Unexpected *nvboshi*: The Making of New Womanhood in Contemporary China

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Abstract

Chinese female PhDs or *nvboshi* have been constantly stigmatised as the 'third gender' by the society and media in China. Previous studies have primarily focused on discussing their relationship and marriage within the 'leftover women' discourse. However, the exploration of their lived experiences has not attracted scholarly attention. This thesis aims at illustrating the real life of *nvboshi* in contemporary society. More specifically, this thesis examines the difficulties and barriers Chinese *nvboshi* face in their daily lives and their coping strategies accordingly. Drawing on Yan Yunxiang's work on Chinese individualisation, through conducting semi-structured interviews with thirty-three *nvboshi*, I explore their lived experiences in terms of their relationship and singleness, career barriers and development, as well as the negotiations between individual desires and family obligations. My findings reveal that there exists two different perceptions of singleness among these *nvboshi*: undesirable singleness and celebrated singleness. Instead of being left out in the marriage market, most of these *nvboshi* choose to embrace singleness and construct the individualised single lifestyles through self-reliance, which reflects these women's pursuit of living a life of one's own. Meanwhile, these *nvboshi* place a high value on their own career advancement and have navigated various strategies to deal with the structural constraints in the workplace. Moreover, facing the conflict between individual desires and family obligations, these *nvboshi* have strived to develop individual agency to seek a balance, rather than making a sacrifice for the family. By examining their experiences and practices, I find that these *nvboshi* have employed individual strategies and constant negotiations to navigate a patriarchal culture in ways that support their own development and individual desires in their lives. Therefore, I argue that these women have constructed a striving and desiring womanhood in contemporary Chinese society.

Key words: *nvboshi*, striving and desiring womanhood, individualisation, individual agency

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Author’s Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Chapter One
Introduction

1.1 All Starts from Here: Three Stories behind this Thesis

I have often asked myself 'where do I start?' when it comes to explaining why I chose to research Chinese female PhD students or *nvboshi*[1] as they are called in China. Perhaps the best place to begin is by describing the events that motivated me to embark on this intellectual journey. Two of the three events happened to me personally, the other to a friend of mine, but each has had a profound influence on my academic interests and I would like to share them with you, as a way of introducing the subject matter of the thesis.

When I started the PhD application process, I was planning to study in a university in my home city in China. To help with my preparations, my father introduced me to a friend of his working in a university, who could give me some useful inside information about how to successfully apply for a PhD. We arranged to meet but something shocking happened during the meeting. He asked me a few questions, which I remember very clearly even now. 'Do you have a boyfriend?' 'Are you going to get married and have kids in the next few years?' 'Can you spend most of your time working for your supervisor?' Frankly, I did not know how to respond to his questions, and I was confused about why he had asked them. Worse still, these questions were not the only shocking things he had to say:

> *To be honest, I have four tiers for recruiting PhD students. Firstly, I prefer to select male students. This is because male students will not be bothered by relationships or marriage. Even if they get married during their studies, they don't need to worry about family and kids. They can still work for me entirely without any distraction. But female students can't do this. Marriage and family will distract them. Tier 2 of recruiting will be male students who have been already working outside of universities for years with abundant*

[1] *Nvboshi* is Mandarin spelling for 'female PhD student'. The reason for using the Mandarin rather than the English term is because that it has 'specific social and cultural connotations, and exposes how hegemonic power works to impact public culture and discourses' (Li, 2020:179). In this study, *nvboshi* refers to all my participants, including those who are currently working and currently doing PhD study in the university.

resources and social networks. These students often need a PhD degree to advance their career, and we can make the resources exchange and do big projects together. Then, I will consider female students who have already married and have kids, as I do not need to worry about these women withdrawing from our projects because of sudden pregnancy. You know, too many female PhD students get married and get pregnant during their PhD studies and have to withdraw from research projects. It is such a big influence on supervisors. I don't want that. So I prefer women who have kids. It is an insurance policy for me. Lastly, if I can't find any students who match the above requirements, I will then consider students like you. No boyfriend, no marriage, no kid. It is kind of a risk for me. Don't be surprised. We (supervisors of PhD students) all do this. It is very normal in universities.

Some of my female family members and friends had told me they had experienced gender discrimination. To be honest, I was slightly skeptical about this because I had not experienced it myself. But during the meeting with my father's professor friend, I began to understand what they were talking about. I still remember how shocked I was in the meeting and what made me more sad and helpless was that I did not know how to respond to him. After the meeting, I had mixed feelings and a lot of questions. I wondered why a professionally trained teacher in a top university would have such gendered views on female students. How could he select students on the basis of gender instead of academic abilities? The saddest part was that he regarded his views as 'normal'. This was the first time in my life that I had directly come across gender inequality being practised and it forced me to seriously think about my future research interests. Should I go on to pursue my PhD study within my Master's subject of Communication and Journalism? Due to this critical meeting, I was a little uncertain.

The second event that pushed me into starting this research was a joke my friend told me, although I am not quite sure if it can be called a joke. Here it is. When I was preparing my PhD application, a friend from my Masters course signed me up for a popular dating website without telling me. I remember that I was working in my office one morning when, suddenly, I received a call from the matchmaker of this dating website. When the matchmaker introduced herself, I thought it was some kind of crank call and was about to hang up but then

she started listing my educational background and personal information. I was scared because I thought that my personal information had been leaked somewhere, so I hung up the phone. Later that day, my friend messaged me, saying that she had signed me up for the website. I was upset. The next day, I received another call from the matchmaker and we had a conversation which I will never forget:

> *Matchmaker: I have a few men who are very interested in your profile, and they would like to meet with you. You are particularly attractive to these men as you have a Master's degree and a good job. Also, you are a local person so you definitely have your own flat in this city. Besides, your age (25) is ideal. You can get married at 26 and have your first child before 28, which is perfect for a woman.*
>
> *Me: Sorry. I am not planning to find a boyfriend and I am going to do a PhD.*
>
> *Matchmaker: OMG. Why are you going to do a PhD at your age? Don't you know how difficult it is for nvboshi to find a boyfriend? Don't you know that nvboshi are a third gender[2]? Most of our clients specify that they don't want a nvboshi. If you become a nvboshi, you will be left behind and become a leftover woman. You won't have any chance in the marriage market. Now, you have many choices. Once you become a nvboshi, you will be the one who is being judged, and most men don't want a nvboshi for a wife. You SHOULD NOT do this. You should prioritise your marriage at this age. My daughter got married at 25 and she does not need to work hard and make money because her husband does this. Her life is really easy. That is what you need to do. Girls do not need such higher educational degrees.*

After a long and frustrating conversation, I ended with an 'I will risk it. Thank you.' This incident happened after the meeting with the PhD supervisor mentioned above, although I had already read many articles about how hard it is for *nvboshi* to find a boyfriend, and how these women are described using insulting terminology such as 'UFO' (ugly, foolish and old). Nevertheless, this was the first time I had heard such strong opinions on *nvboshi* being

[2] I will talk about the 'third gender' in the next section of this chapter.

voiced in person and it made me think that does the whole society think of *nvboshi* like this matchmaker? What do *nvboshi* think of themselves? Why are there more and more women choosing to do PhDs if people and society have such prejudices about these women? I then tried to find some articles and studies on this group, to see what the academic research had to say about these women. Surprisingly, the reports I found mainly focused on negative life experiences such as failed relationships, unsatisfactory careers and their stigmatisation as the 'third gender'. There were many academic studies investigating how the public image of *nvboshi* has been constructed within the media context. But I was expecting to find some sociological or feminist literature regarding how these women see themselves and respond to their stereotyping and the prejudice directed towards them. The research was actually quite limited and there was nothing on *nvboshi's* own voices, so I had an idea 'How about I do this study myself?'

After these two episodes, I started to become interested in researching these women's lives but the event that finally made up my mind was a New Year's gathering where I met my friend, Summer, a lovely young woman who dreamt of doing a PhD abroad and was working hard in order to obtain a scholarship. At the party, she told me that she had been granted a half-scholarship from her preferred university in Canada and would not need to pay for her tuition, just her living expenses. However, her parents were refusing to support her as they needed to spend the money on a new flat and were preparing for her older brother's marriage. Her parents thought that her brother was more important than her, even though he had not gone to university, and they still believed that a son was more important than a daughter who will get married to a man eventually and not be there to care for her parents when they grow old. Summer's parents assumed that she would get married and start a family, which meant that there was no need for her to get a PhD degree, or for them to waste their money on her. She cried so hard that day and had to turn down the opportunity to study because she could not persuade her parents to pay for her living expenses in Canada.

Summer's experience made me realise that many parents view money spent on children as a kind of investment. This investment is assigned on the basis of gender and girls will be less likely to benefit from it than their brothers. I was surprised by the values and ideologies that Summer's parents held. They treated Summer in a particularly traditional and gendered way, and saw their daughter as someone's future wife and daughter-in-law who would not make any contribution to her original family and could not shoulder the responsibility of elderly

care. Also, they did not recognise the value of PhD education for a woman and prioritised women's gendered roles, which contributed to the breaking of my friend's dream. I felt so sorry for her.

After the New Year's gathering, I had more questions. First of all, it was apparent that there were many prejudices against Chinese *nvboshi*, especially regarding relationships and marriage. As my matchmaker said '*nvboshi* are not welcomed in the marriage market.' If this was true, I wondered how these *nvboshi* face such a situation and deal with this in reality? Have all the *nvboshi* been influenced by such stereotypes? Secondly, living in a society filled with traditional gender attitudes and patriarchal ideologies, how do these *nvboshi* live their lives and pursue their life goals? What kind of difficulties are they facing and what are their strategies for navigating these problems? Thirdly, what is life really like for *nvboshi*? When I was doing my Master degree, a female professor in my department was my role model. Although she was not married, I did not see any negativity from her, just that she was devoted to her work and enjoyed her single life without being trapped by patriarchal ideologies and traditional gender values. She was not how society thinks a *nvboshi* would be. These observations and experiences led me to start my exploration of the world of these women. Not only is there limited research on this particular social group, but also it is essential to pay more attention to these women and make sure that they are offered opportunities to voice their narratives within a male-dominated society.

1.2 Overview of the Background of Researching *nvboshi* in China

Chinese *nvboshi* should be regarded as precious intellectual assets, appreciated and treated with respect, yet are experiencing assorted difficulties and struggles in their lives. On an individual level, many women start PhDs between the ages of 24 and 27, the ideal age for a woman to get married from a mainstream Chinese perspective. As such, these women face a conflict between pursuing their studies or getting married. Some may get married during their PhD studies, while postponing marriage is a strategy often adopted by *nvboshi* to deal with the situation. And one of the foreseeable consequences of this choice is that women will postpone fulfilling family roles such as having children. In this regard, these women might be judged by society. On a societal level, through the generalised images the Chinese media has constructed, *nvboshi* are being stigmatised and discriminated against, particularly in

relationships and the marriage market. In order to research their life experiences, I am going to broadly introduce the research background from two aspects: the influence of educational development on women and the contemporary media context regarding *nvboshi* in China.

1.2.1 Women, patriarchy and education in China

Before we begin exploring the lives of *nvboshi*, it is firstly necessary to consider the experience of Chinese women historically and socially, along with the influence of Chinese patriarchal culture and how this has affected the development of education for women. Over the long period of Confucian China, men prevailed in different domains of social and political development practices; women, however, were suffering from a high level of inequality when compared to men, even in comparison with their male family members (Bélanger, Lee, & Wang, 2010). The entire process of a woman's upbringing was centred around becoming acquainted with the essential qualities of being virtuous and obedient. In other words, what was advocated by these traditional social values and patriarchal beliefs regarding Chinese women was housework skills such as cooking, housekeeping and childcare, etc. Confucian Chinese society upheld the gendered value that 'ignorance is a woman's virtue' (女子无才便是德) and it was argued that uneducated women made more desirable wives and mothers, in order to ensure the continuity and harmony of the household and the society. This patriarchal ideology created a culture of female reliance and subordination to men, which characterised Chinese society for hundreds of years (Lee, 1995). It was believed that the major responsibility of a woman was to fulfil her gendered roles in the domestic area and traditional Confucian ideas such as the 'three obediences and four virtues[3]' (三从四德) were used to regulate women's behaviours. They also revealed the gender hierarchy of Chinese patriarchal culture within this structure, a 'hierarchy of control over women was intrinsically tied to the traditional beliefs of Chinese society' (Lee, 1995, p. 347); and under the influence of these patriarchal values, Chinese women were not allowed to have access to education. Strictly constrained by social customs and conduct principles, women were mainly trained to be docile and introvert, qualities which were considered as

[3] The three obediences and four virtues were the moral principles and social code defining behaviour for women in ancient Chinese society. The three obediences required women to obey her father as a maiden daughter, obey her husband as chaste wife and obey her son as a widow (在家从父，出嫁从夫，夫死从子). The four virtues entailed feminine virtues in ethics (妇德), speech (妇言), facial appearance (妇容), and in domestic duties (妇功).

their best attributes in the past (Lee, 1995), and they were not allowed to develop their talents like men as well.

Under the patriarchal circumstances of such traditional Chinese culture, women suffered a lot from the gender inequality facing them. In the family, girls tended to be discriminated against by their family members when compared to boys. Girls were viewed as a burden to their original family and would have few opportunities for receiving much education (Blake, 1994). For ordinary families with low incomes, raising girls would be regarded as an extra burden for the whole family. Gender discrimination brought about by public patriarchy was extremely detrimental for young Chinese women over the centuries, forcing them to get married at a rather early age, generally before they were 16 years old (Hamilton, 1990). In addition to this, women in patriarchal society could not lead a decent life without relying on men for support. The living standards of their families would directly determine a woman's quality of life, by and large. For example, women in poverty-stricken families would tend to suffer from poverty together with their family members and had few opportunities and limited agency to make changes to their living conditions, unless improvements were made by their male family members. That is to say, for these women, their overriding concern would be to find a good husband to marry, one who would love them and could afford a decent life. Such a concept was widely accepted in traditional Chinese culture. Even today, the statement that the best thing for a woman to do with her life is to marry a good man is still regarded as reasonable in Chinese society, even though women enjoy a level of equality with men in most respects, such as access to educational opportunities and job opportunities(To, 2013). This reflects the profound social impact that patriarchy rooted in traditional Chinese culture still has on Chinese society.

Moreover, due to the impact of patriarchy on China, women had few opportunities to develop a career (Sechiyama, 2013). In traditional China, they were expected to stay at home to undertake all sorts of domestic work in daily life. In a sense, Chinese women were supposed to make all sorts of plans in relation to their personal development on the basis of the familial needs to realise their goals. As a result, almost all the income in traditional Chinese families came from male family members. Generally, the income structure of a family would determine or greatly affect the roles and labour division of the family members in traditional Chinese society. Without an individual career or income, women thus had difficulties in preserving equality with their husbands and gaining power within the family, which was

another key problem facing Chinese women in the past because of the impacts of patriarchy on China.

During the long period of serious gender inequality, Chinese women had no opportunity to make improvements to their social status for various reasons. Without sufficiently educated women, there was even less of a possibility for changes to be made to the unfavourable position of women in Chinese society (Ma & Jacobs, 2010). Changes started to occur to the serious inequality between men and women during the mid-19th century, when China was reaching the end of its final dynasty - namely the Qing Dynasty (1636-1912) - and suffering from the opium war initiated when Western aggressors invaded and exploited the country, which was especially weak in terms of national defense capability. New and different schools of thoughts from Western countries were introduced to the Chinese public, including feminism and feminist movements (Lee, 1995). More and more Chinese women started to receive some education, and fewer and fewer Chinese people criticised such changes (Sechiyama, 2013). Chinese women started to change public views about their own status and social roles, although to a limited degree. Following the establishment of the Republic of China (1912-1949), the government began to build more public schools for girls and invited Western teachers to teach English and Western culture. More and more young women were thus provided with access to education, and with the promotion of female education, women stepped out of their private households and into the public sphere to build up their own social relations and networks.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China (1949), women were universally encouraged to work 'as an economic resource to contribute to national modernisation and industrialisation programmes' (Turner, 2006, p. 49), in accordance with Mao's slogan that 'women can hold up half of the sky'. After the People's Republic came into being, China witnessed great changes in terms of the educational opportunities offered to women (Croll, 1995). Unlike the conditions in the previous centuries, when women were offered little or no formal education, now Chinese women receive the same education as men do via the nine-year compulsory education policy and national college entrance examination. As reforms have progressed, Chinese women's absolute educational attainment has visibly increased (Hannum et al., 2007) which in turn contributes to women's labour participation rate. According to The White Paper on Equality, Development and Sharing - Progress of

Women's Cause in 70 Years since New China's Founding[4] released by China's State Council Information Office in 2019, the proportion of female students in regular institutions of Higher Education has rapidly increased, especially since 1978. In 1978, the proportion of female students was only 24.1%, while in 2017, the number reached a record high with over half (52.5%) of female students in regular institutions of Higher Education. Over the past few decades, China's higher education system has been developing at an unprecedented pace (Bai, 2006) and the number of Chinese women who have been able to pursue education has grown dramatically (Turner, 2006). Thus, a growing number of educated and skilled women are found in the current Chinese labour market, pursuing the kind of careers only men were allowed to embark on in the past.

Another fundamental factor that has contributed to this change would be the implementation of the One-Child Policy. This policy has not only changed the demographic pattern of China, but also has opened up more chances for singleton daughters, especially urban daughters (Fong, 2002, 2004). In 1982, The One-Child Policy was officially documented in China's Constitution. Because of this policy, urban households have shown a high interest in investing and educating their only child regardless of their sex (Croll, 1995; Fong, 2002; Tsui & Rich, 2002). Many urban parents realise that daughters can fulfil their expectations as well as sons, and therefore the resources that were previously ascribed to sons have been relocated on these only-one daughters in urban households. As a result, these daughters have enjoyed privileges, advantageous social-economic conditions and heavy family investments that enable them to access higher education (Lee, 2012; Xie, 2021). Fong (2004) calls these daughters the 'only hope' for Chinese families. Turner (2006) argues that due to their participation in higher education, Chinese women are not only being given permission to make individual life choices for themselves, but also to seek opportunities to release themselves from traditionally accepted social and family roles. A desire to gain independence and build careers has been shown by these degree-educated professional women, who have developed into a new social class and identified themselves as self-determining individuals in contemporary China. As a result, these women are enabled to 'participate not only in prosperity, but in the changing power dynamics emerging in China today' (Turner, 2006, p. 62).

[4] White Paper on Equality, Development and Sharing - Progress of Women's Cause in 70 Years since New China's Founding: 平等，发展，共享：新中国 70 年妇女事业的发展与进步白皮书

1.2.2 Chinese nvboshi: the 'third gender' in the media context

In China, there is a well-known saying, 'There are three types of people in the world: men, women and *nvboshi*' (See Figure 1). Even if it was meant as a joke, the idea that *nvboshi* are a 'third gender' has become a mainstay of public discourse. One of the most famous *nvboshi* on Chinese TV is Hu Yifei (胡一菲), a fictional character from a popular comedy show entitled iPartment (爱情公寓, 2011—2020). In one episode, Yifei receives a PhD offer. In a gathering without Yifei, her roommates talk about her becoming a *nvboshi*. One of the roommates, Zeng Xiaoxian, repeats the 'third gender' saying.

Figure 1 iPartment, Season II, EP 9

I have tried to find the words to describe the image of *nvboshi* shown in the picture above. The character looks like it has a male body with an extraterrestrial head. I can say that it is definitely an exaggeration but this picture also implies what the creators think of *nvboshi* to some extent. Xiaoxian uses a metaphor to describe *nvboshi*, calling them 'the fighter jets of mankind' and goes on to argue that they can only be controlled by outstanding man - a man with a Bachelor's or Master's degree is not enough for these *nvboshi*, and even nanboshi (male PhDs) are barely qualified. His argument strongly implies that it is not easy to marry a *nvboshi* and is reinforced by the image of Yifei constructed in the show, which is that of a manly woman trained to the highest level in taekwondo. Not surprisingly, her personality is associated with her PhD identity and her 'third gender' is a feature of every single episode.

Since the Chinese state officially defined women over 27 but still single as *shengnv* (剩女, leftover women) in 2007 (Fincher, 2016), the discussions regarding China's leftover women have become pervasive. During this process, the mass media has played a fundamental role in 'turning *shengnv* into a pejorative household term' (Zhang, 2020, p. 39), defining women who remain single over a certain age as 'unchosen' , 'unattractive' and 'unwanted' (Gong, Tu, & Jiang, 2017; Lin & Baker, 2019). As a peculiar subgroup, *nvboshi* have gradually become a target for the mass media. Together with the 'leftover women' discourse, Li (2020) identifies three types of *nvboshi* in media representations: the anxious (being passive and lacking agency in the marriage market), the eccentric (being accused of having too much agency and not conforming to gender norms), the mistreated (being given support). Li (2020) argues that *nvboshi* have 'ended up being depicted as an anxious, self-pitying, and eccentric 'third gender' that is outside the culture's norms, not liked or desired by men, and even alienated from women who are more obedient to men' (p.171). Moreover, in order to maintain the patriarchal power within Chinese society, *nvboshi* are detrimentally framed by the media as 'a potential challenge to the nation' (Li, 2020, p. 171). Compared with their gender roles, *nvboshi*'s professional achievements and values are not appreciated in the media context. Thanks to the interplay of the 'third gender' and 'leftover women' discourses, *nvboshi* have encountered much denigration. In particular, they are discriminated against in the marriage market.

Figure 2 Chinese matchmaking standards, from Phoenix News

Figure 2 is from an article talking about current matchmaking standards in the Chinese marriage market. Although it is not official acknowledgement, this figure does unveil the assorted standards for men and women in the Chinese marriage market to a certain degree. In particular, it provides a vivid picture of *nvboshi*'s situation in the marriage market. As represented in Figure 2, we can see that nanboshi (male PhDs) are regarded as the most desirable men, whereas *nvboshi* are categorised as the least wanted women. Certainly, the categorisation in this picture cannot represent the entire social perception of *nvboshi* in China. However, it does partially reflect the unequal treatment *nvboshi* encounter in the marriage market, which can also be seen from my experience above and my participants' stories (see Chapter Four).

Although Chinese *nvboshi* are stigmatised and prejudiced against, a growing number of women choose to pursue a PhD education. For the past two decades, according to the statistics from the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, the number and proportion of female PhD students in China have been increasing steadily. In 2000, there were 14,457 female PhD candidates in Higher Education Institutes, about a quarter of the total. The number passed 100,000 in 2012 and reached 175,259 in 2019, about 41.32% of the total.

Year	Candidates for PhD in Regular Higher Education Institute	Male	Female	Percentage (%)
2019	424,182	248,923	175,259	41.32
2018	389,518	232,263	157,255	40.37
2017	361,997	219,824	142,173	39.27
2016	342,027	209,895	132,132	38.63
2015	326,687	203,034	123,653	37.85
2014	312,676	197,217	115,459	36.93
2013	298,283	188,207	110,076	36.9

2012	283,810	180,374	103,436	36.45
2011	271,261	173,252	98,009	36.13
2010	258,950	167,063	91,887	35.48
2009	246,319	160,461	85,858	34.86
2008	236,600	154,500	82,100	34.7
2007	222,500	146,700	75,800	34.07
2006	208,000	137,600	70,500	33.87
2005	191,300	129,000	62,300	32.57
2004	165,600	113,700	51,900	31.37
2003	136,687	97,021	39,666	29.02
2002	108,737	78,234	30,503	28.05
2001	76,840	56,668	20,172	26.25
2000	59,837	45,380	14,457	24.16

Table 1 Statistics on the number of male and female PhD students from 2000 to 2019

These statistics forces me to think again about the questions posed in the previous section. Since *nvboshi* are being judged, stigmatised and devalued, why is it that more and more women want to become a part of this group? How do they deal with the problems in their lives?

1.3 Research Aims, Questions and the Significance of this Study

I admit that *nvboshi* is not a new group of women in the studies of women's experience in China. There have been studies of highly educated women in China and *nvboshi* have featured as participants in these studies, in the name of highly-educated career women, along with other women who are degree-educated and have career prospects. For example, in an investigation of single women's self-identity in China, Zhang (2020) interviewed 26 highly-educated well-paid single women. Five participants had a PhD degree. Xie (2021) recruited one *nvboshi* in her study of the gendered experience of Chinese privileged young women. However, these studies do not consider the experiences of *nvboshi* specifically as *nvboshi*, i.e.

the identities and lived experiences of this group of women remain under-explored. Besides, reviewing the existing literature specifically on *nvboshi*, I find that most studies are primarily concerned with these women's intimate relationships, social stigma and identity construction in the media context. For instance, Gu (2015) interviewed unmarried *nvboshi* and explored their experiences of being stigmatised in Chinese society. Zeng (2020) examined the ways *nvboshi* used social media to deal with the stereotypes of them. Although *nvboshi's* lives are filled with challenges and opportunities, very little is known about the narratives of their life experiences and their sense-making of these experiences. My aim is therefore to illuminate the lives of contemporary *nvboshi*, in particular their relationships, career development and family life. The research goals of this thesis are two-fold: 1) to explore the challenges *nvboshi* are encountering in their daily lives and how they negotiate such situations; 2) to unveil the new womanhood *nvboshi* try to construct by exercising their agency in contemporary China. In order to achieve these two goals, I developed the following research questions:

1 How do *nvboshi* perceive singleness in contemporary China?
2 What kind of difficulties do *nvboshi* face at work? How do they deal with the barriers to achieve their career goals?
3 How do *nvboshi* pursue individual desires and goals through negotiation with familial obligations?

Through examining their experiences, this research project is significant for the following reasons. First of all, this study centres on *nvboshi*, providing a nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of these women within the contemporary Chinese context. This will contribute to the current studies on Chinese educated women's experiences. Secondly, according to the many Chinese media reports, it would be easy to perceive them as a group of women whose life is unhappy on the basis of the negative depiction of *nvboshi*. As such, as well as discussing the barriers in *nvboshi's* life, this study will also illustrate the proactive actions and strategies that *nvboshi* take to make their life more enjoyable and valuable. Through this study, people can see an alternative portrait of *nvboshi*, which is significantly different from the image in media representation. Thirdly, drawing on Yan Yunxiang's framework of Chinese individualisation (Yan, 2003, 2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2014, 2016a, 2016b, 2020), this study explores the individual agency *nvboshi* employ to make a life for themselves. My emphasis on *nvboshi* being a new kind of womanhood will shed light on the

existing studies of womanhood in China and beyond. Besides, this study opens up further research opportunities to explore the pluralised life course and patterns of Chinese women.

1.4 Thesis Outline

There are six chapters following this introduction. I will begin with Chapter Two, a literature review for the thesis. This chapter will focus on the existing literature that helps to set up the context for my interest in exploring the experiences of *nvboshi* in Chinese society. In addition, the theoretical considerations of the thesis are also discussed in this chapter. After the literature review, Chapter Three will describe the methodology employed in this research. A reflexive examination of my research design, research preparation, as well as the research process will be provided in this chapter. As a researcher and a *nvboshi*, I will pay particular attention to the relationship with my participants during the fieldwork, the power dynamics between us and how I position myself as an outsider and an insider in the interviews.

Chapter Four to Six will demonstrate the empirical evidence that I collected from my interviews. Chapter Four will be directed towards exploring their relationship experiences. In China, *nvboshi* are described as a unique group which is having difficulty in finding a boyfriend in the marriage market. The aim of this chapter is going to provide a deeper understanding of how those single *nvboshi* perceive singlehood, and how their life has been influenced by singleness. This chapter investigates these women's own narratives in terms of their experiences of being single, and demonstrates the participants' different perceptions of singleness. This chapter argues that while a few *nvboshi* are struggling with being single, perceiving singleness as an unwanted experience in their life, most participants, including those married ones, tend to display appreciation of singleness. In appreciating singleness, they provide an account of womanhood which contrasts with traditional gendered norms and expectations. These women are exercising their agency to enjoy free choices regarding their relationships, and to achieve an individualised single lifestyle on their own.

After exploring the intimate relationships of my participants, Chapter Five shifts the focus onto how *nvboshi* experience working in Chinese academia. Analysing the narratives of my participants, this chapter examines how these *nvboshi* achieve their career goals through self-development. In the first section, examining the patriarchal practices imposed on my

participants by the male-dominated institutions, two major institutional discriminations can be seen in their working life. Furthermore, based on their self-reflection, my participants perceived themselves as playing the misrecognised roles at work. In the second section of this chapter, the strategies that my participants articulate to deal with the problems at work will be discussed. It is argued that gender inequalities result from the pervasive patriarchal values within academia. Facing such a situation, instead of opting out from career, *nvboshi* are actively advancing themselves through external support from family and the development of individual agency so that they can achieve their goals of independence and self-reliance.

Chapter Six will be the last analytical chapter of the thesis. In this chapter, I put my focus on the private sphere. This chapter will primarily focus on how *nvboshi* negotiate between familial obligations and individual desires. The first section investigates my participants' experiences with their parents. In this section, various practices and choices in relation to the individual desires and parents' demands will be discussed. Through their practices, we can see my participants' different perceptions of being a filial daughter. Facing parents' different demands and expectations, these daughters find it necessary to keep negotiating with their parents so that they can achieve a balance between the goals of being a filial daughter and retaining individual desires in the intergenerational relations. The second section discusses those married participants' balancing acts between individual desires and family obligations. This chapter argues that the unequal distribution of domestic jobs has resulted in my participants' constraints in developing their PhD career and pursuing personal values beyond family. As such, these *nvboshi* have conducted ongoing negotiation in the family relationships through gaining more bargaining power and placing more emphasis on individual desires.

The Conclusion summarises the main arguments and contributions of this study. In terms of the *nvboshi*'s relationship, career and family life, these women have employed individual strategies and constant negotiations to navigate a patriarchal culture in ways that support their own development and individual desires. During the process of negotiation, these *nvboshi* have been striving for liberating themselves from the external constraints of the patriarchal order, the traditional gender ideology and the old value system through taking more self-responsibility and constant hard work. By doing this, I argue that these women have constructed a striving and desiring womanhood. The limitations and the implications for future studies have also discussed in this chapter.

Chapter Two
Literature Review

This chapter will review the existing studies related to my participants, and provide the theoretical considerations of this study. I will start this chapter by reviewing studies that depict the contradictory background in relation to women's experience in China. On the one hand, the significant social-economic-cultural transitions have brought about a shift away from the patriarchal version of womanhood to a modern womanhood, along with the rise of individualism in China. On the other hand, the pushback which has been underpinned by the resurgence of patriarchy and the changing policies regarding women's life has also emerged during such transitional progress. As a result, Chinese women face a set of significant tensions in their lives. I will then review current studies in relation to urban educated, professional women and their relationships to career and family life, which will explore the research gap that this study is going to address. Finally, my focus will shift to the theoretical consideration that will assist in my understanding of the lived experiences of *nvboshi* in the following analytical chapters.

2.1 Chinese Women: Living in a Conflicting Society in Contemporary China

In recent decades, rapid social, economic, and cultural changes have significantly impacted on the way Chinese women conduct their daily lives, as well as the way they perceive themselves and the environment around them (Croll, 1995; Gui, 2020; Kim, 2010; Liu, 2014; Xie, 2021; Zarafonetis, 2014). During the transition from a socialist planned economy to a market-led economy, increasing opportunities for extensive education and employment have been brought about by the rapid economic and social changes in China, especially for women. Chinese women are encouraged to proactively compete for their own demands and pursuits, as well as improve the level of their education and learn more new techniques and skills (Croll, 1995). That is to say, China's economic reform, beginning in 1978, accelerates the promotion of access for Chinese women in the workplace (Leung, 2003) and to enjoy education (Pepper, 2017). Besides, since China has entered the WTO[5] in 2001, Chinese women are given more opportunities to get educated—not only inside of China—but also to participate in international education to enhance their employment opportunities (Turner,

[5] WTO: World Trade Organization

2006). Increasing international openness and economic development has set a social condition in which Chinese urban women are able to become more economically productive and professionally competitive than in the past due to such economic and social changes (Turner, 2006). As a result, women have gained much from the rising opportunities (Cook & Dong, 2011) under the context of reform.

Under the influence of the economic reform and the One-Child Policy, attitudes to women's gender role have dramatically changed. Some scholars find that flexible and egalitarian gender role attitudes are generally endorsed by better educated individuals, especially educated women, and this is also evident in other Asian contexts (Chia, Allred, & Jerzak, 1997; Leung & Ng, 1999; Song & Ji, 2020; Song & Lai, 2020; Teo et al., 2003; Zhang, 2006). Shu (2004) conducts a quantitative study measuring Chinese attitudes towards women's career, marriage rights, sexual freedom, and the importance of having sons, and then makes a further argument that the increasing level of individual education has shown greater positive influence on women than on men, with an implication on women's rising empowerment. In other words, with the development of the reform, these better-educated women would be less likely to conform to the traditional gender-based role division and tend to support egalitarian gender ideals. This change has contributed to the rising of what Croll (1995) calls as the new modern Chinese women, with an emphasis on 'strong, independent of spirit and uniquely female' (Croll, 1995, p. 177) without depending on men. In fact, the traditional perception of the woman as 'virtuous wife and good mother' had already started to change since the PRC was founded. The new Constitution (1954) and the marriage law (1950) had greatly advanced gender equality during the Maoist era, stipulating women's equal rights with men in every aspect of life. Mao's slogan that 'women can hold up half of the sky' was widely accepted. During this period, women, who were called as 'iron women', were expected to 'physically strong and economically active' (Croll, 1995, p. 177) like their male peers in taking the assorted jobs, reflecting women's pursuit of economic independence. Furthermore, the concept of 'the four self'[6] (Croll, 1995, p. 150), officially promoted by the Chinese communist party at The Sixth National Women's Congress in 1983, had further benefitted women's awareness. Incorporated with the post-Mao discourse of female independence, Chinese women have been gradually given expectations and pressures to be 'independent, knowledgeable and competent'(Liu, 2014, p. 21) during the reform and

[6] Four selves: self-esteem, self-awareness, self-possession, self-love (Croll, 1995, p. 150)

transformation. This social phenomenon reflects the ideal of the new modern Chinese women in the reform period. Incorporated with the rising individualism in society (Thornham & Feng, 2010), women, especially those educated women, have aspired to take charge of their own lives, with an increasing emphasis on self-determination, individual efforts, as well as exercising smart choices concerning the self. As a result, these new modern women have gained more opportunities and achieved self-development and mobility in terms of their lives (Kim, 2010; Liu, 2014; Thornham & Feng, 2010). Media advertising features a range of ideal feminine roles: 'cultural nurturer', 'strong woman', and 'urban sophisticate' (Hung, Li, & Belk, 2007, p. 1040) during this period.

These new modern women's strong aspirations have been confirmed by some scholars. Hanser (2002) notes that more urban educated women started to perceive themselves as the 'enterprising selves' (p. 191) in the driven market competition, leading them to 'recast their understanding of society and to see social situations as inhabited by autonomous, responsible individual actors' (p. 201). Hanser (2002) argues that these young educated Chinese urbanites are aware of taking responsibility for themselves with strong aspiration on self-development. Examining the experiences of highly educated Chinese women, Kim (2010) argues that with a heightened self-awareness, these women have become self-driven agents for progressing their careers, financial freedom, as well as 'imagined future of individualization' (p. 40). Kim (2010) defines this as female individualisation (p. 40). As a result, these women are more eager to pursue independence, autonomy and self-fulfilment regarding various aspects of their lives (Gaetano, 2010; Gui, 2020; Skoglund, 2020; Wang & Nehring, 2014; Zhang, 2020), rather than constraining themselves in the domestic sphere. At the same time, a new discourse has emerged in terms of these educated professional women, who are given labels such as '*nvqiangren*' (女强人) and 'three-high women'[7] (三高女性). In a study of 'three-high' women, Sit (2014) finds that 'three high' status has granted more power and agency for these women to challenge the traditional portrayal of Chinese women, even though these women are often judged for daring 'to defy gender-appropriate behavior patterns' (p. 45). These 'three-highers' are regarded as a group of empowered women reconstructing Chinese womanhood (Sit, 2014). In an investigation of identity construction of young Chinese women from urban one-child households, Liu (2014) writes that 'female independence incorporates notions of self-worth, self-reliance and individual autonomy rather than being controlled by

[7] Three-high women: high education, high income and high position

others' (p. 21), reflecting women's awareness of subordination, taking charge of one's own life as well as rising individualism based on self-reflexivity and individual choices. In Liu's study, these young women have come to be termed the 'autonomous modern female' (2014, p. 22), which suggests their eagerness for self-actualisation and self-expression. All of these discourses have been found to challenge traditional notions of womanhood and femininity. As a result, Chinese womanhood has been experiencing a shift from 'virtuous wife and good mother' (贤妻良母) to 'emergent modern womanhood' (Gaetano, 2014; Liu, 2014; Zhang, 2020), demonstrating women's waning support for patriarchy and the development of individual female agency (Yan, 2020).

However, alongside rapid economic reform and modernisation, we also see an obvious pushback that is underpinned by the traditional value system and gender norms, which will further constrain women's agency in everyday life. First of all, in terms of women's status and gender roles, Leung (2003) argues that a high degree of social control over gender construction has still been preserved by the socialist state, forcing women to 'play a role of dependence' (p. 370) in the family. By doing this, the traditional gender expectations of women have been restored. Leung (2003) notes that gender politics in China seems to be going backwards towards more traditional sex role differences and power imbalances, as women are asked to make sacrifices for the collective interests of the nation state. As a result, it is still considered 'natural' for women to be family-oriented people regardless of their socioeconomic status (Cook & Dong, 2011). Besides, the evolving gender discriminations have brought about a perception of women as inferior and less productive than their male counterparts (Hanser, 2002; Song, 2011) because of their 'strong psychological barriers to being active and enterprising' (Hanser, 2002, p. 200). And the contradictory practices regarding educated women have further squeezed their space within the society, and make their lives more challenging. On the one hand, these women are perceived as achievement-oriented and decisive (Tang et al., 2002; Zuo, 2003), being asked to share equal obligations as their male counterparts in the workplace. On the other hand, these women are pressured to play the traditional feminine roles, facing a double burden of paid work and unpaid domestic work that women must still negotiate, underpinned by the unequal gender norms and power imbalance within Chinese society (Cook & Dong, 2011; Turner, 2006; Zuo, 2013; Zuo & Jiang, 2009).

Moreover, the changes on national policies have also had an impact on women's experiences. In 2015, the state implemented the Two-Child Policy to replace the One-Child Policy because of the fast-ageing population and low fertility rate in China (Basten & Jiang, 2014). One of the significant consequences of this policy is the potential risk for women's employment and career development (Wu, 2016), which may further increase women's domestic responsibilities and undermine their social roles (Schwank, et al., 2018). As a result, women, especially those educated women with established careers may be discriminated against in the workplace. As I was writing this thesis, the Three-Child Policy was applied by the state (2021). What are the consequences of this policy? How will this policy influence Chinese women? All these questions have not yet been explored. But, based on the gendered influence of the Two-Child Policy on women, it is safe to say that Chinese women will be facing much more intensive pressure regarding their public life and personal life in future China.

From the above, we can see a conflicting context that my participants face in contemporary Chinese society. On the one hand, the social-economic-cultural transition has encouraged the reconstruction of womanhood. Firstly, the promotion of national policies and the economic reform have enabled Chinese urban women, especially those who are from singleton families, to have access to higher education and multiple privileges. Secondly, with the increased influence of education on women, perceptions of traditional values and gender norms have changed, women's self-awareness has improved and aspirations to independence and personal fulfilment have taken root (Kim, 2010; Liu, 2014; Skoglund, 2020). As a result, the traditional womanhood emphasising on mothering and family-orientation has been reconsidered by these educated women. On the other hand, the resurgence of gender inequality and patriarchal traditions (Chang, 2019; Fincher, 2016; Ji & Yeung, 2014; Li, 2020) and the social control on gender construction to uphold social order (Leung, 2003), as well as the changing childbearing policies have led to a pushback on women's self-development. As such, what my participants face are such conflicting social expectations that influence various aspects of their lives. In the next section, I will specifically review the studies concerning the experiences of relationship, career development and family life of highly educated women in urban China.

2.2 Educated Urban Women: Relationship, Career and Family Life

This section will focus on the lived experiences of urban educated women in terms of their relationship, career and family. Firstly, I will review the relevant literature in relation to urban women's relationship and singlehood in China. Secondly, I will review the studies of exploring women's working experience and constraints in Chinese universities. This is based on the fact that my participants are all working in universities. Finally, I will turn my focus to exploring the research on how women negotiate the pursuit of individual desires and family values. By reviewing the current literature related to my work, I will also demonstrate how I situate myself in this study.

2.2.1 Relationship and singlehood of professional educated women

With an increasing number of women choosing to postpone marriage in both Western and Eastern countries (see Dales, 2014; Gaetano, 2014; Ji, 2015; Osteria, 2015; Qian, 2012; Reynolds et al., 2007; To, 2013; Zhang, 2020), singlehood has become an option available to women. However, in a Chinese culture still dominated by the principles of Confucian philosophy, the commonly accepted value in today's China is still that people should get married when they reach a certain age (Yeung & Hu, 2016). In other words, people who still remain single at a certain age would face various discriminations and prejudices, especially women. Given the fact that China still adheres to the traditional gender-based role expectations, the rising number of single women is perceived as a 'marriage crisis' (Zhang, 2020, p. 39) in China.

The concept of singleness has been explored by some Western scholars. Although scholars believe that the concept of singleness entails some positive features, such as independence, autonomy and freedom, Reynolds and Taylor (2005) note that single women are regarded as a dysfunctional form of womanhood and their singleness is generally seen as a deficit identity, 'defined by lack and by the shared conception of single women as outside normal family life and ordinary intimate relationship' (p. 198-199). In this regard, being single still presents as a 'problem' for women (Budgeon, 2016). Sharp and Ganong (2011) argue that in social environments characterised by pressure to adhere to the traditional life pathway, singles are regularly reminded that their single identity is a problem. They (2011) point out

that staying single is perceived as a deviant life path and there exists various 'encountering triggers' (p. 970) in women's lives to remind them of their singleness and pressure them to get married, start a family and have children. Under these conditions, single women may be experiencing ongoing pressure from external environment in their single lives, a finding which sheds light on the subject matter of this thesis. In the Chinese context, stigmatised as the 'third gender', how will *nvboshi* be affected by the social environment in terms of their singleness?

Chinese scholars have conducted quantitative studies and qualitative studies to find out the reasons resulting in singleness. Some quantitative scholars have explored how the level of education affects women's marriage timing (Qian, 2012; Tian, 2013; Yu & Xie, 2013). They show that in contrast to less-educated women, those well-educated women are more likely to postpone getting married. However, their educational attainment does not have a positive influence on their bargaining power in the marriage market, unlike well-educated males, who are considered more desirable partners. This inequality can be mostly explained by the traditional gender role expectations placed on women, whose feminine qualities and domestic abilities are more emphasised in today's China (Gui, 2020; Ji, 2015; Tian, 2013; Xia & Zhou, 2003). As a result, those educated women with established careers face a dilemma whereby remaining single results in more negative judgments and imposed pressure, but is often the only option in a marriage market that discriminates against their educational and professional achievements (Gong, Tu, & Jiang, 2017), and contributes to their difficulties in finding a partner.

Qualitative methods have also been used to explore the factors contributing to women's singleness. Many studies have found evidence of the existence of structural constraints, but some have been more interested in exploring women's agency. In the discussions about the influence of structural constraints, the 'leftover women' issue in Chinese society has been found to be the key factor for the rise in the number of single women of marriageable age. The 'leftover women' issue has been attracting extensive coverage in Western and Chinese scholarship for quite a long time, since the derogatory term *shengnv* (leftover women) was invented by the Chinese government to describe those women who are over 27 years but still single (Fincher, 2016; To, 2013). Being stigmatised as 'leftover women' to some extent reflects the fact that these singletons are unwanted and unchosen (Gong, Tu, & Jiang, 2017). But more importantly, Zhang (2020) argues that the 'leftover women' discourse is more

about the essence of patriarchy permeating the entirety of Chinese society, 'which shows a routine of negative perceptions regarding independent professional women who do not submit to traditional female domestic roles of wife and mother' (p. 40). In this sense, the discourse of the 'leftover women' not only serves as a patriarchal critique of women's singleness, but also indicates how attempts at female empowerment are being suppressed. In addition to this, the strong influence of parental control and gender constraints (see Fincher, 2016; Gaetano, 2010, 2014; Gong, Tu, & Jiang, 2017; Ji, 2015; To, 2013) as well as people's patriarchal attitudes toward women's higher education and prospective career, have also contributed to preventing educated single women from getting married.

Other scholars discuss the structural constraints on single educated women by demonstrating the unequal social expectations of them, when compared with their male counterparts. Gui's (2020) interviews with 30 single professional Chinese women is an example. In Gui's study, the participants aspire to act out the modern roles suggested by the ideologies of independence and autonomy, while also living up to the gendered expectations of them in the domestic arena. In other words, these single professional women are playing traditional roles and modern roles simultaneously, which supports Ji's (2015) finding that single educated women in Shanghai are expected (and attempting) to fulfil both traditional roles and modern roles. Gui (2020) notes that these women are also encouraged to shoulder the expectations of 'being an ideal worker and at the same time also being an ideal caregiver' (p. 1973), while their male counterparts are only expected to be the former. Moreover, because of the unequal division of labour in the family and the contradictory social expectations, these women have a double burden to look forward to. Naturally, instead of rushing into marriage, these educated women are choosing to stay single so that they can take their time to find a man with similar values to them, and might be more willing to help out in the domestic sphere. In this sense, remaining single is the result of a proactive choice to face (and ideally, overcome) the dilemma, rather than a simple rejection by the marriage market.

In contrast with studies of structural constraints, many scholars choose to explore the role of individual agency in educated women's lives. They argue that one important aspect of the 'leftover women' issue is well-educated single women challenging the traditional notion of womanhood and having to exercise greater agency as a result. After conducting in-depth interviews with 14 highly educated professional Chinese women between the ages of 26-38, Gaetano (2014) concludes that despite being stigmatised as 'leftover women', they remain

quite positive about their lives. They have created new identities and roles for themselves as singletons, ones which emphasise kinship relationships and their modern roles as 'home owners and consumers, financiers, entrepreneurs, professionals, cosmopolitans, or social activists' (p. 143). These roles and identities in turn challenge the normative ideals of femininity and the traditional female life trajectory. In addition, Gaetano (2014) points out that the ongoing promotion of egalitarian gender relations reflects these women's objection to gender inequalities in marriage. In this sense, women's agency has been highlighted in various practices and as a result, a new model of womanhood entailing independence and late marriage has emerged out of these women's single lives in urban China. More recent research by Zhang (2020) reports similar findings. In Zhang's (2020) face-to-face interviews with 26 single well-paid and highly educated women, an intentionally 'victorious' womanhood is constructed by the participants, who have redefined their singleness as an asset identity in response to the perception of singleness as a deficit identity (Reyolds & Taylor, 2005). These educated women are placing more value on independence and meaningful connections with others. Various coping strategies have been applied to negotiate the normative female life course through motherhood and marriage, such as deconstructing traditional gendered expectations of women and demonstrating a busy and self-fulfilling single life.

Among Zhang's (2020) participants, five *nvboshi* were interviewed, not enough to answer my research questions but I have been inspired by Zhang's findings in several ways. For instance, the building of meaningful connections with other people practised by Zhang's participants has prompted me to explore the ways in which my participants deal with their single life. Zhang also reports that single women who chose to live alone suffer from loneliness, hence I have tried to find out whether my participants face the same problem and how these *nvboshi* respond to it. Moreover, both Gaetano's (2014) and Zhang's (2020) studies have disadvantages as well as advantages, and some things can also be learnt from these. For one, focusing on the agency of the educated professional well-paid single women, these studies argue that confronting their disadvantaged positions after being labelled as 'leftover women' in the marriage market, these women engage in various practices to challenge the notion of 'leftover women' and give more meaning to their single lives by redefining womanhood as independence, freedom and autonomy. However, in their writings, I do not find any discussions of how these single educated women subjectively perceive their singleness or how their lives have been influenced by their single status, issues which will be explored in my study.

In addition to investigating individual agency through practices of challenging the traditional womanhood, other scholars find these highly-educated professional women's proactive assertion of individual agency in their mate choices. According to the findings from previous quantitative studies (see Qian, 2012; Tian, 2013), men, especially highly-educated men, have more spouse-selection power in the marriage market, whereas educated women are in a powerless and a disadvantaged position. Nonetheless, this does not necessarily mean that a highly-educated woman cannot continue to exercise choices when it comes to selecting an ideal partner. On the contrary, scholars argue that single educated professionals are able to retain their power in a relationship. To (2013) contends that because they are exposed to gendered and filial constraints, the highly-educated professional women in her study have to adopt various partner choice strategies to respond to the 'leftover women' situation and then make informed marriage choices. Cai and Wang (2014) note that women have gained more freedom to decide whether, when and who to marry because marriage was regarded more as an individual choice than a response to state policies since the 1990s.

Other studies on singlehood within the Asian context will also be useful for interpreting my participants' attitudes toward marriage. Like China, Japan has witnessed a sharp increase in the number of single women in recent decades (Osteria, 2015; Ronald & Nakano, 2013; Yoshida, 2016). Many scholars regard this expansion in singlehood as a lifestyle choice. For example, Osteria (2015) argues that single women are consciously choosing singlehood as a lifestyle in response to their dissatisfaction with traditional marriage, particularly those single educated women seeking to meet their individual desires for self-development. It is believed that educated single women would be less likely to make a sacrifice to do the unpaid housework, given the fact that the domestic burden normally falls to women (Dales, 2013). Meanwhile, instead of gaining self-fulfilment and satisfaction from marriage, educated professional women can gain these feelings from their careers (Dales, 2013). As such, more and more educated women are choosing to stay single in Japan.

According to the studies mentioned above, the singleness of educated professional women results from the persistence of certain structural constraints in Chinese society, which contributes to their disadvantaged positions in the marriage market. At the same time, the individual agency of these women has enabled them to challenge the conservative gender values and patriarchal ideologies in terms of marriage and female life course. These

discussions around the structure and agency debate will help me to examine my participants' experiences by looking at the influence of structure and further exploring *nvboshi*'s use of agency in their single lives. However, the above studies also leave a few questions that need to be answered. For instance, in what ways does the single identity impact their lives? Given the fact that these women are actively challenging traditional womanhood, how do they exercise their agency in order to live the single life? Such questions will be an important part of my exploration of *nvboshi*'s experiences.

2.2.2 Female academics in the Chinese academia

Because all of my participants who have jobs are working in universities, I am going to review the existing literature relating to the experiences of female academics in universities. Before I start, I would like to highlight here that in Chinese universities, if a person wants to find a job that involves teaching and researching, then having a PhD degree is a must. If a person wants to work in an administrative role, there are no strict requirements, therefore, I will primarily focus on the experiences of women doing research-teaching-based jobs in academia. Other female faculty responsible for administrative jobs will not be involved.

The experiences of female academics have already been extensively discussed around the world. I would like to start with the structure of academia and how this influences female academics in Western settings. Many scholars believe that the academic institutions are gendered and highly hierarchical (Aiston & Fo, 2021; Crabtree & Shiel, 2019; Dlamini & Adams, 2014; Heijstra et al., 2017). Acker (1992) introduces the concept of 'gendered institutions' to demonstrate that 'gender is present in the processes, practices, images and ideologies, and distributions of power in the various sectors of social life' (p. 567). Using this idea as a starting point, Menéndez et al. (2012) further clarifies the content of the gendered institutions, in which 'job design, career ladders, work practices, recruitment and selection methods, and the culture of organizations are invested with assumptions and expectations about gender-appropriate roles'(p. 4). In the academia, the existence of a gendered and highly hierarchical structure is broadly recognised and supported by findings such as under-representation in senior positions, impeded promotion and lack of recognition, gender stereotype and inequalities, and impeded intellectual and emotional well-being (Aiston & Fo, 2021; Angervall & Beach, 2017, 2018; Bailyn, 2003; Crabtree & Shiel, 2019; Currie et al.,

2000; Dlamini & Adams, 2014; Fotaki, 2013; Kim et al., 2010; Morley, 2006, 2013). Currie et al. (2000) borrows the notion of 'greedy institution' (Coser, 1974) to describe the universities as 'greedy universities' which require staff to make personal and professional sacrifices so as to be part of the university culture. As a result, academics regardless of gender not only need to take on intellectual work, but are also expected to 'be involved in detailed administrative and "quality assurance" type work' (Currie et al., 2000, p. 271). In these circumstances, how the workload is assigned seems like the key influence on the workplace experiences of academics.

Žarkov (2015) uses the phrase 'housewives of the academic kitchen' to refer to those male and female academics who have to work longer hours and attend 'other' academic and non-academic engagements (p. 272). Angervall and Beach (2017) extend this notion to the female academics who function as 'the housewives of academia' (p. 14) and perform jobs that cannot advance their careers because they are only informally recognised (Angervall & Beach, 2018). These women are not only playing the role of a professional academic in the workplace, but are also pushed to take on a housewife role at work, taking care of male staff and the more mundane aspects of academic activities. Drawing on the notion of 'institutional housekeeping' (Bird at al., 2004), Heijstra et al. (2017) coin the term 'academic housework' to refer to the service work conducted by the housewives of academia, which 'receives little recognition within the process of academic career making or within the definition of academic excellence' (p. 765). As a result, their careers are devalued and constrained, as their efforts are neither officially recognised nor increase their credibility within the institutions. As well as being treated as the housewives of academia, Crabtree and Shiel (2019) point out that the career progression of British female academics is likely to be impeded by the gendered career pathways in academia. This is because female academics are normally 'channeled into feminized teaching and administrative roles' (p. 1), where there are limited opportunities for career progression. At the same time, although British female academics' 'mothering' role providing emotional support to students and 'housekeeping' role taking over routine teaching responsibilities are vital, these gender-based roles and tasks are underestimated by the institutes and thus their career pathways are obstructed. In other words, the roles of these female academics in British academia are assumed as feminised, which further contribute to the gender inequalities in the academia. As a result of this, female academics suffer from continued marginalisation and devaluation within the masculine symbolic order of the academia (Fotaki, 2013).

In terms of their experiences of being marginalised, other practices imposed on female academics have also been examined. By conducting 35 interviews with women academics in three leading research-intensive universities in Hong Kong, Aiston and Fo (2021) explore women academics' experiences of being silenced. Based on their participants' accounts, Aiston and Fo (2021) argue that internal silencing is common, which they regard as a response to women's inner voice and a strategy used to silence and enforce conformity. Meanwhile, external silencing could also be seen in the participants' experiences. According to Aiston and Fo (2021), external silencing occurs when women are excluded in the workplace. In order to analyse these silencing practices, the idea of micropolitics (Blase, 1991) was used by Aiston and Fo (2021). Blasé (1991) argues that micropolitics is used by people to protect themselves and compete with others by impacting on their behaviours. Aiston and Fo (2021) used this concept to explain the ways in which power in professional relations is transmitted 'through seemingly trivial incidents and transactions' (Morley, 2016, p. 1). The end result of this is that patriarchal power within the gendered academia is maintained, while the underrepresentation of women is reinforced.

In a similar vein, a number of Chinese scholars have argued that Chinese universities are structured by gender and the long tradition of patriarchy; at the same time, the academic structure is also highly hierarchical (Guo, Tsang, & Ding, 2010; Hayhoe, 1996; Rhoads & Gu, 2011; Zhang, 2010; Zhao, 2008; Zhao, 2020). The existence of gender stereotypes in Chinese universities is regarded as a detrimental factor constraining female academics' career development. (Zhao, 2008; Zhang, 2010). Zhao (2008) adopts both qualitative and quantitative approaches to explore the career patterns of Chinese academic women. There are 11 *nvboshi* among the 14 interviewees. According to Zhao's (2008) study, traditional gender ideologies and gender-based expectations have penetrated the patriarchal structure of Chinese universities. Regardless of their professional roles and achievements, women are assumed to be family-oriented, which reflects the traditional perception of women as 'good mother and virtuous wife' in the workplace. Influenced by such traditional perceptions, Zhao (2008) finds that the participants are expected by their male leaders in the workplace to successfully play their gendered roles at work and in the domestic sphere. The majority of the family jobs and responsibilities are taken by these women because of the unequal household division of labour. As such, these women face a conflict between work and family. Most of the participants in this study are *nvboshi*, which means Zhao's work is quite relevant to my study

on the workplace experiences of *nvboshi*. In Zhao's study, we can see how the ideology of gender role has resulted in the inequalities between *nvboshi* and their male counterparts. On the one hand, these women's professional status is not properly recognised in the workplace, which contributes to the unequal job division; on the other hand, as they are assumed to be family-oriented, these women will have limited opportunities for promotion. Consequently, Zhao (2008) argues that an expanded gender gap has emerged in Chinese universities. Likewise, Zhang's (2010) mixed-method study also demonstrates the barriers created by gender stereotypes and discrimination in promotion in Chinese universities. However, Zhang's work primarily focuses on measuring female academics' stress levels, arguing that the challenges and constraints in these women's professional lives contributed to their rising levels of stress and thus made the university 'an unpleasant place' for them (Zhang, 2010, p. 170).

Other studies have conducted face-to-face interviews with both female and male academics to demonstrate the different experiences of the two cohorts. From interviews with 15 women and 12 men respectively in a leading university in China, with a focus on academic women's gendered experiences, Rhoads and Gu (2011) report that female academics are confronted by four major challenges: working double time, the glass ceiling, the boys club and social exclusion and comrades in arms (p. 733); these are perceived as severe challenges by the female participants. Interestingly, however, the male academics in the study display their ignorance of the barriers confronted by their female colleagues, defining the difficulties women faced as 'fairly minor' (Rhoads & Gu, 2011, p. 741). Thus, problems which can be sensed by women academics do not seem to affect or even be noticed by male academics. Rhoads and Gu (2011) also point out female academics confront a virtual glass ceiling at work, due to the male-dominated system and patriarchal practices in the university. They argue that sometimes female academics feel it is harder to find leadership opportunities because they are excluded from the male networking in their departments. For example, male academics bond with each other at drinking sessions and over dinner. Since most of Rhoads and Gu's female participants do not enjoy this kind of interaction and Chinese drinking culture, they feel left out and have difficulties in taking on leadership roles given that most of their leaders are male. Working in a male-dominated institution, female academics encounter invisible obstacles to promotion due to their inability to join the boys club, which female participants perceive as a virtual glass ceiling. Rhoads and Gu (2011) note that these women are having to 'adapt to the communication and leadership practices associated with men' (p.

747). In this respect, female academics face an additional pressure and struggle in their professional lives. Rhoads and Gu's analysis not only highlights the difficulties that result from structural constraints, but has also alerted me to the concept of female academics being more likely to encounter barriers which are not visible.

The above studies are primarily about how the structure of the academia has influenced the experiences of female academics in Chinese universities, but a few scholars have focused their investigations on women's use of agency when dealing with difficulties in the workplace. It is argued that in the face of the various problems identified above, female academics tend to employ certain strategies to get around the structural imbalances in the institutions. In terms of the conflicts between work and family and the overload caused by childbearing, one of the strategies most often applied is getting support from family, especially the older generations (Tang, 2001; Zhao, 2008; Zhao, 2020). Besides, according to Zhao's (2020) study of *nvboshi* seeking academic positions in China, we can see that although these *nvboshi* express their powerlessness in relation to the gender stereotypes and institutional discriminations in the universities, they tend to focus on self-development through professional achievements and becoming more adaptable in the different jobs they are allocated. At the same time, Zhao's (2020) participants also demonstrate willingness to provide support for other female academics, which is seen as 'affective labor' (p. 109). Zhao's interviews with these *nvboshi* are quite helpful for my study. However, bearing in mind that female academics are effectively excluded from the opportunities their male counterparts have access to, Zhao's study fails to provide an answer to the question of how *nvboshi* deal with their unequal access to the more sought after positions in the academia. Meanwhile, since the participants are willing to adapt to different roles, are these women choosing to take on more administrative jobs or transfer to administrative positions so that they could achieve the goal of promotion? These questions will be considered in more detail by my study.

2.2.3 Women's negotiations between individual desires and expectations and family obligations

The One-Child Policy, ongoing economic reform, cultural development, as well as individualisation have significantly influenced the family system and family life in both

urban and rural areas of China (Cheung & Yeung, 2015; Fong, 2002; Ji, 2017; Song & Ji, 2020; Yan, 2011, 2020; Yang, 2020). In the urban households in particular, parental attitudes have changed due to the rise of the only-one daughter, who has become parents' only hope (Fong, 2002) for the family. As a consequence of these changes, these only daughters have enjoyed unparalleled family investment in their development, particularly their education. More and more have access to private education and international higher education with family support (Turner, 2006) and their individual competence and self-empowerment are increasing accordingly. Xie (2021) calls these only daughters, born under the context of the One-Child Policy, China's privileged young women.

In terms of the intergenerational relations, filial piety is still believed to be the most important value in Chinese families. As a set of moral principles (Bell, 2010; Croll, 1995; Eklund, 2018), the ideology of filial piety contains 'an element of reciprocity' (Eklund, 2018, p. 296) and requires the younger generation to 'respect, honour, and obey their parents' (p. 296). People who fail to fulfil filial duties may be judged at the moral level and a large body of studies has shown that the ideology of filial piety remains quite strong among children from one-child households (Eklund, 2018; Hu & Scott, 2016; Liu, 2008a; Skoglund, 2020; To, 2015). The adult daughters are pretty filial, in particular when it comes to providing elderly care and financial support (Cheung & Kwan, 2009; Deutsch, 2006; Liu, 2008a; Shi, 2009; Xie & Zhu, 2009; Yi et al., 2016; Zhan & Montgomery, 2003) because of their increased education and financial potential, as well as the intergenerational contract (Croll, 2006), playing the 'substitute sons' role (Croll, 1995, p. 169) in their families. However, researchers have also found a conflict between individual desires and collective-familial values. In their investigation of young adult only-one's attitudes toward filial piety in China, Liu's study (2008a) finds an inherent tension between the individual values, which emphasises autonomous choices and individual freedom, and the family values that entails self-sacrifice. As a result, these young adult only-ones find it quite challenging having to be dutiful towards their parents, especially as their only-childhood means that all filial pressures are directed towards them exclusively. Under these circumstances, young adult only-ones feel a strong sense of burden in the intergenerational relations. Liu's (2008a) study is quite useful for understanding the tension between educated young adults' personal desires and their parents' demands for filial piety, as well as the dilemma these young people face. However, her study does not discuss the ways these educated young adults adopt to solve the practical problems

of juggling individual and collective-familial responsibilities, or to what extent these educated young adults have achieved a balance between the two.

In addition to the conflict between individual interests and parents' demands of filial piety, another concern raised by scholars is the influence of individuals' changing practices around the notion of filial piety in intergenerational relations. Examining assorted practices of young people in Chinese rural areas, Yan (2016) notes that the notion of filial piety has changed from the traditional requirement for children to sacrifice their 'time, labor, wealth, and even life to make parents happy' (Yan, 2011, p. 37) to a more contemporary form that is 'caring and supportive but not obedient' (p. 250) and which is commonly practised by young people in today's China (Yan, 2016). Two major practices are engaged in by these young people in order to negotiate between their individual interests and filial obligations. The first one identified by Yan (2016) is the removal of unconditional obedience to parents; the second is the shifting focus of happiness from the senior generation downward to the younger generation. In other words, in intergenerational relations, when parents stop demanding traditional filial piety from the younger generation, their children's desires for happiness will become the new priority for these parents. That is to say, when young people feel happy, parents will feel happy too. In this sense, the filial duties have been achieved. Yan's finding is quite intriguing and insightful for my study. However, the context in which he conducts his work is quite different from mine. My participants are all from urban one-child families and typically have more filial duties to perform than Yan's participants. This is mainly because of the heavy investment that their parents have made in them, which means that they feel a greater obligation to be filial to their parents (Ji, 2017; Liu, 2008a). As such, I need to consider if Yan's argument is applicable to the urban Chinese context.

Drawing on Yan's (2016) argument above, Skoglund (2020) interviews 12 single professional women in Shanghai to examine how they negotiate individual pursuits with intergenerational obligations. Skoglund (2020) notes that these urban daughters are engaging in similar practices to those reported by Yan (2016). That is to say, Skoglund's participants are more oriented towards the contemporary notion of filial piety, providing care and support for their parents but not blindly obeying them. When it comes to individual desires such as marriage and career choices, these educated urban daughters tend to be more focusing on their personal wants, claiming that they cannot satisfy all of their parents' demands. Skoglund (2020) points out two key practices in this respect: keeping a distance from the family to

focus on personal wants, while making minor sacrifices for parents. Both of these practices need constant ongoing negotiation with parents and Skoglund (2020) concludes that the extent to which these women adapt their behaviours and desires to meet parents' demands will significantly impact the nature of intergenerational relations. In one sense, it is clear from this research that women's agency is being valued. However, in terms of how young women balance their desires and filial obligations, Skoglund (2020) does not explore the ways in which these urban educated daughters use their agency to deal with the tensions. In light of this, I find Yan's (2020) work on young rural women's negotiation between individual desires and pursuits and family obligations helpful. According to Yan (2020), his participants have been gaining more bargaining power through various practices such as seeking jobs in urban areas to support themselves, trying out different lifestyles or building up wife-centred family networks after marriage. Although my participants are from a different background and more highly educated than Yan's participants, his work has inspired me to look at how my participants negotiate with their families.

From the studies above, we can see that there are two conflicting ideologies currently influencing Chinese family life: the ideology of individualism and the ideology of familism (Song & Ji, 2020). Recent empirical evidence suggests that traditional gender roles and gendered practices have been reshaped by these competing values and this has resulted in a new conflict regarding the domestic division of labour within the family (Qian & Li, 2020; Song & Lai, 2020). Men are still more likely to adhere to their traditional gender roles, while women, especially educated women, tend to have more egalitarian attitudes and expect husbands to share the domestic chores (Shu, 2004; Song & Lai, 2020; Zhang, 2006). However, most scholars believe that women are still expected to take on the majority of domestic tasks and childbearing responsibilities, due to the state's retreat from providing childcare in private homes and failure to proactively promote an egalitarian gender ideology (Cook & Dong, 2011; Ji, et al., 2017; Yan, 2010a; Zhang, 2017). As a result, working women continue to suffer from double burdens and 'face limited freedom to negotiate new forms of family life' (Song & Ji, 2020, p. 12). Meanwhile, they are often pushed to self-sacrifice for the sake of their families (Song, 2011; Song & Ji, 2020).

In addition to these structural problems, scholars have also consistently found that ideology of gender roles - men as the primary provider for a family - is recognised and accepted by the majority of women. Even women who have full-time careers with a satisfactory income have

been found willing to make sacrifices for the sake of family values, as well as family well-being, reflecting their adherence to traditional gender role expectations. According to Zuo and Bian's (2001) early study and Zuo's (2003) work, most couples perceive the unequal domestic division as fair and full-time working women are willing to sacrifice their own careers to support their husbands' career development, even though they are also financial contributors to their families. This situation can also be seen in Ji's (2015) study of single professional women in Shanghai. Ji's participants share quite contradictory views, emphasising independence and personal career, while also accepting the need to make compromises for the family when there is a necessity. In more recent work on privileged Chinese women, Xie (2021) also finds that many full-time employed women with good career prospects believe that they should be the ones to make sacrifices for the family, so that their husbands can concentrate on their provider roles. By doing this, these privileged women can achieve their goals of being a good wife.

From the above studies, we can see the competing values of individualism and familism held by educated women. While they recognise the value of having a career of one's own, when this conflicts with family interests, they will compromise by taking on the primary family obligations and housework. Their attitudes and practices reflect women's acceptance of the old value of sacrificing for family and the traditional ideology of gender role. Arguably, the interplay of the external structural constraints and women's internalised subscription to the symbolic family model of 'male-breadwinner/female-homemaker' has intensified women's gender role and the unequal division of labour within the family. These studies are valuable for understanding how my participants deal with the tensions between their own expectations and family interests. Do they have similar attitudes and make sacrifices for their husbands and family like the participants in the above studies? I will answer this question in my analysis.

Reviewing the studies of Chinese female academics provides some clues about how *nvboshi* feel about their lives. From the studies we can see that *nvboshi* are faced with various barriers in the Chinese academia due to the traditional gender norms and patriarchal beliefs within the institutions. They will therefore feel constrained and unable to breakthrough in their careers, as well as powerless to solve the structural problems restricting them. However, in Zhao's (2020) study, the *nvboshi* interviewed do report adopting certain strategies to advance their careers, including building up female academic networks, self-empowerment and accepting

different jobs. Knowing about these strategies will be very useful for me when it comes to exploring how my participants negotiate career barriers. In terms of *nvboshi*'s relationships, as noted before, there are no specific studies focusing on *nvboshi*'s relationship experiences and only a limited number of *nvboshi* have been interviewed. That is to say, the existing studies on educated professional women's relationship and singlehood do provide some valuable knowledge on these women's situation in the marriage market and their attitudes towards being single. However, again this is not enough for me to answer my research questions. The existing research does not explore the ways in which these single educated women actually live their lives. Apart from being positive about singleness, is there any other attitude towards being single among these women? When it comes to the conflict between individual desires and expectations and family obligations, the existing research confirms the structural problems and the competing values faced by educated women, as well as providing some information on educated women's acceptance of gender role ideology and traditional family values. However, it does not consider those educated women who reject the traditional gender ideology, and how they negotiate the conflict between their own and their families' expectations. Although these existing literature has some useful information on the lived experiences of educated women, it cannot provide a deeper understanding of *nvboshi*'s lived experiences of relationships, work and family. In terms of these three crucial aspects of individual life, what difficulties do *nvboshi* face and how do they deal with them? This is the gap I am going to address in this thesis.

Through reviewing the above studies related to urban educated women's relationships, career and family life, a key issue that comes out of these studies is the tension between structure and agency. This has led me to search for theoretical frameworks that can explain this interplay and these frameworks will be discussed in the section below.

2.3 Theoretical Considerations: Chinese Individualisation

In order to deal with the key issues identified above, I am going to draw on Yan Yunxiang's framework of Chinese individualisation to explore the lived experiences of *nvboshi*. The reason why I think Yan's work will be helpful is that it considers Chinese individualisation in terms of the interplay between the institutional changes and individual agency in the pursuit of a life of one's own. According to Yan (2010a), Chinese individualisation is born in a

different context from the individualisation in Western Europe. While individuals are naturally born with individual rights and freedom in a society with political democracy and affluent material needs in the process of individualisation in Western Europe, Chinese individualisation is born in a society full of underdeveloped economy and national poverty with individual's suppressed rights and freedoms 'for the sake of national survival and satisfaction of material needs' (Yan, 2010a, p. 507). Meanwhile, in the process of individualisation in Western context, the state's power has been restricted by various mechanisms so that individual's rights and freedom can be protected. And it is commonly accepted that the individual is 'naturally autonomous and a self-determining agent' (Yan, 2010a, p. 508). However, in Chinese society, individual desires and autonomy are in the ongoing suppression and being regarded as dangerous which is a destroy to the collective values. In this sense, Yan's work on Chinese individualisation is more suitable to examine my participants' experiences within the context of contemporary China.

The rise of the individual is regarded by Yan (2010a) as the first and foremost institutional change in the process of Chinese individualisation. According to the ample existing research (see Halskov & Svarverud, 2010; Yan, 2020), the rise of the individual in China can primarily be seen in: 1) the increased emphasis on individual rights and freedom; 2) the tendency for people to make autonomous choices in various social practices; 3) the disembedding of individuals from previously all-encompassing social categories such as family, kinship, patriarchal order, community and gender. Yan (2010a, 2010b, 2020) identifies that the rise of the individual officially started after the economic reforms began, alongside a bunch of institutional changes that have a profound effect on individual Chinese people, such as the collapse of the *danwei*, the increased international openness and the reduction of state-owned enterprises. All these changes have contributed to the rise of Chinese individual in the process of individualisation.

Since the market-led economic reforms began in the late 1970s, collective party-state support was withdrawn from the individual in many arenas, forcing Chinese people to take more responsibility for their own self-development as well as become more competitive and productive. For example, the downsizing and privatisation of the state-owned enterprises represented the end of 'life-time employment, housing, medical care, pensions, and other benefits' (Yan, 2010a, p. 498). As a result, workers laid off encountered tremendous economic hardship and life pressure, with only limited welfare support, and under these

conditions were pushed to take more self-responsibility and proactively participate in market competition so that they would be able to deal with the harsh reality. During the process of the economic reform, Yan (2010a, 2010b) argues that the individual has to become more self-reliant and reflexive on the risks and uncertainties. At the same time, a greater array of individual choices, the de-standardisation of life course, and the new patterns of lifestyle have emerged brought about by the economic reform in the individualisation process. The individual then has become 'an important and independent social category' (Yan, 2010a, p. 501) as a result of the sharply increased awareness of individual rights and freedom. However, it should be noted that the individual has gained more mobility, freedom and choices but also the necessity for self-management and self-driven due to the lack of collective protection and the state's support.

Although the party-state has retreated from private life in China, the process of Chinese individualisation is nevertheless led by the party-state through 'soft management (as opposed to control) of the interplay among the players: the individual, the market, social group, institutions and global capitalism' (Yan, 2020, p. 289). Yan (2010a) calls it 'party-state-managed individualisation' (p. 509) as it has been pushed on Chinese society in a way of top-down. Unlike individualisation in Western Europe, the aim of Chinese individualisation is to increase the power and wealth of the nation (Yan, 2016b). In this process, the individual is still perceived as and encouraged to be a means to the end of modernisation, with increasing emphasis on the need for individual sacrifices for the larger extended family (Yan, 2016b). Yan perceives it as half-baked individualisation (2016b) as it forces the individual to go back to being subordinate to the collectivity. In this sense, the Chinese individual may encounter more barriers during the pursuit of individual desires, freedom and rights, including limited institutional benefits and pressure to sacrifice for the collective values. All in all, on the one hand, the party-state pushes the individuals to be more productive and self-reliant for their own well-being. On the other hand, the individuals are pressured to make self-sacrifices for the larger extended family through the party-state's downplaying of individual autonomy, choices and freedom (Yan, 2016b). I will need to pay close attention to this dichotomy in my analysis of *nvboshi*'s experiences, to whether or not these women confront multiple challenges in their lives and how these challenges have influenced their lives. To what extent are these *nvboshi* able to pursue individual goals?

In answer to these questions, some pieces of the puzzle can be found in a speech made by President Xi to a meeting of the All-China Women's Federation in 2013. In the speech, President Xi stressed that Chinese women should proactively take on the responsibilities of care for the elderly, child care and educating children in the private sphere. What was advocated in the political discourse is also reflected in Yan's (2016b) argument that the productive individual is being pushed to work hard for family, rather than merely for themselves. As such, Yan summarises the features of Chinese individualisation as follows:

> *Individualization in China is characterized by the management of the party-state and the absence of cultural democracy, the absence of a welfare state regime, and the absence of classic individualism and political liberalism. In this sense, the Chinese individualization process remains at the stage of emancipation politics of first modernity. Yet individuals in China also live in an environment where a fluid labour market, flexible employment, increasing risks, a culture of intimacy and self-expression, and a greater emphasis on individual responsibility and self-reliance have been created by the globalization of the market economy and an ideology of consumerism. The Chinese simultaneously demonstrates pre-modern, modern, and late-modern conditions, and the Chinese individual must deal with all of these conditions simultaneously. (Yan, 2010a, p. 510)*

Another consideration of Yan's theorisation of Chinese individualisation is exploring individual agency at the level of remaking the self and creating a subjective lifestyle. During the ongoing process of Chinese individualisation, severe competition in the market-led economy, institutional reform and changing state policies have contributed to the emergence of a new type of the individual in Chinese society, which Yan calls the 'striving individual' (2014, p. 184). The strong urge to succeed and the fear of losing out require the striving individual to 'be industrious, self-disciplined, calculating, and pragmatic' (Yan, 2014, p. 188). Comparing the striving individual with the Western 'enterprising self' (Rose, 2007), Yan (2014) argues that the chief difference between the two lies in the 'unfinished task of emancipation politics' (p. 189) in Chinese society. That is to say, rights such as freedom, autonomy and liberty taken for granted by the Western enterprising self are goals that the Chinese striving individual has to work for. In addition to this, at the material level, the

striving individual is pursuing goals ‘such as comfortable material lives, secure employment, welfare benefits’ (Yan, 2020, p. 290) that have already been reached by the vast majority of those living in Western countries. Therefore, Yan (2014) surmises that the practices conducted by the striving individual in China are necessarily ‘confined to the sphere of private life and to economic activities in the public sphere’ (p. 188). More specifically, most Chinese are striving for freedom and autonomy within the traditional family system, as well as accumulating wealth through hard work and career development. Given that individuals have been pushed to take on more self-responsibility and become more self-reliant in the individualisation process, Yan concludes that the greatest challenge facing the striving individual in China is the overwhelming pressure to make more money.

I find the concept of the striving individual to be quite fluid. As an idea, it originated from Yan’s in-depth observations of his participants striving for hard-to-reach goals within no-choice-but situations, in both cities and the countryside. The striving individual was then constructed as a biographic pattern by these people to deal with the tremendous stress they were under due to their low salaries and limited options. Yan (2014) reports that other social groups, such as white-collar professionals and students can also be seen as striving individuals. For these social groups, the multiple goals they are striving for include competing with the younger cohort to secure positions at work and studying hard to improve their life chances. This is particularly true for rural students, who have limited educational resources. All of these types of people are living as striving individuals, at great personal cost, but apart from spending most of their time making money, their goals they strive for are often quite divergent. In this sense, I find the concept is very helpful for exploring how my participants deal with the constraints they face in the different areas of their lives. As a special social group in Chinese society, how my participants are actually living their lives will be the central focus of this study.

Yan believes that Chinese economic reforms have changed the standard individual biography from Maoist socialism to ‘the pursuit of a life of one’s own’ (Yan, 2010a, p. 502) and that this had become an unstoppable tendency by the mid-1980s. The idea of ‘a life of one’s own’, introduced by Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, is seen as an ‘individual quest’ (2001, p. 76). In his exploration of the individual creation of different lifestyles, Yan borrowed Lisa Rofel’s (2007) idea of the ‘desiring self’ to articulate the explosion of individual desires in Chinese society and explore how the rise of desiring self has contributed to the pursuit of a life of

one's own in the individualisation process. Rofel (2007) first introduced the notion of the desiring self in *Desiring China*:

> *A sea-change has swept through China in the last fifteen years: to replace socialist experimentation with the ''universal human nature'' imagined as the essential ingredient of cosmopolitan worldliness. This model of human nature has the desiring subject as its core: the individual who operates through sexual, material, and affective self-interest. (Rofel, 2007, p. 3)*

She uses the term 'desire' to describe the individual's widespread 'aspirations, needs, and longings' (Rofel, 2007, p. 3). Examining urban professional women's lived experiences and practices, Rofel (2007) finds that compared with their mother's generation whose lives 'have been nothing but a life of sacrifice and constraints' (2007, p. 117), these urban daughters see themselves 'as having within their grasp the possibility of becoming free of all constraints' (p. 118) through consumption of various sorts, sex, flexibility and mobility. Yan then applies the concept of desiring self to the context of Chinese individualisation and concludes that the rise of desiring self can be seen in the increased pursuit of emotions and desires 'such as those for intimacy and love, a good life and easy work, and self-indulgence' (Yan, 2010a, p. 504) in Chinese society. That is to say, Chinese individuals are now able to pursue alternative lifestyles in accordance with their own desires.

In conjunction with the development of the desiring self in China, another concept that has come to the fore is that of the divided self (Lee et al., 2011). This is a notion based on the Confucian ideology of the dual-self: the small self (小我) and the great self (大我). It is argued that the great self should always come first, a dictate that leads to 'the individual's sacrifice of personal interest or pleasure for the sake of a larger collectivity' (p. 7). As a reflection of the internalised hierarchical order, Yan (2010a) considers the dual-self as representing the relationship between the individual and the collectivity. According to Lee et al. (2011), the divided self can be understood as part collective self who would focus on collective-familial interests and values, and part private self who would choose self-interests over those of the collectivity. Therefore, the major challenges that the divided self faces are 'self-interest and collective good, struggling over desire and responsibility, negotiating contradictory emotions' (Lee et al., 2011, p. 4). In Skoglund's (2020) study of how Chinese

single women negotiate individual desires with filial obligations, in conflicts between individuals and their parents, the divided self can be often seen in the choices of these single women embracing their own needs, rather than making a sacrifice for their parents. In this sense, Skoglund (2020) argues, the divided self would further highlight the rise of the desiring self among single professional women.

The concept of the striving individual puts the emphasis on people's agency to pursue their own desires, while the desiring self and a divided self help us to make sense of individual decisions when confronting the old values and patriarchal ideologies. However, I notice that no one has tried to combine all three concepts together to explore individual choices and desires. In this study, I am going to apply each of these ideas to the lived experiences and practices of *nvboshi* under the context of Chinese individualisation, to demonstrate how they pursue the goal of living a life of one's own. In order to displace how Yan's argument has been used in the existing literature, I am going to share two recent works on young women's dating experiences and the life experiences of the post-90s generations respectively.

Yan's theory of Chinese individualisation has been applied by a few scholars to explore the lived experiences and practices of different groups of people in China. Living in a highly fluid environment of Beijing, Wang and Nehring (2014) find that the interests in pursuing sex, romance and love have turned these young women into desiring selves (Rofel, 2007). Through their dating practices, a high level of self-reflection and a different level of agency have been found among these young women. On the one hand, their quest for a satisfying close relationship is regarded by these women as a way of overcoming personal constraints such as 'the lack of a Beijing hukou or desirable material wealth' (2013, p. 23). On the other hand, the ongoing construction of individual biographies on the basis of self-reflection during the quest has been intensified. In this sense, Wang and Nehring (2014) argue that individualisation has not only served as 'an ambition—a desire for emancipation—but also as a lived reality' (p. 24) for these young Beijing women. In order to pursue an ideal intimate relationship, they have disembedded themselves from 'historically prevalent commitments and institutional arrangements' (Wang & Nehring, 2014, p. 24). Meanwhile, female agency has also been given attention in the exploration of women's dating practices. Wang and Nehring identify how differences in social-structural position impacted on women's ability to negotiate when dating. In another case, Yang's (2020) work focuses on the ways women deal with the contradictions between individual career choices and family relations in China.

Based on Yan's argument, Yang (2020) finds that the participants tend to remake themselves by pursuing financial independence to achieve a lifestyle they enjoy. Such pursuits are reflected in these young people's different attitudes towards the 'iron rice bowl'[8] to those of their parents. Doing 'iron rice bowl' jobs is perceived as a practice of the collective taking responsibility for the individual by the post-90s generation, while these young people expect to lead a more flexible lifestyle full of autonomous choices and self-management, taking self-responsibility for their own success or failure. As a result, these young people's lives will be more individualised and reflexive, but also their family relationships may become intense due to their disembedding from the normative life course. Both of these two studies are examples of applying Yan's theory about Chinese individualisation as an analytical tool for exploring how the disembedding process can be seen in lived experiences, as well as the extent to which individual agency impacts on these experiences and negotiations with others.

It also should be noted that although Yan (2010a) has already claimed that the process of Chinese individualisation has enabled the individuals to liberate themselves from the previous all-encompassing social categories, however, in terms of gender, Yan's studies do not answer that how the individuals, especially women, disembed themselves from the constraints of gender hierarchy. And also the influence of gender on these individuals, again particularly women, has not yet been explored during the individualisation process in China. Besides, Jiao (2013) criticises that Yan's argument is not convincing as he explains the social changes within Chinese society without considering the organisation. Jiao (2013) argues that individuals are getting more dependent on various economic, political, and social organisations, alongside with the individualisation process in Chinese society. But, Yan's research fails to take the relations between the individuals and assorted organisations into account when he is considering the case of Chinese individualisation.

2.4 Conclusion

In the first section of this chapter, I outline the broad circumstances under which Chinese women currently live. It is a context full of opportunities and contradictions, which may create unexpected challenges or irresolvable problems for women. In this context, we can see

[8] 'Iron rice bowl' or *tiefanwan* (铁饭碗) in Chinese means secured employment. For example, civil servant in government institutes is usually considered as 'iron rice bowl' job in China.

the changes that happened to womanhood, alongside increasing awareness of individual needs and aspirations for independence and autonomy. In order to understand the current situation of *nvboshi* in Chinese society, educated women's relationship experiences, career development and family life are then reviewed separately. From the review, it is clear that current studies on the experiences of Chinese *nvboshi* are very limited. Even though they are recruited in a few studies, as a group of women who have the highest educational attainment and at the same time consistently stigmatised, these women's difficulties and barriers in their lives are hardly found in the current literature. But, the existing studies on Chinese educated women in urban China do shed some light on the subject matter of my study and will be relevant in the analysis of my participants. Moreover, these existing studies have helped me to find my place in the study. As noted above, social structure and individual agency have been found to be the two major factors impacting the experiences of educated professional women. As such, in this study, I will situate myself in the position of discussing structure and women's agency to explore how these *nvboshi* exercise their agency to deal with their problems and lead a life of one's own.

In order to answer this question, I will draw on Yan Yunxiang's theory of Chinese individualisation. Yan (2020) argues that Chinese society is experiencing a process of individualisation led by the institutional changes and 'soft management' (p. 289). During the individualisation process, the individuals have disembedded themselves from the previous all-encompassing social categories and ties such as family, kinship, organisations, patriarchal orders and community. As a result, individuals are pushed to be responsible for their own lives through self-reliance and a more and more desiring self (Rofel, 2007) has emerged during the process as a result of the legitimation of individual desires in China. Also, people are becoming striving individuals, striving for themselves and their desires, even though such pursuits may touch on the collective values and create new tensions in social relations. Yan's theorisation of Chinese individualisation offers a critical framework on the perspectives of structure and agency, one with which I am going to apply to my data to explore whether and to what extent the notion of Chinese individualisation helps us understand the experiences of *nvboshi*. But first, in the next chapter, I will explain how I conducted my fieldwork and collected my data in China.

Chapter Three
Methodology

As Clough and Nutbrown (2012) put it, a methodology chapter is a 'research diary' (p. 35), a record of how the researcher designs and carries out their research. This chapter provides an opportunity not only to discuss the choice of methods adopted but also to detail the process and the adaptations as it evolved during the fieldwork. I will start by presenting how I prepared for the fieldwork. Then, the procedure of data collection, including the recruitment strategies and the process of interview, will be discussed respectively. I will also talk about my dual roles in the interview. The last section focuses on data analysis.

3.1 Preparation before the Fieldwork

The focus of this section is on the preparations before the fieldwork started. I will firstly discuss the reason that I used semi-structured interviews to collect data, then the major preparations that were made before I went back to China will be described. Finally, I will share how I did my pilot study in the UK.

3.1.1 Choosing a data collection method

As I noted above, the aim of doing this study is to explore the lived experiences of Chinese *nvboshi* as they have not been given enough academic attention and therefore been under-explored. Examining the current research on these women, I found that few qualitative studies have been conducted exploring their experiences of relationships, career development and family life. How their experiences are lived and how these *nvboshi* make sense of their stories and encountering would be the issue that this study is going to address. Therefore, I will be standing at these women's own perspectives and understanding of their lives to discuss these questions. The fieldwork is seen as 'an interactive and reflexive proceeding' (Chin, 2016, p. 99), and thus the interactions between my participants and me are always needed. In order to answer my research questions, this study is going to apply interpretivist approach, and would contribute to the further understanding and exploration of women's lives, especially the experience of *nvboshi* within the Chinese context. To achieve this aim, I designed my research around a qualitative methodology as this was considered to be the most

appropriate way of exploring the experiences and stories of women. Qualitative methods offered me the opportunity and space to explore these women's understanding and sense-making of different topics, whereas I cannot get these subjective data from a quantitative method. At the preparation stage of the fieldwork, I was thinking about the way to collect data. Since I was going to be exploring women's experiences, focus groups and individual interviews would be the obvious choices. As explained by Bryman (2016), in a focus group, participants are allowed to 'probe each other's reasons for holding a certain view' (p. 503), and also a wide range of different views relating to a specific topic will be elicited. However, in this study, I found that it was difficult for my participants to share their own experiences in a group discussion. As a Chinese person, I fully understand how much Chinese people would not like to talk about their personal life and experiences relating to their intimate relationship and family life when other participants were present. Besides, my participants had different social status and personal backgrounds. Some were students; some were lecturers, and some were professors. It would not be easy to gather these women into different groups to share their experiences.

Why did I employ a semi-structured interview technique in this study? There were two major considerations for selecting this method as the means of collecting data. First of all, semi-structured interviews were 'well suited for the exploration of the perceptions and opinions of respondents regarding complex and sometimes sensitives' (Barriball & While, 1994, p. 330). In this study, how my participants perceive their experiences in daily life would be the key question that I am going to deal with. Qualitative semi-structured interviews can be applied interchangeably with in-depth interviews (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005) to uncover the perspectives of research participants. Doing semi-structured interviews offered participants opportunities of sharing their own stories and experiences (Patton,1990). Secondly, a standardised interview outline was precluded because of the varied 'professional, educational and personal histories' (Barriball & While, 1994, p. 330) of the respondents. In this study, even though all the participants were standing at the same educational level, the differences in their personal status, study experiences and work backgrounds were quite obvious. In order to gain in-depth understanding of their experiences and lives, a set of loose interviewing questions (Robson, 2002) would help to unpack my participants' unique experiences in their daily lives, and offer individual participant the freedom to talk about what is important to them (Biber, Hesse-Biber, & Leavy, 2006). In sum, these were the reasons I chose the semi-structured interview as the method to collect data for this study.

3.1.2 Preparations before recruitment

Three important preparations were made before I started to recruit participants. The first was to create a fieldwork tracking diary. I only recruited seven participants before I landed in China and started my fieldwork. That is to say, I would do the interviews while recruiting more participants simultaneously in China. Considering the amount of work to do, I created a fieldwork tracking diary when the recruitment started. There were two major components in the diary. One was the everyday to-do list. The other was a profile of every single participant. The participant profiles were created to keep track of the progression of every participant. If I received a reply from a participant, I created a profile for her. By doing this, the entire process of recruiting and interviewing was highly organised. The second preparation was to update my information on the website of the department. The reason for doing this was to increase my credibility when I was recruiting participants. Six participants did visit the website of my department and read my information before they agreed to participate in the interview. This made me realise that officially identified information was a great way of gaining the trust of participants. The last preparation was to create an outline of the interview questions (see Appendix E and F). This mainly focused on four aspects, including a few general questions, relationship and marriage, career experience, and family life. All the questions were kept very open to ensure that my participants could share as much as possible.

3.1.3 Pilot study

I did my pilot study in the UK before I went back to China to collect data. Five participants who were currently studying in the University of York were invited to do a face-to-face interview with me. Each interview was about 90 minutes to two hours. By doing the pilot study, I noticed that sharing some certain personal experiences and stories may cause unexpected stress and discomfort for my participants. For example, one participant shared her break-up and cried during the interview. Another one also cried, telling me the story that her parents had refused to finance her PhD studies, and instead, supported her younger brother when it was time for him to do a PhD. Both conversations made me realise that there were sensitive topics or particular experiences which would be stressful for my participants. As such, I needed to be very cautious about this. After finishing the pilot study, I contacted a

psychological consultant service in Beijing, which aims at providing talking and other relevant services for women for free. They could provide professional help if my participants felt uncomfortable or stressful after the interviews.

3.2 The Process of Recruitment

This section will primarily illustrate the recruitment strategies that I used and the characteristics of my participants.

3.2.1 Recruiting strategies

The recruitment of participants was one of the most difficult parts of the fieldwork preparations. Before starting my fieldwork, I spent two months recruiting interviewees. By the end of the fieldwork, I had finished 33 interviews for my qualitative data. Taken as a whole, the methods I used to recruit these participants can be divided into four steps. The first was my contacts. Most of the interviews were conducted in Beijing, Nanjing, and Chengdu. I finished my undergraduate and master's study in Nanjing and Beijing respectively. As such, I have many personal networks in both cities. Chengdu, the biggest city in the Southwest of China, is my hometown with a few top universities. There are many networks I could use for recruiting participants. Participants, in the first stage, were sourced from my contacts, including my former classmates/supervisors/professors in universities and friends/family's recommendations to suggest possible contacts and thereafter used the snowballing method. The personal contacts of a researcher were a key resource to enhance participant recruitment efforts (Joseph, Keller, & Ainsworth, 2016). In the studies of Sandy To (2013, 2015) and Sit (2014) on Chinese professional women, both of them used personal networking to recruit potential participants as their first recruitment strategy. As compared with other methods to recruit participants, such as contacting the universities or research institutions to recommend participants, personal contact was the most time-saving method for me because electronic recruitment messages were sent by personal contacts to personally distribute to their friends, colleagues, family members, etc. Potential participants could be recruited very quickly, and I could add them on WeChat to provide them with more information about the study and the interview.

Through personal contacts, I recruited 14 participants. But the number was less than my minimal expectation (25 or above). Besides, during the recruitment process, I noticed that participants sourced from my contacts were sharing some similarities such as research fields, age, universities, and personal relationship status. This was because most of my friends/classmates only knew of people in their subjects or similar academic fields. They did not have contacts with potential participants in the Sciences or less closely related subjects. In other words, participants recruited in step one did not meet the demands of my fieldwork. Therefore, I started the snowballing method. Snowballing, allowing research participants to recruit new participants for a study, is frequently used by researchers where it is difficult to find potential participants (Bryman, 2016). I ended every interview by asking the participant to recommend her friends, working partners, roommates or colleagues that might have an interest in my research. Once I had interviewed a participant, she would have a deeper understanding of the interview process and could evaluate 'the feasibility of inviting her friends to join' (Chin, 2016, p. 65). When researching sensitive topics, Hendricks and Blanken (1992) claim that the population will be hard to access, thus snowball sampling has additional advantages in practice. I was able to successfully recruit a further 13 participants by snowballing.

Using personal contacts and snowballing, I had already recruited 27 participants but the number of participants who were currently working was still far from my expectation. Hence, I moved on to using emails and telephone calls as a recruitment strategy. First, I searched many universities' websites to find possible contacts. I sent out emails inviting them to participate in the study. I sent out 20 emails but only one replied to me with a rejection of my invitation. I gave up on this method as I believed that they might be suspicious about my invitation and study, and would not want to be a part of it. I then started to use the telephone to contact them directly on the office numbers and private numbers were shown on the university website. I tried to contact their office numbers first as I knew it was impolite and inappropriate to contact their private phone numbers directly. If the office number was not available, I would send a message to their private phone to introduce myself and my intention to invite them to take part in an interview, as well as a photocopy of my student ID card. The people who were interested in my research would respond to me and through this method, I was able to find another four participants.

I also used social media as a recruitment tool for my research. Gelinas et al, (2017)

distinguish two types of social media recruitment activity. Passive recruitment is when researchers distribute recruitment posters and flyers 'with the aim of attracting potential participants to contact the research team for more information' (p. 3). When researchers know which characteristics they are looking for in suitable participants, they will actively approach and communicate with 'specific individuals' (p. 3) to participate in the research. In my study, I used active recruitment to find a few participants who had shown an interest in the experience of *nvboshi* in Chinese society and two participants were recruited in this way. The first was Xun. She had published an attention-catching talk show video about *nvboshi* on Weibo, a Chinese version of Twitter. The video was forwarded by many official accounts and key opinion leaders, and sparked many discussions about *nvboshi* on social media platforms. I sent her an instant message, inviting her to my interview. The other was Mandy. She forwarded Xun's video, and left very insightful comments on it, showing her views about the social status and unequal treatment of *nvboshi* in society. In these two cases, social media helped me to find suitable participants but there were significant ethical issues to be considered with this type of recruitment strategy, which I will talk about in the next section. All in all, using the four recruitment strategies described above, I had successfully invited 33 interviewees by the end of my fieldwork.

3.2.2 The samples

When preparing for my fieldwork, initially, I aimed to recruit participants in the age range of 25 to 35 years old. Most Chinese students graduate from postgraduate study at 24/25 years old and start their PhD studies at 25/26 years old without gap years. Following this pattern, a female postgraduate could finish her PhD study at around 30 to 31 years old. But some of them might choose to get married and have babies during this period, and their studies may be interrupted, which was why in the first place I thought that 25 to 35 would be a reasonable age range for me to recruit participants from. However, during the procedure of recruitment, I changed this standard. On the one hand, I realised that some participants who have been working for years were over 35; on the other hand, I ignored the fact that some women may choose to do a PhD after they had worked for a few years. As such, I decided to change the age range so that I could recruit enough participants to share their experiences and stories at different life stages.

Name	Age	Relationship/marital status	Work status
Ang	31	Single	Post-doctor
Tingting	27	Single	Student
Ruiny	25	Single	Student; runs a tutorial centre with friends
Yang	26	Single	Student
Flyang	28	Single	Student
Luao	31	Single	Post-doctor; have two companies
Xun	26	Single	Student
Mandy	26	Single	Student
Chan	31	Single	Student
Qi	27	Single	Student
Chong	27	Single	Student; co-works with a few educational organisations in China
Alice	29	Single	Student
Nannan	28	Single	Student
Nai	27	Single	Student
Xiaofang	38	Single	Lecturer; has a part-time job in an architect's studio
Leong	29	Single	Student
Fay	29	Single	Student
Xiaoxiao	28	Engagement	Student
Wendy	30	In a relationship	Administrative staff in a university
North	28	In a relationship	Researcher
Xinxin	31	In a relationship	Student
Linlin	32	In a relationship	Research assistant
Ling	36	Married, one child	Lecturer/undergraduate tutor
Xi	34	Married (in the middle of separation), one child	Researcher
Yu	33	Married, one child	Lecturer; has a part-time job for her previous employer as a reporter/freelancer
Hao	33	Married, one child	Associate Professor

Monjin	43	Married, one child	Associate Professor; runs her own business
Amy	38	Married, one child	Lecturer
Lay	36	Married, one child	Associate Professor; co-works with other research institutions and companies
Monica	41	Married, one child	Associate Professor; co-works with other research institutions and companies
Yi	29	Married	Lecturer
Christina	31	Married, one child	Lecturer
Suli	39	Married, one child	Associate Professor; YouTuber

Table 2 The list of Interviewees (for further information, please refer to Appendix G)

As presented in the table above, I successfully recruited 33 interviewees to participate in this research. To guarantee their privacy, I used the pseudonyms they preferred. To summarise, 16 of them are aged from 25-29; 10 are aged from 30-34; five are aged from 35-39 and two of them are over 40. In terms of their relationship/marital status, 17 of my participants are single and the rest are either in a relationship or married. As for their professions, over half of them are still students; 16 of them are doing academic related jobs and one is doing administrative jobs in university. It is also worth noting that nine of them are doing more than one job.

3.3 The Interviews

This section will describe how the interviews were conducted and discuss my reflexivity during the interviews. I will first explain what the procedure for doing the interviews was. There were two main types: face-to-face interviews and telephone interviews. I will then reflect on what it was like to be both an 'insider' and 'outsider' in the interviews.

3.3.1 Carrying out the interviews

Face-to-face and telephone interviews were the main methods I used to collect data. As the fieldwork started at the beginning of December, a few participants had already returned home for holidays and could only be contacted electronically. In addition, I recruited two participants from the social media platform. One of them was studying abroad and a telephone interview was therefore the most effective method for us. The telephone interviews were finished through Wechat. Wechat is a common instant messaging tool in China, similar to Whatsapp. In the first place, I was planning to use Wechat video calls to interview participants. However, three participants expressed that they preferred audio calls because they would feel embarrassed talking about their private experiences with a stranger in a video call. Another participant, Amy, rejected this idea because her baby boy could wake up at any time, and she had to take care of him. The audio call interview would be more flexible for her because she could do the interview and take care of her son simultaneously. In order to provide them with the most convenience and make them feel comfortable, I decided to use Wechat audio call to collect data.

The face-to-face interviews were conducted in my participants' offices, coffee houses and afternoon tea shops. My participants picked the location that they felt comfortable with. Each interview began with a casual chat and then I informed the participant that they could stop the interview at any time, or ask me to turn off the recorder if they did not want to share something on the record. I wanted them to know that although they were participants in the study, they had the power to be interviewed in the way they wanted. By doing this, I found that the participants tended to be more open-minded and shared more in-depth feelings and experiences.

Examining current research on audio call and telephone interviewing, it appears that this type of interview has several advantages. Compared with a face-to-face interview, telephone interviews are more flexible (Trier-Bieniek, 2012). This advantage was reflected in my fieldwork experience. For one thing, telephone interviewing enabled me to deal with the problem of physical distance when participants were in different countries and cities. For another, this type of interview made it easier for those participants in the middle of something such as Amy. They could stay at home and accept the interview. Some scholars assert that telephone interviews may cause less-honest discussion and turn lackluster when sensitive topics are talked about (Shuy, 2002; Trochim & Donnelly, 2001). However, Trier-Bieniek (2012) argues that because of the 'anonymity involved' and 'an increasing security with

virtual conversation' (p. 642), there are more possibilities for more honest and sensitive discussions during phone interviews. Trier-Bieniek (2012) also suggests that participants can benefit from a telephone interview as 'they are being interviewed in familiar, comfortable settings' (p. 642). Monica is an example of the benefits that a phone interview can provide. When I was interviewing Monica on Wechat, she shared her experience of being sexually abused during her childhood and the significant influence this had on her life afterward. I did not expect her to share such a private and horrible experience with me, as this was a quite sensitive and miserable experience for a woman. But in Monica's case, I found that a telephone interview seemed to eliminate the embarrassment and discomfort that a face-to-face meeting might cause.

> *Monica: I am not gonna tell you this experience if we are in a face-to-face meeting today. Because I am not ready to tell my experience to a stranger face-to-face. But telephoning makes me feel very safe and relaxed. You can't see my face and I can't see your face.*

However, telephone interviews also had several disadvantages. The most obvious challenge was the technology itself. Since the quality of audio call on Wechat was determined by the strength of the internet signal, there would inevitably be a few interruptions due to a bad connection during the interview. In North's interview, we were consistently interrupted during our conversation due to the weak internet signal in her lab. Not only did these interruptions distract us, they also affected the sharing of her stories. Finally, we rescheduled our interview for when North was at home with a stable internet connection. Another challenge that I encountered in the phone interview was due to the lack of 'visual contact between interviewer and interviewee' (Farooq, 2015, p. 3) which limited nonverbal communication, including body language and facial expressions. This was an advantage of the face-to-face interview. Doing face-to-face interviews allowed me to use this information 'as a key communication tool that ensures messages are correctly understood' (Farooq, 2015, p. 3). Likewise, my participants could observe my response to their experiences and answers in a face-to-face interview. This nonverbal information granted me more opportunities to observe my participants' hesitations, pauses, silences, and confusion in their responses, and further understand the meaning behind their stories.

Additionally, face-to-face communication allowed me to build rapport with my participants. As Fontana and Frey (2005) point out, rapport plays a key role in creating a communicative environment where participants feel comfortable enough to talk openly and freely. This in turn helps interviewers to collect rich and in-depth data from the participants during the interview. With this in mind, before I started an interview I would make small talk with my participants. Normally, I would ask something like 'How was the traffic getting here?' 'Do you visit this place often?' 'How has your day been?' This lightened the atmosphere, put my participants at ease and made both of us feel more relaxed and casual. It was a way of bringing us closer together as well as warming up for the interview. Apart from small talks, other acts like offering participants a cup of coffee, sweets or biscuits (Chapple, 1999) also helped to create a warm environment 'conducive to a free flowing conversation' (Farooq, 2015, p. 6). I offered hot beverages to every single participant in the face-to-face interviews. If the interviews were conducted in participants' offices or labs, I brought hot drinks with me, as I wanted them to be happy to talk with me.

3.3.2 'Insider' and 'outsider' in the interviews

Many scholars have noted the importance of the personal position of the researcher in qualitative settings (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Gair, 2012). As a member of *nvboshi*, how I positioned myself in the interview, and what kind of role I played in the interview were therefore concerns that needed to be considered here. Berger (2015) argues that researchers need to 'carefully self monitor the impact of their biases, beliefs, and personal experience on their research' (p. 220). This told me that extra attention should be paid to the influence of positioning of researchers on interviewees in an interview. Sharing my experience of being a *nvboshi* with my participants positioned me as an insider during the interview. Insiders are defined as researchers who conduct research with the groups to which they also belong to (Kanuha, 2000). Being an insider in this study meant that it was easier to diminish the distance between me and my participants and therefore further understand my participants' reactions and responses. Let me take an example. Xinxin's story with her parents was very similar to mine. When she was talking about this experience, I shared my experience as well. She was holding my hand, saying: '*I finally found a person who has the same experience and feeling as me.*' Having similar experiences helped me to gain trust and achieve rapport with my participants, as well as attain deeper insight into their lives. Because of my 'shared

experience' position, participants were more open with me and more willing to share their stories.

Nevertheless, I became very aware that my 'insider' role was a double-edged sword. Reflecting after the first three interviews were completed, I realised that my participants sometimes failed to express their individual experiences or share how they felt about their experiences in enough detail. One participant said: 'you have a similar experience to me. You know how I feel.' This reminded me that although we shared a similar experience, my feelings and opinions did not represent the feelings and opinions of my participants. I needed to propose follow-up questions to encourage them to share their own views and kept reminding myself of the 'insider' role during the fieldwork. I became very cautious about disclosing too much about my personal opinions. For example, some participants liked asking me questions in the interviews 'What is your opinion on this thing? What would you do if you were me?' When I was asked these questions, I would not express my opinions directly. I was concerned that my response would affect my participants' thinking. As noted by Berger (2015), the researcher's position may 'affect the information that participants are willing to share' (p. 220). Hence, it was of great importance for me to keep track of my position in the interviews.

As well as being an 'insider' in the interview, I also saw myself as an 'outsider' listener as well, a position Letherby (2003) refers to as the 'friendly stranger'. Unlike a real friend, the friendly stranger 'does not exercise social control over respondents because the relationship exists for the purpose of the research and is terminated when the research is complete' (Letherby, 2003, p. 129). Ideally, participants would feel more relaxed and comfortable talking with a friendly stranger, and I found that when I was playing the role of 'outsider' in the interview, it helped to ease my participants' nervousness about being judged when discussing private issues with their family members or friends. For example, one participant stated: '*I won't be talking about these things and sharing my views with my parents. They definitely will judge and criticise me.*' Many participants claimed that it was much easier to share their inner feelings with a stranger who they can trust and would not be judgmental. Under these circumstances, my role as a friendly stranger was like a mirror that they could talk to and share their thoughts with, as their privacy was fully guaranteed.

3.3.3 Ethical issues and power dynamics

This study has been ethically approved by the ELMPS Ethics Committee of the University of York. Since my research is concerned about women's daily lives, including their relationships, work experience and families, ethical issues have been central to the entire fieldwork process. As Miller and Bell (2002) remind us, participants' privacy must be fully protected by researchers and research cannot be conducted without the full agreement of participants. Gaining informed consent from my participants was crucial and before I started recruiting, a consent form (see Appendix C and D) and an information sheet for participants (see Appendix A and B) had already been drafted. The information sheet gave a brief introduction to myself and clearly identified the purpose of the study, how interviews would be conducted, their privacy protected and their right to end the interviews, refuse to answer any questions and withdraw from the research at any time. The consent form was used to ask whether or not my participants gave their consent before we started the interview. All consent forms were signed by my participants. For the three interviews conducted on the telephone, I sent a digital consent form to my participants and printed it out after they sent it back to me with their signatures. By doing this, the research could be conducted in an ethical way. I prepared the information sheet and the consent form in Chinese and English and I sent both out to the participants. The aim was to avoid any misunderstanding in translation and make sure that my participants could achieve a clear indication of what this study was for. It is widely accepted that informed consent should be obtained in the participants' 'home tongue and with an understanding of their world view or value system' (Benatar & Singer, 2000, p. 825). Since my participants were all doing research, they were quite familiar with the consent form and already had the knowledge of how the consent form would be used in an academic study.

Another ethical consideration in this study that I attached greater importance to was using social media as a research recruitment tool. As mentioned above, two participants were found on Weibo. I was very cautious about contacting potential participants in this way because I was worried they might think I was going to steal their personal information and then block me. According to Gelinas et al. (2017), the most salient ethical considerations of social media recruitment include respect for privacy and other interest and transparency. Researchers are required to 'engage in recruitment activities to be truthful and honest when describing the aims, details, risks, and benefits of studies' (p. 6). Investigators have the obligation to

‘proactively disclose their presence on social media when collecting information for recruitment purposes’ (Gelinas et al., 2017, p. 6). As such, I used my personal social media account to contact my participants. First, I sent out a message with a picture of my university student ID card so that these people could trust me, introducing myself and the purpose of the message. Then they would reply to show their interest or reject me. Sometimes, there were no responses at all. For those people who showed interest in the study, I would send a picture of my Chinese ID card so that they could identify me and would feel safe to have further communication with me. I realised that for those participants who were found online, confirming the researcher's identity was the very first and most important step for the participants to decide whether they wanted to take part in the study or not. In addition, I realised that using the researcher’s real social media account to recruit was also essential to gain trust of participants. They could review the researcher’s personal page to confirm researcher’s identity. For example, my participants could review all my previous posts and pictures on my personal page on Weibo.

Confidentiality and anonymity were also major ethical considerations in this study. Before the interviews, many participants expressed concerns about confidentiality and anonymity, asking what I was going to do with their information. I told them that all personal information, including their email address, work address, telephone numbers and social media accounts would only be used for correspondence purposes and would not appear in the thesis. Moreover, their real names would not be shown in the transcripts, data analysis or thesis. According to Wiles et al. (2006), confidentiality is a principle that ‘is integral to our societal beliefs that individuals matter and that individuals have the right for their affairs to be private’ (p. 3). The notion of anonymity is to ensure that the identity of participants will not be disclosed (Wiles et al., 2006). In this study, I have used pseudonyms given by my participants to replace their own names after the interviews, and I have kept all the information sheets and consent forms in my personal locker at home. All the records of the interviews and transcripts were securely locked in my personal laptop. The data was also backed up at the University filestore, which is regularly maintained by the IT service. After leaving the university, the data will be transferred to my Google Drive account and a regular check will be conducted. In addition to the above, I also noted that although the purpose of this study was to demonstrate the real life of Chinese *nvboshi* by letting their voice be heard, how I was going to validate my participants’ words was a big concern for me. What if they just told me the stories that they wanted me to hear? As Chin (2016) argues that interviewing

data can only offer subjective findings. Therefore, I did not intend to present the accounts of these *nvboshi* I interviewed as 'universal truth' (Chin, 2016, p. 98) regarding the lived experiences of *nvboshi* in Chinese society. During the interviews, not only the verbal language has been recorded, but every single non-verbal communication, including pause, hesitation, changes in tones, facial expressions, as well as body language, have been noted in detail. Both verbal and non-verbal information contributed to my participants' stories and their sense of meaning making. In light of this, I was convinced that these *nvboshi* in this study shared 'what they believed to be true in the given situation' (Chin, 2016, p. 98).

Some participants from the Science disciplines claimed that this was their first time participating in a social science study. Therefore, before we started the interview, I would deliver some basic information about the study and encourage them to ask questions if they needed me to give a more detailed explanation. Since the interviews would probably involve some sensitive topics such as relationship experiences, break-ups and family problems, I tried to deal with this at the research design stage. As noted above, I contacted a psychological consultant institution for women in Beijing before my trip back to China. I shared the contact information of this institution with my participants before we started the interviews. Besides, when participants were sharing an experience that might be sensitive, I would ask if they needed me to turn off the recorder so that I could make sure that the interview would not cause them nervousness and discomfort.

The balance of power between a researcher and interviewees is a topic of great importance in a qualitative study. The power relations within the interview can be fluid and changeable (Cotterill, 1992; Tang, 2002; Zhang, 2018). As such, the researcher may not always be in a superior position in relation to the participants being interviewed. During the interview, when I was interviewing participants who was working, I felt that the power position between us shifted to some extent. Most of these participants were older and more experienced in doing academic research than me. For example, one participant was an associate professor doing research regarding Chinese women's experience and empowerment, and she would propose her own questions after I asked mine such as 'Is this question related to your research aim?' 'What is your purpose for asking this question?' In this kind of interview, I was aware that some participants were not only simply taking part in the study, but also evaluating the intentions behind my questions in the interviews. In this case, the balance of power in the interview became more heavily weighted towards the participant. As argued by Lincoln et al.

(2011) that ensuring research participants realise that they could be able to speak for themselves is an important part of a qualitative research. Hence, I offered as much space and freedom as possible for my participants to propose their questions and raise their confusions during the interviews so that they could immerse in the communication to the largest extent to voice themselves.

3.4 The Process of Data Analysis

Data analysis is a 'process of bringing order, structure, and interpretation to the mass of collected data' (Marshall & Rossman, 2014, p. 111). After finishing all the interviews in Beijing, I started manually transcribing each interview. As Marshall and Rossman (2014) point out, transcribing and translating were not 'merely technical tasks; both entail judgment and interpretation' (p. 208). In order to ensure the accuracy of the data, I chose to transcribe in Chinese. All 33 interviews were tape recorded and the average length of each interview was around 90 minutes, and as a result, transcribing was a lengthy process. The analysis of this study concentrated on providing a full description of *nvboshi*'s experiences, individual values and pursuits, attitudes towards one's own life, as well as how they make sense of these experiences. Thus, the audiotapes were transcribed entirely and nonverbal sounds (e.g. laughs, long pause, sighs) and body language were also shown in the transcripts. Among all the interviews, five participants from my hometown expressed that they felt more natural and comfortable speaking the local language instead of Mandarin and therefore these interviews were conducted in my local language. This caused the first difficulty in my transcription: transcribing the spoken-word in the local language (from a tape recording) to text (a transcription). Since there were many distinctions in expressions and wording between Mandarin and my local language, I shared the transcripts with these five participants to ensure that the meaning was accurately rendered in the transcribed account of their words.

During the interviews, metaphors and Chinese idioms were often used by participants to express their opinions and richness of their experiences. However, the translation of these metaphors and idioms from Chinese to English was very complex due to the different cultural contexts and linguistic representations through languages (Bühler, 2002). Hence, I decided to do the data analysis in the original language. After finishing transcribing, I started to build up a thematic framework to organise data. And then, each theme had its own matrix, where

every single clarified subtheme could be allocated. Next, based on my research questions and research aim, I began to organise the themes on relationship experience, singlehood, lifestyles, career difficulties and advancement, family negotiations, conflicts and individual pursuit, drawing on my participants' narratives to support the main opinions being expressed. When it came to the stage of translating the coded data from Chinese into English, only the selected quotations were translated into English. Those Chinese wordings and phrases that I found difficult to be translated because of the lack of an exact equivalent in English would remain Mandarin spelling. For example, when talking about their interaction with husbands, some participants used the Chinese word '*buganxin*' (不甘心) to express their attitudes towards being forced to make sacrifices for family. I found it hard to find a proper translation to represent this phrase and I was worried that the inaccurate translation might lose my participants' meaning. Filep (2009) notes that when researchers were confronted with culture-specific terminology, the words cannot be translated into other languages. Therefore, I decided to maintain these phrases in Chinese in this thesis.

Moreover, I also reflected on my insider-outsider role in the process of analysis. During the interviews, as a *nvboshi* myself, each time a participant knowingly indicated that I knew her feelings and points, I would ask her to elaborate her own opinions, taking notes in my diary accordingly. Hence, during the analysis, in addition to the transcript, I kept reviewing my fieldwork notes to see how each participant reflected on their perceptions. This was because, on the one hand, as an insider of the research group, there were experiences shared by my participants in this study that I could relate to at a deeper level, arousing similar feelings. On the other hand, I was very cautious to avoid letting my opinions and feelings influence the analysis and interpretations of my participants' accounts. According to Dwyer and Buckle (2009), compared with the insider or outsider status in a qualitative study, it is crucial for researchers to have 'an ability to be open, authentic, honest, deeply interested in the experience or one's research participants, and committed to accurately and adequately representing their experience' (p. 59). As such, the necessity of reflexivity is highly valued in the analysis process. Researchers cannot retreat to a distant 'researcher' role in a qualitative study because participants are carried with researchers through the individual transcripts (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Therefore, I was trying to occupy the space between insider-outsider status. Even when I found out that my participants shared a similar experience with

me, I focused on the reasons that contributed to their experiences, rather than relating my own opinions and feelings with theirs in the analysis process.

3.5 Conclusion

The entire fieldwork was an intriguing journey for me. The preparation stage, recruitment process and interviews, as well as data analysis offered me many opportunities to gain a deeper understanding of how to do qualitative research. This chapter has presented some key issues that emerged during my fieldwork in China. In addition to adopting personal contacts and snowballing to recruit participants, I realised the power of social media in helping me to find suitable candidates for my research. In particular, if you know the specific characteristics of participants, using social media as a tool to reach out interviewees is an efficient way to conduct the recruitment process. Besides, in light of doing interviews with participants who shared the same gender and similar educational background as myself, my position in the interview was an essential element. How to situate myself in the interview was always a big concern in my fieldwork. I suggest that acting as a 'friendly stranger' outsider and an 'experience-sharing' insider would be an appropriate approach when conducting individual interview with the same gender. Meanwhile, I paid attention to ethical issues and power dynamics, which were significantly fundamental in ensuring that my participants' voices could be heard. Based on the data analysis, three major themes, including being a single *nvboshi*, career barriers and pursuits, and negotiations between family values and individual desires emerged. The next three chapters will present and discuss the findings in terms of these three themes.

Chapter Four
The Experience of Being a Single *nvboshi*

When people are talking about a nvboshi, their first impressions would be 'God! She must be single.'

Xun

As I mentioned in the introduction, this study explores the experience of Chinese *nvboshi* by hearing directly from their own words. During the interviews, I asked the participants in the study: '*What is the first impression do you think people would have when they talk about nvboshi?*' Unsurprisingly, most participants believed that when people think of *nvboshi*, they would come up with a picture of a group of women who are *shengnv* (剩女 leftover women). Looking at media reports, online discussions and academic articles regarding *nvboshi*, it is not hard to find that their intimate relationships and marriage status are the most attractive topics. As such, in order to achieve the goal of this study, I would like to start this thesis by discussing their intimate relationships. Among the 33 participants in this study, 14 participants remain single, and 12 of them are married. The rest of them are currently in a romantic relationship. Each participant in this study was asked to talk about their dating experiences and important romantic relationships in their lives, and to share how they make sense of breaking-up, being single and married, and what these experiences mean to them.

In today's China, patriarchal systems and traditional values have been significantly influenced and challenged by Western values and culture, along with globalisation and individualisation (Wang et al., 2015; Yan, 2003, 2010a, 2020). As a result, women who are highly educated with established careers tend to postpone marriage (Gaetano, 2014; Qian & Qian, 2014; Yeung & Hu, 2016), and refuse to sacrifice work for family (Osteria, 2015). Although the media and political discourses in China have already engaged in profound discussions on the private relationships and marital status of *nvboshi* (see Li, 2020; Zhang, 2020), there are few scholarly publications on analysing *nvboshi*'s own accounts of singlehood. As such, this chapter seeks to explore these women's different perceptions of

being single by looking at how they experience it in their daily lives, and how these unmarried *nvboshi* navigate their single life in contemporary China

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section focuses on the participants' understanding of why they are single. According to the study participants, remaining single is a result of either their own choosing or by circumstance. Then, the second section and the third section discuss two different ways the participants make sense of being single in China respectively. The second section focuses on the perception that being single is something undesirable for the participants, and needs to be overcome. And such unwanted singleness has brought about some negative emotions for the participants as it makes them feel difficult to fit into the dominant culture in China. The third section discusses other participants who celebrate being single, and how these women adopt singlehood as their major lifestyle.

4.1 Being Single: By Choice or By Circumstance?

'I chose to stay single.'

Before I interviewed the participants, I believed that they would be eager to get rid of their single status, and might worry about being single. This argument was based on my pilot study in the UK. Three participants in the pilot study expressed their worries and anxieties about remaining single, and were afraid of being left out. They shared their concerns about the contradictions between getting married and pursuing studies, and their struggles of negotiating with traditional expectations. As such, before I went back to China to do my fieldwork, I had an assumption that most single *nvboshi* were influenced by their single status. Surprisingly, during my interviews I found out that although a few participants thought of being single in a negative way, most participants told me that they have chosen to remain single. By doing this, they can find the right man who matches their expectations, then have a 'modern' marriage that does not require them to sacrifice themselves for their families. We can see this from Leong's account below.

> *Leong: Many people around me pressure me to get married because they are afraid that I might not find a guy when I grow old. But, I don't want to get married because I am reaching the age to get married. I think that the ideal*

marriage for me has to be based on a kind of egalitarian relationships. I hope that my marriage is more modern. My husband and I could work, make money and take care of our family together. But my male colleague criticised me that my viewpoint is too innocent because women are born with some biological characteristics to shoulder more responsibilities in a household and make sacrifices for family. I can't accept that. So, I chose to remain single.

Leong was doing her PhD in the UK and had been co-working with some researchers in China as well. She was very satisfied with her current life. Facing the pressure of being pushed to get married at a certain age, Leong expressed her aspiration on seeking the modern marriage that includes egalitarian relationship and shared family responsibilities, even though her viewpoint was criticised as 'innocent' by her male colleague. This practice reflects Rofel's (2007) notion of the desiring self. Rofel (2007) notes that contemporary China has legitimised the place of individual desires in assorted social practices, which allows individuals to enjoy freedom to express their own desires. Compared with the old generations who tend to make self-sacrifice for family and other people, the younger generation, especially those educated professional women prefer to pursue individual desires and personal wants, such as intimacy, free love and sex (Rofel, 2007). For Leong, her choice to stay single revealed her pursuit and insist on the ideal of autonomous marriage choice and egalitarian relationship detached from the traditional marriage value. Instead of going into marriage as people expected, she chose to look for a partner who would have the similar gender value with her.

In addition, Leong's standpoint regarding traditional gender norms was echoed by many of the other interviewees who believed that seeking egalitarian values was essential in a contemporary relationship, marriage, and family in Chinese society. By comparison, this idea has been less acknowledged, or sometimes criticised by men who are holding traditional gender ideology and patriarchal values. In terms of the gender egalitarian ideology, previous studies have found that single educated women are more interested in seeking egalitarian gender ideology than their male counterparts (Chang, 1999; To, 2013; Zhang, 2006). That is to say, these women are showing aspirations to a more egalitarian relationship, whereas those conservative men express their adherence to the traditional marriage patterns. As Leong mentioned in the extract, her male colleague disagreed with her gender views on marriage

and attributed her singleness to her egalitarian gender attitude. Such criticism actually unveiled a lack of acceptance in masculine culture of values incompatible with tradition. Regardless of their educational achievements, women are still expected to perform the homemaker role, while men take on the role of breadwinner in Chinese families, which still hold firmly to gender role segregation (Qian & Qian, 2014). In this regard, some of the participants' egalitarian attitudes represent a challenge to traditional gender roles and relations in a marriage, and undermine men's dominance in the familial structure.

Just like Leong, some other participants had also chosen to remain single, but for different reasons. These participants chose to remain single because of their observations about other people's marriages. Two examples are as follows:

> *Chong: Many people think that I am single because it is hard for nvboshi to find a boyfriend. Actually, it is not. I don't want marriage because I think marriage is too complicated and sometimes if the marriage is bad, there would be more pressure. Like my best friend, her marriage was not like what she expected before getting married. She often fights with her husband because of the domestic things, childbearing. I think I could use that fighting time to focus on myself and make my life more enjoyable. It is not worthwhile to spend my valuable time on a marriage.*
>
> *Fay: I don't think that it is not easy for nvboshi to find a boyfriend and get married. For myself, I myself chose to be single. It is mainly because my mom is a full-time wife. She sacrificed her work and devoted herself to our family. So, she is very dependent on my father. In particular, financially. In my family, my father is the only person who has the right and power to decide everything. I don't want that life. For now, I would like to focus on myself, improving my professional skills so that I can find a good job in the future. At that time, I wouldn't need to depend on a man to live my life.*

From the accounts above, we can see that observations about other people's marriages contributed to the participants' choosing to be single. Chinese *nvboshi* are described by the mass media as a group of women who have difficulty in finding a partner and therefore have

to live the single life as so-called ‘leftover women’. However, according to Chong and Fay, being single was not the consequence of the stereotypical depiction of *nvboshi* in the media. It is the result of their own choice. From observing their friends’ and parents’ marriages, not only did the research participants regard marriage as a high cost, but also they found marriage may interfere with their plans to develop themselves. This perception reflected the participants’ disinterest in marriage and their increased emphasis on individual pursuits and self-development. As such, they have chosen to remain single, rather than being ‘left out’ of the marriage market.

This is consistent with the findings of Yeung and Hu’s study (2016) on marriage values and behaviours in China, where highly educated women are forgoing marriage and pursuing alternative lifestyles because of ‘the increasingly low tolerance for a bad marriage and the high opportunity cost of marriage’ (p. 473). Meanwhile, Gui (2020) finds that being single is a self-selected choice of those educated professional women who are stigmatised as the ‘leftover women’, as these women expect to find a man who show the egalitarian gender values as them. In this respect, compared with those women who choose to get married at a certain age, the participants in this study tend to position themselves as the centre of their own life, instead of being pressured to enter the marriage.

‘I want a boyfriend. But it is a difficult thing to achieve.’

Unlike the participants who saw their singleness as a choice, a few participants argued that staying single was not their intentions. For these *nvboshi*, although they were trying to find a partner, their dating and relationships did not go well. The participants believed that the stigmatisation of *nvboshi* as the ‘third gender’ and being categorised as *shengnv* by the mass media and public discourse have created a false perception of *nvboshi*. As a result of this, *nvboshi* may encounter more rejections and barriers in the marriage market.

> *Flyang: I have been seeing many guys introduced to me by my mother or her friends. But, it hasn’t gone very well … Those guys can’t accept the fact that I am a PhD student. A guy said ‘It sounded weird that I am dating a nvboshi.’ So, I don’t think that men would want to date a woman who has labels and stigmatisation. It’s very unfair for us.*

According to Flyang's account, the man she met described dating her as 'weird' which might cause him to be judged by other people. On the one hand, as I noted in the introduction, thanks to the consistent intensification of mass media, the idea of the 'third gender' has basically became a synonym for *nvboshi* in China. When people are talking about *nvboshi*, they will come up with the notion of the 'third gender'. On the other hand, being labelled as *shengnv*, *nvboshi* are defined as unwanted by men. Therefore, although the man did not explain why he felt weird, the negative public image of *nvboshi* constructed by mass media may affect people's perceptions of these women. As Li (2020) argues, *nvboshi* may find their social encounters more difficult because Chinese media have deliberately framed these women in a negative way. In the interview, Flyang told me that she was looking forward to being in a relationship, getting married and having children as soon as possible. Unlike the participants who chose to stay single, She was eager to end her single life and placed great value on marriage and family. However, her dating experiences were not smooth. Most of her dates were ended after the first meeting by the men. In this regard, it not only echoed that the negative image and stigmatisation of *nvboshi* made these women's dating experiences more challenging, but also demonstrated these women's limited power and constrained agency of selection in the marriage market. Different from those participants who actively chose to stay single, Flyang's singleness can be perceived as a result of the negative depiction of *nvboshi* in the media and society, which she perceived as unfair.

In addition, other participants believed that patriarchal culture and traditional gender values resulted in their singleness. According to the experiences of these *nvboshi*, their failures to find a man reflected the exclusion of *nvboshi* by Chinese patriarchal society. Although the Chinese state has been promoting gender equality in recent decades, with the increasing gender imbalance and decreasing birth rate in recent years, there appears to be a resurgence of patriarchy and old values in China (Fincher, 2016). For example, on the one hand, women are encouraged to go back home and take up the job of childbearing (Gui, 2020; Song, 2011). In the interviews, the participants reported that they were dumped because the men they were dating wanted to find family-oriented and dependent women. On the other hand, these women claimed that their career prospects and financial power served as a burden on men. As such, the singleness of *nvboshi* is a complex consequence of the unacceptability of both their educational attainment and their financial status. Judged according to Chinese patriarchal values, such personal qualities are not attractive in a marriage for men (Qian,

2012; Tian, 2013). As a result, the participants have to experience singleness because of such a hostile environment. The following extracts illustrate this:

> *Nai: I was dumped by my ex-boyfriend. He thought that my education degree is too high. He said he can't control me if we get married. He expected to find a girl who is less educated. I can't believe that I was dumped by such ridiculous excuse. I think…because of many traditional values, many men can't accept to date a woman who is well educated or has higher educational attainment than them. I feel like nvboshi is excluded by men and the society. Unless you married a male PhD. The culture and the society is not friendly to us.*
>
> *Yang: My ex-boyfriend broke up with me because he said dating with me had pressured him so much because I have a PhD degree and have my own business. He told me that I make more money than him and I have stronger professional prospects than him. He has too much pressure because of it. He felt like he was not needed by me and losing face. So, he broke up with me.*

According to Nai and Yang's experiences, their ex-boyfriends preferred to date girlfriends who were more dependent on men, reflecting that the patriarchal ideologies were pervasive in contemporary Chinese society (Fincher, 2016; Ji, 2015; To, 2013). Higher education background and excellent performance in making money imply my participants' less dependence on a man's finances to achieve material stability and less likelihood to fulfil the gender roles. However, what the patriarchal ideologies are promoting is still the consideration of a woman's ability to perform their gender roles in the domestic sphere (Ji, 2015; Ji et al., 2017; Zuo & Bian, 2001). As such, within these contradictions, these *nvboshi* are encountering singleness.

From the above accounts, we can see that some participants considered their singleness as an individual choice, which is consistent with Gui's (2020) finding, while others believed that it was a result of the influence of Chinese patriarchal values. Consequently, I find that these *nvboshi*'s experiences of singlehood can be categorised into two types: undesirable singleness

and celebrated singleness. In the following sections, I will discuss the experiences of these two forms of singleness in turn.

4.2 The Unwanted Experience of Being Single in China

In today's China, marriage and family are still viewed as the central ideology within Chinese culture. People's behaviours and choices, in this case, those of the participants, are strongly constrained by Chinese patriarchal ideas and values, which are preserved within the intergenerational relationships. Among the interviews, four single participants presented marriage as the most important thing for women. Therefore, being single is perceived as a deficit identity (Reynolds & Taylor, 2005). In this section, I am going to elucidate these participants' perceptions of undesirable singleness, and how they feel the shame of being single within Chinese patriarchal society.

4.2.1 Undesirable singleness

> *I don't like to tell other people that I am a single PhD student because some people may make fun of it. I have been experiencing singleness in a very negative way. Those stereotypes and judgements on nvboshi have deeply influenced my personal relationship. Some men I met think of me as a woman who only knows how to study and is boring. I really want to be in a relationship.*
>
> *Chan*

When we started to talk about dating experiences and relationships, Chan opened with the above statement, which indexed PhD education 'as a source of shame for women, reinforcing the concept that higher education for women is something foreign or perverse, a deficit that must be concealed' (Feldshuh, 2014, p. 8). Similarly to other Chinese women with traditional values, Chan believed that involvement in a relationship and a marriage is an experience that women should include in their lives. However, her journey to find a partner was encountering many barriers.

Chan: I am very traditional and for me getting married is very important. Being single is a big problem that has influenced me for a long time. It makes me feel different from other people. Like my roommate and my best friends, they are all married. So, as the only single woman in my social circle, I feel like I am weird. Besides, being single makes me feel lonely and unlovable. I hate being single.

Chan's perception of singleness started from defining herself as a traditional woman, showing her adherence to the conservative gender norms. Then, living in a social circle filled with married people, she found being single as a problem and perceived herself as the 'weird' woman in her social group. Such perception revealed Chan's subscription to the marriage value, and regarded being single as an 'weird' action that would cause difficulty in socialising for her. In this regard, singleness was seen as a deficit identity by the participant (Reynolds & Taylor, 2005). This supports Budgeon's (2015) argument that staying single is still interpreted as a problem even though the scope for women's autonomy and independence has clearly increased. In addition, being single was the cause of many negative emotions and much self-questioning for Chan. One may argue that through the external influence of the traditional values and internal influence of the negative emotions, Chan was experiencing an unwanted singleness. She had been influenced by the social environment and understood singleness as 'unwanted' and 'undesirable', as did Tingting, who had a similar experience.

Tingting: I feel the urge to find a boyfriend. Most of my female colleagues, who are older than me, in our lab are single. I see how hard they try to make achievements both in study and personal life. Also, how much pressure they are experiencing in every aspect of life when they grow old. Also, our male supervisors often emphasise the importance of marriage. I really don't want to be single.

In Tingting's case, the influence of her colleagues was the main contributor to her perception of singleness as an unwanted experience. Tingting's embrace of marriage and rejection of singleness was the result of observing her single female colleagues. In order to avoid a

similar fate, Tingting strongly rejected being single as a life status, and according to her account, we can see how other people, in this case her male supervisors, viewed singleness as an undesirable identity for women and continued to push the single women like Tingting to get married. As a consequence, my participant felt more anxious and pressured about being single.

The experiences of Chan and Tingting reflected how the social environment has influenced the participants' perceptions of singleness. According to Sharp and Ganong (2011), single women are being reminded that they are on a different life path in their lives. Sharp and Ganong (2011) regard this reminder to single women as the 'pressure to conform to the conventional pathway' (p. 966), which is particularly given to women's single status. They contend that there are 'encountering triggers' (Sharp & Ganong, 2011, p. 970) in single women's lives that remind them of their deviant life paths, including 'couple-oriented holidays' (p. 970-971), 'family-oriented holidays' (p. 971), and celebrating occasions such as wedding ceremonies and childbirths of friends. These triggers in single women's lives would keep reminding of relationship and marriage and result in more pressure on them. As shown in Chan's account, people in her social group were all married, which made her feel that she was 'different' from her friends through the constant remind of her single status. In this regard, her social group served as a trigger for Chan. In Tingting's case, the daily observation from her single female colleagues' lives can also be seen as a trigger in her life to pressure her to end the singleness. Hence, Chan and Tingting would suffer more from being single.

In addition to Chan and Tingting whose perceptions were influenced by their environment, Nannan perceived singleness as undesirable because of her mother's influence. Regarding marriage as an essential part of womanhood, being single represented an incomplete life for a woman. Nannan's mother frequently emphasised the importance and the value of getting married in front of her, which contributed to Nannan's desperation to change her single identity. Under such influence, Nannan had been intensively pressured to get married by such ideology. Besides, due to the active endorsement of certain gender ideologies by the media, there is an assumption that it is hard for *nvboshi* to find a boyfriend and marry off. As a result, Nannan thought of being single as a stigmatised identity which would prevent her from becoming a complete woman.

Nannan: I was desperate to get married the first day I started my PhD. On the one hand, my parents, especially my mother, wanted me to get married as soon as possible, and they pressured me so much. My mom thinks that it is incomplete if a woman can't get married at a certain age. On the other hand, I myself am very terrified of the fact that nvboshi are difficult to marry off. I have met a few men during PhD study, but all didn't work out. I am really worried that I can't marry off. I don't want to be an incomplete woman.

From the above analysis, it is clear that the marriage value and the traditional gender ideology are still pervasive and dominant in these participants' lives. As single *nvboshi*, their undesired singleness reflects the participants' worries that they may not be acceptable when judged by the marriage value in China. As such, these *nvboshi* position singleness as a deviant identity that would jeopardise their fitting into the patriarchal culture and environment.

4.2.2 Shaming narratives of being single nvboshi in Chinese society

When I was talking about singleness with these *nvboshi*, I asked them 'How do you feel about being single?' They would often respond that it made them feel ashamed. Scheff (2003) argues that shame is a central emotion tying together individual and social aspects of human affects as a means of regulation and distance. Over the course of the interviews, three main kinds of shame emerged: *diulian* (丢脸), *kelian* (可怜), *youwenti* (有问题).

diulian 丢脸

Diulian was mentioned many times in the interviews and can be literally translated as a 'loss of face'. *Lian*, from a Chinese perspective, refers to 'one's dignity, self-respect, feeling of social concern and ability to fill social obligations in front of other people' (Bedford, 2004, p. 36). The process of *diulian*, or losing face, is determined and judged by other people on the basis of what you have done. For the participants, being a single woman was seen as a thing that caused a loss of face, as we can see from Chan's experience.

Chan: Every time I am asked about my relationship status, I just feel ashamed of being single. You know… being single, at my age, is not something to be proud of, especially when people know that I am a nvboshi. It makes me feel much sadder by other people's judgement. You know, people may think I am old. I am a highly educated woman. I am single… It makes me feel like I am a problematic woman and rejected for marriage and by society. If I can't get married, I will think of myself as a failure. I will ruin the face and reputation of my parents.

During our interview, Chan cried when she talked about how being single made her lose face. She shared her unsuccessful experiences of dating and expressed concerns that it might be more difficult for her to marry with increasing age. Chan was facing a conflict between pursuing PhD education or get married at her age, and she told me that she had considered giving up on her studies before finding a job, in order to get married. This was because she was worried that her educational status would add extra difficulties in finding a boyfriend. According to her account, she evaluated herself and behaviours by valuing other people's opinions and judgements. As such, she had been experiencing *diulian* and a greater sense of shame of being single and that might further make her parents lose face as well. This view is coherent with Bedford's findings. Bedford (2004) argues that *diulian* will have a stronger effect on a person who increasingly values the opinions of other people. In this case, Chan's narratives revealed how much she cared about other people's judgement, and how self-reflection on being single had shaped her perception of self by regarding herself as a failure.

An additional factor, touched upon by most participants in the interviews, was parental concern. Their parents placed a great deal of importance on marriage and would very much like to see their daughters getting married. Only a few participants mentioned that parents had accepted their choices to be single forever. In other words, marriage still occupies the central position in individual life from the perspective of most parents, which is consistent with the current gender ideology in Chinese society. Likewise, Chan persisted with the traditional idea that marriage is the centre of life when it comes to assessing a woman's value and consequently perceived her singleness as a failure, as the opposite of what she and her family believed in. In this regard, Chan's feelings reflected her fear of withdrawing from traditions, of not being accepted by the collective institutions and becoming the 'abnormal' one who

would not fit into the public's gendered perception of women, which was why she felt that singleness would result in her and her family experiencing *diulian*.

kelian 可怜

Kelian was a feeling similar to *diulian* and was used by a few participants to describe their feelings about being single. It can be literally translated as pity and is used as a noun, an adjective or a verb in Chinese. Tingting opened with the statement, '*being single is making me feel kelian. It looks like I am not wanted by anyone.*' Flyang said: '*my parents and matchmaker keep introducing men to me. I feel that they are kelian (pitying) me. It makes me feel that I am the product that can't sell so people are trying so hard to introduce different customers to see me.*' *Diulian* was felt by both participants and their parents, while *kelian* was self-pity and something participants felt for themselves.

> *Tingting: I feel pretty kelian when I was attending my friends' wedding ceremonies without taking a boyfriend with me. Being single is an experience of…[long pause], making me think less of myself. Especially as I am always the one in my social group, who had good academic performance at school, has the highest education and a promising career. But, when it comes to the topic of marriage, I am the worst one. Sometimes, I can feel that my girlfriends are avoiding talking about their husbands in front of me because they may think that I may feel embarrassed. The more they do this, the more pity I feel about myself.*

When I interviewed Tingting, she had just broken up with her boyfriend. She told me that her parents were fine with her singleness and encouraged her to focus on her PhD studies. However, Tingting could not avoid feeling self-pity as most of her friends were married or in a relationship, which placed a certain amount of pressure on her. I noticed that Tingting used a few strong words to describe her feeling, such as 'worst'. She regarded herself as the 'worst one' because she had failed to find a boyfriend, even though she is the only PhD student among her friends and has better career prospect than her friends who depend on their husbands and parents to support them.

In the interview, Tingting further expressed the contradiction she felt between pursuing self-development and wanting to get married. She said: '*I know it is important for modern women to achieve self-development through education and career. That is the reason I chose to do a PhD. However, I am still deeply manipulated by traditional ideas regarding marriage and family.*' Tingting's situation, reported by some other participants later, indeed unveiled the conflict between tradition and modernity in today's China. On the one hand, to a large extent, Tingting's values and behaviours were constrained by the traditional gender norms and the patriarchal ideologies; on the other hand, she was herself situated in a cultural environment where women are entitled to get higher education and have more freedom to make individual choices. However, in Tingting's case, educational attainment had little impact on her attitude towards marriage. Through the evaluation of herself on the basis of the performance on relationship and marriage, Tingting showed a strong feeling of pity for herself, as well as knowing that she might be pitied by others because she failed to find a boyfriend.

youwenti 有问题

Youwenti, which means problematic, was the third narrative that the participants used in the interviews. Participants used this term to describe how other people may think of them. The following extracts are some examples.

> *Nannan: I am 28 years old. Being single, at my age, is kind of an embarrassment. People may think that I am having some problems. I was often asked by some people, like 'how come you are still single at 28?''Why don't you find a boyfriend?' These questions make me feel that staying single is a huge fault. It's like…I have some problems so I can't find a boyfriend. For example, one of my parents' friends who used to introduce men to me told me that 'You are too independent and strong. Men don't like this.' Sometimes I feel that maybe I do have some problems.*
>
> *Yang: my auntie used to ask me 'what is wrong with you?' They think that the reason I remain single is because I have something wrong. For example, my personality. I am high maintenance. I am too strong in a relationship, and it*

makes my boyfriend feel too much pressure. All these judgements just exist around me, and make me often question myself.

Personal relationships should be kept to oneself and should be a personal responsibility. However, due to the One-Child Policy in China, young people's marital trajectory is the kind of a family issue that attracts the attention of much older generations (To, 2013). We can see from the extracts above, because of the continued judgements and criticising opinions on the participants' singleness from outside, Nannan and Yang had some self-doubts and confusions about being single. As their accounts showed, the participants' singleness was strongly judged by others, especially the older generations. At the same time, it is obvious that the ideology of marriage had still remained as a central principle to evaluate women, while staying single had been regarded as an abnormal behaviour by the outside. For my participants, because of their singleness, these women were adversely judged as problematic. As a result, Nannan and Yang felt a sense of shame about being single, articulating themselves as self-problematic agents based on others' opinions of them.

It is argued by Kaufman (2008) that the revival of traditional 'husband-baby-home' model in the early 21st century, which was caused by world uncertainty, has produced pity for single women. (p. 22). In this light, the issues my participants encountered in daily life can be understood as practices compelling these *nvboshi* to get rid of their single status, and enter the marriage pool. Older generations accused them of displaying unconventional and unacceptable personality traits that would affect the results of their dating and such accusations can be explained by the notion of society's accusing finger (Kaufman, 2008, p. 25). For example, Nai was accused of being high maintenance and having too strong a personality for her failed relationship to succeed. All these accusing fingers can be understood as expressions of the patriarchal power and the traditional gender norms within Chinese society. By succumbing to them, the participants have formed a sense of being problematically single in daily life.

4.3 The Unexpected Joy of Being Single in China

Unlike the participants talked about above, more and more educated single women are choosing to embrace singleness as it provides them with more opportunities, personal

freedom and time to live their own life (Osteria, 2015). In contrast to the previous section, I am now going to demonstrate how these participants were enjoying the daily practice of singleness. From this section, we should be able to see how the participants were searching to 'live a life of one's own' (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001, p. 56; Yan, 2010a). The participants, including married women, valueed their agency to pursue freedom, autonomy and independence to adopt a lifestyle they enjoyed, rather than confining themselves to the traditional marriage norms that 'perpetuate patriarchal customs of males as the dominant figure in marriage and women as second class helpers' (Tweed, 2008, p. 66). The following accounts are some examples of how this philosophy was put into practice:

> *Alice: As a nvboshi, I believe that fulfilling my personal values socially and professionally is essential in my life. Being a single nvboshi gives me more courage and independence to be myself, instead of a wife and a mother, or a daughter.*
>
> *Xun: I believe that being a single woman has been the most incredible time in my life without worrying about other people's thoughts and feelings. I could put my entire focus on my life, and could take advantage of my single time to develop myself to be a better version. More confident, more independent and more self-empowered.*

These extracts demonstrate the aspirations of the participants to construct a new form of womanhood as singles. This is evident in their aspirations to increase the acceptability and self-satisfaction of singlehood. I call it celebrated singleness.

4.3.1 Celebrated singleness

In today's China, it is still believed that marriage is nearly universal (Yeung & Hu, 2016) and Coontz (2006) suggests that coupling and marriage are favoured as they are perceived as the source of happiness, life satisfaction and a sense of fulfilment. And in China, marriage is also seen as the most effective way for women to maintain a stable life. However, this viewpoint is not shared by the participants.

Chong: We used to believe that marriage is the only way that women get happiness and sustainable support. But, I would not say so. To some extent, I think that marriage and family is a restriction for self-development. It is like a thing that you must do, no matter if you want it or not. Otherwise, you will be judged. However, for me, I think that I should explore more options in my life. Especially being single is a good thing for me. I use my time to focus on my studies and work. I participate in many research projects which are valuable and contribute to my future work. I can totally get fulfilment on my own… All these things can give more meanings to my life. Marriage is not a must for me.

'The ideology of marriage and family has historically channelled the female life course' (Budgeon, 2016, p. 404). People, especially women, who fail to achieve it are often criticised by the society and culture but, as Dales (2013) argues, educated professional women can gain satisfaction from their careers, while marriage is often perceived to be a cost to women's independence and autonomy, as well as a domestic burden that typically falls to women. As highly educated women with career prospects, many participants in this study shared the same values as Chong. They can gain benefits from singlehood, such as investing in themselves to achieve self-development and realise individual values. Under this condition, these participants did not find marriage to be a necessity in their lives.

According to Yan's (2010a, 2012) study of Chinese individualisation, the individualisation process has liberated individual Chinese people from the constraints of previous all-encompassing social categories, such as family, kinship and gender. As a result of this, individuals are granted more opportunities to explore the newly emerging lifestyles, and therefore they have been encouraged, or even forced to become more self-reliant and take more personal responsibility for their life choices and actions. In the narratives of Chong, she had done many valuable things in the pursuit of self-fulfilment through work and study. Marriage was no longer the centre of her life. Conversely, Chong perceived marriage as a restriction on her exploration of self-development. Her critique of using the marriage ideology to evaluate women's value and her choosing of singlehood reflected her desire to create new lifestyle patterns. In this regard, the marginalising process of marriage reflected the participant's pursuit of individual aspirations and her appreciation of singlehood.

In parallel with the marginalisation of marriage, there was an emphasis on freedom to make decisions independently in the narratives of my participants. Compared with those single *nvboshi* who regarded being single as a problem, some participants perceived singlehood as freedom to choose the terms of their life. With the longing for increased personal freedom and an autonomous life, singlehood has become more valuable for these *nvboshi*.

> *Alice: Singleness means you have a lot of approaches to live your life. I feel more free and less unhappy when I am single than being in a relationship. For example, I used to be interested in one-night stands, then I did it. Marriage and family is not everything. I think my single life is very meaningful and rich. I study, I work, I travel around and I make friends. It is way better than being involved in a relationship and marriage.*

Alice very much valued her freedom to make a choice, and regarded this as one of the advantages offered by singleness. Compared with being in a relationship, Alice found that not being in a relationship offered her more opportunities to explore new options regarding her life. By interviewing 26 highly-educated well-paid single women in China, Zhang (2020) argues that singleness 'allows women to be free to make their own decisions and become self-governing individuals' (p. 42). In a sense, single women are facilitating their own independence and gaining control over their lives. Reflecting on her experience, Alice found her single life more productive and meaningful than a coupled relationship, as it allowed her to spend more time working on herself and socialising. She critiqued the idea that marriage and family should be the central focus of womanhood and emphasised the value of pursuing personal desires. Other participants also felt that being single means they can construct an alternative value system, giving them more options for how they lead their lives. The following accounts are examples of this view.

> *Xun: I was raised in a single parent family. I know it is extremely hard to do your career and family at the same time. Even though you have a husband, it is still hard to complete my individual goals in career and study, as well as my domestic responsibilities. So, I myself chose my PhD study and personal career. Some people say I am selfish. But in my view, womanhood does not*

need to be all about childbearing, upbringing, or homemaking. As a modern woman with higher education, I think that I can choose what I really want, instead of what society expects me to do. So, I quite like being single.

Similar to Alice's view, Xun also disagreed with the traditional perception of womanhood. Based on her own experiences growing up, she did not perceive herself as being able to fulfil the obligations of family and marriage while pursuing a career and individual goals simultaneously. Therefore, reflecting on her inner needs and desires, instead of conforming to the gendered expectations of women, Xun chose individual pursuits over marriage and family. Her choice revealed the participant's selection of individualism over traditional responsibilities and signalled the emergence of an ideology of celebrated singlehood among these *nvboshi*. This echoes Gaetano's (2014) study on highly educated professional women's experiences of being single in China. Through in-depth interviews with 14 women, Gaetano (2014) finds that instead of being stereotypically stuck by the 'leftover women' label, these highly educated professional women critiqued the marriage value and constructed meaningful lives by 'attaining educational and career goals' (p. 146).

As shown in the accounts above, these participants' practices of embracing singleness have demonstrated the ideal of a desiring self (Rofel, 2007) towards the relationship and marriage. Instead of following the cultural and social expectation on female life pathway, these women's aspirations on individual desires and self-development reflected the rising of the desiring self (Rofel, 2007) in the construction of new womanhood. Meanwhile, the pursuit of singleness not only represented these *nvboshi*'s disembedment from the traditional marriage value and normative female life course, but also showed the need to navigate their single lives largely on their own. As such, these single *nvboshi* have constructed different lifestyles to live their lives.

4.3.2 The individualised lifestyle as a single nvboshi

Previous studies have noted that singlehood is regarded as viable and welcomed experience by single educated women in China (Gaetano, 2014; Gui, 2020; Zhang, 2020), 'with physical, psychological, economic and domestic freedom' (Zhang, 2020, p. 49). The state of being single not only grants these women more independence and autonomy (Gaetano, 2014;

Turner, 2006; Zhang, 2020), but also allows them to challenge the traditional conception of womanhood. For the single research participants, instead of living the normative life at a certain age, being single grants them the scope to navigate an ideal single lifestyle. There are two kinds of lifestyles that have emerged in the participants' experiences of singlehood: the self-reliant single lifestyle and living alone.

The self-reliant single lifestyle

In traditional Chinese culture, marriage is the foundation of a family, and the family is the place where stability is achieved. Women have often sought a stable life and material security through marriage and then lived their lives relying on their husbands. However, the participants in this study have developed a self-reliant single lifestyle through self-development by achieving financial independence and stability. By doing this, not only have they gained more freedom and autonomy in terms of their lifestyle, but they have also avoided the domestic responsibilities and sacrifices that women have traditionally made for their family. A 35-year-old single *nvboshi*, Xiaofang, has been living a self-reliant life since she earned her PhD degree.

> *Xiaofang: People, especially the older generations, think that a single woman cannot be stable. I don't think so. I think being single can also make my life stable. I have a job in the uni and I am also doing a part-time job in my spare time. I make decent money that lets me live the wonderful life I want. I can buy anything I want. I get a lot of satisfaction from my work. Plus, I don't need to worry about those domestic staff and family responsibilities. I enjoy the feeling of relying on myself and I have more autonomy.*

Contrary to the traditional Chinese views on marriage, as a single woman, Xiaofang illustrated a very positive self-reliant lifestyle. Instead of seeking reliance and security from marriage, she had turned herself into the source of stability. From her account, we can see that her self-reliant lifestyle was primarily based on her satisfying career. Xiaofang was working as a lecturer in her department and at the same time took advantage of her free time to work as a designer in her friend's company. In other words, not only did she have the two incomes she needed to live a financially secure life on her own, she also derived a great deal

of satisfaction from these jobs. In a study of single women's lifestyles in Asia, Osteria (2016) argues that single women, especially those educated women with established careers, have a far greater range of choices about their lifestyles because of their paid jobs and stable income. That is to say, without depending on a marriage and fulfilling the gender roles, these educated professional women have agency to initiate alternative life choices. As a *nvboshi* who possessed professional skills and a fancy educational background, Xiaofang's career and personal abilities enabled her to live a stable, satisfying life without familial obligations and sacrifice. As a result, she has been able to achieve more individual autonomy and self-determination in terms of her life planning.

According to the traditional Chinese values, marriage is the most effective way for a woman to acquire financial security. This is because men are viewed as breadwinners who should take major responsibilities of making money for a family, as one of the participants, Xiaoxiao, mentioned in her interview. Xiaoxiao's parents impressed on her the importance of finding a husband from a good family with enough accumulated wealth that she would have an easy life. Marriage was seen as a *baozhang* (保障), which translated as 'guarantee', by the participants' parents. However, some participants favoured the opposite strategy of seeking a financial guarantee, Luao being one example. Unlike Xiaofang, Luao had not only achieved financial independence but now also looked after her parents and supported them financially. Luao started her business when doing her PhD. Now, she has two companies and is also working as a post-doc in a top university in Beijing. Her comments are as follows:

> *Luao: I am always a self-reliant person. I have been working so hard to run two public accounts on WeChat and keep my business going. I have been single for almost six years and I am 31 years old now. Many people told me to find a man and get married. But, I am not in a hurry to get married because I am rich[laugh]. I mean…maybe other women need to get married to baozhang(guarantee) their lives. I don't. Living a life on my own lets me not worry that men would expect me to pay back anything because I am not living on a man. I feel so proud of myself and so fulfilled because I not only achieve economic freedom, but also give money to my parents every month.*

Living as a self-reliant person, Luao's career achievement functioned as 'an alternative source of socially sanctioned fulfilment' (Osteria, 2016, p. 106). This was reflected in her personal economic freedom and financial support of her parents. Although she had been single for a few years, Luao did not see herself as a 'leftover woman'. On the contrary, she was using her PhD studies and personal strengths to establish a very promising business and achieve financial security on her own. Many participants like Luao believed that such financial self-sufficiency was more reliable than depending on a marriage, as women needed to devote themselves and make a sacrifice in a marriage without being paid. In her account, as a self-reliant woman who had achieved financial independence, Luao clearly expressed that she did not expect any benefits from a marriage. The idea of the patriarchal dividend can be used here to interpret her situation. This concept, first proposed by Connell (1997), can be used to explain the extent to which men can gain benefits from the patriarchal system. Connell (1997) further argues that 'other groups of men play part of the price, alongside women, for the maintenance of an unequal gender order' (Connell, 1997, p. 64). This means that, in some conditions, women are allowed to share the patriarchal dividend with men in order to maintain men's patriarchal power. In other words, if women tend to share the benefits from the patriarchal system by getting married, then they need to maintain the unequal relations in a family. However, for Luao, on the one hand, her outstanding career facilitated her independence and resolved 'the economic uncertainty' (Dales, 2013, p. 124). As such, she did not need to gain security and a financial 'guarantee' in the traditional way. On the other hand, practising a self-reliant lifestyle meant that Luao had no need to change her current single life pattern, as she can live a life she enjoyed without gaining benefits from the patriarchal dividend.

Xiaofang and Luao had managed to make considerable progress in their careers, but there were other participants who had not yet achieved financial independence. Nevertheless, they were also in pursuit of a self-reliant, single lifestyle, and Alice was an example. As a student, Alice's studies were paid for by her parents, which resulted in the over-participation of her parents in her life. They would meddle in her individual decisions. In order to maintain individual autonomy and self-determination, Alice worked as hard as she can to maintain a self-reliant life.

Alice: Although I am far away from achieving financial independence, I try my best to live my life on my own. I am doing my PhD study while doing part-time jobs to make some money. My parents pay for my study fee and I cover my living expenses myself. By doing this, I can gain some rights of making decisions myself. And I want them to know that I can live the life I want on my own without counting on them, or getting married as they expect. I believe in myself and I can take responsibility for my own life.

In the interviews, I found that parental participation in these *nvboshi*'s lives was not uncommon, particularly when the issues were to do with relationships and marriage. By putting her faith in self-efficacy, Alice expressed the desire to take control of her life. As such, although she was counting on her parents, she was trying to release herself from financial dependence on them. By doing this, she could have some agency to gain self-determination from her parents. This view can also be found in other participants' accounts. They felt that believing in themselves would help them on the way to constructing a self-reliant life as a single woman. From the above accounts, one may argue that a self-reliant life is a highly individualised way for single women to deal with the pressure to get married and remove themselves from traditional gender expectations. Also, living a self-reliant single life allows the participants to make their own decisions and create an alternative model of womanhood.

However, it should be noted that living a self-reliant life is not easy for these single *nvboshi*. As shown in the accounts of Xiaofang, Luao and Alice, the major thing that they needed to deal with was the financial stability. Therefore, we can see that how hard these women worked for making more money on their own and reducing the dependence on family and marriage. Yan's (2014) notion of the striving individual (p. 184) can be used here to understand the participants' experiences. According to Yan (2014), the striving individual emerges in the process of individualisation in China, alongside with the increased aspiration on individual desires, in particular the desire to make more money, and the uncertainties and risks brought by the market-oriented economy. The aim of the striving individual is to 'better her life in accordance with an individual plan, seeking to live a life of one's own' (Yan, 2014, p. 189). As such, for these *nvboshi* who did not want marriage, in order to continue their single life and maintain the autonomy, they needed to strive for increasing financial power

and getting more agency to live their self-reliant lives. In this sense, these single *nvboshi* can be perceived as the striving individual, as described by Yan (2014).

Living alone

Living alone was another practice that the single research participants adopted in their singlehood. Osteria (2015) notes that living alone has already become a fashionable lifestyle in some Asian countries for single people, which is viewed as 'a way to invest time in their personal and professional growth while strengthening their self-sufficiency' (p. 105). This argument is reflected in the participants' accounts. Although most single participants in this study were still living with their parents, there were four participants chose to live alone.

> *Ruiny: I rent a flat near my university. When the semester finished, I didn't go back to my hometown. I would prefer to live in my flat with myself. I enjoy living alone. If I go back home, I have to live with my parents. They will pressure me to find a boyfriend and always complain about me being single. It upset me. Living alone makes me have more time to focus on myself. I like my lifestyle.*

Although Ruiny had a student dorm in the university, she chose to live in her flat during and after semester. According to her, living alone enabled her to invest time in her personal life to do the things she really enjoyed and valued, and to build up a network of friends and business partners.

> *Ruiny: I am running a small business with my partners. It's going well. People think that having a relationship is important for a young woman. I don't think so. We can pursue our values. Why can't we be single? I can do many things with my friends and we keep each other company. We care about each other. Because, I don't want to be restricted by marriage or the so-called family obligations either. So, I choose to live alone.*

People may seek emotional care from a marriage. But in Ruiny's case, having a network of friends and business partners seemed to serve as an emotional surrogate, and such networks were frequently mentioned by other participants in the interviews. Instead of seeking companionship from a man, Ruiny had chosen to rely on her friends for company and emotional support. This is consistent with Roseneil and Budgeon's (2004) work that most of the emotional care and support their participants received is provided by friendship. Moreover, living independently as an autonomous choice indicated that Ruiny was less likely to follow the traditional life trajectory of women, showing her emphasis on the importance of controlling her own life.

In addition to Ruiny who sought companionship from friends, Qi chose to partner herself while living alone. In the study of singles in society and in science, it is argued that 'marriage is culturally constructed as an achievement that can be attained by just about anyone, and which should be attained by a certain point in adulthood' (DePaulo & Morris, 2005a, p. 61). However, as mentioned above, marriage or couple relationships were not seen as necessary to the participants' well-being. Qi even promoted 'self-partnering' as a way to provide for emotional needs without having to rely on others.

> *Qi: I got much hurt from my last relationship. Since then, I started to stop seeking emotional care from a man. I think I can be a partner to myself. It's like… I used to please my ex-boyfriend to expect care and attention from him. Now, I please myself. I put more time and attention on what I need and how to make myself happier. For example, I like writing diary. It's like talking to myself. I am now the one who keeps accompany of myself. It's like a kind of self-accompany. I enjoy this single life more and more.*

Qi's account added more features to the lifestyle of living alone. While Ruiny found companionship through building strong friendship networks and having an active social life, Qi chose to seek accompany from herself, rather than involving in a relationship. Reflecting on her last, miserable relationship, Qi now was focusing on her inner needs and feelings through different methods of self-accompany. Traditionally, the aim of marriage is to get support materially and to receive care and emotional accompaniment. However, in Qi's

account, she perceived herself as a ‘friend’ to provide companionship, and I would regard this practice as an enjoyment of self-accompany when living alone.

In Zhang’s (2020) work on the experience of Chinese single educated women, it argues that living alone would cause loneliness to these single women because of the lack of accompany of parents. However, for the participants in this study, some of them chose to live alone because of the pressure from their parents to push them to get married. In this regard, living alone allowed them more time to focus on their own desires and wants, and released them from the pressure of getting married. The research participants who were living alone I interviewed did not report loneliness like Zhang’s (2020) participants. This is mostly because these single women managed to build connections with their friends and enjoy self-accompany. I would like to clarify the differences between these two lifestyles. For those *nvboshi* who chose the self-reliant lifestyle, they did not need to necessarily live alone by themselves. Some women were still living with their parents, such as Xiaofang and Alice. The self-reliant lifestyle focused more on the economic aspect and participants’ abilities to take responsibility for their own lives. For example, although Xiaofang was living with her parents, she defined that she was living a self-reliant life. It is mostly because she had two jobs and made ‘decent money’ that can support a life she enjoyed, which means that she did not need any financial support from the older generation or a marriage to secure her life. For those participants who chose to live alone, some of them, especially those who were currently studying, still counted on family support, in particular for the financial aspect. Meanwhile, in terms of companionship, living alone places more emphasis on the networks of friends and personal contacts.

These two very different single lifestyles that the participants have constructed for themselves reveal two facts, both of which are associated with individualism: one is that these single *nvboshi* are attempting to release themselves from the structural constraints of marriage and family by regarding singlehood as a choice, a choice that allows them to pursue a new kind of womanhood; the other is that their selection of independence and autonomy reflects the agency they have to put themselves at the centre of their own lives, in order to live in ways that will satisfy their needs for self-development and increasingly individualised values. Through the construction of these two single lifestyles, the ideology of singlehood has been intensified by the participants.

In the study of professional educated women's marriage choices, To (2013) argues that the persistence of the patriarchal social structure has significantly impacted on these women's marital endeavours and resulted in the profound 'leftover women' issue in Chinese society. In terms of getting married or being single, women are still regulated and controlled by external gendered and cultural constraints, as well as their parents. Marriage is still regarded as a 'must' for Chinese women (To, 2013). Therefore, it is understandable that my participants who view being single as a undesirable state would expect to end their single life as they find the single status does not fit into the traditional perception of women and the patriarchal social structure. Meanwhile, it seems that these women have limited agency to change such situation. However, majority of my participants who chose to remain single have demonstrated certain amount of agency which 'create spaces or opportunities for acts that allow self-expression, self-promotion or other expansion of personal capacity' (Dales, 2014, p. 239). Arguably, compared with living a normative life course and playing the traditional domestic roles, the driving force that behind these *nvboshi* is to pursue their individualised lifestyles and realise their non-traditional feminine ideal through competing with the patriarchal social structure and marriage value.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has addressed three findings. Firstly, although Chinese *nvboshi* have been constructed as a group of 'unselected', 'unwelcomed' and 'marginalised' women in the marriage market, most of the participants in my study claimed to have chosen singleness and identify various advantages to being single. This is not consistent with the public perception of single *nvboshi*. These *nvboshi*'s personal choice of singleness is similar, with those educated professional women who are stigmatised as the 'leftover women' proactively choosing to stay single (Gaetano, 2014; Gui, 2020). For these *nvboshi*, they do have some agency to make their own choices in terms of the patriarchal pressure and the discriminatory judgements on *nvboshi*. Meanwhile, previous studies have already examined the benefits of not being in a relationship, arguing that single women are allowed to be free to make their own decisions and become self-governing and independent individuals (Gui, 2020; Zhang, 2020). However, according to this chapter, even if the possibility of gaining independence and autonomy is increasing because of their higher education and promising careers, a small portion of *nvboshi* are still negatively influenced by their single identity. It is not only

because singleness continues to serve as a deficit identity for these women, but also because the participants are significantly influenced by triggers in their social environment which keep reminding them of their single identity and pressure them to follow the traditional life paths (Sharp & Ganong, 2011). As a result, being single is still perceived as stigmatised and marginalised by these *nvboshi*, and this perception further contributes to their alienation from the mainstream gender values in Chinese society.

Secondly, although marriage has always been a consideration when evaluating women's gender roles in China (Gui, 2020), many of the participants in this study refuse to be negatively defined by their marital status. These single *nvboshi* are trying to construct a new form of womanhood by identifying singlehood as an alternative course to marriage, even though such new values do not fit with the commonly accepted gender norms and the patriarchal culture of contemporary Chinese society. This contradiction manifests itself in the pervasive stereotypical opinions and discriminatory treatments of *nvboshi* in China. I would argue that the participants are actively disembodying themselves from marriage and, as a result, they are being pushed to be increasingly self-reliant by making more individualised choices and developing agency in terms of their life course. They manage to have more satisfying lives and fulfilling experiences without marriage by adopting an individualised single lifestyle. In this regard, I agree with Gaetano's (2014) argument that through challenging and transforming gender ideal and the linear life course, highly educated single women actively construct their lives through alternative perceptions of female personhood, which is called emergent womanhood by Gaetano (2014). Compared with those participants who are intensively influenced by the patriarchal culture and the traditional gender ideologies, these *nvboshi* tend to place more emphasis on individual needs and desires, as well as self-development. These *nvboshi*'s choices of being single unveils an ideology of singlehood in contemporary Chinese society, which is their selection of individual independence and autonomy over women's gendered responsibilities. As a result, they have achieved the goal of placing themselves at the centre of their own life planning.

Thirdly, most participants' proactive pursuit of singleness unveils the desiring self (Rofel, 2007) in their lives, and their practices of constructing an individualised lifestyle on their own elucidates the idea of the striving individual (Yan, 2014). Through the hard working, these *nvboshi* could be able to make their lives enjoyable without counting on marriage. Meanwhile, the extent to which the participants have achieved economic stability also

influences the amount of agency they possess to make individualised choices. In this process, their emphasis on career has become an important factor in their quest for self-determination. I agree with Dales's argument (2013) that it is much harder for educated single women to 'sacrifice work in favour of unpaid domestic labor' (p. 124). Many *nvboshi* discussed in this chapter have already approved this view. However, it is not easy for these educated women to advance their careers. More difficulties and barriers stand in the way of their career development. And I argue that in order to maintain independence and pursue their individual desires, these *nvboshi* have to develop their careers as much as they can, to deal with the pervasive patriarchy and inequalities in China.

Chapter Five
I came, I saw, I didn't quit: Barriers in the Pursuit of Career and Strategies to Breakthrough

When you finish PhD study and enter the workplace, you then embark on a journey with ubiquitous constraints imposed by power holders.

Ang

In the conclusion to the previous chapter, I argued that working hard and making more money is my single participants' major method to retain a single life, so that they do not need to rely on their parents or marriage. In order to explore this theme further, this chapter turns the focus onto the career experiences of Chinese *nvboshi*. Before I conducted my interviews, I thought that working in universities could be classed as a dream job for women because of the flexible hours, holidays and other welfare benefits. According to the statistical report from the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2019), female educational personnel [9](女教职工) account for 49.46% of those employed in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). At the same time, 50.32% of full-time teachers[10] (女专任教师) in HEIs are female, over half of the total number employed. Before interviewing my participants, most things I had heard about working in HEIs were quite positive. When I was doing my postgraduate study in China, the lives of those female teachers (including lecturers, associate professors and professors) I knew seemed quite appealing to me. I viewed some of them as role models because what I had observed of their daily working life and their passion for research seemed like the ideal working life for me. I could see that even the few single female teachers I knew enjoyed their single lives and focused on themselves without being concerned about the traditional views on women. So, when I started to interview, I was

[9] Female educational personnel 女教职工 refer to those women whose job is mainly about administration in HEIs. The recruitment standards for these admin positions are lower than those standards for recruiting female teacher. In particular, they don't need a PhD degree. Besides, female educational personnel are not involved with any teaching, researching or publishing jobs in HEIs.

[10] Female full-time teacher 女专任教师 in this report refer to those teachers who are doing teaching, researching and publishing work in HEIs. Especially, in top universities or outstanding research institutions, female full-time teachers are required to have a PhD degree as an essential qualification.

expecting to hear stories that would further encourage me to pursue my dream of working as a female academic in the future and becoming a good teacher.

However, during the interviews I found that my participants' career development was not as good as I imagined in the first place. They had showed me a different side of working life, which included gender discrimination and unequal treatment when compared with their male colleagues. As such, the central question that I am going to address in this chapter is how these *nvboshi* pursue career development through dealing with the gendered constraints of the patriarchal culture in Chinese academia. Among all 17 participants who are currently working, only one of them is doing an administrative job in the university. The others reported that they were involved with teaching, researching, publishing, and admin jobs simultaneously in the universities. As a result of the interplay of these jobs, these women were encountering more difficulties in their daily working lives. To answer my central question, what is the life of *nvboshi*, I divide the chapter into two sections. The focus of the first section is on the gender inequalities my participants encounter at work. By examining various discriminatory practices, I firstly illustrate two major institutional discriminations against my participants at work: visible gendered scrutiny and unavoidable exclusion at work. Then, I examine the roles that *nvboshi* were playing in the workplace. I argue that my participants are having their roles in the institution misrecognised and are seen more as (potential) mothers or academic housekeepers than as fully-fledged professionals. In the second section, I discuss the negotiations and strategies that my participants navigate to advance their careers. Examining their strategies, I argue that although these *nvboshi* are facing barriers and having constrained agency at work, they are building the capacity to deal with problems and take responsibility for their own lives through career development and improving their earning power.

5.1 Surviving in a Patriarchal Academic Context

As noted above, this section is going to be focusing on the inequalities and discriminations my participants encountered in their working life. I will conduct the analysis in two directions. The first analyses the institutional discriminations against *nvboshi*, and the second involves discussing how they were perceived by other people at work. By analysing their

discriminatory experiences, we can have a closer look at the tensions that exist between *nvboshi* and the patriarchal culture within Chinese universities.

5.1.1 Two kinds of institutional discrimination against nvboshi

Visible gendered scrutiny

Many participants, including those who were studying at the moment, reported that the culture of patriarchy was everywhere within the academic structure. This is not only due to the underrepresentation of female academics in higher institutions, but also because of the patriarchal nature of higher education in China (Zhao, 2020). According to my participants, gendered scrutiny performed in a patriarchal manner was not uncommon in the working area. It manifested itself in various ways. For example, Ang used her job-hunting experience to show me how she was assessed by the interviewers, and how this interview made her feel like she was different from the male interviewees.

> *Ang: In the interview, I was often asked some unprofessional and inappropriate questions. 'Do you have a boyfriend?' 'Will you choose to be a full-time mother if you have a kid?' I don't think that I should be evaluated in this way and I refused to share my plan with these men (the interviewers). If the universities are taking the applicant's status into account, then they should write in the recruiting standards. I remembered a group interview, I was the only female applicant. The interviewer asked me 'as a woman, how are you going to deal with the conflict between family and work?' I was so offended because he didn't ask other male interviewees the same question.*
>
> *Me: How did you feel about that?*
>
> *Ang: When I heard the question, I wanted to leave. This question made me feel like, …as if just women would face the conflict between work and family and men won't. It made me feel that it is a woman issue. I was thinking that I am good enough for that position. But after this question, I feel like…I feel like I have no hope because the interviewers didn't place me and other male*

candidates on the same level to evaluate. We were naturally unequal in this interview.

From Ang's perspective, the personal relationship status and family plans of candidates should not be considered at an interview. However, she found that her gender somehow became the most influential factor for the interviewers. Apart from Ang, other participants told me that most interviewers they met were men, occasionally one or two women. Therefore, when Ang was being interviewed, she was indeed playing two layers of identities. The first layer was her professional identity, assessed by the interviewers from an academic perspective; the second layer was her gender identity, evaluated by the interviewers from a man's perspective. As Ang recounted, there was no requirement in the job description specifically asking candidates to reveal their individual plans regarding marriage and childcare. Nevertheless, she had been asked these questions in almost every interview. This phenomenon coincides with the argument in the study of academic women in higher education in China that gender is a subtle element that impacts the outcomes of recruitment when both candidates have similar qualifications and experience with a PhD degree (Zhao, 2008). To further think about the reasons, Hayhoe's (2004) work concerning university graduates in China could explain universities' reluctance to 'take responsibility for maternity leave, and a perception that women graduates were less likely to be able to travel' (p. 227) which contributed to female graduates' disadvantages in job-hunting. According to Ang's experience, I would argue that the pre-existing gender-based assumption that female academics need to handle the family-work conflict also contributes to this situation.

When Ang reflected on her experience, she made it clear that she objected to being asked these kinds of questions, especially when she was asked them in front of other male candidates in a group interview. Her initial reaction was to leave but she told me that she stayed to answer the questions because she needed a job. Due to the unequal power distribution between her and the interviewers, the minute the interviewer asked these questions, the biased criteria in the evaluation of my participant and other male candidates emerged. This can be seen as the institutional discrimination against women. Kim et. al. (2010) argue that people use institutional discrimination to 'promote unequal treatment or restrict the opportunities of a target group' (p. 453). In Ang's case, her interviewers made gender visible in their questioning by making it clear that it would be a factor impacting any

recruitment decisions. In this sense, gender was not only a subtle element (Zhao, 2008) but an explicit part of the interview process, which made Ang feel like she was positioned in an unequal and lower status than the male candidates because her professional qualities and personal life plan were being evaluated simultaneously. Such biased criteria in the evaluation of recruitment contributed to the gender discrimination and as a result made it much less likely that Ang would get the job.

In addition to the recruitment bias, when my participants started work at their universities they were also discriminated against. We can see this problem from Xiaofang's account below.

> *Xiaofang: Two years ago, I could have joined a national research team. But since I was single, my leader thought that I should spend more time on dating. Working in a national research team will occupy most of my time. So, he made the decision, cut me off the team, and replaced me with a male teacher who joined the department later than me.*
>
> *Me：Is singleness a problem for your male colleagues?*
>
> *Xiaofang: According to my observations, I don't think so. Those male leaders often ask the male teachers to focus on jobs. Like the one who replaced me in the research team, he is younger than me and he is single as well. But, my leader still had him on the team.*

Like Ang, whose relationship status was questioned at job interviews, Xiaofang also suggested that her singleness was treated as a problem, in this case by her male team leader when deciding whether she could join the research team or not. However, singleness was not seen as a disadvantage for her male colleague. Xiaofang's reflections were built on her observation of how she was treated differently from her male colleagues. Her team leader expected her to spend more time on personal relationship, yet at the same time encouraged the male teachers to focus on developing their careers. Thus, although female academics like my participants may not consider personal relationships in their career development, their superiors, especially those males who have more power than them, will use female academics' relationship status to determine the organisational opportunities. For *nvboshi*,

getting married or not and fulfilling their domestic roles were seen by male superiors as more important than their career performance. As a result of this, these *nvboshi* may be systematically, albeit perhaps not intentionally, discriminated against. As argued by Kim et al. (2010) institutional barriers and discriminatory practices situate women in a less conducive working environment, which can damage their career advancement and academic productivity.

Unavoidable exclusion at work

The underrepresentation of women in the academia has been well documented around the globe (Bailyn, 2003; Morley, 2006; Rhoads & Gu, 2011). In terms of being marginalised, my participants claimed that they often felt like an 'outsider' in their departments or research teams, either because they felt unwelcomed and untrusted, or because of the exclusion from the pre-existing networks, especially those connecting male members of staff. According to the interviews, my participants had experienced various forms of exclusions. It was not just the working participants, as those *nvboshi* who were studying also reported that they were experiencing exclusion when doing research work with their male counterparts. Let me take North as an example. North was working as a researcher in a university. Unlike the other participants, North did not need to do teaching and admin jobs. When I interviewed her, she shared her previous experience of working in this institution after she had finished her PhD studies. As a junior researcher and a female, she experienced different forms of exclusions in her daily work.

> *North: I was the only woman in my previous research project. When I started working in that team, I felt like my team leader and other male colleagues didn't trust my skills and professional ability. When we were doing the discussion meeting, they barely gave me opportunities to speak and never took my ideas and thoughts seriously. Those male colleagues have their networks which were very hard for me to join in. They would only let me do the basic experiments, but they never let me do the key experiments. Those male researchers will do them. It is quite common in a lab filled with male researchers. That made me feel that I am an outsider in this team.*

The undervaluing of female academics was not a new phenomenon and other participants in this study also reported such experiences. In North's case, the influence of the old boys' club on her early research experience was significant, which caused her to be undervalued in daily work. As the only female researcher in the team, it seemed even harder for North to break through such a barrier because of the lack of female networks and colleagues she could rely on, and the unchallenged gendered nature of the institution. From North's perspective, she perceived her experience as exclusion because of the few opportunities offered to share her ideas at the discussion meeting and the limited chances to get access to the key experiments. The former practice was to silence her voice at work, which supports Aiston and Fo's (2021) finding that female academics face external silencing by exclusion. As shown in North's accounts, this exclusion manifested itself in the way of depriving her of the opportunities to share her own ideas. The latter practice signalled that North was regarded as a less trusted and less valued researcher than her male colleagues. Under this condition, North may feel subordinate to the male-dominated group, and her well-being may be damaged at work. Exclusion of my participants can also be seen from Xi's story. She shared her experience of attending a conference discussing 'Should academic women give birth to a second child?'. However, Xi found this conference pretty ridiculous because all the people invited to give a speech and join in the discussions were men.

> *Xi: It was the most ridiculous conference I have ever attended. We were discussing a topic related to women. But, can you believe that no women were invited to give a speech? The people who spoke on the stage were all men. What did we (female researchers) do? We were sitting in the viewing area like outsiders, and listening to them saying nonsense like female teachers should go home and have a second kid. We should be the insider of this conference, talking and sharing. Now, it is like men give the command to us, and we follow their command to go home and have kids. Where is the female voice?*

This is yet another vivid example of how my participants were being excluded at work. Xi's reflection on her experience of attending a conference where male teachers talked about a topic regarding women while no female academics were offered opportunities to express their views showed her feeling of being excluded from the discussions. As such, Xi perceived herself as an 'outsider' rather than an 'insider'. Xi described her experience as like obeying a

command, a description that perfectly conveyed my participant's perception of the unequal power in professional relations. This can be interpreted using the idea of micropolitics (Blase, 1991), a concept that refers to how people use power to influence others, protect themselves and compete with each other to get what they want. The study of micropolitics offers an explanation of 'how power is relayed through seemingly trivial incidents and transactions' (Morley, 2016, p. 1) and reveals 'the increasingly subtle and sophisticated ways in which dominance is achieved in organizations' (Morley, 2016, p. 1). In Xi's anecdote, we can see an example of micropolitics and how subtle power was relayed within an academic conference - a conference talking about an issue related to female teachers, to which no female professionals were invited, or offered an opportunity on the stage to share their perspectives. Female academics are not welcomed and effectively excluded from this male-dominated conference, which is not uncommon, given that such conferences are conceived as 'arenas for displaying hegemonic masculinities' (Fotaki, 2013, p. 1262). Due to the abnormal relationship between male and female academics as performers and audience in the conference, my participant's agency was constrained through preventing her voice from being heard and further entrenching her marginalisation within the patriarchal academic institutions.

5.1.2 Misrecognised roles at work: (potential) mother, academic housekeeper and less respected professional

In the study of research universities in Australia, Currie et al. (2000) borrow the notion of 'greedy institution' (Coser, 1974) to advance the argument that universities as a result of marketisation are exploiting academics by requiring them to become involved in 'detailed administrative and quality assurance work' (Currie et al., 2000, p. 271). According to my participants, although they were hired specifically for a research and teaching position, it was inevitable that they will be required by the department to undertake many administrative jobs, which they would not be paid for. '*There is an unfair gap between us and those administrative staff. They are hired for doing admin jobs without a PhD degree. We are supposed to do the research and teaching, however, we ended up doing all kinds of work. Sometimes, more admin jobs than academic work.*' Xi said. This situation relates to the recruitment policy in Chinese universities: for academic positions, including teaching and researching jobs, a PhD is essential; for administrative roles, a Master's degree is sufficient.

Administrative workers do not need to perform academic tasks, yet academic staff will always be allocated admin work, which Xi regarded as 'unfair treatment'. In this section, I will explore three kinds of roles that my participants perceive themselves as having at work. Instead of viewing themselves as professionals, my participants' perceptions of their roles are complex, interrelating with their gender. I refer to this situation as misrecognised roles at work.

'When you have a kid, you will always be viewed as a mommy.'

In the interviews, the majority of those married participants with children reported that once they became mothers, '*people will always treat you from a perspective of a mother*', as Ling put it. In this regard, my participants' gendered role served as a detrimental factor that affected their work experience. Their role as a mother trumped their professional role in the workplace. We can take Ling as an example. Ling used to be a tutor in her department before she got her PhD. In the final year of her PhD studies she had a baby. After finishing her studies, Ling was expecting to be offered teaching and researching tasks instead of admin duties, but her leaders did not assign her to teaching or research because they assumed that she would need to spend more time on her family and child rearing.

> *Ling: After I had a kid, my leaders thought that I needed more time to focus on my baby. I remember that I wanted to join a research project, but my leader rejected my application because he said "there will be many research trips to collect data. It is not suitable for me because I have a little kid who needs me more." Although I told them that my parents will help out and we had a nanny, they still didn't trust that I can handle my job well. But it is not a problem for those male teachers who have children. Family and children are not a problem for them.*

Ling's account suggested that as a *nvboshi* who possesses the same professional qualities and skills as her male counterparts, the treatment she received was not based on her educational background and academic abilities, that gender role ideology had a significant influence on her daily work allocations. Before Ling got her PhD she was not qualified to do research projects or teach but after she gained her PhD and had a child, she was still not expected to

do valuable research and teaching as her team leaders assumed that being a mother was more important for her. That is to say, when the gender role of these *nvboshi* changed, their professions and qualifications would not bring any extras and competence for them in their daily work. Conversely, their gender role came first. I could feel Ling's frustration and annoyance when she was sharing her experience in the interview. Comparing herself with her male colleagues, she observed that parenthood was not problematic for men and that team leaders did not consider the gender role of being a father as an influential factor in a man's career. Their working conditions and career progression will not be impacted by whether these men have children or not. Because of the cultural values and the gender ideology in Chinese society, women are viewed as the ones who should take more responsibilities for childbearing. Thus, within this patriarchal context, it seems that there is limited space and many constraints are set for these *nvboshi* when it comes to using their professional knowledge and academic skills to advance their careers, which will be significantly impeded if they become a mother.

In Ling's case, we can see how a female academic is treated differently because of gender, moreover how her professional abilities and educational achievements fade into the background when she becomes a mother. This process can begin before motherhood and Suli shared her experience of how she was treated as a potential mother by her department.

> *Suli: Before I had my child, my leader had a very uncomfortable conversation with me regarding a visiting research opportunity. I was one of four applicants. And I was the only one who was married but had no children. The other two were men and another female teacher's child was in primary school. My leader asked me 'since you have been married for a couple of years, do you have any baby plans? Will this visiting research affect you because it will last for one year?' I was thinking if I have a baby plan, so what? Why did this affect my application and why did my leader connect my plan to my qualifications when they were deciding a job opportunity. I hadn't become a mother, but my leader started to think of me as a mother already.*

Suli's experience again confirmed the importance of gender roles within the patriarchal academic institution. When she was applying for a visiting research opportunity, her baby

plan had become a consideration for her leaders. She did not know how to answer these questions, which had nothing to do with her application and were all about her family plan and personal life. She did inform her leader that she was considering having a child, but it was not a settled plan. In the end, Suli did not get the opportunity. While it is impossible to say whether the conversation she had with her leader had an influence on the final decision, we can nevertheless see some stereotypical gender implications from these questions. Let me use another way to look at these questions. 'If you have a baby plan, then this opportunity is not suitable for you because a research leave for one year will affect your baby plan.' Suli's leader illustrated the stereotype that when a woman's family plan conflicts with her career, she should prioritise her family plan. It has nothing to do with their educational attainment, and it is just about their gender. In other words, the ideology of gender role always exists, permeating through every aspect of the patriarchal academic structure. It has been reinforced through certain practices on my married participants. In the case of Suli, even if she did not have a child, her leader considered her as a potential mother who should prioritise any plans she had to start a family.

According to the accounts of Ling and Suli, it seems that in the workplace my participants face a dilemma: if they want to pursue a career, they need a PhD degree with strong publications, just like their *nanboshi* (male PhDs) counterparts. If they have children, or are pushing the age of having a child, they are labelled as a (potential) mother who should take the domestic responsibility. This indicates that their PhD degree and professional qualifications have no obvious positive influence on their career progression. Such imposed gender role constraints result in the delay of my participants' career development and make the gender discrimination quite overt through the kinds of practices on these *nvboshi* in the workplace.

'I am feeling like a *baomu* (保姆)in the office.'

In their daily work, some participants reported that instead of being treated as professionals, they were aware of being treated like a woman doing a less valuable job by their male leaders and counterparts. In other words, what they were asked to do had gained less recognition and value for themselves as well as other people. Linlin was one of the participants who used her own experience to illustrate how she was constrained in her working life. Linlin finished her

PhD studies with a full scholarship in Europe and now is working as a research assistant. Originally, she was expecting to advance her career gradually by accumulating experience in the lab. However, since she was hired, most of the tasks she had done were admin jobs and writing proposals for research projects.

> *Linlin: My boss told me that one of the major reasons that he hired me was that our lab needs female workers who could do the administrative jobs. So he thinks that I could do both admin jobs and research because I am a female. Although my job title is research assistant, all I have done is really just ASSISTANT, such as writing the proposal for applying for a fund, preparing materials they need, and maintaining daily operation of the institution. But when they are actually building up the research team, I will not be considered as I am a young woman, not married, and I have got enough OTHER JOBS to do.*

From the reasons that Linlin's boss hired her, we can see that at the stage of recruiting Linlin was considered as a candidate who could not only do the research assistant job but also take care of the admin jobs in her lab. That is to say, Linlin did not receive a reasonable assessment in terms of her professions and academic abilities. At the beginning of her career, her work experience had been affected by the gender stereotype that women excel at administrative jobs. Based on her account, it is hard to tell which factors influenced the process of decision-making and the outcome of the recruitment, but it is justified to say that Linlin's gender and feminine qualities were assessed and considered by her boss during the recruitment process. Therefore, it is not surprising that Linlin was asked to do many nonacademic jobs in the institution. Moreover, Linlin found the jobs she had done as having nothing to do with conducting experiments, calculations and writing. These other jobs can be understood as performing a service for others and were not the kind of jobs that will increase Linlin's specialist expertise or gain her recognition. They were jobs done for others instead of for herself. Heijstra et al. (2017) perceive such kind of jobs as 'academic housework', referring to 'all the academic service work within the institution' (p. 765) with limited recognition and value.

When it came to constituting a new research team, Linlin was rejected by her boss using the excuse that she needed to focus on her other non-academic tasks. In his view, finishing these non-academic tasks should be more important to Linlin than joining the research team, which implied that my participant's academic abilities and skills were not properly appreciated. Such job arrangement unveiled the gender bias Linlin's leader had, which can be seen as a consequence of the ideology of gender role within the institution. Male researchers were offered more valuable opportunities, while female researchers like Linlin were asked to concentrate on devalued tasks. Ang's experience showed some resemblances with Linlin's. She also claimed that she was being treated abnormally at work but instead of experiencing unequal treatment from male superiors, it was her male peers that sometimes treated her like a *baomu* rather than a colleague.

> *Ang: My male colleagues, not my team leaders, often ask me to buy things for them or do something for them when they are busy with work. Because I am taking most of the admin jobs in my institution, they think that it is normal to ask me to buy stuff or do things for them when they are busy, such as buy them lunch or collect materials from other institutions. Most are tiny things. They don't consider if it would affect what I am doing right now and they think that I am the one who SHOULD do this because I am a woman. I feel like a baomu (保姆) in the office.*

The term *baomu* refers to those who work in families and are paid to take care of the domestic jobs. Ang described herself as a *baomu* in her office. This metaphor vividly elucidated the hierarchy which was based on the ideology of gender within her office. Previous studies argue that the departments in Chinese research institutions are structured by gender with a long tradition of patriarchy (Zhao, 2008; Zhao, 2020). Scholars use the term 'housewives of academia' (Angervall & Beach, 2017; Žarkov, 2015) to identify the role of female faculty and academics in universities. According to these studies, the notion of housewives of academia can be defined as women being employed to satisfy the demands of their institutions through doing work that 'gives little formal recognition and few rewards in terms of vertical career development' (Angervall & Beach, 2017, p. 12). In this sense, although these women are often excluded from career-advancing activities, the tasks they perform do make a contribution to the development of academic institutions. It should be

noted that according to my participants, some of them conformed with the definition of housewives of academia. For example, Yi said: '*I don't like doing admin jobs as well. But, sometimes these jobs are important for running a department. Both male and female teachers have to do it. But, we (female teachers) do the majority.*' For the others, for example Ang, I do not think it is accurate to use this term to describe their roles. It is because compared with the housewives of academia, what Ang was asked to do was not just for the sake of the institution but for the personal benefit of her male colleagues as well, with no positive effect at all on her own career development. This is the distinction between housewives of academia and a *baomu* in an institution. A housewife is a part of a family, while a *baomu* is normally understood as being outside of the family. In Ang's case, she reflected on her experience to identify herself as a *baomu* who stepped into the office to provide devalued service for other people. In this regard, the hierarchy was visible in her experience and it may lower her status at work and further increase the difficulties she had fitting into the patriarchal working culture.

Furthermore, the unequal power relations distributed in her office, which had been fortified by the patriarchal ideologies in Chinese society, was also shown in her account. Chin (2016) argues that the person at the superior position has the power to 'set the rules of the domain and furthermore to form the culture of the workplace' (p. 112). In Ang's case, the male peer was situated as the position of commanding power because of the pre-existing masculine culture in her office. As a result, Ang was allocated to do the admin and deal with other trivial issues, at the same time was asked to provide meaningless service for her male colleagues, which can be seen as a big challenge for her to overcome. Pyke's (2011) study could provide an explanation for this in that because of the complex structure of gender inequality within the academic institutions, women are unable to refuse service requests. The example of buying lunch for her male colleague not only demonstrated that asking a female colleague to do things for them was seen as natural by these men, but also elucidated how my participant was not treated as a professional with the same academic background as a male academic. Therefore, I think it is important to acknowledge that the hierarchical ladder within the institutions existed not just between my participants and their male leaders, but also between *nvboshi* and their male peers.

‘I am a less recognised professional.’

According to my participants, lack of recognition for female academics was common. In the interviews, participants reported how their career progression had been impeded due to the lack of recognition from their leaders. These participants were on the cusp of advancing their careers and making more money. Monica can be an example. As an associate professor in the department, Monica told me that she had to work twice, or three times harder than her male counterparts to prove her worth. Lack of recognition from her leaders meant that she had limited space and opportunities to advance her career. Speaking about the reasons why she was underappreciated, Monica identified gender as the primary factor.

> *Monica: I have been an associate professor for a few years. I failed to be promoted to a professor several times. Because my leader told me that being an AP is already enough for a female teacher. He thinks that I am not the breadwinner in my family, so I don’t need to get a further promotion. My current position is suitable and enough for me. I observe that all the female teachers in my department who are in the same position as me are working very hard and are expecting to get more opportunities, such as research or supervising students. We are doing it not just for money, but for our self-esteem. But, compared with our male counterparts, we don’t get equal recognition for the same level of achievement. Male teachers are seen as the underpinning skeleton of the department, enjoying many opportunities and quick promotion, while we are not.*

Monica’s account indicated gender bias in the promotion ladder within her department. Being identified as not the primary breadwinner in the family by her leader implied that she did not need to be offered a promotion opportunity to make more money for her family. In this regard, I argue that even if my participant’s income is not needed by the family, this would still be a discriminatory practice. According to Monica and her observation, when considering the promotion, the gender role had come to be the prioritising consideration for her leaders. In turn, their professional performance was losing recognition and equal assessment. As such, being an AP was presumably seen as ‘enough’ and a ‘suitable’ position for my participant, as it would not affect male academics’ promotion chances and match the

needs of these *nvboshi*. However, from Monica's observation of other female teachers, they were against the bias that female academics did not need to be promoted to higher positions such as professors within the promotion ladder. They worked much harder to prove themselves, while their leaders did not give equal recognition to these women. Thus, my participants faced a lack of recognition with more opportunities offered to male teachers but less provided for female counterparts. In this process, Monica perceived herself as a less recognised professional in the department. In Chin's (2016) work on female employees' daily experiences, she argues that female workers are shadowed by the gendered ideology of labour division 'from the domestic domain into the public sphere' (p. 120). In Monica's experience, since her financial power was not seen as a matter for the family by her leaders, she failed to enjoy enough recognition in terms of her academic achievement. Her male counterparts were identified as the major supporters both in the domestic domain and the work sphere. That is to say, professional recognition for these *nvboshi* was closely associated with the gendered status in the family. On the one hand, my participants were less needed financially at home; on the other hand, they were required to devote more time and energy domestically. Both factors had constituted barriers for their career advancement.

5.2 Creating a Better 'fit' with the Patriarchal Working Culture

Due to the various discriminatory practices directed at *nvboshi*, my participants have found their jobs in the universities to be insecure and difficult to advance in. This in turn contributes to devaluation of their professional skills and adversely affects their potential earnings. As such, it is important to consider how these women deal with this situation.

During the interviews, I asked whether they had ever considered opting out. Surprisingly, none of them wanted to opt out, even though they were facing many constraints and barriers. Instead, these *nvboshi* have tried to come up with various solutions to deal with the difficulties they have been experiencing and to advance their careers. In doing so, they have made progress towards their goals of economic independence and increasing self-value. Therefore, this section will focus on the agency of my participants and explore the strategies they use to navigate their working lives. Three strategies are applied by these *nvboshi* to help them to pursue a fulfilling career and create a better fit within the patriarchal working

conditions, ultimately, to achieve their goal of pursuing a valuable career inside and outside of the universities.

5.2.1 Winning the support from family

According to my participants' narratives, especially those with children, they were facing a dual burden of being expected to fulfil professional roles and domestic roles. We can see from the above discussions that my participants were viewed as family-oriented once they were married and had children. Their value and working arrangements were reconsidered by their departments on the basis that these women should and would spend more time with their family. Such gender ideology has been underpinned by patriarchy. As a result, my participants found it even more difficult to prove that they could handle their jobs well and get more recognition from the male leaders. As such, coming up with solutions to change their working situation and make sure that their careers will go on seems important and inevitable. Seeking support and help from family members was the strategy that most married participants applied in their daily life. In doing so, these women were trying to achieve the balance between family roles and academic roles without sacrificing their careers like their mothers. Five participants shared their strategy of splitting the domestic jobs with their husbands. In this way, they have managed to relieve the family pressure and have more time to focus on their jobs.

> *Amy: My husband is my biggest help. Before we married, we made a deal that we were going to shoulder the domestic jobs and responsibilities together. When I was busy with publications and research, my husband always took care of the family jobs and supported me very much. Without his support, I can't publish my papers and concentrate on my work.*

> *Hao: My husband and I are involved with chores and childbearing together. After my son was born, my husband tried his best to reduce my burden. Last year, I was busy with promotion and attended a lot of conferences. So many trips every month. My husband took over the responsibility of looking after our son and supported my career. And now, I am an associated professor. Without his help, I can't take a break from the pressure of family and work.*

Both of these examples demonstrated that these women cannot handle the conflict between family and work without support from their spouses. This strategy is a quite common way for working women around the world to balance family and work. However, there is a fact that we cannot ignore from their extracts. Both Amy and Hao's career advancement depended on their husbands' gender role ideology. In other words, their husbands did not believe in the traditional gender-based labour division within Chinese families and would like to shoulder the domestic responsibilities with their wives. That is to say, compared with those participants whose husbands refused to involve themselves in any family responsibilities, Amy and Hao had more possibilities and time to advance their careers because of the support they received from their husbands.

In addition to spousal support, getting help from their parents was another approach that my participants used to balance work and family, particularly those participants whose children were very young. In China, it is common that grandparents lend hands on looking after their grandchildren (Liu, 2013), which the working mothers can benefit from it to spare more time on individual career. Among those married participants, four mentioned that their parents were helping to save them time and money.

> *Suli: When I started working at the university, I was very busy and my husband was busy. Besides, we can't afford a babysitter. So, my parents moved in with us and took care of my son full-time. They volunteered to help us. Without their help, I wouldn't have been promoted to an associate professor in just two years.*
>
> *Hao: In addition to my husband, my parents are a big help. In the daytime, my parents take care of my son and do the chores. In the evening, my husband and I do those jobs and my parents will get some rest. They always step up to help us when my husband and I are busy. As their daughter, they have supported me in various aspects of my life so that I could devote myself to my work.*

Hao sought domestic help from her parents as well as her husband when she needed to focus on her job. In this case, we can see that the strategy she used to get family support was interwoven. With the help of both her husband and parents, she can devote more time to pursue her career, and for the other participants, family support was also their preferred strategy for balancing family and work.

5.2.2 Creating multiple career development paths

Given the limited job opportunities available, plus unequal salaries and the patriarchal climate within the academic institutions, some of my participants had adopted a strategy that allowed them to overcome gender-based constraints and advance their careers. Developing a second career outside of the universities was the strategy some participants used and the major factor contributing to this strategy, according to my participants, was generalised insecurity caused by the unequal treatment and the limited opportunities within the academia.

Having a second career did not mean that my participants were going to quit their jobs in the universities. On the contrary, my participants perceived their second jobs as a 'slash' working style. The slash concept was first introduced by Marci Alboher (2007) to capture the newly emerging working styles of millennials and implied that people can work across different fields, which led to a hybridity in the composition of one's career. Since my participants were facing many constraints and inequalities at work, some of them had also applied this concept to develop their careers. Enriched in cultural capital, social networks and academic resources, some *nvboshi* were pursuing a second career concerning their professions and hobbies outside of the universities. By doing a second job, my participants can create more choices at work. Instead of waiting for job opportunities to be approved by their leaders and the departments, expanding their jobs outside of the department, on the one hand, granted these *nvboshi* more autonomy to decide what they wanted to do, as well as defined what they can do. On the other hand, the projects they participated in outside of the universities will in turn make a contribution to their publications and advance their careers within the department. Typically, they would start their own business, looking for collaborative opportunities with other research institutions, governmental projects and companies. Monjin said the following:

Monjin: I had been an associate professor for over five years, I find it very hard to pursue a further promotion. And I had a child at that time, which resulted in my leader cutting me off many research opportunities and asking me to focus on my family. I am terrified of this. I don't want my leader to stop thinking of me as a professional academic. I felt insecure every day. It felt like one day, I had to go home and rely on my husband. So, I decided to use my contacts and resources, and opened my own business outside of the university. I am collaborating with some companies and governmental institutions to do research projects, which I make extra money from it. Besides, I can publish papers based on these projects. I feel like I have more guarantees about my future.

According to Monjin, since limited opportunities were offered within the department, she used her expertise and social network to expand her academic career outside of the university. In the process, she removed many constraints and could enjoy more autonomy to decide which research projects she wanted to do. Monjin was not the only participant who had established a second career outside of the university. The interviewees told me that it is a common phenomenon among university teachers as long as you have the professional ability and social connections. Many companies and institutions would like to co-work with university academics, especially those with higher degrees, strong publications and working titles. For Monjin, making more money and increasing individual accountability was the driving force behind her choosing this strategy, as she found that female academics were constrained in many ways within her department, which affected her earnings as well as her career advancement. Besides, gender and her family roles served as barriers that caused her to be undervalued due to the patriarchal ideologies. As a result, a wage gap emerged and in order to make more money and gain more research opportunities, Monjin chose to expand her job outside of the university instead of relying on her department.

In addition to Monjin, Luao was another example illustrating how this strategy worked. As a *nvboshi* who was working as a post-doc in a university and running two companies, Luao had stronger money-making power and demonstrated even greater independence. Because of her two jobs, she can handle unequal treatments in her department more confidently, with less worries and uncertainty about life. And while both Monjin and Luao acknowledged in the

interviews that doing two jobs had brought them much pressure, they planned to continue as this was the most efficient way for them to pursue a fulfilling career and achieve financial independence at the same time.

> *Luao: I started my business when I was still a PhD student. Until today, I am working as a postdoc and insisting on developing my business. For example, most articles I write on my social public account are based on what I have been researching in university. So, both jobs are interrelated. I make a lot of money from my jobs. Meanwhile, if I encounter inequalities in my department, I would not worry about the income, job opportunities or something else. Because I have a second job and I have life security. So, I think it is good to do two jobs as long as you manage to do it.*

Whereas Monjin and Luao had used their professions to expand their careers into related sectors, others had established a second career based on their hobbies and interests. Take Suli for an example. Suli was an associate professor and also a Youtuber. At first, she did this as a hobby but when her followers increased and she began to make money from it, it became a second career.

> *Suli: I was expecting to be promoted to professor. But I can't see any further advancement working in my department. And also there are many constraints for female academics. Then I started to produce videos and created my channel. I like sharing make-up, my lifestyle, and showing the viewers what the life of a female academic looks like. When I started to make money from my channel, filming has become my second job every week. I want to make more money on my own and maintain my financial independence. So, I continue my work in the university and meanwhile I spend my free time to develop my channel. I am having two careers simultaneously. It is tired, but I would like to strive for it.*

Suli was facing the similar dilemma as Monjin, which was hard to get promoted to professor. Unlike Monjin, Suli had chosen to develop her channel as her second career gradually and

made money from it. Although it had nothing to do with her job in the university, she had employed this strategy to make extra money, maximising her agency and reducing the risks that her university job had brought. These participants' strategy of building up multiple career development paths illustrated their strive for progressing career, achieving financial ability, as well as maintaining the autonomy. At the same time, this strategy could also help to reduce the constraints from the institutions as these *nvboshi* can have more autonomy in terms of own careers, such as Monjin.

5.2.3 Taking advantage of feminine qualities

The third strategy that was reported by a few participants was taking advantage of their feminine qualities and successfully translating these into strengths to advance their careers. Wendy would be the first example that can demonstrate this strategy. Wendy got a PhD degree in Physics. After she had finished her PhD, she went to Singapore to do a postdoc for two years, then found a teaching job in a Chinese university. Most of the tasks she was asked to do were administrative or basic teaching until she was asked to help the student recruitment team. When I was interviewing her, she was the Head of Student Recruitment in her department and had not been involved with any teaching or researching at all. That is to say, her current job had nothing to do with physics, as she explained below:

> *Wendy: In the first place, the reason that I was asked to work in this recruitment team was that they needed a female teacher to deal with the paperwork. I tried to get back to teaching and researching. It didn't work. People always think that females excel more at admin work and are more sensitive. Then I thought maybe I could take advantage of it. So, no matter what kind of job the team leader gave me, I tried my best to finish it. And because I have abundant study experience as a nvboshi and postdoc, I enjoy telling students what physics studies like and sharing my experience of studying physics as a woman and encouraging them to do physics. And now, I am the head of this team. It is very valuable for me and helpful for students.*

When I heard that she had quit teaching and researching, I felt a little bit sorry for Wendy, but after hearing her story I changed my mind. Although she was the only participant in the

project specifically doing an admin job, she was enthusiastic about her work and clearly enjoyed it. Whereas most participants expressed dissatisfaction with being allocated admin jobs, which they saw as a form of rejection or exclusion, Wendy's attitude was more positive. After failing to get back into teaching and researching, Wendy took advantage of her supposed female strengths and instead of complaining about the work assignments, used conscientiousness and patience to gain recognition from her leaders and the position of the Head of Student Recruitment. Instead of fighting against the stereotype of women doing admin jobs, Wendy had chosen to use it to her advantages, playing to her strengths and with the pre-existing gendered expectations about her abilities. Besides, as a member of the recruiting team, she also had taken advantage of her expertise and experience, applying these to her daily work. By patiently sharing her experience of doing physics, she had used her knowledge differently to encourage more students, especially females, to pursue physics. This was perceived as valuable by Wendy but nonetheless she was still constrained by the patriarchal academic system and having to play by the rules within her department. From Wendy's experience, we can see that she had styled herself to fit into a male-dominated working environment and become the beneficiary of the patriarchal values within the institution through promotion and recognition.

In addition to Wendy, other participants who were leading teams expressed a similar view in terms of management style. They gave more encouragement and support to team members, especially female researchers in the team. I would take Lay as an example. As an associate professor who also co-worked with other research institutions, Lay had more opportunities to constitute her research teams and apply her leadership. But in the interview, Lay refused to identify herself as a person who had achieved a senior position. She argued that compared with those who were actually in senior positions due to their official powers and administrative titles, she was just an associate professor who was at the middle level of her department and was allowed to build up her own research teams by the department. Lay shared her strategy below:

> *Lay: When I was leading a research team, unlike some male counterparts who allocate the basic research jobs to female researchers and remove them from the core circle of the team, I worked very closely with all my team members. I would always gather all my members together to discuss the project and make*

> *sure everyone's voice was heard, especially the female researchers. This will keep the harmony within the team and improve the working efficiency. In turn, this will significantly contribute to my career development.*

Women can be a successful leader by 'drawing on the skills and attitudes they developed that are unique to their socialisation as women' (Liu, 2013, p. 488). According to Eagly and Carli (2007), Lay's leadership style can be defined as a participative and collaborative style. She gave encouragement and support to all team members and provided opportunities for everyone to share their thoughts and ideas. In doing so, both Lay and the team members can benefit from the work they did. Unlike the traditional command-and-control style, my participants liked Lay sought more collaboration from 'their subordinates by making their interactions with subordinates positive for everyone involved, thus creating a win-win situation' (Liu, 2013, p. 488). From Lay's perspective, such an interactive strategy worked particularly well with the female younger researchers in her team, and also enabled herself to acquire more academic achievements and advance her career.

My participants made it clear in the interviews that they had never considered opting out from their careers, even though they were facing various gendered constraints and experiencing much pressure. This was because they perceived their work as the only way to fully live their lives and maintain meaningful independence. They actively navigated different strategies to advance their careers and strived to make as much money as possible on their own. As *nvboshi* who had enjoyed the highest education and possessed abundant resources, they were able to detach from 'traditional ideas, values, norms, beliefs, and ideologies' (Mills, 2007, p. 65). This process of individualisation 'generates greater individual autonomy and freedom of choice for individuals to shape their lives' (Mills, 2007, p. 65). In the light of this, working within such male-dominated universities, my participants were practicing alternative options that enabled them to exercise agency to achieve their career goals. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that it was too soon to say whether these *nvboshi* had already removed the gender-based constraints on them within the academic hierarchy system. These strategies were only used to deal with those constraints and inequalities they were facing, rather than being used to change the patriarchal nature of the university.

5.3 Conclusion

The preceding chapter depicted how singlehood was practised and perceived by Chinese *nvboshi*. According to their stories, we can see their aspirations were to pursue independence and autonomy by having a career and making money of their own. As such, this chapter provided us with a further understanding of how it was hard for these *nvboshi* to develop their careers, which reflected the fact that although *nvboshi* had the same educational background as their male counterparts, in most cases, their educational achievements and professional abilities had little positive effect on their promotion prospects or performance evaluation.

Two main conclusions can be drawn from this chapter. Firstly, gender is the major detrimental factor impacting my participants' careers. Moreover, the patriarchal structure of academia has made the working environment more gendered and less conducive for my participants. Looking at their experiences of work, gender ideologies within the patriarchal academic structure designate these *nvboshi* as inferior to their male counterparts. In their daily work, not only do my participants have to deal with various patriarchal practices, they are also perceived as less professional than their male colleagues in the institutions. As the analysis above shows, my participants are being misrecognised at work due to the perceived tension between women's work and family roles, as well as public perceptions of women as naturally family-oriented. This perception further impedes my participants from 'being active and enterprising' (Hanser, 2001, p. 200) at work. Hanser (2001) contends that it is more difficult for young Chinese women to progress own career and achieve self-development because of the tensions between women's working and family life. As a result, my participants find themselves less able to advance their careers because of the ways in which they are devalued.

Secondly, this chapter also explores the strategies employed by my participants to advance their careers. Despite the discriminatory practices imposed on these working *nvboshi*, my participants have rarely given up on self-development and the goal of achieving financial independence, preferring to adapt their behaviours and use their strengths to progress career. Previous studies have used the concept of 'missing agency' (Shepherd, 2017) to explore the underrepresentation of female academics in educational leadership. However, my findings

show that these working *nvboshi* do have some degree of agency, which they use to deal with the barriers they face at work by applying three major strategies: seeking help from old generations and partners, taking advantage of feminine strengths and applying multiple career development paths. Arguably, in order to achieve their goals of advancing their careers and living a life on their own, my participants' strategies illustrate the processes of individualisation whereby these women take on self-responsibility for the negotiation and management of structural problems to make their life liveable.

To conclude, this chapter elucidates the unequal treatment and discrimination experiences of *nvboshi* in academia, and their solutions to manage work barriers to advance career. Their work experiences can probably be seen as one of the most vivid facets of their striving for an independent and self-reliant existence through the pursuit of a fulfilling career that brings them financial power. Insofar as they are able to achieve this, these *nvboshi* will become more autonomous and reflexive individuals, who shoulder more self-responsibility in terms of their own life. Furthermore, their performance and achievements in careers will in turn affect their family life, as Xi put it, '*how much money I make has deeply influenced my status and negotiations in family*.' Given this nexus between work, money and domesticity, in the next chapter I will explore the family life of *nvboshi*.

Chapter Six
Negotiation and Pursuit of Individual Desires In the Family Sphere

No matter if you are married or not, you should always try your best to follow your innermost desires and needs. People may think that it is normal for women to make a sacrifice for your family. But, remember, pursuing what you want is also normal for women. It is not selfish.

Yu

Attitudes such as '*kaoziji*' (靠自己, living on the own) and '*zhuiqiuzijixiangyaode*' (追求自己想要，pursue what I want) appeared consistently across the data, especially when participants talked about family life. In this chapter, I look at these *nvboshi*'s experiences regarding their family lives. During the conversations, I was often impressed by them. Though they were facing structural constraints in their engagement with parents, husbands and other family members, they showed self-reflection and took proactive steps to solve their problems, illustrating a strong sense of independence and self-reliance within the family structure. The central question of this chapter is how these *nvboshi* pursue individual desires and values through the negotiations with their family members, namely their parents and husbands. In order to answer this question, I have divided this chapter into two major sections. The first section explores the participants' experiences of pursuing individual goals and performing the role of filial daughter in their intergenerational relations. According to the interviews, the participants found the central ideology that impacted on their choices and behaviours in relation to parents was Chinese filial piety. Satisfying parents' needs and insisting on individual desires and interests simultaneously was not an easy task. Parents' different demands on filial piety may impact the participants' agency to pursue individual goals. Also, it appeared that these daughters' definition of filial piety, to some degree, conflicted with their parents'. As a result, the extent to which the parents' demands can be satisfied and how has become a central question that the participants needed to think about, one which was associated with their pursuit of individual desires. The major discussion of the second section is around those married *nvboshi*. During the interviews, I found that married *nvboshi* had a common characteristic which was placing high value on family relationships and gender obligations as a mother and a wife. However, they displayed different attitudes

towards the traditional gender ideology and family values, which contributed to their various practices when negotiating with their husbands to achieve their individual desires and values.

6.1 Pursuing Individual Desires and the Making of a Filial Daughter

As noted before, the One-Child Policy implemented in the late 1970s brought dramatic changes to various aspects of Chinese lives. These *nvboshi* from one-child households have become the only beneficiaries of profound family investment, which contributes to empowering them to live their own lives and pursuing individual goals. Although sons are ascribed the role of fulfilling filial piety, studies have shown that single urban daughters can also be the ones who will meet parents' demands for filial piety (Fong, 2002; To, 2015b). Filial piety is defined as a moral code in Confucianism, regulating intergenerational relations (Bell, 2010; Eklund, 2018). Yan (2016) identifies three aspects of the traditional norm of filial piety: 'unconditional respect and obedience of the junior generation to the senior generation; financial support and elderly care; and the provision of ritual services to ancestors' (p. 249). Self-sacrifice is regarded as the key requirement in meeting the traditional filial piety (Yan, 2016). Facing tension between the filial obligations and the individual interests (Liu, 2008a; Skoglund, 2020; Yan, 2011, 2016), some of the participants chose to compromise their individual desires to obey their parents, so that they could achieve the goal of being a filial daughter. Xun's view of satisfying her mother's wishes is representative of this cohort.

Xun is from a single parent family, raised by her mother. When Xun was doing her undergraduate degree, she was offered an opportunity to study in the UK as an exchange student. After she had finished her undergraduate degree, she was accepted onto a PhD programme with a full scholarship in the UK. However, her mother was unhappy with this and asked to do her PhD in a Chinese university instead. Eventually, to avoid upsetting her mother, Xun chose to do her PhD in China.

> *Xun: I have a very close relationship with my mum. She had a hard life raising me alone. Because my mum was afraid that I might continue to work outside of China and she wanted me to stay close with her. So, she didn't want me to do a PhD in the UK.*

Me: How about you? Did you want to study in the UK?

Xun: Of course. The opportunity was amazing and I also had the full scholarship. But, I don't want to upset my mum and I had no other choices. Either satisfying my mum or following what I want. So, in order to make my mum happy, I can compromise my needs even though I would feel a little bit regretful. I think it's a form of me fulfilling filial piety and being a filial daughter.

Xun's account revealed a high level of appreciation for her mother's dedication to her upbringing, which she perceived as a hardship for her mother. As the only daughter in her family, in terms of deciding her study location, on the one hand, Xun realised that there were not too many choices left to reconcile her own aspirations with her mother's demands. In a sense, facing such a "no other choice" situation, the only-child status may have resulted in limited leeway for Xun to satisfy her individual goals and her mother's wishes simultaneously. This resembles Liu's (2008) findings that single status is seen as the most constraining factor on individual freedom and choice, as well as on filial obligations. On the other hand, it seems that it would be impossible for Xun to choose freely without taking her mother's needs into consideration, because of the close bond between them, reflecting a strong sense of filial duty. Deutsch (2006) notes that growing up within a context of heavy family investment and privilege, only children may be more likely to proactively shoulder the responsibility for their parents' welfare. In Xun's case, studying in the UK might upset her mother and distance their mother-daughter bond geographically. Hence, Xun chose to compromise and acquiesce to her mother's demands. From her point of view, making sacrifices for her mother was perceived as a form of fulfilling filial piety. By doing so, she perceived herself as a filial daughter.

The above extract clearly revealed Xun's expectations on her future development. Nonetheless, she still chose to cater to her mother's expectations. This practice concurs with Yan's (2011) perception of the traditional definition of filial piety in which 'one is expected to sacrifice one's time, labour, wealth, and even life to make parents happy' (p. 37). By doing this, Xun could achieve her goal of being a filial daughter. The conflict between individual desires and parents' expectations was consistently reflected in the participants' accounts. Xinxin regarded living up to her father's expectations as a way to repay her parents. When

discussing her career choice, Xinxin was expecting to find a job in a university, while her father had high expectations of her finding a job in a governmental institution.

> *Xinxin: My father always wanted a boy and so he had higher expectations of me. After I finished my PhD, my father showed much stronger desire to push me to get a job in a governmental institution. Because he thinks that working in a governmental institution is a proud thing. As a PhD holder, it would be easy for me to get promoted[…]it is guangzong yaozu (光宗耀祖). I told him that I didn't want to work in a governmental institution. He got upset every time. Since my parents spent so much money on my education and they were always supportive, I think I have an obligation to pay back. Finally, I got a job in a governmental institution and my father was very happy. Looking at his proud face, I think it's worth it.*

Like Xun, Xinxin was another participant who compromised to live up to her parents' expectations. In her extract, she mentioned a Chinese idiom: *guangzong yaozu*. This idiom can be translated as bringing honour to one's ancestors. Normally, this is the ascribed responsibility for male family members in Chinese culture. However, more and more daughters, especially only children are taking up this responsibility, serving as a 'substitute son' (Croll, 1995, p. 169; Liu, 2008a) for their parents. This Chinese idiom was vividly revealed in the high expectations Xinxin's father had for his daughter due to the investment he had made in her education and future when she was growing up. As the only beneficiary of this investment and unconditional parental support, Xinxin had internalised the idea that she was obliged to 'pay back' her father and obey the core concept of filial piety.

However, Xinxin also found a clash between her own desire to find a job in a university and her father's expectation that she would work for the government. As shown in her extract, meeting her father's demands had become an internalised obligation for her, so she must work to repay her parents' support and dedication to her. Such repayment can be understood as a form of performing the filial duties, which resounds with Yan's (2003) finding that repaying parents for the 'gift of life' is deemed the 'purest' and most traditional way of fulfilling filial piety (p. 88). In this regard, it appears that Xinxin had encountered a similar 'no other choice' situation to Xun. Both eventually chose to 'let their obligations to defer to

parental wishes trump (her) own personal desires and preferences' (Whyte, 2004, p. 120). By doing this, the participants can be filial daughters, although their ability to make individual choices will be compromised.

Previous studies have found the tightened intergenerational relations within the context of the One-Child Policy would encourage a great sense of fulfilling the duties for parents' love and dedication (Ji, 2017; Liu, 2008a). Filial obligation, 'which is inherently based upon the negation of the self in relation to the family collectivity' (Liu, 2008a, p. 407) is therefore inevitably caught up in the contradiction with individual values and desires associated with 'autonomy, mobility and choice' (Liu, 2008a, p. 407). In this sense, some of the participants had to make compromises. Other participants I interviewed showed an interest in negotiating individual desires and choices concerning the self with their parents so that they could be filial as well as fulfilling their individual desires. North is representative of this cohort. After finishing her PhD, North found a job as a research assistant in a university in Shanghai but her parents pressured her to go home and find a job in her hometown because, for one thing, they wanted to live close to their daughter so that they could take care of each other. Another reason was that living with parents in her home city would be much easier financially as the living expenses in Shanghai were pretty high. However, North rejected her parents.

> *North: Working and living in a big city is always my dream. I worked as hard as possible to make my dream come true. I can't give up. Although I understand my parents' thoughts, I can't satisfy them. So, I have been working hard, doing a research job in the university and also participating in some research projects, which were introduced by my PhD supervisors. It helps me to make good money. When my financial status improved, I started to send money back to my parents to show that I can live a good life on my own in Shanghai. I can xiaojing(孝敬) them. Although I can't satisfy their wish of living with them, I try my best to look after them in another way. So, if you can't satisfy your parents' needs and you don't want to sacrifice your own needs either, you need to think about another way within your ability to fulfil filial piety. Otherwise, I will feel unfilial.*

Xiaojing (孝敬) is a standard filial practice in China. According to the Chinese Dictionary, *xiaojing* involves the younger generation giving presents or money to the older generations to show their respect and filial piety. What North faced was a common problem for most of the participants. On the one hand, parents hoped their daughters will find a job in their home cities and live with them until they get married. On the other hand, these *nvboshi* can enjoy the abundant educational resources and working opportunities in big cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, which was beneficial for their own self-development. As a result, these women were put in the contradictory position of having to meet parents' demands as a filial daughter and pursuing individual interests as a desiring self (Rofel, 2007). In this sense, North's situation was similar to Xun and Xinxin's.

For North, she aspired to work and live in Shanghai, trying to live an independent life on her own. In order to achieve this goal, after getting her PhD degree, she found a job as a researcher in a top university. Although her early research experience was not satisfying (see Chapter Five) she never thought about giving up and returning to her home city. As shown in her account, she would not give up on her dream to satisfy her parents' demands, even if she might be criticised as unfilial. This reflected a proactive separation of her own desires from her parents' expectations so that she could pursue her goals. Moreover, when she realised that she would not be able to meet her parents' expectations, she found it necessary to come up with another way to fulfil her filial obligations. In her case, she had made good progress in her career and achieved some financial security, thus sending money was perceived as an alternative form of filial piety by her parents. Insofar as the desiring self (Rofel, 2007) can be found in her life, equally North can be a filial daughter through the practice of being 'caring and supportive but not obedient' (Yan, 2016, p. 250).

Examining North's experience, her balancing of individual desires and parental demands reflects a contemporary form of filial piety (Yan, 2016) which involves 'relinquishing unconditional obedience and submission from the junior to the senior generations' (p. 244). In this way, the traditional notion of filial piety has been significantly eroded (Yan, 2016). In other words, individuals now have more space to make their own choices and adhere to their own values. However, it should be noted that insisting on individual choices in intergenerational relations does not necessarily mean that these participants are not fulfilling their filial duties. In fact, these practices show how much my participants have reflected on

the meaning of filial piety during the process of individualisation. As North's experience revealed, by finding an alternative way to meet parental expectations and fulfil filial duties, she could be able to liberate herself from the constraints of traditional filial obligations and adopt her method to be filial without damaging her own desires and expectations. In doing so, she had achieved a balance between pursuing personal goals and taking care of her parents. Meanwhile, it is important to note that North needed to work extra hard to ensure her financial stability so that she could maintain her life in Shanghai and look after her parents in the financial way simultaneously. In this sense, North was also living as the striving individual, as evocatively described by Yan (2016).

While North was trying to seek a balance between the desiring self and a filial daughter, other participants stated that fulfilling filial obligations was challenging for them. For example, Xiaoxiao's parents expected her to find a man from a family who shared the same background as her family. However, Xiaoxiao was engaged to a man from a rural family, which resulted in continual fights with her parents. Xiaoxiao explained as follows:

> *Xiaoxiao: Although my fiancé is from a rural family, he is a responsible and a nice man. He works hard and takes good care of me. But my parents can't accept him. When I was dating him, my parents introduced another man who is from an urban family with a good financial situation and asked me to break up with my fiancé. We had many fights over this issue. They criticised me as butinghua (不听话) and unfilial. I told them that I didn't need them to decide who I should marry as an independent woman. I also told them that we won't need their help or my fiancé's parents' help to take care of our child. […] We are going to rely on ourselves […] I only want to choose what makes me happy. It seems hard for me to be a filial daughter because I can't obey my parents and my parents can't respect my choice.*

In Xiaoxiao's case, *butinghua* (不听话) meant a child disobeying their parents' wishes or demands. The disagreement about Xiaoxiao's marriage choice resulted in Xiaoxiao being defined as a disobedient daughter. According to her account, while her parents wanted her to

find a boyfriend from a good family with a stable financial situation, Xiaoxiao was looking for a husband she loved. That is to say, compared with the economic benefits that would come with a marriage, Xiaoxiao placed more emphasis on love and emotions in her search for a husband. This supports Yan's (2010a) argument that during the process of Chinese individualisation, with the rise of the desiring self (Rofel, 2007), Chinese people would be placing increasing importance on their personal life and desires such as freely chosen marriage or love. This trend has resulted in the separation of individuals from previously all-encompassing social categories such as the family, kinship and community (Yan, 2010a). Regarding future childbearing arrangements, Xiaoxiao insisted that she will not need support from the older generations to look after her children in the future, which was a sign of her withdrawing from intergenerational relations. Therefore, in this process of disembedding herself from the traditional family structure, not only can we see a portrait of the desiring self with the strong sense of taking responsibility for her future life, but also there was a divided self (Lee et al., 2011) shown in Xiaoxiao's account. According to Lee et al. (2011), in today's China, the self can be morally divided into the private self and the collective self in terms of the individual interests and collective values. As Xiaoxiao separated her own desire of finding a husband she loved from her parents' desires and expectations on finding a man with a good family background, the divided self was therefore visible.

Moreover, identifying herself as an independent woman, Xiaoxiao maintained that she should have the right to exercise free choice regarding her marriage, rather than following her parents' instructions. The rising awareness of individual rights reinforced Xiaoxiao's determination to take proactive action in terms of her marital choices and achieve 'a haven for personal happiness' (Yan, 2016, p. 245). Xiaoxiao perceived it as a personal choice that could make her happy. Such practices resulted in the further decline of the traditional filial piety (Yan, 2016). By doing this, Xiaoxiao's family life will become more individualised in relation to the tension between her own desires and collective familial values. In the interview, Xiaoxiao told me that she cared about her parents and would like to take care of them. However, when it came to the key issues that mattered to her such as a relationship, marriage and jobs, she found it difficult to reach mutual understanding and respect with her parents. As such, it appeared to be challenging for her to be the filial daughter her parents expected. Having different perceptions of the notion of filial piety may contribute to this situation.

The above accounts unveil the coexistence of competing value systems in the intergenerational relations. Liu Fengshu (2008a) notes that the traditional filial values and the values associated with individualism during the disembedding process 'confront the individual with competing and conflicting discourses that one has to come to terms with, in some ways' (p. 417). The younger generations are expected to respect filial values because they represent collective-familial values and interests that focus on selfless and self-sacrifice for the family (Liu, 2008a). In this sense, the participants need to reconcile their desires and choices concerning the personal life with their parents' demands and expectations. As shown in their accounts, it is evident that filial piety is still a commonly shared belief among these *nvboshi*. However, through 'relinquishing the hierarchical demands for subordination of the young to the old' (Yan, 2003, 2016, p. 250) many participants are moving beyond the traditional notion of filial piety. These *nvboshi* have chosen to perform alternative filial acts to be dutiful to their parents through constant striving at work. As a result, these women are granted more freedom to pursue their individual desires and goals. In addition, some participants such as Xiaoxiao tend to prioritise personal choices because they find living up to their parents' expectations may entail sacrificing their own ambitions. This reflects the ongoing contradiction between individual desires and familial interests in the intergenerational relations, and therefore constant negotiations are always needed. But this also demonstrates these *nvboshi*'s experiences of the individualisation of family life and their detachment from the intergenerational relations, which requires them to be more self-reliant and hard working to deal with the risks and problems they may face in the future. In the next section, I shift the focus to *nvboshi*'s experiences with their husbands to explore how they negotiate the balance between individual interests and collective-familial interests.

6.2 Being a Wife, a Mother and More

During the transition from a socialist-planned economy to a market economy, the Chinese family pattern has tended towards mosaic familism, constituted by a mix of traditional familism and patriarchal power, as well as modern components such as rising individualism (Ji, 2017). In this mosaic pattern, Ji (2017) emphasises that husbands and wives need to work together to negotiate between traditional norms and modern values. However, because of the retreat of the welfare state regime from private life (Yan, 2010a) and the resurgence of patriarchal values in people's everyday lives (Fincher, 2016; Gui, 2020; Ji, 2015), the

expectations of gendered family roles for women have been revived in China (Song & Ji, 2020). Even highly educated women with an established career are only granted 'limited freedom to negotiate new forms of family life' (Song & Ji, 2020, p. 12); furthermore, they are often required to 'compromise women's individual interests in the name of family well-being' (p. 12). In this sense, women's agency to pursue individual goals continues to be constrained by the traditional gender ideology and family values.

During the interviews, I found that none of the married participants' husbands had the same educational attainment as their wives. The participants claimed that although they make contributions to their families financially, the majority of domestic jobs and responsibilities fall to them. '*It's like the money I make for this family is meaningless. Only the money my husband makes it meaningful for this family*.' Yu said. Moreover, in the interviews, I was aware that these married *nvboshi* aspired towards individual goals and values, claiming that it was unacceptable for them to depend on their husbands to support them. These valuable accounts will help me to further understand the participants' interpretation of womanhood within the context of family life in contemporary Chinese society. In this section, I will examine how these *nvboshi* pursue their individual desires through various balancing acts and continuing negotiations in the family sphere.

6.2.1 'I am now putting more emphasis on my own feelings and desires.'

When we were talking about the conflicts between individual desires and family responsibilities in the interviews, these research participants kept emphasising the importance of maintaining individual desires and goals in the private sphere. Even the unmarried participants said that they will continue to pursue their dreams and life goals after they get married and have children, so that they can maintain their individuality. The participants in my study have received extensive higher education and have well-developed professional abilities. Most of them even have international study and work experience, and are being influenced by Western cultures and values. Nonetheless, these women are aware that the traditional values are still deeply rooted in their families, impacting on their agency to make choices and decisions in the private sphere. Some participants reported that their husbands did not even care about their desires and feelings, and that their contributions to the family were taken for granted. Under these circumstances, they felt that they should be braver and

pay more attention to what they needed, rather than always prioritising family and sacrificing themselves for the sake of the family. Xi's view is typical of this cohort. When I was interviewing Xi, she was in the middle of a separation. Her husband hardly participated in chores and seldom took care of their daughter. Her mother-in-law had a son-preference and thus she treated Xi and her daughter badly. As a result, Xi decided to ask for a divorce.

> *Xi: My family is a dual-income family. My husband and I basically make the same money. But, my husband is the typical traditional Chinese man. He is a shuai shou zhang gui (甩手掌柜) at home. I have to take almost all the domestic jobs and look after our daughter.[...] I think that women can take a little bit more family jobs, especially the childbearing stuff. But, I can't accept that men do nothing at home. So, I had many fights with my husbands. And, the worst part is, no matter how much I did for this family, they(her husband and her mother-in-law) don't recognise my dedication [long pause]*
>
> *Me: So, you decided to divorce?*
>
> *Xi: Yes. In the previous years, almost all my attention was given to my daughter and this family. I barely thought about my own feelings, happiness and what I want and need. Now, it is the time[...] Although I don't have my own flat in Beijing, I have a promising job and I can make money on my own. I deserve to live a life I enjoy more. I know that my future life is not easy and has many uncertainties. So, I must work harder […]. What I want is […] erm […] I want to pay more attention to myself and listen to my inner voices while I am being a mother.*

In modern China, even though the dual-income family has already become the primary type (see Xu et al., 2007; Xiao & Hong, 2010) Xi's family life was dominated by the traditional gender values. She described her husband as a *shuaishouzhanggui* in the family. I found this description quite interesting because the word has two layers of meaning in this context. Firstly, '*zhanggui*' (掌柜) can be understood as a boss or a shopkeeper, suggesting one's highest position and greatest power in a business. This description indicated her husband's superior position in her family. Secondly, '*shuaishou*' (甩手) means hands-off something, or

somebody who does not do anything in a community or in a team. Therefore, according to her account, Xi's husband can be pictured as a man who did not take on domestic responsibilities and jobs, yet was in a superior position with more power in the private sphere. In addition, Xi's family jobs and dedication were not recognised, and on the contrary were regarded as a 'should-do' by her husband and mother-in-law. This reflected the permeating traditional family values in her family, and at the same time echoed the argument that women's educational attainment and earning potential do not exempt them from the gendered role (Song & Ji, 2020).

Instead of seeking an egalitarian gender attitude in private life like other participants, Xi claimed that women should be able to take on 'a little bit more' of the domestic tasks and childbearing responsibilities than men. Her account revealed her partial agreement with the ideology of a gendered division of labour in the family and showed her expectations regarding her husband's participation in the domestic sphere. Since her husband subscribed to the traditional gender role ideology, and having lived such an unhappy and exhausting family life for a few years, Xi eventually decided to divorce, claiming that she needed to pay more attention to herself. This ideological transformation unveiled her increasing awareness of individual desires in the family (Yan, 2011). Instead of ongoing tolerance, Xi started to emphasise her own happiness and feelings in the marriage and family. Besides, in terms of the future, Xi was aware of the hardship and uncertainties and thus she showed a strong notion of self-reliance by depending on her hard work and career development. Yan (2011) notes that the individualisation of family life can be seen through the disembedding of the individual from the patriarchal order. In Xi's experience, her decision to divorce can be seen as detaching herself from the gendered hierarchy brought about by marriage and the family division of labour. By doing this, she could have more agency to pursue individual desires and values, and then be more individualised in the private sphere.

Given the limited care she gave herself before the divorce, Xi explained in the interview that she wanted to '*pay more attention to myself and listen to the inner voices*.' Getting a divorce can be seen as a way of levelling up individual desires in the family sphere. Besides, despite Xi placing greater importance on individual feelings and happiness than before, that did not necessarily mean that she was not fulfilling her mothering responsibilities. On the contrary, Xi still cared about her daughter as much as she can. In other words, she was still meeting the demands of being a parent in a way that her husband did not have to.

In addition to Xi, Yi is another participant who shared similar views regarding individual desires in family life. After finishing her PhD in the UK, she returned back to China and had been working in a top university for two years when I interviewed her. However, Yi was quite dissatisfied with her working conditions and daily work arrangements, so she was working in the university while seeking new job opportunities. Afterwards, her previous colleague in the UK offered her a three-year contract in a research institution. Following a long discussion with her husband , Yi finally accepted the offer.

Yi: After I got the offer, I really didn't know how to choose. My family needs me. Working abroad for three years makes me feel like I am an irresponsible woman for my family.

Me: What do you mean 'irresponsible woman'?

Yi: Well, after women get married, we need to pay attention to our family. It doesn't mean that you need to entirely focus on family and are not allowed to develop a career. It means that you need to consider more family well-being and plans. For example, my husband and I were planning on having a kid. Working abroad will affect our plan. So, at the beginning, I was considering rejecting this offer because this baby plan is very important, not just for my husband and me, but also for our parents and parent-in-laws.

Me: Then why did you decide to accept the offer?

Yi: To be honest, I am really expecting to make some achievements in my career. This job will benefit my career. I really wanted to take it. [a short pause] I often think about whether or not my personal interests must compromise for family needs. In the future, if some other things conflict with family, do I continue to compromise? So, I was thinking, as a married woman, I need to consider family needs, but as an independent person, I also need to consider my own wants [...] Then, I had a long discussion with my husband and we finally decided to postpone the baby plan.

When Yi started to look for a new job, she was planning to find one in Beijing rather than abroad. She told me that she shares domestic tasks with her husband and both of them contribute to the family finances. As a wife, Yi had a strong sense of family responsibility. Working abroad indicated that she would be withdrawing from the domestic arena temporarily, leaving all the family and elder-care responsibilities to her husband. In this regard, it will break the current balance of labour division in her family, suggesting that the stability and continuity of her family life will not be maintained. That is to say, their family well-being might be to some extent undermined by the participant.

In addition, from her account it can be seen that Yi was caught in the contradiction of the traditional-modern mosaic family (Ji, 2015, 2017). On the one hand, Yi admitted that married women should '*consider more family well-being and plans.*' Meanwhile, because of the baby plan, she thought about sacrificing the job opportunity when she received the offer. This implied that she had relatively conservative family values. According to Yi, the baby plan was crucial to her family, and associated with everyone's well-being. That is to say, interrupting this family plan would result in negative effects on her family and jeopardise the collective-familial interests. Yi thus perceived herself as an irresponsible woman if she accepted the offer. On the other hand, Yi's narratives elucidated her 'modern desires' (Ji, 2017, p. 9). She placed great value on her career and aspirations for professional achievements. At the same time, she was very clear about the benefits of this job for advancing her future career and increasing her financial clout. As such, she also had a strong desire to accept this rare job opportunity. Under the traditional-modern mosaic, Yi would have found it hard to make the choice.

In terms of making the final decision, Yi underwent much self-reflection on the merits of pursuing individual interests versus meeting familial needs. At the beginning of her narrative, she revealed her intention to reject the job so that the baby plan could go ahead. However, as a married woman, she was worried that she might need to consistently sacrifice her own desires and interests for family in the future. And so, after a long negotiation with her husband, she finally chose to accept the job offer and temporarily postponed the baby plan. In other words, Yi chose her personal interests over family interests in this case. Yi's practice invoked the notion of 'a divided self' (Lee et al., 2011). In the case of Yi, after she received the offer, her initial response was to evaluate the influence of this job opportunity on her baby plan. Realising the contradiction between these two things, she was considering making a

sacrifice for the sake of family. Then, through self-reflection on her own needs and family demands, she chose to fulfil her own expectation in this case, revealing the notion of the divided self. The aim of her making this choice was to gain more working experiences and progress her career in the future. In this process, her personal interests had gained more emphasis in the family sphere.

As illustrated by the experiences of Xi and Yi, we can see that these women were in partial agreement with the traditional gender ideology and family values. They had either made sacrifices for the family or had prioritised family interests when personal desires contradicted with the collectivity. This resonates with Ji's (2015) study of Chinese educated professional women who partially subscribed to the patriarchal norms and would make compromises when necessary within the context of the traditional-modern mosaic. Yet, in the participants' accounts, there emerged an increased emphasis on individual desires and values through constant negotiations and self-reflections. In this regard, the divided self was visible. Kleinman (2011) argues that as a divided self, Chinese women who are getting away the patriarchal constraints of marriage and family are in an ongoing quest for 'meaning includes a struggle for a valued identity and status' (p. 275) and having a better life they value. By giving more emphasis on individual needs, these *nvboshi* could gain some freedom and space to care about themselves from the family responsibilities and ties and then adapt their practices to maintain a balance between individual desires and family obligations. In the next section, I discuss the experiences of those participants who did not accept the traditional gender ideology and values, and evaluate their attempts to balance individual desires and family obligations.

6.2.2 'I don't want to sacrifice for the family and I will strive for my own life.'

Unlike the participants mentioned above, some other *nvboshi* reported in the interviews that they had always attached much importance to personal needs and desires, and had tried their best to ensure that those individual goals would not be sacrificed in the name of familial needs. At the same time, they did not agree with the traditional gender ideology. However, faced with the tension between individual pursuits and family interests, these *nvboshi* found that they not only had to deal with gendered expectations from the outside but also sometimes had to balance their own conflicting desires. Monjin's account can represent this view.

Monjin: I care about my husband and my son very much. Fulfilling the responsibilities as a mother and a wife is my own want. At the same time, I attach high importance to my career development and achieving the goal of financial independence. [a short pause] But, I often feel that it is very challenging for me to seek a balance between these things […] Such as, I often need to travel to different cities to attend conferences. That will limit my time for my husband and my son. In addition, my mother and my mother-in-law give me extra pressure for a long time. In my family, we've had a nanny since I gave birth to my son. And my husband also takes part in the domestic jobs. But my mother and my mother-in-law still criticise me bugujia (不顾家) and that I care too much about developing my career and making money. They think that I need to spend more time with my family and child. All those old values they are talking about are definitely rejected by me […] Life is really not easy for a woman who wants to be a mother, a wife and a person who has own pursuits [sigh]

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Monjin was working as an associate professor in a university, while running her own small business outside of the university. From the way in which she consistently worked hard in her career (see Chapter Five), we can see how much Monjin cared about her own professional development, but her account also reflected the value she placed on family relationships. Unlike those women who identified family responsibilities as a burden imposed by traditions and gender, Monjin conceived of her domestic obligations as an individual desire or pursuit. She placed the same emphasis on family and career development. In the interview, Monjin shared a few stories about when her son was little. She told me that if she needed to fly to another city to attend conferences, she took her son and nanny together. Otherwise, she had to miss the conferences. Monjin claimed that the moment she became a mother, she wanted to fulfil the mothering responsibility. But, this did not mean that she must sacrifice her career. Therefore, Monjin had been trying very hard to maintain a balance between these two goals.

Recent studies of urban, educated Chinese females confirm that such women are willing to compromise and sacrifice more for their husbands and families, even though they also place

value on their own career and independence (see Ji, 2015; Gui, 2020; Xie, 2021; Zuo, 2003). That is to say, these educated urban women agree with the traditional gender-role expectations and show the modern desires simultaneously, reflecting the traditional-modern mosaic pattern. However, the participants like Monjin showed the opposite view. Confronting the gender expectations of the old generation, she did not intend to make a compromise for the sake of those expectations. As her account showed, she was completely invested in her career and making money to support herself and her family, as opposed to conforming to the family-child-centred ideology shared by her mother and mother-in-law, who called her '*bugujia*' (不顾家).This term can be translated as not caring about family, or not spending much time on family. They criticised Monjin's ambition to develop her career and make money as limiting the time and energy she spent on family and her son. This can be understood as a critique of the individualist ideology held by the participant in the private sphere, revealing incompatibility with the traditional family ideology. Even though Monjin had hired a nanny to help with the domestic tasks, her mother and mother-in-law expected her to spend more time on family and child. In other words, the participant's gender role as a mother and a wife was still prioritised by the older generation. Consequently, Monjin had to resist the external expectations from the traditional older generation, which was rooted in the traditional gender role ideology in the Chinese family. This supports the finding of the previous studies that growing up within the context of the One-Child Policy, women, especially those educated ones with professional abilities, are not confined to the self-sacrificing ideology in the family sphere (Yang, 2020).

Monjin said in the interview that, in addition to dealing with the external expectations, accomplishing family responsibilities and pursuing her career development and financial independence were all individual wants. In order to achieve these goals, Monjin had to juggle these desires. However, in reality, it appeared that these individual desires were sometimes in conflict. Therefore, she was having to navigate back and forth to balance her own conflicting individual desires. As a result, participants like Monjin may need to work extra hard and spend more energy on dealing with these desires so that they can achieve a balance in their family life.

In the case of Monjin, although the older generation still held quite conservative gender values, her husband, according to her, tended to participate in the domestic arena as much as

possible, which to a certain degree reduced the domestic burden for Monjin and enabled her to devote more time and energy to developing her career. But, this situation was not common among the participants. Most of them expressed that if they wanted to pursue their goals in the family, they needed to do more work. Otherwise, '*you just give up what you want*' Christina said. When I was interviewing Christina, she shared her experience of a visiting research trip to a university in the USA, taking her son with her due to the lack of family support. Speaking about the reasons for this, her extract is as follows:

> *Christina: My husband said he can't take care of son on his own for half a year and he has a job to do. My mother-in-law asked me to give up this opportunity because this family and my son need me. Of course I know that I have the responsibility to look after my son. But I also want to grasp this opportunity which will contribute to my career. Therefore, I proposed that we can get a nanny to cover this period. But he rejected this and he wanted me to stay anyway so that he can focus on his work. We had many fights […] Finally, I had to take my son with me to the USA. It was a tough time for me, but I was glad that I didn't give up this opportunity. Why should married women compromise their own interests for family, children and husband's career? I buganxin (不甘心).*
>
> *Me: What do you mean buganxin (不甘心)?*
>
> *Christina: Well, I strove very much to get my PhD and I work very hard. Just because I am not making the same money as my husband, then I need to make a compromise for my family and his work. Why? My career is also important for me. So, facing this incredible opportunity, I won't buganxin (不甘心) sacrifice it. I would rather do more as long as I can insist on my goal and my pursuits […] Although it is very exhausting and makes me cry sometimes.*

Christina's staying would maintain the current labour division in her family and avoid domestic distractions for her husband, so that he would be able to focus on his work. In other words, Christina's husband regarded domestic jobs as something that would distract him and furthermore prevent him from focusing on his own job. In this regard, the participant was

treated more as a committed family woman than a professional woman who had her own career and interests. In this dual-income family, the participant's domestic role was more appreciated by her husband than her professional role. Christina's mother-in-law even directly asked her to give up the opportunity as the family needed a mother and a wife. Their response to my participant's job opportunity unveiled the fundamentally gender-based structure of the family relations and conservative gender labour divisions in her family, which may have constrained Christina's decision-making and left her in a dilemma. Xie (2021) argues that educated Chinese women's career development and earnings are constrained by the male primary breadwinner role for the family, mirroring the male dominance in the public life. In Christina's family, even though both of them worked and made money for the financial stability of the family, her husband regarded himself as the main provider and the participant was still treated as a homemaker by her mother-in-law. As a result, Christina may have limited choices in this situation.

As a mother, Christina clearly understood her family responsibilities, whilst placing great value on individual pursuits. In order not to sacrifice the opportunity and at the same time to ensure that the family would be well taken care of while she was away, she suggested having a nanny. However, her husband even rejected this suggestion. His rejection can be interpreted as a dissatisfaction with the participant's selection of career over family responsibilities. It resonates with Song and Lai's (2020) finding that urban educated women will be criticised by their conservative husbands for prioritising individual career development over family obligations, revealing the conflicting trend of individualism and familism in Chinese family structure (Song & Ji, 2020). Consequently, Christina may find it more difficult to seek her desires and fulfil her family obligations simultaneously, finding these two goals as incompatible in the domestic sphere.

Finally, Christina had to choose to take her son with her so that she could go on her visiting research trip while fulfilling the mothering responsibility. She told me that this was the only choice she could make in that situation. During her visit to the USA, Christina had to cope with an extensive double burden (Zuo, 2013) which she described as 'a tough time for me.' Recent studies have found that the competing ideologies and values (Song & Ji, 2020) and the structural constraints in Chinese family, such as 'the state's retreat from both providing social services and actively promoting egalitarian gender ideology' (Ji et al., 2017, p. 774), have intensified women's disadvantaged position in the family (Cook & Dong, 2011; Ji,

2017; Ji et al., 2017). Under these uneasy circumstances, in terms of seeking a balance between individual goals and family responsibilities, Christina needed to do more to maintain her desires and fulfil the family obligations. That meant that Christina might have to constantly juggle work and domestic responsibilities. This situation was also reported by other *nvboshi* later in the interviews. They claimed that without the family support from the older generation, husbands' involvement or hired nannies, the family jobs, especially the childbearing responsibilities primarily fell back on them, which constrained their career advancement and other individual life plans.

As Christina's account shown, she never considered giving up and, conversely, worked hard to meet her own goals and family responsibilities. This was the same with the other participants, including the unmarried ones. These *nvboshi* clearly objected to the traditional gendered value of sacrificing individual careers and pursuits for family and their husbands' career development, but they recognised their family obligations. This is different from previous finding that the educated career women would rather take on more childcare responsibility and housework to support their husbands' career development, even though they share the financial burden with their husbands (Zuo, 2003, 2005; Xie, 2021). This seems impossible for the participants in this study to accept. Compared with the participants in previous research, my participants tend to act in the opposite way, emphasising that they would strive for self-development and achieving a balance between their individual pursuits and housework. As a result, these *nvboshi* may experience extensive exhaustion and hardship in the private sphere, which makes their family life more challenging.

Facing pressure to compromise for the sake of her family, Christina used *buganxin* (不甘心) to express her attitude. She was not the only participant in this study to use this word. *Buganxin* (不甘心) can be understood as being 'unwilling to do something', or 'unable to accept (doing) something'. It indicates a kind of strong, personal willingness not to do or not to accept to (do) something. As mentioned above, none of the participants' husbands had the same educational status as their wives and some participants were on the same financial level as their husbands. Plus, even the participants like Christina who made less money than their husbands had shown reluctance to be confined by the traditional ideology of women sacrificing for family, instead valuing their efforts to get a PhD degree and emphasising their career prospects. This reflects the fact that within this group of *nvboshi*, there exists an

internalised self-esteem that pushes them to pursue self-development and achieve success in their professional lives, even if they are married, rather than following the traditional female life trajectory. In this regard, it appears reasonable that these *nvboshi* would resist the traditional values in the family sphere. In order to achieve this goal, these women may need to gain more bargaining power to negotiate between pursuing their individual desires and fulfilling the family obligations through constant striving. Yu's account reflects this view.

> *Yu: My husband is very traditional and his income is bigger than mine. He hardly participates in housework and childbearing. So, although I did not agree with this traditional gender ideology, I used to do most of the domestic tasks because I had limited choices. But, I buganxin (不甘心) to live my life as he wants and I don't want to be tied up by my wife and mother role.*
>
> *Me: What do you mean 'don't want to be tied up'?*
>
> *Yu: It means, except for being a mother and a wife, I want to seek more development in terms of my life. I want to explore my life while I am being a mother and a wife. So, I have been very striving to get more power. I finished my PhD study and because of my job in this university, I got a Beijing hukou[11] (北京户口). Then, my husband and my son got it as well. Besides, I also work as a part-time freelancer for my previous company. I learnt how to invest, such as buying stock and I make more money than before. All these things make me feel more powerful to negotiate with my husband even though the negotiations are not going very well […] In fact, I am not just striving for making more money on my own, but also striving for gaining more self-determination and autonomy for myself in the family sphere.*

In Yu's account, although she did not believe in the traditional gender ideology, her uncompetitive earnings made it hard to negotiate the domestic division of labour with her husband. Zhang et al. (2008) have shown that married women are disadvantaged in family

[11] Beijing hukou: hukou is Chinese household registration system. Getting a Beijing hukou means that my participant and her family could be able to enjoy all the benefits that only provided for local citizen. It should be noted that it is extremely hard to get a Beijing hukou because the amount of hukou is limited every year. Therefore, my participant got Beijing hukou on her own can be a big deal for her family. In the previous six years in Beijing, Yu and her husband did not get one until Yu found a job in the university.

life because of the gender gaps in career development and earnings in post-reform China. That is to say, due to the unequal distribution of financial power between her and her husband, Yu felt powerless when it came to the domestic labour division in the family. As such, she used to encounter a tremendous burden of housework and childbearing, and felt *buganxin* to have a family-committed life as her husband expected. In terms of her constrained family life, Yu's account reflected her aspiration to pursue individual values beyond family because she did not want to '*be tied up by my wife and mother role*.' This perception of gender role is different from the portrait of married women in Chinese patriarchal discourse, as '*xianneizhu*' (贤内助,virtuous domestic assistant). This word is usually used to 'praise the domestic assistance that a good wife provides for her husband to succeed outside' (Xie, 2021, p. 205). In this context, it is mostly these *xianneizhu* who would make the career sacrifice to go back home when necessary to support their husbands' careers. Apparently, most participants in this study do not belong to this cohort. Instead of being a *xianneizhu* who always prioritises familial needs, majority of the *nvboshi* I interviewed show their strong aspirations to be a desiring self in the negotiation with the family obligations.

Similar to other participants mentioned above, even though Yu expressed her aspiration to gain more freedom and space to explore life options, she emphasised her gender role and responsibilities as a mother and a wife in the family. In other words, what Yu was looking for was to liberate herself from a life dominated by the traditional gender ideology her husband upheld, rather than rejecting her family obligations. This was also evidenced in the other participants' accounts. In this regard, their husbands' attitudes towards family obligations, labour division and negotiations were influential. In order to achieve her goal, Yu realised that she had to gain more bargaining power. Therefore, Yu quit her job and spent five years getting her PhD degree. During her studies, she worked as a part-time freelancer for her previous company otherwise she would fully depend on her husband due to zero income as a student. As for the outsiders who were living in Beijing, Yu successfully got a Beijing *hukou* through her job in the university. Her husband and son also benefited from it and had an official local citizenship identity. And also they can enjoy welfare benefits only available to local people. '*These welfare benefits are extremely important for my family.*' Yu said. In this sense, Yu had been a provider for her family in a non-financial way. In addition, she had increased her financial potential through the various practices mentioned in her extract. All

these things functioned as increased bargaining power for Yu to negotiate with her husband in relation to her 'fallback position' (Song & Ji, 2020, p. 13) in family life.

In Yu's account, 'striving' was frequently mentioned. It seemed that striving had become her life attitude. According to Yan (2014), the striving individual must be 'industrious, self-disciplined, calculating, and pragmatic' (p. 186), taking self-responsibility and striving for self-interest and well-being in the sphere of private life and public life. From Yu's interview extract, it was evident that in order to free herself from the unequal family labour division and the patriarchal order to pursue individual values and self-development, she had conducted assorted practices and worked extra hard to gain more bargaining power so that she could be able to negotiate with her husband in the family sphere. That reflected Yan's definition of the striving individual. As shown in Yu's account, making more money was not the only aim she was striving for. She was also striving for a life with more self-determination and autonomy that she enjoyed. By doing this, Yu may achieve her pursuit of being a mother and a wife, as well as exploring more life options.

6.3 Conclusion

The first finding of this chapter is that for my participants whose educational attainment is higher than their husbands' and have strong self-esteem to advance themselves, these women place high importance on their own PhD career development and pursuing individual values beyond family. However, the unequal distribution of domestic jobs and family obligations leads my participants to hardly focus on their career progression and individual pursuits. Therefore, they intend to face the tension in the intergenerational relations and the family relationships. This tension obviously originates from the contradiction between traditional Chinese cultural expectations on women and my participants' own desires and expectations. In order to deal with this situation, my participants have been in a constant negotiation and resistance in terms of the family responsibilities and individual desires. They have conducted various balancing acts to ensure that they would not sacrifice their own careers for the sake of family, even though this means that these *nvboshi* may experience more hard work and spend more energy. These women's actual pursuit of individual desires and expectations depict the rise of the individual in the private sphere, reflecting 'the ongoing negotiation and contestation between the rising individual and the various forms of collectivity' (Yan, 2010b,

p. 15). Yan (2011) argues that individual desires for rights, freedom, material comforts and individual happiness have gained legitimacy and become the centre of everyday life during the process of individualisation of family life. As such, along with the idea of living one's own life (Yan, 2010a), there emerges a space for these *nvboshi* to pay more attention to their own needs and feelings, as well as the actual pursuit of these desires in the private life. In this regard, these women can act out the desiring self (Rofel, 2007) in the family sphere and furthermore distance themselves from their patriarchal relations by seeking a balance of their own life goals and family obligations. However, it should be noted that the ideological conflicts in the family are still noticeable, which is reflected in the participants' accounts. There may be a lack of mutual understanding regarding individual choices and family expectations between parents and daughters. Meanwhile, the different attitudes towards gender ideology, family roles and labour division may cause more tensions among the participants, their husbands, parents, and in-laws. As such, these *nvboshi* may be put in an opposite situation in the balancing and negotiation given that their desires and pursuits have not been recognised and understood.

The second finding of this chapter is that, facing the conflict between individual desires and collective interests, individual agency of the participants is formulated in a way of being a hybrid of a divided self (Lee et al., 2011), a desiring self (Rofel, 2007) and the striving individual (Yan, 2014) in their family lives. Most of the participants proactively placed more emphasis on their own desires and took actions accordingly, and then worked hard to increase their ability and power to deal with the structural constraints in the private sphere. However, some would still make a compromise in order to maintain the collective interests. In order to liberate themselves from the constraints and unequal relations in the family, these *nvboshi* need to work extra hard to balance and negotiate family duties so that they could also strive for their own desires and values. At the same time, it should be noted that *nvboshi*'s actual pursuit of individual values and career development, and their detachment from the heavy domestic burden may cause new critique on their choices and behaviours As shown in my participants' accounts. Therefore, new tensions in the family relationships might happen and as a result, these desiring women need to gain more power and resources to exercise their agency. In this sense, individual agency would be highly advanced and cherished.

Chapter Seven
Conclusion

When I decided to do my PhD study, my uncle said 'Doing a Master's is enough for a woman. A Master's degree will definitely help you to find a good job. Why do you want to do a PhD and be a nvboshi anyway? Don't be such a xiangbukai (想不开).'

Lisa

Lisa's uncle used the word '*xiangbukai*' (想不开) to describe her choice to do a PhD, a word normally used to describe somebody with strong aspirations to do something that other people see it as stressful and difficult. Lisa's uncle's account reveals two facts about contemporary Chinese society. The first is that a young woman choosing to do a PhD will not always be supported or understood by the people around her. Some will argue that doing a PhD might create more problems than it solves, given the fact that Chinese *nvboshi* have been stigmatised as a 'third gender' for a very long time and are not faring well in the marriage market. This is why Lisa's uncle could not understand her choice to do a PhD. The second reveal, which is a very interesting one, is that most people see a Master's degree as the most appropriate level of education for a young woman. On the one hand, when it comes to recruitment, apart from those jobs which require a PhD degree (such as university lecturer) the highest degree needed is a Master's, which is why Lisa's uncle thought that it would be enough for her when job-hunting. On the other hand, as Lisa noted: '*a woman with a Master's degree will not be a threat to men, on the contrary, this demonstrates that the woman is knowledgeable and would be good at educating her children in the future.*' Lisa's view was echoed by many other participants in the interviews. During the interviews, they talked about the difference between being a MA and being a PhD, and I still remember Nai's comment: '*It's like there is a magical boundary between a female MA and a nvboshi. When you cross this boundary to become a nvboshi, you are a third gender and men can't control you.*' It is therefore essential to centre on *nvboshi* and investigate their lived experience, rather than simply including them in studies under the broad umbrella of 'educated professional women' with other degree-educated women.

At the National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) earlier this year, President Xi Jinping gave an important speech outlining the national expectations of Chinese women. He urged Chinese women to become *fendouzhe* (奋斗者, strivers) by following their personal dreams and actively participating in the modernisation of China and the construction of Chinese socialism. This discourse echoed the famous slogan from the Mao era that 'Women can hold up the half sky'. Even in today's China, President Xi keeps emphasising women's functions as 'the half sky' during the process of Chinese socialism construction. In this sense, the national expectations are encouraging women to help the state develop through their striving towards individual self-development and personal life goals.

It is important to see that the interplay of the legitimisation of various desires (Rofel, 2007) and the idea of living one's own life (Yan, 2010a) has imposed changes on the conservative gender order (Gaetano, 2014) and further attracted women to explore new life patterns, such as singleness. For my participants, on the one hand, they are a group of intellectual women with professional expertise and career prospects, with strong aspirations to achieve self-actualisation and advance in their professional lives. Unlike their mothers' generation, whose lives are full of financial instability and self-sacrifice with limited educational options, the participants in my study have benefited much from the opportunities created by the One-Child Policy, economic reforms since the 1980s and the ongoing modernisation of Chinese society. They have been empowered to pursue personal desires and individual values. On the other hand, marriage and family are still nearly universal in contemporary Chinese society (Yeung & Hu, 2013) and therefore a woman will be judged on her ability to perform traditional gender roles in the domestic area, regardless of her socioeconomic status or educational attainment (Tian, 2013; Xia & Zhou, 2003). Moreover, with the implementation of the Two-Child policy (2015) and Three-Child policy (2021), Chinese women are now more likely to encounter constraints and pressures in terms of their life choices.

7.1 Overview and Main Argument of the Study

I began this thesis by sharing the three episodes that led me to embark on this research exploring the lived experiences of *nvboshi* in contemporary Chinese society. These stories contributed to my thinking on the motivations of women doing a PhD and how their lives

have been influenced by the stigmatisation and prejudice on *nvboshi*, as well as facing the external pressure and misunderstanding, how they deal with the difficulties and pursue their dreams. The reason I wanted to explore *nvboshi*'s experiences was not only because of the limited studies, but also because these women have shown some peculiar characteristics. First of all, among all the degree-educated women, *nvboshi* is the only group of women with a specific stigma, as the 'third gender' in Chinese society. This stigma has resulted in the passive separation of *nvboshi* from normal women, placing them in opposition to men and women. Secondly, compared with *nanboshi* (male PhDs), these women are much less likely to gain the recognition they deserve or to be treated as equals, in spite of the fact that they have worked just as hard as their male counterparts to get a PhD degree. Given their gender, it seems that the educational attainment and professional achievements of the *nvboshi* are not worth mentioning. On the contrary, these qualities have become somewhat detrimental factors that impact on their lives. Thirdly, when it came to talking about motivations for doing a PhD in the interviews, many participants told me that their friends, family members and even parents could not understand '*why I want to be a nvboshi'*. They worried that doing a PhD would change these women's identities and that their life experiences would be influenced and changed accordingly. However, Nannan told me that her family was very supportive of her younger male cousin doing a PhD and regarded it as something for the family to be proud of. Given these characteristics of *nvboshi*, I argue that studying their experiences will unveil the mysterious mask of *nvboshi* and ensure their voices can be heard by the outside so that we can have a justified perception of these women. Meanwhile, through looking at their experiences and struggles, we can see the changes in women's perceptions of womanhood in contemporary China.

In order to collect first-hand data, I interviewed 33 *nvboshi* with different relationship backgrounds and work experiences, collecting their stories and experiences of singlehood and relationships, career constraints and development, as well as family obligations and individual desires. Through the analysis of these accounts, I found that two key words characterise my participants' experiences: striving and desiring. My participants kept repeating and emphasising self-reliance in the interviews, showing a strong aspiration to gain autonomy and self-determination in every aspect of their lives. Facing the dual discriminations of the 'third gender' and the 'leftover woman', most of my participants maintained a positive attitude towards being single and regarded their single status as a result of self-selection, rather than being left behind by the marriage market. For these *nvboshi*,

their celebrated singleness allowed them independence and freedom from domestic burdens and marriage, and reflected my participants' objection to the traditional perception of womanhood. This finding supports Zhang's (2020) study of single professional women, which finds that educated professional women have constructed an asset identity to 'bypass the realm of marriage and motherhood' (p. 49). Zhang critiques the patriarchal definition of womanhood through marriage and motherhood, a view reflected in my participants' single lifestyles. I would argue that an ideology of singlehood has emerged, one which is favoured by these *nvboshi*, who through the construction of individualised single lifestyles has intensified this ideology. In addition, there is a small number of *nvboshi* who regarded being single as a status that made them feel ashamed in their everyday lives.

Instead of getting married at a certain age, most *nvboshi* welcomed their singleness. For these women, embracing the single life bravely can be seen as a practice of their actual pursuit of individual desires. Living a single life enabled them to focus on self-development and pursue individual values beyond family and marriage. Besides, the promotion of singlehood demonstrated a process that was gradually setting *nvboshi* free from most previous all-encompassing social categories such as family, marriage and kinship (Yan, 2010a). During this process, they needed to actively take responsibility for their own lives, given that they cannot get financial stability from a marriage, and the parameters of their new single lifestyles had been constructed accordingly. Through the construction of new lifestyles, women's individual agency was seen. As such, these *nvboshi* were placing high value on self-reliance and they needed to strive for more power and resources to develop their agency so that they could be able to deal with the uncertainties generated by their single life. By doing so, *nvboshi* can continue to enjoy their single life.

As well as relationships, I also discussed another important aspect of *nvboshi*'s lives, which was their career development. All of the 33 participants were very ambitious and some of them even go as far as to claim that '*Marriage may not be a must. But, career is really important for me.*' They all regarded career as the most effective way of demonstrating their professional expertise and abilities, and consequently took their jobs very seriously and were trying very hard to advance their careers as much as they can. In doing so, my participants expected to gain individual rewards beyond family and marriage, rather than being recognised as a knowledgeable mother who took on the responsibility of educating children at home. According to Chapter Five, however, we can see that developing a career was not

that easy. One of the biggest challenges that my participants faced was the unequal treatment they received compared to their male counterparts. As noted before, if a person wants to be a lecturer or researcher in a Chinese university, a PhD degree is the most necessary qualification. Since both men and women are allowed to do a PhD, my participants quite naturally assumed that they would be treated equally and granted equal opportunities to their male counterparts. But, in reality, these *nvboshi* were suffering from the various patriarchal practices imposed by the gendered structure of the academia. Rather than being treated as professional researchers/lecturers, they were playing more misrecognised roles that vividly demonstrated the unequal gendered treatments in the workplace. Surprisingly, it is not just their male leaders but also their male peers who were being unfair. Arguably, such practices reflected the fact that *nvboshi* are devalued and moreover still assumed to be family-oriented, regardless of their achievements and contributions. This implied the unequal power distribution within the institutions and illustrated that the ideology of gender and gender role has permeated the symbolic patriarchal order within the Chinese academia. From my participants' experiences in the workplace, it can be seen that gender was the key factor that contributed to their struggles. For single *nvboshi*, there was pressure to find a boyfriend and end their single life; for those who are married, there was pressure either to have a child at the ideal age, or to spend more time on family. For both types of participants, this constrained their career development.

As shown in their narratives, these *nvboshi* were very open about expressing their desires to be promoted and make more money of their own. In order to achieve their goals, they had to employ coping strategies to deal with the barriers that constrained them in the workplace. I would argue that these coping strategies not only reflect their agency and ability to take self-responsibility for sorting out and fixing the structural problems in their working lives, but also demonstrate their ongoing striving to lead a self-reliant life.

In Chapter Six, I primarily focused on *nvboshi*'s negotiations between their own interests and family obligations to parents and husbands. There were two big challenges facing *nvboshi* in their private lives. One was the conflict between individual interests and collective interests; the other was the influence of the traditional gender ideology and old family values in the private sphere. Half-baked Chinese individualisation (Yan, 2016b) encourages individual responsibility to compete and develop, but also places an emphasis on individual obligations to the family. Under these circumstances, Yan (2016b) argues that Chinese individuals are

pushed to strive for a larger group, namely family, rather than merely for themselves. That is to say, within the context of family, these *nvboshi*'s hard work and individual pursuits are supposed to contribute to the family's well-being and interests, rather than just themselves. Meanwhile, the conservative gender role ideology and traditional family values held by most of my participants' husbands and the older generation were still having a decisive impact on my participants' family life experiences. As such, in order to pursue individual desires and release themselves from the constraints of the traditional filial obligations and the lion's share of gendered housework, these *nvboshi* had chosen to conduct ongoing negotiations. During the negotiating process, a hybrid of the divided self (Lee et al., 2011), a desiring self (Rofel, 2007) and the striving individual (Yan, 2014) can be found in these women. By identifying their family responsibilities and valuing individual desires, these women were performing as a striving individual to increase their financial power to negotiate the family duties. In this sense, these *nvboshi*'s family lives were more individualised. Meanwhile, there existed an internalised self-esteem driving these *nvboshi*. As Hao said: '*as a nvboshi, I can't accept living my life following the traditional expectations of women. I must have my own career, individual values and have the ability to live my life on my own. Otherwise, why did I work so hard to get a PhD degree?*' Other participants shared similar views in the interviews and their accounts showed *nvboshi*'s strong self-esteem drives them to live a life of their own through hard work, rather than by seeking stability through marriage and family. This resonates with the privileged Chinese daughters in Xie's (2021) study, whose internalised self-esteem also 'drives them to strive for a better life and happiness' (p. 257).

By analysing the lived experiences and various practices of *nvboshi* in relation to their relationships, career and family life, I argue that these *nvboshi* have employed individual strategies and the constant negotiations to navigate a patriarchal culture in ways that could support self-development and their own pursuit of individual goals and desires in their lives. During this process, these women's lives are showing an ongoing trend of individualisation in China by disembedding themselves from the external social constraints which include the normative female life course, patriarchal traditions and old value system. However, the enduring structural constraints and the widening tensions between individual interests and collective values would continue to exist and impact on these women. As such, in order to deal with these situations, these *nvboshi* need to strive to become more self-reliant subjects. Meanwhile, the development of individual agency has played an active role in potentially empowering these women and furthermore has contributed to the greater exercise of personal

choices and the actual pursuit of individual desires. Arguably these *nvboshi* have constructed a new womanhood on the basis of their lived experiences within the process of individualisation, which I call striving and desiring womanhood. The idea of striving and desiring womanhood contributes to the redefinition of traditional womanhood brought about by the modern values of independence, autonomy and late marriage (see Gaetano, 2014; Liu, 2014; Zhang, 2020), at the same time placing more value on individual agency.

7.2 The Main Contributions of this Study

So far, there has only been a limited number of studies like mine, which is centred on the lived experiences of *nvboshi* in contemporary China, a group of women with the highest educational degree yet stigmatised as the 'third gender' by mainstream society. Liu's (2008a) study of young adult only-children university students, Yang's (2020) study on work and family life of the post-90s generation in China, Skoglund's (2020) study on the intergenerational obligations and career development of educated professional women, Zarafonetis's (2014) research on the intimate relationships of educated urban women and Xie's (2021) on the privileged daughters of one-child families are examples. A few *nvboshi* were recruited in these studies, while in other research specifically focusing on *nvboshi*, scholars primarily explore their relationship experiences and marriage issues (Gu, 2015; Zhang, 2020). That is to say, if people want to take a closer look at the lived experience of *nvboshi*, the existing research does not allow for this. My study provides first-hand empirical data showing the experiences and difficulties faced by these highly educated professional women in urban China. It also analyses *nvboshi*'s practices and attitudes towards living a life of one's own within the context of Chinese individualisation, a previously under-explored issue.

In light of this, centring on the experiences of Chinese *nvboshi*, this study has made two major contributions: the first is to the existing studies on Chinese educated women with career prospects; the second is the application of Yan Yunxiang's argument on Chinese individualisation.

7.2.1 Contributions to the current studies on educated women

Chinese *nvboshi* are famous for being the 'third gender' in Chinese society. The most common way that the majority people come to know about these women is from media reports. As discussed in the opening chapter, *nvboshi* are framed quite negatively by the mass media, which uses labels such as 'struggling to find a husband', 'twisted personalities', and 'boring and unattractive' to define them. One could argue that *nvboshi* are living in a society where these labels and prejudices are applied to them every single day. Their real lives, stories and values have barely become known to outsiders, hence the aim of this thesis, to advance knowledge about this field. Analysing their unique experiences, the difficulties they encounter, as well as their coping strategies and attitudes regarding intimate relationships, career and family, this study not only enriches the existing knowledge on the contradictions highly-educated professional women must negotiate in their everyday lives, but also contributes to the study of the development of women's agency in Chinese society.

Firstly, in terms of the experience of being single, my analysis complements and expands Gaetano's (2014), Zhang's (2020) and Gui's (2020) studies on well-educated professional women in urban China. Through in-depth interviews, the existing studies have already articulated professional women's critique of the 'leftover women' discourse: 'leftover women' are reinterpreted as 'victorious women' by Zhang's (2020) participants and being single is regarded as a choice by Gui's (2020) participants. In addition to this, these women have also challenged the traditional perception of womanhood as mothering and marriage by constructing alternative social identities, while promoting egalitarian gender relations in marriage. On the basis of these studies, my research has further explored how being single is experienced by the *nvboshi* sub-group. In terms of being a single *nvboshi* in China, my participants show dissimilar perceptions. A minority articulate quite negative attitudes and share their experiences of feeling ashamed about being single. I define their experiences as undesirable singleness. Most participants, however, are living their single lives in a quite progressive way and have constructed individualised single lifestyles accordingly, which I call celebrated singleness. According to the existing studies, women have mostly positive attitudes towards single life, although Gaetano (2014) and Gui (2020) find that their participants also express contradictory ideas regarding their own aspirations and the traditional expectations of women. On the one hand, they emphasise independence, autonomy and an egalitarian relationship; on the other hand, they are trying to shoulder their gendered expectations because of the ideology of filial piety and the traditional gender norms. By contrast, my participants who embrace singlehood are more liberal. They do not

show conflicting opinions and on the contrary, they choose being single as a way to get rid of the traditional expectations and responsibilities so that they could develop themselves, reflecting the disembedding from the marriage value. In this regard, we can see the ideology of celebrated singlehood among these *nvboshi*. Another expansion of my study to the existing research is the exploration of these women's agency in dealing with single life. The existing studies demonstrate women's attitudes towards singlehood without exploring how they are actually going about living their single lives. In my study, I discuss two individualised single lifestyles constructed by my participants in order to enjoy their singleness and which reflect their agency and aspirations to live a life of one's own.

Secondly, when it comes to discussing my participants' experience of work, I fully concur with the previous studies that the enduring institutional discriminations and the ideology of gender role significantly have impeded female academics on daily basis and resulted in their disadvantaged positions within the gendered structure of the academia in China (Tang, 2001; Zhao, 2008; Zhang, 2010; Zhao, 2020). What my participants reported in the interviews supports the existing research on Chinese female academics. However, my analysis expands the discussion started by the studies, again, in terms of how women actually experience this inequality, in particular how it affects Chinese *nvboshi*. For one thing, in terms of the gender roles, I admit that my participants' professional roles have not been respected either, just like the participants in the other studies. Based on this finding, I have explored what kinds of roles my participants are playing in the workplace, identifying misrecognised roles such as (potential) mother, academic housekeeper and less respected professional. These roles vividly reflect the patriarchal practices and unequal power distribution within the institutions. Moreover, my study also focuses on women's agency and the different strategies used by the participants to deal with such structural problems, as well as achieve their goals of making more money of their own. The ways in which they navigated these dilemmas illustrate my participants' sense of taking responsibilities for themselves, which will be more likely to empower them to reduce the influence of gendered structure and patriarchal order within the academia.

Thirdly, my analysis complements Liu's (2008) study of young-adult Chinese only-children's negotiation between the filial and individual self. Liu's participants claim that their only-child identity has forced them to take on the filial child role and under these circumstances, their parents' demands for filial piety may require great sacrifices from these only-children. It

seems to be a challenge for these young people to negotiate between their individual self and filial self. I agree with Liu's analysis and based on Liu's findings, I have further explored how individual desires and interests are balanced by my participants with family obligations in the intergenerational relations, shedding more light on Chinese only-children's filial practices. Meanwhile, my participants' approaches to negotiating with their parents reflect the changing notion of filial piety, which is defined as contemporary filial piety by Yan (2016a). In addition, my study contests previous findings on women's attitudes towards traditional gender roles and family values. Xie's (2021) research on privileged Chinese young women finds that many would not mind sacrificing their careers for the sake of their family, even though they are full-time employees with good salaries. Ji (2015) points out that many professional single women place great value on their independence and career development and yet also subscribe to the traditional value of women giving up their careers to support family and husbands. According to Zuo (2003), many wives would make such a compromise to further their husbands' careers as they see their husbands as the main provider, even though these wives are also making financial contributions to their dual-income families. By comparison, while the *nvboshi* in this research recognise their family obligations, they strongly object to the traditional value of women sacrificing for family and place more emphasis on individual desires and actual pursuits in the private sphere. Although they cannot make radical changes to the family, these women are working hard to reduce the constraints in the private sphere through the development of agency.

As noted above, this study has complemented and expanded the existing research relating to the experiences of educated Chinese women, and also contested the findings of some previous studies. In this regard, the thesis enriches the current literature on educated Chinese women and provides an insight into women's agency in contemporary China.

7.2.2 Contributions to the application of Chinese individualisation

Drawing on Yan Yunxiang's work on Chinese individualisation, my study extends his work in two respects. Firstly, it provides ample evidence to confirm the rise of the individual and the disembedding from the traditional ideology and the old value system (Yan, 2010a). Yan (2010b) argues that the rise of the individual is one of the characteristics that 'depicts the contours of an individualizing society' (p. 14) in China. From my exploration of *nvboshi*'s

experiences in terms of their relationships, career development and family life, we can see that these women's increasing emphasis on pursuing individual desires and how they exercise autonomous choices in social practices, in particular in their intimate partnerships. Instead of adhering to the marriage and family values system, these *nvboshi* are particularly receptive to singlehood and exercise their choices to stay single, constructing individualised single lifestyles that challenge the traditional female life course. At the same time, when confronting dilemmas in their lives, the development of individual agency has allowed *nvboshi* to proactively play the role of leading on a life of one's own with a greater sense of self-reliance, which is especially important in the case of Chinese individualisation (Yan, 2010a). In order to maintain their gains, these *nvboshi* are more willing to take more self-responsibility for the uncertainties and risks emerging from the disembedding process. However, I also need to clarify here that individualisation is a social process whereby people end up taking responsibility for themselves, whether they like it or not, which potentially means propping up existing systems of inequality; the aim of people exercising agency to solve their own problems is to make their lives liveable, rather than tackling the bigger structural problems being addressed in this social process. In this sense, the negotiations and the strategies that *nvboshi* use to reach their goals and overcome the difficulties they encounter will not necessarily bring about critical changes to the existing constraints.

Secondly, this study enriches the concept of the striving individual. Yan (2014) argues that the striving individual is 'a self-driven, calculating, and determined subject' (p. 189) who not only has a strong desire to make money and be successful in material terms, but also seeks to live life of their own. Chinese *nvboshi* are a group of women who have enjoyed higher education and have good career prospects, yet experience constant stigmatisation and prejudices, which results in the barriers and difficulties in their lives. The women in this study need to work hard towards personal goals to pursue individual values beyond family and marriage, while simultaneously dealing with the patriarchal judgements and prejudices directed towards them, as well as unequal treatments due to the ideology of gender. For these *nvboshi*, who aspire to be independent and self-reliant, not only is it necessary to strive to increase their financial power and take more control of their own lives so that they can gain more self-determination, they must also strive to maintain a balance between individual needs and duties and the collective interests. In this sense, these highly-educated women represent the newly emerging striving individual in contemporary Chinese society.

7.3 Limitations of this Study and Implications for Future Research

There are a few limitations of this study. First of all, I had to conduct my fieldwork in limited geographical locations because of limited time and money, as well as personal contacts and networks. I went back to China in the middle of November, 2017 and started my fieldwork at the beginning of December. This was a particularly special timing to do fieldwork. On the one hand, it was the end of term and therefore my participants were quite busy with their work and studies. I was rejected by four potential participants because of this reason. On the other hand, it was close to New Year and some of my potential participants had already gone back home for holidays. It was thus quite challenging to recruit participants in different cities during that time. In addition, I only recruited participants in three cities: Beijing, Nanjing and Chengdu. I finished my undergraduate and postgraduate studies in Nanjing and Beijing separately and thus I had many networks in these two cities. Chengdu is my home city which is also full of my personal contacts and family networks. As such, due to the limited social networks in other cities and money (I was self-funded), I eventually ended up recruiting in these three cities. Plus, all the participants in this study are from one-child families in urban areas. Those who are from multiple children families and rural areas are not included. That is to say, there is a lack of discussion about the influence of different backgrounds and classes on *nvboshi*'s experiences in this study. Therefore, only a relatively small sample of *nvboshi* was recruited and my research findings are potentially not representative or generalisable to *nvboshi* as a whole. Given these limitations, priorities for future research may include sampling *nvboshi* from multiple child households and rural areas on the same topic in order to gain a better understanding of *nvboshi* from various backgrounds.

Secondly, I failed to use focus group to collect data in the fieldwork. Considering my research questions and interest, the focus groups could have helped me to get more comprehensive opinions and intensive views in terms of the specific topics. The focus group method is 'an interview with several people on a specific topic or issue' (Bryman, 2012, p. 501). For example, in the discussion of *nvboshi*'s singleness, organising participants who are showing different attitudes towards singlehood in a focus group will be more likely to come up with comprehensive discussions. However, because of the different social status of the participants in this study, it was decided against gathering these *nvboshi* together in a focus

group to share opinions that may involve sensitive topics. In future, scholars should endeavour to employ other methods of data collection to plug the gaps left by this study.

Thirdly, all the participants in this study are working in universities, thus the discussions around their professional life are highly restricted to the scope of higher education institutions. The major reason that contributed to this situation is my failure to recruit *nvboshi* who are not working in the universities. Consequently, the discussion of *nvboshi*'s working lives in this study primarily sheds light on the experience of female academics in China. In future studies, participants working in different job categories in various industries could be recruited to gain greater perspectives on *nvboshi*'s professional lives.

In future explorations of the experience of *nvboshi*, another direction to focus on is *nvboshi*'s pluralised life course and biographical patterns during the process of individualisation. As shown in this study, through their greater determination to pursue individual desires and proactively take self-responsibility in relation to living lives of their own, *nvboshi* have constructed a striving and desiring womanhood, which reflects their objection to the traditional perception of women in patriarchal Chinese society. In light of this striving and desiring womanhood, what the life trajectories of these women turn out to be, and what kinds of biographical patterns will be formed and how, still needs to be explored within the process of individualisation. As a group of highly-educated professional women, *nvboshi* have aspirations to exercise autonomous choices and achieve self-actualisation. However, considering the increased risks and uncertainties emerging from the process of individualisation, these women will need to deal with its negative impacts by taking on more responsibilities and proactive actions. As Yan (2010a) argues that new psychological pressures and burdens will happen on the Chinese individual's journey of remaking the self. In this sense, these women may face a contested situation in their lives and future research could focus on how this contested individualisation shapes *nvboshi*'s experiences in China.

Appendix A

Information Sheet for Research Participants (English Version)

Hello, my name is Qian Wang. I am a PhD student in the Department of Sociology at University of York in the United Kingdom. I am currently doing a research project regarding the experience of Chinese female doctors. My supervisors are Mr Brian Loader and Dr Nathan Manning. This research project aims to better understand the goals and life experiences of contemporary Chinese female doctors. I will specifically explore the problems, coping strategies, self-perception and experiences encountered by them in intimate relationship, career development and family life.

I am honoured to invite you to participate in this research and share your experiences and stories. I will conduct a face-to-face interview with you for about 60–90 minutes. For further follow-up research, the entire interview will be recorded. I will not use your personal information and photos in any reports, oral statements or articles without your permission. To ensure your privacy, all interview materials and audio recordings will be anonymised. All information will be kept strictly in accordance with the University's Code of Practice on Research Integrity and the University Data Management Policy, and relevant recordings will be destroyed after the research is finished. You can withdraw your data or stop the interview at any time during the process. I will delete your data immediately without any backup.

Please feel free to get in touch if you are interested in the research or have any questions. My contact information is as follows:

Email: wq557@york.ac.uk
WeChat: itsuka0114
China Phone: 18808059468
UK phone: 07756109447

Thank you!

Appendix B

Information Sheet for Research Participants (Chinese Version)

研究参与说明

您好，我叫王茜，是英国约克大学社会学系的博士在读生，目前我正在进行关于中国女博士的项目研究，我的博士生导师是 Brian Loader 先生和 Dr. Nathan Manning。本研究项目的目的是为了更深入地了解和展现当前中国女博士的生活经历，将着重具体探索女博士在婚恋，职业发展和家庭生活这三方面所遇到的问题，应对策略，自我认知和具体体验。

我非常荣幸能邀请您参与到这项研究当中来分享您的经历和故事，我将会对您进行大约一小时至一小时三十分钟左右的面对面访谈。为了方便后续研究工作，本次访谈将全程录音。没有您的允许，我不会将您的个人信息和照片用于任何报告，口头陈述或文章中。为了确保您的隐私，所有的访谈资料，录音音频都会被匿名处理，所有信息都将会严格按照约克大学《研究数据保护草案》进行保存，并在研究结束后销毁相关录音。您可以在访谈过程中的任何时候撤销您的访谈数据或拒绝继续参与访谈，我会立即将您的资料销毁不会做任何数据备份。

如果您对我的研究感兴趣或有任何问题，欢迎您与我联系，我的联系方式如下：

邮箱：wq557@york.ac.uk
微信：itsuka0114
中国电话：18808059468
英国电话：07756109447

感谢您的阅读！

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form (English Version)

'The experience of Chinese nvboshi' research project

Supervisors: Brian Loader (brian.loader@york.ac.uk)
Dr. Nathan Manning (nathan.manning@york.ac.uk)
PhD student: Miss. Qian Wang (wq557@york.ac.uk)

Consent form for parents/guardians

This form is for you to state whether or not you agree to take part in the study. Please read and answer every question. You can withdraw at any stage prior to the publication of the data. Also, your identity will be anonymized throughout the research project, and your personal information will be confidential. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, please ask Qian Wang.

Have you read and understood the information leaflet about the study?	Yes ❒ No ❒
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions about the study?	Yes ❒ No ❒
Do you understand that the information you provide will be held in confidence by the researcher?	Yes ❒ No ❒
Do you understand that you can withdraw at any stage prior to the publication of the data?	Yes ❒ No ❒
Do you understand that you are also free to refuse to answer any question?	Yes ❒ No ❒
	Yes ❒ No ❒

Do you understand that the information you provide may be used in future research?

Do you agree to take part in the study? Yes ❒ No ❒

If yes, do you agree to your interview being recorded? Yes ❒ No ❒
(You may take part in the study without agreeing to this).

Your name (in BLOCK letters):

_____

Your signature:

_____

Interviewer's name:

_____

Date: _____

Appendix D

Informed Consent Form (Chinese Version)

受 访 同 意 书

'The experience of Chinese nvboshi' 研究项目

导师: Brian Loader (brian.loader@york.ac.uk)

Dr. Nathan Manning (nathan.manning@york.ac.uk)

学生: Miss. Qian Wang (wq557@york.ac.uk)

这个表格是给您做决定是否同意参与此次研究。请阅读并回答下面的每一个问题。您能在您的数据被发表之前的任何时候撤消您的数据。同时，您的所有身份信息在整个研究过程中都将会完全保密。如果有任何您不理解的地方，或者如果您想了解更多的信息，请咨询研究人员王茜。

您阅读并了解该研究的信息吗？	是 ❒ 否 ❒
您是否有机会询问有关该研究的相关问题？	是❒ 否 ❒
您是否知道您的所有信息都将被研究人员保密？	是 ❒ 否 ❒
您是否知道您可以在数据发表之前的任何时候撤消您的信息？	是 ❒ 否 ❒
您是否知道您有权拒绝回答任何问题？	是 ❒ 否 ❒
您是否知道您提供的信息将会被使用在未来的研究中？	是 ❒ 否 ❒

您是否同意参与此次研究？ 是 ❒ 否 ❒

如果是，您是否同意您的受访内容被录音？ 是 ❒ 否 ❒

(您也可以选择不被录音但仍然参与本研究)

您的名字：_____

您的签名：_____

采访人签名：_____

日期：_____

Appendix E

Interview Outline (English Version)

Part one: general questions

1. Your age
2. Do you have any brothers or sisters?
3. Current relationship/marital status
4. Student or currently working (if you are working, what is your position and how long have you been working?)
5. What is your husband's educational attainment?
6. What do your parents do?
7. your PhD study was self-funded or with scholarship?
8. Please describe your PhD research direction.
9. Why did you choose to do PhD?
10. Did your parents and family members support your decision?
11. How do you think of the situation of nvboshi being regarded as the 'third gender' in China?

Part two: relationship experience

1. Could you please share me your previous (current) relationship?
2. Some people think that nvboshi is the 'leftover women', how do you think of this? Do you think nvboshi has difficulty in finding a boyfriend?
3. Do you think the identity of nvboshi has impacted on you to find a boyfriend?
4. Do you want to find a boyfriend?
5. Are you facing any pressure from outside to find a boyfriend?
6. Have you ever had any unhappy experiences because of singleness?

Part three: career

1. Why did you want to work in the university?
2. Do you face any difficulties or barriers in your daily work?
3. How did that feel about those problems?
4. How do you solve these problems
5. What is your future career plan?

Part four: family

1. What do you think is the biggest concern when you engaging with your parents/husband?
2. Do you think there is a conflict between yourself and your family, for example your thoughts and opinions and your family wants? If yes, could you please describe what it is.
3. What kind of influences do you think these conflicts bring to you?
4. How do you deal with the problems?
5. How did you think of being a daughter/a mother/a wife

Appendix F

Interview Outline (Chinese Version)

采访提纲

第一部分：普通问题

1. 您的年龄
2. 您有兄弟姐妹吗
3. 您目前的感情状态：单身，恋爱，结婚
4. 您是学生还是已经工作，如果工作，您的职位是什么，工作时长
5. 您丈夫的学习是什么
6. 您父母的职业
7. 您的博士学习是自费还是奖学金
8. 请大致描述一下您的博士研究
9. 您为什么选择读博
10. 您的父母家人是否支持您读博
11. 您如何看待‘女博士被当做第三类人‘这个现象

第二部分：情感

1. 请分享一下您的上一段感情经历或现在的感情
2. 有人认为女博士是剩女，您怎么看这个问题？您认为女博士难找对象吗？
3. 您觉得女博士的身份会影响您找对象吗？
4. 您想找男朋友吗？
5. 您有面对任何来自外界的压力让你找男朋友吗？
6. 您曾经因为单身有过一些不好不开心的经历吗？

第三部分：职业发展

1. 您为什么想在大学工作
2. 日常工作中您有面对什么问题或障碍吗？
3. 对于这些问题，您是什么感觉呢？
4. 您有什么解决这些问题的方法吗？

5. 您未来的职业规划是什么?

第四部分：家庭生活

1. 在您和父母/丈夫的关系中，有什么特别困扰您的事吗?
2. 您觉得您的想法，追求和父母/丈夫/家庭之间存在什么冲突吗？如果有，请您详细说明一下
3. 您觉得这种冲突带给您最大的困扰或影响是什么?
4. 您如何解决这些问题的?
5. 您如何看待女儿，妻子/妈妈这一角色的?

Appendix G

Summary of Participants

Ang, 31, a post-doctor, single

Ang finished her study in Chinese university. When I was interviewing Ang, she had been working in a top university in Beijing for no more than one year. Ang had experienced several uncomfortable experiences and unfair treatments during her job interviews. Also, in her daily work, her working condition was not very friendly which made her feel upset.

Tingting, 27, PhD student, single

Tingting was currently studying in a Chinese university. She was working in a lab. Most of her female colleagues were female and single. Tingting felt much pressure to find a boyfriend.

Ruiny, 25, PhD student, single

Ruiny was currently studying in a Chinese university and she had opened up a small tutorial centre with her friends. Ruiny was trying to stop getting any financial support from her parents and achieve financial independence. Meanwhile, Ruiny volunteered in an institution which aimed at providing help for women, such as sexual abuse, domestic violence.

Yang, 26, PhD student, single

Yang was currently studying in a Chinese university. When I was interviewing her, she was just broke up with her ex-boyfriend. Besides, Yang was running a small business with her friends who were also PhD students to help the students to pass the master examination.

Flyang, 28, PhD student, single

Flyang was currently studying in a Chinese university. She quit her previous job to do the PhD study. Flyang had strong aspiration on getting married and having a kid. She had keeping attending matchmaking and was very bothered by being single.

Luao, 31, post-doctor, single

Luao was working as a post-doctor in a top university in Beijing, and at the same time, she has two companies. Her business started when she started her PhD study. She has now achieved financial independence. Luao's friends sometimes would introduce her men and set up a date for her. But Luao herself was not in a rush to find a boyfriend and she quite enjoyed her single life.

Xun, 26, PhD student, single

Xun was currently studying in a Chinese university. I found Xun on Weibo because she presented a talk show regarding being a nvboshi in China. During her undergraduate study, Xun was offered an opportunity to exchange in the UK and after she finished her undergraduate, she was accepted into a PhD project with the full scholarship. However, she finally chose to go back to China and study in Beijing because her mother did not want her to study in the UK.

Mandy, 26, PhD student, single

Mandy was currently studying in the USA. She was also recruited from Weibo. She forwarded Xun's video and left insightful comment. Since Mandy was doing her PhD in the USA, we had to do the interview through WeChat audio call.

Chan, 31, PhD student, single

Chan was currently studying in a Chinese university. She was very bothered by her singleness because most of her friends were married and had children. Meanwhile, her mother had gave her much pressure to find a boyfriend. When I was interviewing her, Chan was struggle with her thesis and also felt anxious about finding a boyfriend.

Qi, 27, PhD student, single

Qi was doing her PhD study in the UK. She found her single life quite satisfied and fulfilled. She used her spare time to participate in a few charities. At the same time, Qi enjoyed spending time with herself. When she was alone, she liked cooking, reading and travelling alone.

Chong, 27, PhD student, single

Chong was doing her PhD study in the UK, and meanwhile, she was co-working with an institution which aimed at teaching sex education for secondary students in China. During her

study in the UK, she would teach sex education through the online classroom and communicate with students.

Alice, 29, PhD student, single

Although Alice was doing the PhD study in the UK, she faced much pressure from her parents to push her to find a boyfriend. As such, they had many argues over this issue. However, Alice was not planning on finding a boyfriend and she intended to focus on herself and finish her study successfully. Hence, Alice often felt stressful and had to deal with the relationship with her parents.

Nannan, 28, PhD student, single

Nannan was doing the PhD study in the UK. When she started her PhD, her mother had constantly introduced men who were also studying in the UK to her. Nannan went to the matchmaking every time, but all did not end very well. When I was interviewing her, she was still single and was very anxious about staying single.

Nai, 27, PhD student, single

Nai was doing the PhD study in the UK. Her ex-boyfriend broke up with her due to her PhD identity. She felt furious about her ex-boyfriend and this thing caused much sadness and anxiety to her.

Xiaofang, 38, lecturer, single

Xiaofang was a lecturer in a university. After she finished her PhD study in the UK and went back to China, Xiaofang had a few dating experiences and two relationships. When I was interviewing her, she was still single and living with her parents. She enjoyed her single life and took good advantage of her free time to do a part-time job as a designer in an architect studio.

Leong, 29, PhD student, single

Leong was doing her PhD study in the UK and meanwhile she sometimes participated in a few research projects in China. Leong had experienced tremendous pressure on her to find a boyfriend. When I was interviewing her, she expressed her egalitarian gender attitude towards relationship and marriage.

Fay, 29, PhD student, single

Fay was currently studying in a Chinese university. During the interview, Fay shared many stories of her father and mother. Her mother was a full-time housewife and lived her life depending on her husband. Fay did not agree on her mother's self-sacrifice for the family, and thought that women should have own careers.

Xiaoxiao, 28, PhD student, engagement

Xiaoxiao was currently studying in a Chinese university. She had constant argues with her parents regarding her marriage choice. Since her parents had stopped financial support for her study and living expenses, Xiaoxiao was also taking a part-time job in the university.

Wendy, 30, administrative staff, in a relationship

After finishing two-year post-doc in Singapore, Wendy went back to China and tried to find a research-related job in the university. However, she was allocated to do the administrative jobs by her leaders. When I was interviewing her, Wendy had already become a team leader and quite enjoyed her administrative jobs.

North, 28, researcher, in a relationship

I knew North when she was studying as a visiting student in the UK. When I was recruiting participants, North was very interested in my research. After she finished her PhD study, North got a job as a researcher in a university in Shanghai. She shared many stories of her being an early researcher in the university. At the same time, North was also facing the pressure of working in Shanghai and going back home as her parents expected.

Xinxin, 31, PhD student, in a relationship

Xinxin was currently studying in a Chinese university. When I was interviewing her, she had just got a job and was ready to graduate. Xinxin and her father had big disagree on her career chocie.

Linlin, 32, research assistant, in a relationship

Linlin finished her PhD study in a top university in Europe with a full scholarship and then found a job as a research assistant in a university. Linlin claimed that her working arrangement was not satisfying and she felt very unhappy and depressed of working in her institution.

Ling, 36, lecturer/ undergraduate tutor, married, one child

Ling was the first one who accepted my interview. She used to work as an undergraduate tutor in her department. Since she wanted to teach and participate in research projects, she chose to get a PhD degree. After she finished her PhD study, although she started to do teaching, Ling had to continue her undergraduate tutor job, which she found very unsatisfied.

Xi, 34, researcher, married, one child

Xi finished her PhD study in China. When I was interviewing her, she was in the middle of separation with her husband. Xi's family life was very stressful and she had also has some unfair experiences in her work, which made her career progression was not easy.

Yu, 33, lecturer, married, one child

Yu finished her PhD study in China. Similar to Xi, Yu's family life was also stressful. Her husband was a supporter of the family mode of male-breadwinner and female-homemaker. Yu was in a long ongoing negotiation with her husband regarding the domestic labor division, which caused many problems and fights between them.

Hao, 33, associate professor (master supervisor), married, one child

Hao finished her PhD study in Hong Kong. She had worked so hard to advance her career. Hao's husband was very supportive and proactively participated in the domestic jobs, which greatly reduced Hao's domestic burden.

Monjin, 43, associate professor (master supervisor), married, one child

Monjin had finished PhD study in the UK with a full scholarship and then had work in a top laboratory in Europe as a post-doctor for two years. After that, she had returned to China and got a job in a top university in Beijing. Meanwhile, Monjin had taken advantage of her personal and social networks to build up her own small business to get the cooperating opportunities from the companies and government.

Amy, 38, lecturer, married, one child

Amy had finished PhD study in the UK with a full scholarship. When I was interviewing her, she had been working in her department for six years but was still not promoted. Amy found

her department was very unfriendly for female teachers and she had experienced unequal treatments.

Lay, 36, associate professor (master supervisor), married, one child

Lay was a self-fund PhD student and finished her study in the UK. Except for working as an associate professor, Lay was also co-working with other research institutions to do research projects together.

Monica, 41, associate professor (master supervisor), married, one child

Monica finished her PhD study in Australia. She was an associate professor in the university and was also co-working with other institutions to do the research projects given the fact that she cannot be granted equal job opportunities in her department.

Yi, 29, lecturer, married, no child

Yi finished her PhD study in the UK with a full scholarship and then had worked in a Chinese university for one year. When I was interviewing her, she just accepted a three-year offer to work as a researcher in a project in Canada.

Christina, 31, lecturer, married, one child

Christina finished her PhD study in China. She had her son during the PhD study and therefore she had to spend many efforts and energy on her study and childbearing simultaneously.

Suli, 39, associate professor (master supervisor), married, one child

Suli finished her PhD study in China. Except for working in the university, Suli had also opened up her own channel to film videos regarding make-up, skincare and lifestyle for more than five years.

Glossary of Key Terms and Phrases

Nvboshi	女博士	It is a term that particularly used to describe those women who are doing PhD study or have already had the PhD degree.
Nanboshi	男博士	Male PhDs
The ‘third gender’	第三类人	It normally refers to Chinese *nvboshi*
Shengnv	剩女	Leftover women
Baomu	保姆	Nanny, babysitter or caregiver
Guangzongyaozu	光宗耀祖	Bring glory to the family
Xianqiliangmu	贤妻良母	Virtuous wife and good mother
Xianneizhu	贤内助	A wife who takes good care of domestic jobs and assists her husband
Kaoziji	靠自己	depend on one’s self

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