses, or rapid, compulsive speech in narrative interviews. For ethical considerations, I made sure to tell my participants before the interview that they could pause when needed, choose not to talk further, or leave the interview entirely.

Moments of silence occur often in narrative interviews. When I was conducting audio interviews and could not see participants' faces, it was difficult to understand the meaning of silence and pauses during participants' storytelling. Silence also implied that sometimes spoken language is not enough for participants to narrate or express all of their feelings and thoughts. For instance, some researchers expected "stories" in narrative interviews but experienced silence instead, only to discover a full narrative when they encouraged participants' artistic productions and role plays (Riessman, 2008). In face-to-face interviews, participants can be encouraged to create art, show pictures and videos, or perform the key moments in their life to help themselves tell stories in detail. In contrast, in online narrative interviews, it is more difficult for participants to narrate in creative ways due to the limitations of local internet speeds and access to technology. In my experience, one participant gave up sending videos about them participating a dating show to me through Zoom while telling stories, because Zoom only allowed people to share their screen to show videos, and they found this was too complicated to operate and their privacy could possibly be invaded. Thus, although women have provided rich information about their life through storytelling online, they lost an opportunity to narrate their stories in a more detailed, lively, and complete way with the help of images or performances. Thus, during the silence—without other of narrative forms—I typically waited for a few seconds to see whether they would continue or used prompts to encourage them; in most situations they had more to tell after pauses and silence.

There are certain aspects of a visual format that can aid researcher interpretation. On this note, Lo Iacono et al. (2016) argued that in face-to-face interviews, participants' presentation of self (Goffman, 1959) may convey useful meanings. That is, participants' choice of location, their size and looks, postures, and speech patterns can help the researcher to understand the participant's story. In my research, women's stories about behaving in feminine ways, applying make-up, or losing weight would have been more easy to fully understand in face-to-face interviews. Without meeting in person, online narrative research—despite the option of video interviews—is conducted in a somewhat contrived environment and lacks the authentic feeling of "real life" interaction. Liu (2006) interviewed one participant at their local university campus in China for one narrative study, providing lots of details on the participant's living environment to help comprehend their story and background. Without meeting in person, the researcher is only able to interpret data by reading stories, but loses the opportunity to understand participants' story in their local historical and cultural context.

Conducting narrative interviews twice using the multi-session method was particularly helpful considering the online nature of the fieldwork. Given the likelihood of misunderstanding or misinterpreting participants' stories without seeing their facial expressions or gestures, I found that the second interview provided a good time for me to ask for explanation or details to better interpret what participants intended to express in their stories.

Section Summary

- In online interviews, it is important for the researcher to consider local software usage habits and relevant internet policies. Being unfamiliar with software can negatively affect rapport-building and interview quality.
- It is inevitable that technical issues will occur in online interviews, and missing even one word in a narrative can affect the coherence of the full story in narrative interviews.
- Without seeing participants' facial expressions and gestures, the online environment makes it difficult for the researcher to adopt creative methods to help participants narrate in their local historical and cultural environment.

Practical Lessons Learned

The pandemic has undoubtedly made online research a more popular option for conducting research in the last 2 years. There is no denying that online methods mitigate issues related to travel, which enables research to be conducted more easily and with fewer costs. However, there are still some limitations of online research that requires researchers to prepare in advance if they are to reduce their negative impacts on research outcomes. I experienced the following three challenges in my fieldwork:

1. When the researcher and participants are located in different countries, it is important for the researcher to consider local internet and electricity infrastructure conditions, local software usage habits, and relevant internet policies. Additionally, data safety and privacy in an online environment can be riskier and raise ethical concerns, requiring the researcher to be more cautious and sensitive to the policies of various online platforms during data collection. When participants experience issues using the software, the researcher can provide guidelines to help participants troubleshoot and to create a more friendly and comfortable online interview environment.
2. It is inevitable that technical issues occur during online interviews. It is also difficult for the researcher to control the participants' surrounding environment to avoid external distractions. Narrative interviews require participants to tell their coherent stories in their own structured way without distractions, but the online environment can pose critical risks to achieving a sufficient length and depth of the narrative. Thus, it is important for the researcher to ensure access to reliable high-speed internet in a private location for the interview.
3. For research methods such as narrative interviews, emotional distress during "silent moments" may happen when participants tell their personal stories. Without seeing participants' facial expressions and gestures, it is necessary for the researcher to ask for further explanation and interpretation from participants during a follow-up interview and clearly inform participants of their right to pause or withdrawal from the interview if they wish to do so at any time. Online environment makes it difficult for the researcher to adopt creative methods to help participants narrate in their local historical and cultural environment; thus, it

is important to include participants in the initial data interpretation and analysis stage to improve the validity of the research.

Section Summary

- In online interviews, it is important for the researcher to consider local internet and electricity infrastructure conditions, local software usage habits, and relevant internet policies.
- Eventually, technical issues will appear in online interviews. To minimize these issues, the researcher needs to ensure access to reliable high-speed internet along with a private and safe location for the interview.
- Without seeing participants' facial expressions and gestures, it is necessary for the researcher to ask for more explanation and interpretation from participants during a follow-up interview and clearly inform participants of their right to pause or withdrawal from the interview if they wish to do so at any time.

Conclusion

The use of online interviews in this narrative research study enabled me to conduct fieldwork in an efficient manner. In the midst of the global pandemic, it saved the researcher time and money typically needed for travel and reduced risks to researcher and participant health and safety. Most importantly, online interviews allowed the researcher to complete the project within the time allotted. However, it also introduced substantive challenges to data collection. In my experience, the researcher may experience challenges in software selection, internet connection issues, external distractions, and emotional "silent moments" of distress in online narrative interviews. It is important to know how to apply online methods with software that participants are unfamiliar with, protect participants' privacy and safety in an online environment, reschedule interviews when issues arise due to technical issues, inform participants of their right to pause or withdraw from the interview if they wish to do so at any time, and include participant in the initial data interpretation and analysis stage to improve the validity of the research.

Section Summary

- The use of online narrative interviews made fieldwork not only generally more efficient but also made

  it feasible to continue during a global pandemic.
- Online methods did introduce new challenges for narrative interviews due to internet connection issues, external distractions, and emotional "silent moments" of distress.

- Online research required the researcher to prepare to mitigate any negative impact and risks, and to implement strategies to improve the validity of the research data.

Classroom Discussion Questions

1. What are some advantages and disadvantages of using online methods for narrative interviews?
2. What other ethics-related challenges might you expect to encounter when conducting interviews online or using audio and video technologies?
3. Can you think of any other strategies to help with interpreting emotions and meaning when conducting narrative interviews online?

Further Reading

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