Researching The Everyday Lives of 'Unmarried women' in Urban China

: Beyond 'Sheng nǚ'

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Abstract

The situation regarding 'leftover women' in China is a topic of widespread public concern. A government report has defined 'leftover women'/'Sheng nǔ' as single, well-educated, high-income women over the age of 27 (Chinese-language situation report, 2006). The media constantly tries to stigmatise and negatively label these urban unmarried women, who are also subject to various pressures and distresses from all sectors of society because of their single status. This thesis uses material feminism as a theoretical orientation and employs qualitative research based on in-depth semi-structured interviews. Using the snowballing technique, 28 face-to-face interviews were conducted in Beijing and Harbin (both located in China) with unmarried women aged 27–42 who work in various occupations in addition to interviews with the mothers of 10 unmarried women (six in Beijing and four in Harbin). This study focuses on three areas: the reasons why urban unmarried women are single; whether they feel the pressure of the stigma associated with it; and the corresponding coping strategies they employ. The data analysis section is divided into three chapters that focus on the establishment of a typology of urban unmarried women, the intergenerational conflict and negotiation process and their gendered experiences in the workplace. This study shows that the real image of urban unmarried women is not the homogenised and uniformly negative image portrayed by the mass media, and that the connotation of the negative concept of leftover women has been redefined. It also shows that the pressures on urban unmarried women are multidimensional and come mainly from their families and areas of work and that these women negotiate such pressures in different ways. Overall, the purpose of this study is to explore, at a micro level, the competing and colluding social, cultural and material pressures experienced by unmarried urban working women who remain unmarried after reaching the socially desirable age for marriage, as well as the ways in which these women negotiate these pressures in different environments, in order to restore the true status of the unmarried women's existence in urban China and challenge the traditional gender narratives and gender orders inherent in Chinese

society.

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 submitted for any other degree or professional qualification at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as Bibliography.

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Chapter 1   Introduction

Introduction

Marriage and the choice of spouse have always been important topics in traditional Chinese culture, and for women, the age requirement for marriage is more sensitive than for men. Within the current image of unmarried women portrayed by the mass media, highly educated urban professional women who remain unmarried after the socially expected age for marriage are often portrayed as 'eager to get married', 'lonely in life' or having an 'eccentric personality' and are then negatively labelled as 'leftover women'. As an only child growing up in a Chinese city, I have always been subjected to the gender stereotypes that regarding the need to start a family at the 'right' age to avoid becoming a leftover woman. When I was a teenager, I was terrified of becoming a leftover woman, and I had an unspoken anxiety about marriage. However, as I grew up, I met many highly educated and unmarried professional women over the age of 27. As I came into contact with them, I realised that their lives were completely different from the negative stereotypes portrayed by the media. The conflict that developed between my personal experience of having been in contact with these women and the information I had been receiving for so long sparked my interest in the real lives of unmarried women and formed the initial motivation for me to undertake this study.

Growing up in a socialist country where gender equality between men and women was preached, I used to believe that China had achieved true gender equality because both men and women had the right to be educated and go to work. After I came to the UK to study sociology, I began to understand China's marriage system and the working equality from an intercultural and international perspective, and I began to change my views on gender equality in China. During my postgraduate studies, I became interested in the pressures faced by unmarried men and women' to be single,

and the similarities and differences in the criteria for choosing a spouse, with a particular focus on the impact of gender differences. I gradually began to discover the existing gender inequality in Chinese society, which is hidden underneath the grand social narrative. In order to gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon, I chose to further my studies at the Centre for Women's Studies to acquire more theoretical knowledge and research methods regarding social gender and gender equality. During my doctoral studies, I chose many gender-related courses to help me review my personal growth both as a woman and as an unmarried woman of marriageable age in Chinese society and culture, so as to facilitate the integration of my own gender experiences with my knowledge. I gradually came to realize that the negative stereotypes of unmarried women in urban areas stemmed from both traditional concepts of marriage and the reality of material life, as well as the double squeeze of age and gender, and were shaped by a combination of women's self-perceptions and social evaluations. The deep reason behind this is the social and gender-based regulation of women's identity, in terms of their roles and behavioural norms. Underneath this monolithic portrayal of women lies a symbolic depreciation of gender inequality, which reflects the gender power relations that quietly permeate the social system.

My own single status is one of the reasons why I have chosen to study the daily lives of unmarried urban women as the focus of my PhD thesis. As a member of this group, I want to understand the real-life situation of unmarried urban women, and thus it is necessary to listen to women's real voices. Through this research, I hope to challenge China's traditional gender order and contribute to the improvement of both the public opinion environment for unmarried women and the equality of the gender order in China.

Statement of the research problem

With the increase in the number of singles, the postponement of the age of first

marriage and the rise in the divorce rate, 'singleness' is becoming a new way of life and a social fact that cannot be ignored (Reynolds and Taylor, 2005). According to the 2013 China Statistical Yearbook, the total number of singles in China between the ages of 20 and 59 has reached 170 million, of which 59.6 per cent (about 104 million) are men and 40.4 per cent (about 70 million) are women. However, the dominant culture in China does not approve of the state of being single for a long period of time, and this can even be regarded by the public as shameful behaviour (Xu and Wang, 2003). In China, when people pass a certain age (the expectation of marriage age, which varies by gender), and especially when their singleness is no longer a transitional state, society will always consider this single state as an unfinished or even abnormal state. Among the single population, women who have reached marriageable age but are still single suffer the most serious discrimination: their single status becomes their original sin. People hold negative stereotypes of these women and label them as leftover women. Single women are criticised because the public always believes that everyone needs to get married or they will feel lonely and unhappy. Within this social context, the so-called leftover women are a vulnerable group. These women carry a social stigma and face pressures from different quarters, including their family and the general public.

In China, the issue of leftover women has attracted widespread public attention and discussion. Many popular TV programmes and reality shows deal with this phenomenon, and almost everyone feels free to express his or her opinion on this topic (To, 2015). However, academic research examining this issue with scientific rigour is lacking. Current Chinese academic research on the issue of leftover women in China tends to focus on the macro perspective, on why this phenomenon occurs and how to solve this problem (Xu, 2000; Wang, 2010); meanwhile, at the micro level, there is not much research on the perceptions of being single from the perspective of these women's own experiences. Most of the papers published in Chinese tend to use quantitative research methods to explain the causes of the leftover women phenomenon and offer solutions, as well as to put forward possible policy suggestions

to solve the problem. The mainstream research on urban unmarried women in Chinese academia still tends to treat their singleness as a social disorder and views such unmarried behaviour as a problem that needs to be solved. Thus, many mainstream academics still use the term 'leftover women' for unmarried urban women.

Existing literature within Chinese academia tends to adopt a macro-level research orientation, which can be broadly categorised into socio-cultural, socially constructed, economic and feminist directions. Research in the socio-cultural direction focuses on the impact of traditional cultural factors on unmarried women. Traditional Chinese culture and social practices may explain why unmarried urban Chinese are subject to so much social stigma and pressure. In addition, the marriage gradient creates barriers for highly qualified women looking for an ideal mate (Zhang, 1989; Xu, 2000; Xu and Wang, 2003; Yan, 2003). The socially constructed direction is to argue that the concept of leftover women has been constructed by social media, and that the social stigma against these women has been created by the public by giving them negative stereotypes; this is an example of unfair gender communication (Gao, 2011; Yang, 2011; Zuo, 2012).

Scholars examining this issue from an economic perspective believe that this phenomenon exists because of socio-economic developments (Yeh, 1992; Wang, 2010;Feng, 2014), as the development of modern society and the improvement of women's economic levels have made singlelives possible (Klinenberg, 2002; Lynn and Roona, 2013). In addition, the improvement of the economic status of women has made them more independent than before, which has created different expectations for marriage (Houseknecht and Gordon, 1994;Lewis, 2001). Unlike in the past, when women married in pursuit of greater economic and social security, modern women are more likely to marry for romance, or even for both (Reynolds et al., 2007). However, this causes women to spend more time in selecting a mate. In addition, when these women choose to marry, they tend to be more cautious in modern society (Feng, 2014); the main argument of feminist-orientated research is that the existence of the

phenomenon of leftover women in a male-dominated society represents a form of gender domination (Shen, 2010; Wang, 2010; Zhou, 2010). In a patriarchal society, women's social roles are always related to the family. While men are free to achieve social value, women must invest more free labour in the family. With the awakening of self-awareness, women are unwilling to continue blindly investing in the family and, in turn, demand their value in the workplace (Hochschild, 1979; Zhou, 2010). Once women fail to meet the expectations of their gender roles, they begin to suffer from social stigma. This is the reason why unmarried women in China have to endure so many negative stereotypes. In essence, this stigmatisation of unmarried women is the oppression of women. Regarding how to solve this problem, most researchers suggest that leftover women need to lower their standards when choosing a mate; however, there is no similar requirement for 'leftover men' (Wei and Zhang, 2010). Such differing standards for the different genders is a form of gender discrimination.

Undertaking a review of the mainstream literature on the phenomenon of leftover women in Chinese academia has shown that existing studies have comprehensively summarised the causes and social impacts of the phenomenon of leftover women at the macro level and have put forward corresponding policy recommendations. However, a common problem with these studies is that they follow the general research paradigm of traditional social science research, which is mainly quantitative. Although they focus on women, or so-called women's issues, they are merely carrying out research 'about women' rather than research from women's subjective consciousness, as advocated by feminism. Although these studies focus on unmarried women, they still use the negative term 'leftover women' and focus on solving social problems and contributing to the stability of society rather than focusing on women as the subject of the study. Women's voices are invisible in this literature.

In contrast to the Chinese-language studies that focus on the macro level, the English-language studies on unmarried women in China focus more on their personal experiences and make use of qualitative research methods. What can be observed is

that some of the papers, although they also use stigmatising terms (including 'leftover women'), generally take a more critical approach and are more supportive of women. For example, To's (2015) research focuses on the experiences of unmarried women in finding their ideal partner. Her study mainly interprets the difficulties faced in the daily lives of urban unmarried women when they are choosing a mate. Fincher's (2016) study criticises the pressure on unmarried women brought about by government opinion guidance, and although it also highlights the impact of the pressures of government opinion on women, her study focuses on how the demand for housing in China exacerbates the inequality of wealth between men and women. Ji's (2015) article, published in English, describes her qualitative research on 'leftover women' in Shanghai, and although her research also focuses on the issue of 'leftover women', it is not aimed at women but rather focuses on addressing demographic issues and family relationships. There are also related studies that focus on the workplace experiences of unmarried women, such as Liu's (2017) study, which provides the first ethnographic description of the experiences of young, highly educated professional women who are hailed as 'white-collar beauties' by the Chinese media.

In summary, mainstream research in China still sees the phenomenon of leftover women as a social problem that needs to be solved, and there is a large research gap in terms of methodology and theoretical perspectives in the study of unmarried women in urban China. Other literature published in English is more flexible and diverse in its approach to unmarried women in urban areas, and the researchers are more inclusive in their views of unmarried women. The knowledge produced by these studies is also for use by women and does not just treat women as research subjects.

However, no researchers have used women' daily lives as an entry point to explore, from the micro level, how unmarried women in urban China cope with the social, cultural and material pressures associated with being single in a stigmatised society. By revealing unmarried women's gender experiences and practices of their own

subjectivity in different social contexts of their daily lives, my research will contribute to the development of gender studies in China by complementing the research and theoretical gaps in related fields. At the same time, by exploring the real-life status of urban unmarried women, I will challenge the dominant discourse narrative and the inherent gender order that constructs unmarried women as 'leftover women'.

Research questions

This research project focuses on urban unmarried women and aims to explore the daily life experiences of urban unmarried women in the socio-cultural context of the stigmatisation of leftover women. This investigation seeks to explore the competing and colluding social, cultural and material pressures experienced in the daily lives of women who remain unmarried beyond the socially expected age of marriage and how these women negotiate such pressures in different contexts by answering the following research questions:

1. What are the reasons why unmarried women are single?

2. Do unmarried women perceive any stigma or pressure due to their single status?

3. How do unmarried urban women negotiate these pressures in different settings?

To answer these research questions, a qualitative approach has been adopted in examining the narratives of urban unmarried women regarding their everyday life. Twenty-eight face-to-face, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with urban unmarried women between the ages of 27 and 42(16 of these took place in Beijing with the rest in Harbin).However, the data obtained from these interviews were insufficient to fully answer the research questions. The identity and self-identity of an unmarried urban woman is largely embedded in her social and familial relationships, and in the course of these interviews, I found that the daily practices of these women were greatly influenced by their families. Therefore, to increase the depth of the data, a number of parents of unmarried women in Beijing and Harbin were recruited to obtain more information from different perspectives and to explore

the attitudes of mothers towards their unmarried daughters' single identities as well as any patterns of intergenerational interactions. However, almost none of the participants lived in the same city as their parents, and thus it was difficult to recruit both participants and their parents at the same time. In response, I considered going to a matchmaking corner to recruit participants from their parents' generation, but in the end, I recruited a total of 10 mothers of unmarried women for further study (six in Beijing and four in Harbin).

Given that this research has been conducted from feminist perspective, with the aim of exploring the pressures faced by these unmarried women, it has been necessary to balance the power relations between myself and my participants during the research process, and I have continuously reflected upon and adjusted my position as the researcher in the study to enable my participants to authentically express their personal experiences during the interviews.

Thesis structure

There are six chapters that follow this introduction. Chapter 2 serves as the literature review chapter for this study and consists of five sections that reflect the process of the literature review undertaken. The first section explains the decision to study urban unmarried women, considering whether these women exist and their current predicaments and situations to illustrate the research necessity of this study, while the second section explores why marriage is still so important to individuals and society in modern China from three dimensions (Confucianism, social institutions and policy orientations) to illustrate the reasons why unmarried women have been stigmatised. The third section introduces the changes in the construction of the image of Chinese women from a historical and cultural background and explores how women's social status, the norms of women's lives, normative femininity and feminist politics and movements have changed over time and in different periods of Chinese history in order to better understand the competition and pressures of collusion that unmarried

women in urban China have faced in response to their changing social status and roles in society. In the fourth section, the reasons for and the significance of materialist feminism as the theoretical framework for this study are analysed in depth; while, in the final section of the literature review, the existing literature related to the study of single women is summarised and critically discussed to explore the shortcomings of the existing research, analysing the context and classification of current research on the topic and highlighting the necessity and significance of this study and its contribution to gender studies in China.

Chapter 3 is divided into six sections outlining the methodologies used in this study. The chapter begins with a discussion of cognitive and ontological theories, as they are the basis for the researcher in defining the research paradigm and understanding the research. The social construction theory approach has been used in this study, with a qualitative research method, carried out through face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured interviews, being the most appropriate for method of research. The second section discusses how the feminist theoretical framework has influenced the research design and choice of research methodology and where I as a researcher stand in the study. The next three sections detail the research setting, the data collection methods and the process of recruiting participants in the fieldwork, including a detailed explanation of the reasons for and the process of recruiting the mothers of unmarried women. The final two sections describe the approach taken regarding data processing following the fieldwork and outline a number of ethical considerations, including ganonymity, power relations between the researcher and interviewees and the definition of the identity of the interviewees.

Chapter 4 creates a typology of unmarried urban women based on their attitudes towards marriage and the extent to which they perceive themselves to be stigmatised for being unmarried and also on their value orientations in choosing a spouse. These urban unmarried women can be classified into three types (the realist, the romantic and the liberal), but the barriers between these three types are not fixed and the types

to which they belong may change with time, personal experiences and conceptions of marriage. These different types of urban unmarried women have different criteria for choosing a spouse due to their expectations of marriage, but a set of common basic criteria exists, which reflects the persistence of urban unmarried women in their view of marriage and their prudence in choosing a spouse. It also reveals their views on mate selection that are dominated by the trend of choosing a mate within class-based economic conditions. By restoring the real image of unmarried women under the influence of single status factors, this chapter breaks down the single and generalised stereotypes that have been moulded by the mass media and thus redefines the negative concept of 'sheng nv' as 'shen nv' (prudent women/慎女). In this way, it shows a new view of marriage and family for unmarried women in urban areas, removing the inaccuracies in the pseudo-proposition of leftover women and the gender stereotypes of unmarried women and thus fighting against the stigmatisation of unmarried women.

Chapter 5 focuses on the intergenerational conflict between unmarried daughters and their parents. Differences in the understanding and awareness of the meaning of choosing a spouse have led to intergenerational conflicts and created gaps between intergenerational expectations and the reality of choosing a spouse, which has resulted in intergenerational tensions within the family. In addition to their response to the social phenomenon of urban unmarried women, some parents maintain an uncompromising attitude, and in turn choose to intervene and replace their unmarried daughters' choice of spouse. This chapter considers the blind dating corners in Beijing and Harbin as an example. These park dating corners are a new type of attempt by parents to find suitable spouses for their daughters because they are concerned about their daughters' singleness and seek to find a solution on their daughters' behalf. This behaviour shows the parents' uncompromising attitudes towards their unmarried children's single status. While this results in the overstepping of parents, unmarried women as daughters do not reject their parents' attempts to do so. They voluntarily chose to temporarily cede a part of their own subjectivity in order to co-operate with

their parents' actions. Therefore, the study of the blind dating corners demonstrates the concept of intergenerational conflict between parents' and children's views on marriage, illustrates the ways in which parents try to solve the marital problems on behalf of their children and considers the effective entry point of the interaction and negotiation process of the marital problems between the two parties; this is conducive to the study of the daily pressures faced by urban unmarried women due to the status of singleness in the family and the ways in which they negotiate their family relationships.

Chapter 6, as the final of the analysis chapters, is divided into five parts. In the first three of these sections, the patriarchal nature of the workplace is exposed under the materialist feminist perspective to explain how gender and singleness affects the gender experience of women in the workplace; the construction of women's identities in the workplace and the importance of work for unmarried women are considered; and the dilemmas of unmarried women in choosing a career due to the internalisation of gender roles are revealed. In the fourth section, the different gender experiences in the workplace, including presentation and benevolent gender bias, are discussed, while the final section analyses a new direction of research on how urban working women can use their singleness as a resource in the workplace to exert their own subjectivity and use their singleness to benefit from the patriarchal nature of the workplace, which in turn contributes to the reshaping of gender relations in the workplace.

In the final chapter, the conclusions of this thesis are presented. Beginning with a self-reflection based on this study, I summarise the different types of urban unmarried women to restore the real image of unmarried women before analysing the pressure of intergenerational conflicts that unmarried women suffer in the family and the negotiation processes between the different generations. This chapter also reflects upon the oppression of urban unmarried women in the workplace and the coping strategies based on the gender experiences of urban unmarried women in the

workplace and considers the limitations and possible future directions for research after this study.

Chapter 2: Literature review

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the stigmatised phenomenon of 'leftover women' has garnered widespread attention in Chinese society. However, there are limitations and gaps in the research methodology and theoretical perspectives within the relevant academic literature. To comprehensively explore the daily lives of unmarried women in urban China, this chapter will introduce and discuss the relevant literature pertaining to the research background, significance of the study and the associated theoretical framework. The chapter is structured into five sections, each reflecting a stage in my literature review process. First, I will explain the reason why I want to study urban unmarried women, whether these women exist and their current dilemmas and situations, thereby illustrating the need for this study. Then, I will explain why marriage is still so important to individuals and society in modern China. This examination will encompass three dimensions, namely, Confucianism, social institutions and policy orientations, to illustrate the reasons why unmarried women have been stigmatised. In the next section, I will delve into the evolution of the portrayal of Chinese women within a historical and cultural context. This will involve an exploration of shifts in women's social status, the norms governing their lives, the concept of normative femininity, as well as feminist politics and movements across different periods of Chinese history. This contextual analysis aims to facilitate a deeper understanding of the competitive and colluding pressures that unmarried women in urban China contend with, along with changes in their societal roles and status. The next section will offer a thorough analysis of the rationale for and significance of adopting materialist feminism as the theoretical framework for this study. Finally, I will conduct a comprehensive review and critical discussion of existing literature related to studies on unmarried women. This will involve an analysis of the context and classification of current research on the topic in order to highlight any shortcomings. Through this, I aim to emphasise the necessity and

significance of my study, and its valuable contribution to gender studies in China.

Why study urban unmarried women?

In the context of Chinese society, the term 'leftover women' is familiar to people. There have been countless films, television productions, newspapers and magazines that have centred heated discussions around this social phenomenon. The mass media portrays 'leftover women' as lonely, thorny, isolated and with a bleak outlook. This homogenised stigmatisation and stereotyping has caused a great deal of distress among unmarried women. Statistically, the number of people who fulfil the criteria of a 'leftover woman' does not match this pervasive social clamour. Therefore, I believe that the so-called urban 'leftover women' phenomenon is a socially constructed concept that puts unnecessary social pressure on the majority of unmarried women. Thus, inspired by this concept and social phenomenon, in addition to the constructed stigma, I have become interested in the real daily life experiences of unmarried urban women. I believe that by restoring the voices and life experiences of these women, as well as their actual living conditions, we can improve the stigma attached to unmarried women and challenge the traditional gender discourse, in order to make a broader contribution to gender equality in China. It is my hope that through narrative research on unmarried women, I can restore the woman as a human being, rather than as a flat symbol portrayed by the media.

Comparing the Definitions of So-Called 'Leftover Women' and 'Leftover Men'

In order for readers to better understand why the authors conducted a study on urban unmarried women based on this social phenomenon, the term 'leftover women' first needs to be clearly defined. It was first popularised as an Internet neologism in 2006. The official definition of 'leftover women' or 'sheng nu'/ '剩女' by China's Ministry of Education is 'urban professional women who are over 27 years of age, single,

well-educated, and have a high income'. Although there is no specific explanation as to why it is over 27, the reason may be related to the public expectation that women should get married at this age, which is also the optimal age for childbearing (China Marriage Survey, 2015). Both To's (2016) and Fincher's (2015) studies of the 'leftover women' phenomenon cite the same definition. Literally, 'leftover women' is a term with strong traditional value judgements, implying the irony of women being 'left behind' in the marriage market because they are demanding in choosing a spouse with an ideal marital home. It is a term with a distinctly negative and pejorative connotation.

The term 'leftover men' has a much milder meaning than the heavily stigmatised term 'leftover women'. It does not describe a specific group of people, and there is no clear academic definition of a 'leftover man'.'Leftover men' is usually just a generic term for single men over the age of 30, and the term came about after the emergence of 'leftover women' (Feng, 2014; Zhou, 2010). Comparatively speaking, the term 'leftover men' does not have as many negative connotations as 'leftover women', and the phenomenon of 'leftover men', as a social phenomenon, has not attracted as much public attention as the phenomenon of 'leftover women'.

Does the 'Leftover Women' Phenomenon Really Exist?

China's urban 'leftover women' have been a topic of widespread public concern. However, do the so-called 'leftover women' really exist? Also, are there any leftover men in China? Compared with 'leftover men', why does the phenomenon of 'leftover women' attract so much public attention? When people refer to the factors that generate 'leftover women' ,does it stem from the fact that there are more women than men in China or does it stem from a quantitative mismatch between men and women when it comes to choosing a mate?

In fact, as far as statistics are concerned, the so-called 'leftover women' do not exist. With regard to statistics, China has an imbalance in the ratio of men to women, with men outnumbering women. In all cities in China, the average ratio of men to women between the ages of 20 and 39 is 1.05, and it can be found that there are more males than females (National Census, 2010). Edlund (2005) points out that although the normal sex ratio of human beings is supposed to be more males than females, there are generally more females than males in large metropolitan areas around the world. In addition, cities tend to contain more well-educated professional women than other areas (Edlund, 2005). Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou are three of the most representative cities in China. As shown in the chart below, the average ratio of men and women between the ages of 20 and 39 in these three cities is 1.09, 1.07 and 1.11, respectively. It can be seen that the number of males of marriageable age is still much larger than the number of females in these cities with a large number of highly educated women. Moreover, it can be observed from the chart that, generally speaking, the number of males is slightly higher than the number of females in China's relatively developed cities. Therefore, the excessive number of women is not the reason for the so-called 'leftover women'.

According to statistics, women, especially professional women living in urban areas, are not being 'left behind'. On the contrary, more men have been 'left behind'. The 2010 national census also showed that the ratio of unmarried men to unmarried women born in the 1980s was 136:100 and that of those born in the 1970s was 206:100. It can therefore be seen that there are more 'leftover men' than 'leftover women' in China. Despite the fact that the number of 'leftover men' is higher than the number of 'leftover women', society is still more inclined to focus on women's single status (Wang, 2010).

For example, single women tend to experience more stress and social criticism than single men of the same age. Considering the large number of 'leftover men', they actually need more attention than 'leftover women' (Kawaguchi and Lee, 2012).

Nonetheless, society is more tolerant of the diversity of men's age at marriage (Gao, 2011). Women become less valuable in the marriage market after the age of 25, but men are still in their prime in their 30s (To, 2015; Xu, 2000). Because single men over the age of 30 are often perceived as mature, with more inclusive personalities and better financial conditions, they are even more popular in the marriage market than when they were younger. For women, however, reaching the age of 30 seems to mean that they lose value and become more devalued the older they get. To some extent, therefore, this situation suggests that women's value in the marriage market is still determined by their fertility.

These women are called 'leftover women' because they are excluded from the marriage market (Zuo, 2012; Yang, 2011). If we interpret this in terms of the existence of single women who are excluded from the marriage market, then 'leftover women' do exist. The China Statistical Yearbook (2013) states that the total number of singles in China between the ages of 20 and 59 has reached 170 million, of which 40.4 per cent (70 million) are women. According to data from the 2005 China General Social Survey, which covered the period from 1997 to 2005, the proportion of unmarried women between the ages of 27 and 34 increased rapidly, especially among single women in their 30s, from 1.2 per cent to 3.4 per cent. Thus, unmarried women of socially expected marriageable age (so called 'leftover women') do exist in China, but such women are still quite small in total numbers. However, even such a small sample size has a considerable social impact. A chain of anxiety transfer can be found throughout society. Unmarried women are stigmatised as 'leftover women, and the phenomenon of 'leftover women' is socialised.

The plight of unmarried women in urban China

The pressure on single women in China has never been homogenous. They have been

subjected to multiple and intersecting pressures and discrimination from the macro level (Confucian culture and national population control pressures), the meso level (media image control and intergenerational pressures)and the micro level (sexism, ageismand singleness discrimination).

The public is very concerned about the issue of unmarried young people. Even the Chinese Communist Youth League (2017), which is affiliated with a governmental organisation, has issued a statement to help older unmarried people find their ideal partners, and the hidden output of public opinion and values from officialdom is very obvious. Countless TV dating programmes have been produced for singles over the years. However, the image of 'leftover women' portrayed on television is always unpleasant and pathetic, and women's singleness tends to receive more criticism than men's (Liu, 2016).

Unmarried women living in urban areas are actually among the privileged (Fincher, 2015; Xie, 2021). The majority of unmarried urban women were born in the generation of the one-child policy, and as only children they have enjoyed many of the benefits of this policy, with more opportunities for a good education and more resources from their families than other women from multi-child families (Shen, 2010; Xu, 2000; Yeh, 1992). Even if they were not born in the city, well-educated women in rural areas are more likely to move to big cities for better job and dating opportunities (Edlund, 2005). This is why the 'leftover women' phenomenon is an urban phenomenon.

In addition, since these single women live in cities, they have a certain social status and their own voices. Although there are many single men, they are under relatively less pressure from society and family than women, and the public is more tolerant of their age. These men live in rural or remote areas, have a low social status and hardly have a voice of their own. Some people have previously wondered why, since the phenomenon of 'leftover men' exists as well as that of 'leftover women', these two

groups of people cannot be encouraged to interact in order to solve the problem of singleness. In reality, the conditions of 'leftover men' and 'leftover women' are extremely mismatched. Most 'leftover men' are considered to be passively single due to poor economic conditions (generally living in economically underdeveloped and remote areas), whereas 'leftover women' are the result of active choices(single women in cities are a privileged group basically clustered in large cities). Therefore, it is highly unfeasible to encourage the union of leftover men and women to solve this singleness phenomenon (Fincher,2016; Gaetano,2014; Gui,2020). Additionally, as mentioned above, leftover men are in fact the more vulnerable group that needs attention, but it is single women who are negatively labelled and stereotyped, which reflects a gender inequality in the context of a patriarchal society.

The significance of Gilbert and Guber's discussion on how to define madness in *The Madwomen in the Attic* (1979) is mirrored here. The judgment of urban unmarried women as being unconventionaland, in turn, further defining and stigmatising them as 'leftover women', reflects the persecutory definitions within patriarchal discourse. The definition of 'leftover women' ignores women's autonomous will and subjectivity in choosing when and with whom to marry. Women are not the ones waiting to be 'picked', and a large proportion of women may be delaying or forgoing marriage to resist unequal gender relations in marriage or not wanting to give up their careers and opportunities for marriage. This may not be the intention of some single women, but their singleness reflects an individual attempt to rebel against the established order and the dominant narrative. However, unmarried women are also subjected to multiple pressures from society, the family and everyday life.

Women are targeted when they are unable to fulfil their families' expectations of getting married 'on time', although sometimes the concern about marriage is due to the fact that relatives do not see each other very often and therefore lack common topics for discussion (Yan, 2003). Elders may also act as matchmakers, introducing a stranger (who is considered an ideal mate) to these unmarried women, which may

cause them concern (Liu, 2003). However, in essence, these pressures from the family actually come from their well-intentioned concern for their loved ones.

Pressure from family can be manifested and triggered by some special occasions. For example, the Chinese New Year, also known as the Spring Festival of China, is a perfect example to explain the pressure from family on unmarried women. Just like Christmas in the UK, this holiday is almost the most important traditional event in China. It provides a great opportunity for relatives who work all over the country or even the world to go home and reunite with family and friends. On this day, relatives gather to celebrate the traditional Chinese New Year. It should be a happy and joyful holiday. However, as the New Year approaches, the anxiety of the younger generation increases. This holiday brings great pressure to many single people, especially single women (Gao, 2011; Shen, 2010). Unlike Western societies that promote freedom and personal privacy, Chinese society is heavily influenced by Confucian culture, which teaches that the family is a whole (Yan, 2009; Fei, 1967). In a way, relatives are a continuation of the self. Therefore, in the Chinese social context, when families try to show concern for others, they unconsciously seek to manipulate each other and ignore each other's individualised needs. In other words, the boundaries of Chinese families are not clear (Yan, 2009). The logic is that relatives care about these single women, so they want to make decisions for them or intervene in their decisions in some way because they believe they know what is right. Such relatives are not always direct family members of the nuclear family but may also be distant relatives. This leads to a considerable number of people trying to assess the actions and decisions of these single women and then interfering with them to some extent.

For their families, women's personal relationships are more deserving of attention than their careers (Lee, 1998). In addition, just as the British like to talk about the weather, the starting point in Chinese holiday conversations is usually whether a young person has a date or not. Especially for unmarried women, the elders in their families will try to persuade them to hurry up and get married and have children at the

'right' age. Otherwise, they will become more and more'worthless' in the marriage market as they grow older. Since these elders are their relatives, young people cannot directly refute their views, and this excessive attention puts enormous pressure on these unmarried women.

Unmarried women in China also experience pressure from their peer groups.To (2015) argues that women are more likely to feel stressed when other women of similar age get married or even have children, because they feel that they are moving at a slower pace in life (on a social clock level). Also, when their friends have partners, women tend to feel lonely because they have less time to spend with each other, and they may lose some areas of common interest (Sharp and Ganong, 2007). In addition, in certain cases when an unmarried woman goes for a job interview, her single status can negatively affect her chances of getting the job (Liu, 2016). Companies may perceive single women as unstable or lacking loyalty to the company because they have more freedom to change jobs or even move to another city. Even if they are loyal to the company now, once they get married,their priorities may shift more towards their family than their career.

These pressures not only affect single womenbut also their parents. Parents are anxious about their children's singleness. On the one hand, they are anxious about their daughters' loneliness; on the other, they worry that their daughters will never get married and subsequently affect the family's reputation (To, 2015). In order to help their children get married so that they can deal with these stigmas, the phenomenon of 'parent matchmaking' has emerged (Wang, 2010; Yan, 2003). This refers to a date organised by parents for their children. Anxious parents put information about their children (of marriageable age) on posters in the park, like an advertisement or a CV. They walk around the park looking at other posters trying to find an ideal candidate for their son or daughter. Once they are satisfied with each child's qualifications, these parents exchange their son's or daughter's contact information. On average, 60 per cent of all candidates were women between the ages of 25 and 30. However, the

typical age of men is around 30 to 35 years old (Yang, 2011).

In summary, urban unmarried women do exist, but the so-called 'leftover women' phenomenon is socially constructed. In this social context, they are subjected to multiple squeezes from society, family and other levels of daily life because of their single status. Therefore, research on the daily life of urban single women is necessary.

Why is marriage so important in China?

The fundamental reason why single women face criticism lies in the widespread assumption that everyone needs to get married, or else they will be lonely and unhappy. But why is marriage still so important in China?

Synthesis and Reflection on Current Research on Marriage in China

In order to situate this study fully within its cultural, social, politicaland historical context, the existing literature on Chinese marriage studies in the Chinese context should be more extensively examined and discussed. A review of the existing literature shows that the nature of marriage has evolved over time, but there are limitations in the current academic study of marriage. Researchers have limited themselves to a legally recognised heterosexual marriage perspective, merging marriage and family studies and focusing on the functionality and meaning of marriage in a macro sense. In addition, existing research tends to treat marriage as a social norm that should be taken for granted, and the failure to marry as a 'problem'. This reflects the entrenchment of researchers' understanding of 'marriage' and the further reinforcement of marriage as a social norm, limiting the possibilities for researchers to explore life outside the context of marriage.

Marriage research in the last century has focused on the following areas: marital

union and the ways in which couples get to know each other; mate selection criteria and concepts of marriage (marriage situation and changes); divorce research, including the current situation, causes and the divorce rate (Ma, 1989); marital quality and satisfaction (Xu and Ye, 1998; Lu, 1992); mediation of marital disputes (Zhu, 1988) and marital relations (Ji, 2007). In addition, along with the increasing prominence of population mobility, sex ratio problemsand class problems, topics such as marriage migration, marriage squeezeand marriage gradient have begun to attract the attention of the demographic community (Ji, 1985; Li, 1998). In general, academic research on marriage during this period emphasises the functionality of marriage, which is often linked to fertility (Ji, 1985; Ma 1989). For those who married in the 1950s and 1960s, they were in the midst of China's typical planned economy. At that time, China was in economic difficulties and political movements were prevalent. Although the material life of the people was quite inadequate, they were idealistic and passionate in their desire to contribute to the country. 'Revolution' was the main theme of people's lives. The purpose of marriage was more like finding a like-minded comrade and companion, and romantic love was not a necessary criterion for marriage. Marriages in this era were very stable and the divorce rate was extremely low. Apart from the common proletarian 'revolutionary' goal shared by couples, the view of marriage in that period remained relatively conservative and there was a strong stigma attached to divorce. In addition, most couples conceived multiple children, and the obligation to raise them was very strong in their minds. Even though some marriages were unhappy and accompanied by prolonged quarrels, people still insisted on maintaining their marriages. Marriage is a duty and obligation, and divorce is usually not an option for them (Zhu, 1988).

In the 1970s and 1990s, young people began to demand a more materialistic life, even though it was still insufficient. When choosing a spouse, young people would consider their future partner's family background or whether he or she had a skill that could make a living. In addition, the idea of romantic relationships has also been expressed (Lu, 1992). Under the influence of China's planned economy, the state and

society have shared some of the pressure of marriage. The state-owned enterprises' labour unions play the role of an introducer, helping unmarried workers to solve their 'marriage problems', i.e., introducing them to potential partners to help them get married. Some state-owned enterprises allocate free 'marital housing' to married workers as an employee welfare benefit. And after they give birth to the next generation, the kindergartens organised by the union also greatly reduce the pressure on parents to raise children. People's marriages at this stage remained highly stable, with low divorce rates and increased marital satisfaction (Xu and Ye, 1998; Lu, 1992). Marriages in this period began to be linked to love and material life (Li, 1998).

The focus of marriage research has not changed too dramatically since 2000. Previous research topics, especially those of marital satisfaction, marital quality and mate selection criteria, are still the focus of research. 'Marriage matching' (Qi and Niu, 2012; Li, 2011) and marriage payment (Ji, 2007) are two of the major themes, and the comparative and changing perspectives have become more prominent. With the positive socio-economic impact of China's reform and opening up and the institutional changes brought about by China's transition from a planned economy to a market economy, the material life of the people has been greatly improved. People's material requirements for marriage have gradually increased (Qi and Niu, 2012; Li, 2011). Moreover, the union organisations of state-owned enterprises have withdrawn from people's private life and no longer provide marriage introduction, welfare housing and childcare support (Ji, 2007). The cost of marriage for young people, as well as the increased difficulty of childcare, has made it relatively less easy to get married than it used to be. This is also reflected in changes in academic research themes. The concept of 'marriage anxiety' has begun to come to the fore, especially the phenomenon of unmarried women in urban areas (often described in the literature as the 'leftover women phenomenon') and the prevalence of bachelors in rural areas ('leftover men phenomenon').These trends have come to dominate discussions within the context of the imbalanced sex ratio (Wei and Zhang, 2011). In addition, topics related to social mobility have become more extensive. Alongside the marital problems of the new

generation of rural migrant workers, the number of female-related marital issues – such as the marital patterns of migrant women, the marital relationships of 'leftover women', foreign daughters-in-law, marital trafficking, marital violence and gender relations in the marital system – has begun to increase (Li, 2013; Ye and Wu, 2009; Zhang, 2008; Zhao, 2008).

It is not difficult to see that marriage studies are closely linked to the general context of social change. Related to the heated debates arising from the two revisions of the Marriage Law in 1980 and 2001, the relationship between marriage and affection/love and marriage and economy (such as the division of property in case of divorce) has been emphasised. In connection with the intensification of social mobility, the widening of the gap between the rich and the poor and the emergence of feminism since the 1980s, the relationship between marriage and class (including urban/rural, economic status and educational matching) and gender has also become a focus of attention. From these studies, we can see that the nature of marriage in China has gradually changed with the times, but the current academic research on Chinese marriage still focuses on exploring the functionality and social significance of marriage at a macro level using a top-down approach.

But what exactly is the definition of marriage amidst all these myriad themes? Beyond the meaning prescribed by law, almost none of the existing research papers give a clear definition of their own. There are two possibilities for this phenomenon: one is that researchers consider the definition of marriage as an axiom that cannot be modified; the other is that researchers are actually looking for and determining research topics and objectives according to their own understanding of marriage. There is also a considerable body of literature in which marriage is not even a stand-alone concept but is often juxtaposed with the family, with neither being defined.

It signifies the crystallisation of researchers' perception of 'marriage' and the further entrenchment of marriage as a societal norm, constraining the potential for researchers

to explore life beyond marital contexts. This can be attributed to several factors. In the first place, researchers predominantly envision marriage within the conventional framework of the general populace. This encompasses aspects like partner selection, marriage exchanges, compatibility, interactions, the quality and contentment of a couple's life, marital conflicts and breakdowns, as well as being single and unmarried, among others. This imaginative scope is notably confined. Two overarching assumptions underlie this limited conceptualisation: firstly, that there exists, or should exist, a prevailing model of marriage as it currently stands; and secondly, that only the prevalent circumstances of the mainstream population define the standard or prototypical marriage. These two assumptions have led some authors, while not explicitly defining marriage, to inadvertently categorise all other marital scenarios as 'other' or even as 'variations' in their studies.

While individual studies have begun to explore the circumstances of minorities, such as marriages of people with disabilities (Jie, 2014) and cohabitation of the elderly (Liu, 2005), there remains a long distance to cover. These limited papers still fail to examine the definition of marriage and whether unions within these minority groups vary solely in terms of participants or if there exist additional distinctions, particularly in their fundamental nature compared to those in the mainstream population.

Secondly, the current literature essentially frames marriage as a 'social setting'. Regardless of whether researchers focus on the marital or extramarital context, the definition and parameters are confined to the union and shared life between a man and a woman officially registered as married, on a one-to-one basis. This should have been the starting point and objective of legal studies. Other humanities and social disciplines should be more concerned with the study of 'living entities', that is, what people actually do and how they live in their daily practices. This difference is not just due to disciplinary divisions; it implies a different worldview: who takes the lead in the matter of marriage? Is it the 'living entity' that needs, creates and modifies the 'social set-up', or is it the other way around? While it is not necessary for the author

to delve into this issue in every research paper, lacking an awareness of this difference in worldviews makes it challenging for any specific study to reach the academic depth it deserves and is capable of attaining.

Some studies have made strides in this area, examining phenomena like Naxi marriage, Tibetan polygamy (Zhang, 2013), non-legal marriages (1993), de facto marriages (e.g.,cohabitation, adoption), sexual partnershipsand even one-night stands. However, these studies have yet to delve into the definition of marriage and its applicability, especially the role of these 'non-marital sexual relationships' for individuals and their significance in societal history.

Thirdly, the existing literature predominantly takes the perspective of heterosexual marriage. While recent sociological and legal studies on same-sex marriage (Guo, 2005; Wei, 2012; Fu and Zhang, 2013) and transgender marriage (Zhang, 2007) have broadened the gender spectrum in the context of marriage, describing the phenomenon is insufficient; more groundwork is required. For example, is heterosexuality, sexual relationsor cohabitation a necessary condition for marriage? And what are the sufficient conditions?

In summary, the current definition of marriage research in the Chinese academic sphere is relatively vague, leaving significant gaps from a theoretical standpoint. There is still ample room for development in the realm of imaginative marriage research. This reflects the prevalent stance of the Chinese academic community, which views marriage as the norm by default. The absence of marriage is seen as a deviation from the norm. The study of marital life should shift from a descriptive examination of 'what marriage is like' to an exploration of 'what it constitutes and how it develops'. Additionally, it should consider the feasibility of postponing or forgoing marriage altogether.

The Reality of Marriage in Chinese Society

In contrast to Western social contexts, marriage maintains a crucial role in Chinese society. Understanding its significance is pivotal to grasping the research questions in this thesis. Unfortunately, this study is primarily framed within a context dominated by heterosexuality, as same-sex marriage is not yet legally recognised in China. Unlike Western cultures, which emphasise individualism, Chinese society and culture possess their own distinctive complexities shaped by traditional influences. Collectivism holds greater prominence in Chinese culture. While China has been influenced by Western liberal ideologies since the era of reform and opening up, the definition of 'family as the smallest unit of society' remains the prevailing concept in Chinese sociological academia (Yan, 2010). This underscores the importance of marriage and family in contemporary Chinese society. Therefore, in this section, I will examine why marriage retains such significance in China through the dimensions of Confucianism and social institutions.

Confucianism and 'Filial Piety' (Xiao/孝)

In the modern context, the existence of unmarried women is a result of globalisation rather than a regional phenomenon, let alone a phenomenon exclusive to China (Fang, 2016). But why is there a labelling and phenomenological discourse on older unmarried women in China? As mentioned above, the phenomenon of 'leftover women' is not a demographic issue but a socially constructed cultural phenomenon. While there are few similar stigmatising labels for older unmarried women in Western cultural contexts, similar concepts of 'leftover women' exist in regions also influenced by traditional Confucianism, such as South Korea, Japan and Taiwan (Reynolds, 2005; Sakai, 2003). For example, in Japan, there is a comparable concept to 'leftover woman': 'loser dog'/敗犬 (まけ-いぬ [負け犬]). These two labels carry similar stigmatising connotations, except that 'losing dog' delineates the age at which single women are 'discarded' in the marriage market as 30. Although academics have not

directly attributed the stigmatisation of single women over 27 years of age that occurs in Korea, Japan and Taiwan to the influence of Confucian culture, I would argue that the fact that the stigmatisation of unmarried women as a cultural phenomenon occurs in regions that have been influenced by traditional Confucianism is in some ways indicative of the influence of Confucianism on similar phenomena.

The traditional Confucian culture is rooted in blood ties and promotes 'family-centredness', which forms the core of traditional Chinese culture (Sin, 2021; Chen, 2011). The new family, formed through marriage, serves as the foundation for societal continuity, making marriage pivotal in traditional Chinese culture. Within Confucian culture, individuals exist in intricate relationships between family and household (Connolly, 2012; Ames, 2011; Bernthrong, 2008; Zhan, 2005). In this dynamic, the individual and the family are inseparable. The subjectivity of the individual is subordinate to the family, and within this family-centric relationship, the individual and the family are intertwined (Sin, 2021; Ames, 2011). This may lead to some logical ambiguity between the individual and the family, but there is a clear distinction in human ethics. Thus, in Confucian culture, patriarchy becomes the central axis of 'family culture'. Ethical principles such as the hierarchy of elders and children, distinctions between genders and filial obligations correspond to specific social relations within this hierarchical model, imparting meaning and interpretation to individual behaviour (Sin, 2021). Consequently, in the traditional Confucian perspective, the individual is primarily subordinate to family relations and not an autonomous entity as in Western sociology. Interpersonal relationships form the foundation of societies centred around the family, leading Confucian culture to place greater emphasis on ethics and morality.

In the long process of development of human society, the family has always been the product of many factors, and it is full of social, institutional, cultural and economic shadows. Therefore, when we explore the nature of the family, we always need to do so in the context of a particular era, so that we can have a clearer understanding of the

nature and significance of the family. The nature of the family is not static. During the Qing Dynasty, the order and ethics of the family were entirely governed by Confucianism. From the late Qing to the Republican period, traditional Chinese ideology was impacted by Western economy and culture (Zhan, 2005). With the rise of the New Culture Movement, the traditional family order was challenged and individualism began to be introduced into the Chinese cultural narrative. From the stage of the Republic of China to the founding of the People's Republic of China, statism gradually overtook familism and individualism as the dominant ideology in this special historical period of national survival. With the demise of the feudal social system and the progress of the communist revolution, the traditional family order in China was broken. The traditional parental authority was weakened and the role of women in the family began to rise, while at the same time the people's identification with the nation-state was continuously strengthened (Fei 1976; Yan 1996).

From the period of Mao's rule to the stage of reform and opening up, the country was faced with the major task of economic construction during this period. Family interests had to serve the overall goal of national socialist construction, and national interests completely overrode individual interests. The revolutionary and women's liberation movements of this period largely broke the influence of traditional familism, and individuals were able to denounce family members on their own initiative for political reasons (Fong, 2004; Hershatter, 2007).Yan (2020) argues that this situation was the result of a collectivist approach to the path of individuation in China that rescued the individual from traditional family bondage and freed them from the traditional family bondage of the past.

However, at the same time, the government at this stage also introduced policies that reinforced certain values advocated by 'traditional familism', such as social welfare policies tied to the family, policies on sharing political responsibilities within the family and policies on marital welfare housing. After the reform and opening up, China's economy gained rapid growth with a series of liberalised economic and social

policy reforms. With the rise of individualism, the importance of the family has gradually come to be emphasised, mainly in terms of the functionality of the family. But family relationships in modern China are no longer fixed, and there is no absolute authority in intergenerational relationships. For example, Yan (2021) points out that the focus of family life in the new era of China has shifted from the elders to the younger generation, and a downward flow of intergenerational resources has occurred. This reflects a change in family relationships and patterns.

As history progressed and the mode of production advanced, the family-centric social structure of Chinese society underwent transformation due to Western individualism and urbanisation. Nevertheless, as an ancient and deeply ingrained emotional structure, it is challenging for changes in individual lifestyles and societal shifts to completely eliminate its influence in today's society within a short span of time. As a pre-consciousness of modern society, the concept of family orientation is instilled through family-centred ideology in family education before individuals enter society as adults (Wee, 2014; Chen, 2011; Ivanhoe, 2007). A competing force for individuals within this context is their family's influence, shaped by Confucianism. For instance, during the author's interviews, respondents often expressed the expectation of 'filial piety' when choosing a partner. This signifies that the notion of family orientation has been successfully internalised by the younger generation through the process of socialisation. At the same time, 'filial piety' often implies that parents anticipate the younger generation to assume the responsibility of caring for them in their old age. While for working women, marriage and childcare might entail a reduction in personal income and a potential stagnation of their careers (Fincher, 2016), this also brings an additional human resource to the family, a vital support for old age. This shared expectation in partner selection reflects the children's internalisation of the idea of collectively providing for their parents in their later years.

Confucian concepts also place significant emphasis on parents' social responsibility for their children's education, asserting that if parents fall short in family education,

public opinion is justified in morally criticising them (Sin, 2021; Wee, 2014; Connolly, 2012; Chen, 2011; Zhan, 2005). Thus, concern for children's affairs extends beyond parental care to ensuring they are shielded from significant moral risks. In Confucianism, children's marriage is regarded as a crucial duty for the continuation of the family, and it is the parents' family duty to oversee this responsibility. Failing to fulfil this obligation signifies a neglect of their family responsibilities. Furthermore, as children delay marriage, they may face moral censure from the outside world for not meeting this responsibility, potentially leading to social 'shaming'. This is why parents influenced by Confucian culture invest significant concern in their children's marriages, a concern that inevitably places considerable pressure on them. This ethical framework works both ways, with the 'moralisation of marriage' also imposing a degree of moral weight on single women who do not marry within socially expected timelines.

In Confucianism, the individual is not the autonomous agent who freely chooses their own marriage. Marriage in traditional Chinese culture is not about the personal autonomy of the individual but rather the union of two families (Bernthrong, 2008; Blustein, 1982). Marriage, in a way, becomes an ethical and even moral matter centred around the family. Consequently, under the sway of this belief, unmarried women who postpone marriage not only fail to fulfil significant roles in their personal lives and parental duties but their families also grapple with the moral pressures imposed by society. If a daughter does not marry within a certain timeframe, unless due to religious beliefs, she is viewed as unfilial by her parents. In the broader societal context, this behaviour challenges established ethical norms. China is currently in a period of social transition, and in modern society the freedom to choose a spouse has been widely recognised, and individuals have the freedom to marry out of free will. However, in the Chinese social context, parents still have authority over their children's marriages due to the requirement of 'filial piety'. The Chinese Book of Filial Piety outlines this as a universal requirement, described in one sentence as being a good daughter or son and being good to one's parents (Bernthrong, 2008). One of

the important requirements is to obey and fulfil the demands of the parents in order to make them happy (Ivanhoe, 2007). More recently, parents' interest in their daughters' marriages and children arises from a concern for their daughters' future well-being and security (Zheng and Ho, 2017).

The bond of filial piety makes the intergenerational relationship between children and parents stronger in Chinese society than in Western society. This is why intergenerational relationships in China seem so remarkable. Chinese parents have more control over their adult children to influence their daily lives than in Western societies. The phenomenon of urban unmarried women, which arises in the context of Chinese public opinion, is, in fact, to some extent a manifestation of the struggle between unmarried daughters and the patriarchal power represented by their parents over the issue of marriage.

Unlike Western societies, Chinese families have a particular pattern of family interaction due to the influence of traditional Confucian concepts. In this case, intergenerational support in the family is provided both by children to their parents and by parents to their children. Traditionally, Chinese families have followed this 'feeding-back model', whereby adult children are obliged to support the previous generation, which can be summarised by the phrase 'raising children to prevent old age' (Fei, 2008). Before the advent of the modern public pension system, families in China followed this model in caring for their elders. In the traditional model, if a person did not have offspring, their old age was not guaranteed. Raising children became an economic strategy to secure one's old age. This socio-cultural or social habitus, lagging behind economic development, has remained for the time being. At the same time, practicing filial piety is not just about material support and obligations but can also be an expression of care and love. Yi (2017), in discussing the practice of filial piety among women in northern China, argues that filial piety alone is not enough, as it is also important for women to be seen as filial. This not only earns them respect among their friends and colleagues but also brings honour to their parents. In

addition, by displaying filial piety, they hope to show it to their own children, thus passingthe practice on from generation to generation.

Marriage is not only the sphere in which individuals realise the value of their lives; it is also the primary method for family survival and continuity, as well as the customary mechanism for the ongoing maintenance required for the functioning of society (Chen, 2011). Marriage is a crucial means for the operation and overall upkeep of society, contributing to the establishment of a traditional Chinese relational society. Therefore, marriage is deemed necessary and legitimate for traditional Chinese society.

Social System Aspects

The problematic nature of unmarried urban women, which historically has not been a concern or has been acceptable in certain cultures, poses a threat not in itself but to the established order shaped by a specific historical and cultural context, gradually becoming ingrained in a wider population. In a broader context, marriage holds importance in maintaining social stability and continuity. In traditional Chinese society, the family stands as the most fundamental, enduring and crucial social institution. The traditional family structure is established through the bonds of marriage, the extension of lineage and the perpetuation of the family across generations (Li and Huang, 1992). An important aspect of modern social transformation in China has been the influence on traditional family values and structures, particularly the state's substantial involvement in population management through institutional means, which has fundamentally altered people's perspectives and practices regarding marriage and childbearing.

Since the late 1970s, birth control policies and economic development have triggered

dramatic societal shifts that collectively contributed to fertility decline in China (Ji and Zheng, 2018; Zuo, 2019). After the transition from high to low fertility rates, China swiftly progressed towards very low levels of fertility. For China's population, no demographic event in the first half of the 21st century compares with the arrival of the era of negative population growth (Ji and Zheng, 2018). In response to the acceleration of aging demographics, the state implemented institutional adjustments to fertility policies, initiating the policy in November 2013 that allows couples with one child to have two and fully implementing the policy for couples to have two children in October 2015. However, after these changes, not only did the fertility rate not increase as anticipated but there was also a trend of declining marriage rates. According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), the number of births in China in 2018 was only 15.23 million, which is 5.6 million less than what the government had projected. Instead of a 'peak in the number of births', there was a notable drop of 2 million compared to 2017 (Fan and Zhao, 2020). According to the NBS and the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the national marriage rate in 2018 was 7.2 per 1,000, the lowest since 2013 (Report on China's Population and Labour Issues NO.19, 2019). In other words, policies that were once potent in controlling population growth may not be as effective in promoting people's fertility intentions today.

It is undoubtedly an extraordinary policy to have fertility determined by State policy. We need to return to the nature of marriage and procreation in terms of their social attributes, which, in human society, are subordinate to a particular sociocultural system. Marriage is not an instinctbut an institution. But the institution guides human behaviour into a given pathway in much the same way as instinct does in its domain (Berger, 1996). Marriage and procreation are not simply biological processes based on instinct but are part of the social structure, where marriage is not a private matter and childbearing is a social vocation (Fei, 1998), where society, through the institution of marriage, allows individual life to participate in the process of human reproduction and where the significance of the individual's life takes on a transcendent dimension.

In traditional China, the family based on procreation is a continuous community of endeavour. In the course of modernisation over the past century or so, the traditional marriage and childbearing system has been directly challenged by the changing role of women in society, changes in traditional family patterns and the redefinition of human relationships. Since the reform and opening up, the strong implementation of family planning policies aimed at controlling excessive population growthand the unprecedented rapid urbanisation and industrialisation, which have led to drastic economic and social changes, have impacted Chinese family values and dismantled the social significance of marriage and childbearing at all levels (Zhou, 2003). Unlike traditional societies that emphasised the value of an individual's life in the social cause of 'racial continuity', the era of change has seen the value of the individual being attributed to the individual – individual needs, individual desires, individual consumption and so on – and the relationship between the sexes has been redefined, with women's value no longer confined to the 'race'. Women's value is no longer limited to 'whether she marries well' or 'whether she carries on her husband's family's legacy'. In this process, the concepts of marriage and parenthood, such as'a man should marry when he is old enough, a woman should marry when she is old enough' and 'more children, more blessings', have been fundamentally subverted, and the social connection between procreation and marriage has been disassociated. Yan's (2017) extended observation of the lower cape villages in northern China found that 'most older people have accepted … that the meaning of life is no longer to honour the ancestors, but to enable their children to live a happy life', and similar findings have been made in other studies.

The traditional agricultural economy with the family as the unit of production and self-sufficiency no longer exists. The notion of the act of procreation as the transmission of the family lineage began to be criticised. The traditional model of frugal consumption has been undermined, and hedonism and consumerism have begun to prevail （He，2013）.

Bell's (1992) observation of the impact of modernism on the traditional order helps us

understand the disintegration of the social values of marriage and procreation that China is currently facing: a set of customs that underpinned the traditional value system has come to an end. As a result, society is no longer seen as a natural union of people but rather as a mishmash of separate individuals pursuing their own self-fulfilment. Giddens (2001) also points to the transformation of intimacy in modern societies, where sexuality is now a means of forging connections with others based on intimacy and is no longer rooted in a fixed kinship inherited from one generation to the next. The combination of individualism, mass consumerism and hedonism is a common feature of modern society and has largely eroded traditional Chinese social values. Policies to encourage childbearing in the new situation have so far had little effect. Fei (1999) has revealed the contradiction between racial continuity and individual survival. He points out that the nature of procreation as a matter of self-interest and self-benefit is the meaning and value given to it by society, because if society does not take this matter as an overall responsibility, the integrity of the society is not guaranteed (Fei, 1999). Today's society is faced with three global problems: low fertility rate, low marriage rate and rapid aging, and the prevalence of individualism in modern society has undoubtedly exacerbated the dichotomy between the interests of society as a whole and the interests of the individual. It is therefore understandable that women are encouraged to enter into marriage and take on reproductive responsibilities to take advantage of the pressure of social opinion.

This social dimension of needs and its influence on individual choices can be seen as a manifestation of bodily politics. According to Lock's (1987) definition, bodily politics refers to the management, supervision and control of the body, whether individual or collective. It can occur in the realm of reproduction and sexuality, in the realm of work and leisure and in the realm of disease and other forms of deviance. In a sense, bodily politics is also a form of the social body. Whether the emphasis is on the regulation of individual women's bodies or the collective body, the body is, in this case, only a mediator in the expression of some kind of social control. It is difficult to find positive bodily feelings in it. Foucault studied the role of power over the body

from a historical perspective, in which the body is submissive, disciplined and does not possess agency or initiative. In the context of Chinese social tradition, the manipulation of collective and individual bodies at the political level can be said to abound in history and personal experience. When society is seen as a complete body, the family becomes the smallest cell in the body, and in order to seek the continuation of the body, the generation of new cells is crucial. Hence, marriage is vital. At the same time, since women are physiologically responsible for pregnancy and childbirth, the implicit discipline of society as a public authority on women is more stringent. This theory validates the discursive oppression of unmarried women when they do not conform to societal expectations. However, for unmarried women in urban China under the stigmatisation of 'leftover women', their choice to postpone marriage is, in a sense, a rebellion against the social discipline.

The Bound Uterus: The Dilemma of Single Women's Reproductive Rights in China

China's family planning policies have historically silenced women's voices, especially those of unmarried single mothers. Unlike in Western societies, cohabiting relationships are not recognised in China, where reproductive decisions are closely linked to marital decisions and intergenerational dynamics. Unmarried single mothers in China are particularly penalised for violating gender norms supported by the state's reproductive policies. Single parenthood is not technically illegal in China, but a range of policy, economic and cultural barriers make it difficult for women to be in this position. In the Chinese social context, single women's decision to become unwed mothers reflects their agency, but the link between childbearing and marriage does not allow women to completely disengage from the social system (Zhao and Basnyat, 2021). Therefore, if single women wish to have legitimate and accepted offspring, marriage is the best option.

China's current fertility policy is based on family planning, which means that the

focus of the policy remains family centred. Although the institutional design takes into account the balance between protecting citizens' reproductive rights and fulfilling their family planning obligations, the state requires citizens to form a family before considering procreation for reasons of family stability, public interest and social harmony, thus limiting actual reproductive rights within marriage (Cao and Zhang, 2014; Zhang, 2011). The internal logic of this is that although marriage entitles both spouses to procreate, the actual reproductive rights are shared by both spouses, and marriage also ensures the legal status of the child through the 'hukou' system (household registration) after the couple has given birth. Thus, marriage and reproductive rights are inextricably linked in China. After combing through the local family planning regulations of all Chinese provinces, regions and municipalities directly under the central government, it seems only Jilin province has explicitly provided through local law that women who have reached the legal age of marriage, decided not to marry and are childless can have children through legal, medically assisted reproductive technology. This is the only regional exception in the country that explicitly allows single women to have children in this way. In other provinces and cities in China, marriage is still insisted upon as a prerequisite for childbearing. This family planning policy uses marriage as an 'entry condition' that excludes single women from the body of reproductive rights, leaving them in a state of logically having reproductive rights but effectively being 'disenfranchised' (Zhang, 2011). For example, a woman's requirement and choice of method to have a child without a partner is excluded by the regulations on assisted reproductive technology. This means that single women in China are unable to access medical technologies such as IVF or 'egg freezing' from regular legal medical institutions. In other words, it is not illegal for single women to have children, but it is not supported by social policy.

Another manifestation of the lack of policy support for single parenthood is the issue of 'hukou'. In China, 'hukou' is considered the first step in recognising an individual's social identity. While children born within marriage should have the same rights as children born out of wedlock, when it comes to the implementation of

specific issues, such as 'hukou' registration of newborns, single mothers may encounter some obstacles (Afridi et al., 2015). Some regions may require proof of marriage, and some may require single mothers to pay a fine.

The long history of household division has had a profound impact on the development of the modern Chinese state (Chen, 2019; Yang, 2013). Pre-modern forms of the 'hukou' system were an integral part of the process of state-building, centralisation of power and authority and restriction of migration and social mobility. State-building during the Republican period revolutionised China's system of governance but failed to end the age-old practice of using the 'hukou' to govern society. Where possible, the household registration system was used for conscription, agriculture and industrial organisation. At the dawn of the communist era, the 'hukou' system was radically adapted to the residential system, which played an indispensable role in the establishment of the planned economy and made possible the state's emphasis on socialist control and transformation. To this day, the 'hukou' system remains one of the most fundamental systems of social management in China, as it continues to influence decisions on migration and settlement and remains a central aspect of the social system. Moreover, the 'hukou' system in modern societies is not only one of the tools of social management but also reflects the social identity that individuals are institutionally assigned, and it plays an integral role in people's daily lives (Afridi et al., 2015; Chen, 2009). Barriers in the 'hukou' registration system make it more difficult for single women to have children outside of marriage.

In addition, single mothers receive little support from social welfare and have to bear more financial pressure than married women when giving birth. While social benefits do encompass maternity insurance for women, this policy renders single women ineligible for such benefits. In her study, Zhan (2018) provides instances of the financial hardships experienced by single mothers. For instance, considering the average salary in Guangdong Province is 4,811 RMB per month, the inability to access maternity insurance translates to single mothers losing between 30,000 and

40,000 RMB. Additionally, single parenthood not only influences the traditional family structure in China but also conflicts with prevailing family values. Single mothers and their children are susceptible to societal scrutiny, subjecting them to both financial and moral pressures. As single parenthood is not an easy decision to make in the Chinese social context, marriage is presented as the best option for women who want to have children.

In conclusion, China's traditional socio-cultural, family functions, social institutions and the difficulties of single-parent families reveal the continuing importance and almost indispensable significance of marriage in modern Chinese society. For individual women, marriage is not only a way for them to fulfil their family responsibilities to their parents, in line with prevailing traditional values, but also an appropriate elder care option with an economic function. At the same time, for the macro-society, marriage is also needed by society to fulfil its role of maintaining social stability and continuity. With an understanding of the meaning and significance of marriage in the context of Chinese society, the reasons why women are stigmatised for being single can be better understood.

Chinese women – narrated changes in gender identity

We have always lived in certain cultural and discursive environments, and our perception of our own identity is affected by the environment in which we live. In order to better understand how the gender identities of modern urban unmarried women are shaped, it is necessary to comprehend the social status of women, the norms of women's lives, normative femininity and the processes and changes in feminist politics and movements at different times in history.

After 1949, ideological discourses played a direct role in the daily lives of Chinese women, influencing their actions, gender relations and social standing. The state

defined Chinese women's social identity through official narratives, thus creating what can be termed a 'narrated gender identity'. There have been two significant shifts in the narrative of Chinese women's gender identity. The first is the transition from the gender identity characterised by traditional patriarchy to that of the socialist labourer, which propelled women from the margins of the narrative subject to the mainstream through discourse. The second is the shift from the gender identity of the socialist labourer to that of diversified gender identity, which marginalises women through discourse. So, what kind of gender relations order is behind the discourses in different historical periods? How did various discourses gain legitimacy?

Patriarchy's 'narrated gender identity' presents men as possessing absolute power and authority, while women are portrayed as being subordinated to male patriarchal authority by primarily raising children at home. In the old society, women were confined to the family sphere, with no recognised social identity beyond domestic roles. The May Fourth Movement of 1915 initially challenged the patriarchal gender identity in the realm of ideology and introduced a fresh narrative of gender identity. 'Women's liberation' became not only a political slogan of the time but also a symbol of China's political modernisation process, with various progressive forces advocating for the idea of women's liberation. Equality between men and women was first formally enshrined in Chinese law in 1950, emphasising freedom of marriage, monogamy and equal rights for both genders. During the Maoist era, women were assigned the social role of 'being able to hold up half the sky' (Liu, 2016). Women were encouraged to work and produce alongside men, contributing to the building of socialism. Women took pride in their ability to work, and society recognised and supported women's significant potential to participate in social labour (Hershatter, 2007). It was believed that women could perform as well as, if not better than, men in terms of labour. As a result, women acquired a new identity as socialist labourers.

However, in the affirmative action movement and nation-building of that time, women's responsibilities and contributions within the family were largely absent from

public discourse. China had adopted a 'work points' distribution system during the People's Commune period, where work points were a measure of both the quantity and quality of members' participation in group labour and the basis for allocating labour. Hershatter (2007) argues that, on the one hand, women stepped out of the home during this period, acquiring new skills, earning their own wages or work credits, expanding their social circles and gaining an independent social identity, all of which brought great benefits to women. However, they were also shouldering a dual burden, managing both internal and external responsibilities. After completing collective work in the factories, they returned home to make clothes and shoes for their families, and at night, they handled all the household chores and cared for their large families. This increased the stress of their lives.

While the fundamental policies of the early Mao's era had a transformative impact on women's lives – particularly in opening up employment and educational opportunities – women were positioned as part of the public subject. However, neither the Women's Union nor other state institutions focused on the domestic and family sphere. Instead, the prevailing assumption at this point was that until the state could financially afford to provide childcare and other family and welfare services, these tasks would naturally fall to women. Moreover, if women failed to fulfil these tasks, they would be viewed as irresponsible to the socialist cause. This position was rooted in a socio-biological view of gender difference, asserting that women are naturally bound by their biology to motherhood and other caregiving responsibilities (Evans, 2008).

After the founding of the new People's Republic of China, the Chinese government encouraged childbearing, leading to the first baby boom. Between 1949 and 1953, China's initial census revealed an additional 100 million people added to the country's population. Women who gave birth to many children were bestowed with titles like 'Heroic Mothers' and 'Glorious Mothers'. During Mao's era, in addition to participating in the building of socialism, women were also responsible for supporting

large families with numerous children. This entailed resolving issues related to clothing, food, housing, transport and caring for the elderly. All this unseen labour naturally fell upon women, and there was no public discussion about the extent of this additional burden on women (Hershatter, 2007; Winckler and Greenhalgh, 2005). Fortunately, burdens such as children's education were not solely shouldered by women. The state gradually introduced various benefits like kindergartens, study facilities, canteens, medical care and elderly services through a unified system to alleviate the burden on women's families, with the aim of liberating the female labour force. The functions of the family were to some extent taken over and accommodated by this unified system. During this time, the goals of the family were also somewhat subordinated to the grand objective of socialist production construction. As Song (2018) points out, the gendered division of labour persisted during the socialist period, and particularly the traditional gendered division of labour and patriarchal traditions within the family were consciously retained to some extent in the private sphere.

During the ensuing Cultural Revolution, 16 million young intellectuals from the cities went to the countryside to support construction. As women across the country engaged in agricultural production, the state established numerous female role models to encourage women's participation. These role models portrayed women engaging in heavy manual labour akin to men, while still asserting their freedom of spirit (Fan, 2012). During this particular period in history, gender equality was formally emphasised for both men and women. Women were outwardly encouraged to adopt a de-sexualised appearance, with short hair, and to perform labour-intensive work, aspiring to be on par with men. At that time, nominal 'equal pay for equal work' was advocated, but in practice, there remained a disparity between women's and men's pensions due to childbearing and the number of years of retirement (Cao, 2018; Yan, 2010).

In the early 1980s, China embarked on a gradual process of reform and opening up,

initiating a comprehensive overhaul of the rural and urban economic system and fostering the development of the private sector. A significant number of rural women workers migrated to China's coastal cities in pursuit of their aspirations. At the same time, family planning entered its strictest phase. It was during this period that women's 'narrated gender identity' began to shift. The voices of 'searching for mothers', 'searching for good women' and 'searching for good wives' began to emerge in various media outlets, signifying the repositioning of what constituted a 'good woman' (Tong, 2006). This series of narratives underscored the gendered division of labour. The slogan 'men and women are the same' began to be questioned, and the confusion between 'gender equality' and 'no difference', brought about by the politicisation of the Mao era, was criticised, causing the slogan of gender equality to fade from prominence. Consequently, the notion that 'women should return to the family' started gaining traction. However, under the auspices of the socialist state, it was challenging for the voices advocating for 'women returning to the family' to gain legitimacy. Thus, by the end of the 1980s, the discourse evolved into one of 'Women periodic employment'/'staged employment'. It is a form of intermittent employment in which female workers participate in social labour for a certain period of time and voluntarily cease to do so for some other period of time, according to their own needs, during their career (Hershatter , 2007; Tong，2006). It is the opposite of permanent and stable lifelong employment. This argument advocates that women should give priority to taking care of the family and undertaking family responsibilities when the family needs them, and return to the workplace when family responsibilities are no longer urgent. This not only affects women's career planning but is also oppressive to women.

At the same time, due to remnants of patriarchal ideology, many families opted for prenatal gender screening, resulting in at least 25 to 30 million fewer female babies being born in China after the implementation of family planning policy (Fong, 2004, 2010; Winckler and Greenhalgh, 2005). Hershatter(2007) argues that this is a direct

consequence of policy decisions that do not consider gender. There was no official endorsement of female infanticide at the national level, and even a subsequent policy prohibited hospitals from informing prospective parents of the sex of their baby in advance. However, given that it was in the best interest of individual families to have a boyand considering the family as the unit of production, many families still sought to ascertain the sex of their babies beforehand to ensure the birth of a boy. This has resulted in a demographic imbalance. Under this policy, what benefits individual families may instead be detrimental to society. Nonetheless, the only child born during this policy period enjoys more rights (education, work, inheritance of family property, etc.) and carries more obligations (caring for the elderly) than women in traditional patriarchal societies (Fong, 2004). They are relatively more likely to succeed in their careers.

In the 30 years of reform and opening up, which also coincide with three decades of marketisation, the trend towards public–private separation has gradually emerged. The danwei system has collapsed, and the influence of Marxist ideology has weakened. Various functions of social reproduction and care previously managed by danwei were progressively 'socialised' and 'marketised', reverting to the responsibilities of individual families (e.g., public kindergartens and nursing homes). As the traditional gendered division of labour within the family persisted from the planned economy, it is only logical that these responsibilities continue to be shouldered by women. This has led to an intensification of the conflict between women's family and work roles. Women's position in the labour market – including factors such as an increasing gender income gap, gender discrimination and penalties for motherhood – affects women's influence within the family. Likewise, women's position in the family – characterised by reinforced expectations of women's traditional gender roles and an exacerbated conflict between home and work responsibilities – further impacts women's standing in the labour market, including issues related to gender discrimination and opportunities for advancement (He and Sun, 2017).

The ideological weakening of Marxism has left a void gradually filled by a more intricate conception of gender, which Ji (2017) posits as mosaic familism. This perspective incorporates both the gender norms of Confucian patriarchal tradition and the market economy's emphasis on personal attributes and competitiveness. Intertwined with this is the neoliberal-influenced notion of individual responsibility and personal choice. Ji argues that modern family relations in China resemble a mosaic, where both traditional and modern elements coexist, blend, intertwine and give rise to something new in the Chinese family system. While the traditional emphasis on intergenerational relationships remains significant in the Chinese family, there have been new developments in family structure, relationships and interactions. For example, patriarchal authority has diminished, and more egalitarian and intimate intergenerational relationships have emerged, with emphasis on both the father's and mother's lineage. This complex view of gender, arising from the fusion of tradition and modernity, reflects and supports the new gender dynamics that have surfaced in China during the period of market transition and in the context of globalisation. This intricate gender perspective and set of values also provide insight into the intergenerational conflicts in women's perspectives on mate selection and family in modern society. Amid significant social shifts, an increasing number of professional women are choosing to postpone marriage for the sake of their careers (Jackson and Ho, 2020). Female singleness is gradually becoming a viable option.

For the women's movement, the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 marked a pivotal moment for many Chinese women, particularly educated professionals. It afforded them the unprecedented opportunity to directly engage with women from all corners of the globe, particularly from the Global South (Evans, 2008; Kong, 2019). In these discussions, they shared experiences of how women's organisations in other regions grappled with challenging issues such as poverty, health, education and gender discrimination in social and political contexts dominated by patriarchy. Chinese women were also introduced to new perspectives on gender that

went beyond the biological definitions of gender difference they had been accustomed to. As women began to explore the emancipatory potential of the concept of gender as a social construct capable of transformation, they showed palpable enthusiasm. Despite uncertainties surrounding this burgeoning 'feminist' voice, Women of China demonstrated dynamic creativity in their interactions with international feminism (Evans, 2008).

China's ascent into the new century as an increasingly influential player in the global capitalist system has given rise to deeper social divisions and evolving employment structures. While this has provided many women with unprecedented opportunities for self-fulfilment and recognition, it has also triggered heightened instances of sexism and growing gender disparities. In fact, in 2017, China ranked 100th out of 144 countries in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index. In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift in policy and mainstream discourse towards praising women's domestic virtues, while 'gender equality' has been relegated to a progressively marginalised position in national discussions, including within women's unions (Evans, 2008).

These developments, coupled with activism on social media platforms, have spurred the emergence of a new generation of millennial feminists. Hailing from diverse backgrounds, including LGBTQ+ activism, they are explicitly challenging notions of marriage and family responsibilities in their exploration of feminist ideals. This marks a significant departure from earlier phases of the women's liberation and gender equality movements. As Fincher (2018) points out, while this activism is viewed as a challenge to the status quo of China's male-dominated political system, it has not dampened the surge of female empowerment exchanges on online platforms, where women wield considerable influence in managing marital and familial relationships within the current market environment.

As we enter the 21st century, the image of a successful woman has become

inseparable from the workplace. While excelling in the public sphere, they are still ensnared in an environment of evolving family obligations and gender imbalance (Liu, 2016; Mann, 2011; Rofel, 2007). Women find themselves expending more energy in the delicate balancing act of managing their careers and families. As the national birth rate steadily decreases and an increasing number of Chinese women of childbearing age opt to delay marriage for various reasons, mainstream media and public opinion have begun to label unmarried women as 'leftover women'. Conversely, married women are encouraged to navigate the delicate balance between career and family to embody the image of superhero mothers (Liu, 2007). However, in the Chinese job market, where women already face a glass ceiling, the relaxation of the one-child policy has exacerbated workplace discrimination against women. This, in turn, exerts greater pressure on women to choose between returning to their families or enduring heightened stress in the workplace. The public discourse advocating for 'women to return to their families' has once again become a topic of heated debate. At this juncture, the identities of the narrators have become intricate and diverse, resulting in a multitude of voices. This period is characterised by three key features in public narratives about women's gender identities (Tong, 2006). Firstly, the narrative of 'staged employment' directly addresses the gendered division of labour. Secondly, the government and its male narrators grapple with a discourse and practice dilemma when it comes to the legitimacy of this narrative in terms of gender equality. This is because the subject of 'staged employment' is unequivocally female, and working women are hesitant to voluntarily relinquish their jobs to conform to this discursive practice. Thirdly, for the first time in this discourse, women's voices have been raised in a fully publicised manner, directed towards the narratives of the 'mass media'. In this process, I observe the awakening of women's own 'discursive consciousness'. Women are now active participants, consciously expressing the social conditions that shape their actions, displaying a discursive self-awareness.

Hershatter (2007) contends that the government exerts pressure on women to return to their families through public influence. The state requires women's labour to build a

prosperous society but simultaneously expects women to prioritise their families and nurture the next generation to ensure societal stability. This places women in a quandary. From a broader perspective, the feminist movement in China, as well as the current state of women's existence, is in a state of upward spiralling. Women face heightened pressure to balance career and family, but at the same time, they have more life and career choices. While women's economic circumstances have improved, the public opinion climate has deteriorated.

Simultaneously, the absence of women's voices in Chinese politics remains the prevailing condition. Since the establishment of New China, no woman has been appointed to the highest decision-making body of the Communist Party of China (CPC): the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee (Politburo). Even when women have attained positions in the relatively important Politburo, their roles within the government have been perceived by outsiders as relatively inconsequential. The absence of women's voices at the highest echelons of decision-making within the CPC and the difficulty for women to break through the glass ceiling to reach the uppermost levels of decision-making signifies a considerable journey ahead. Hershatter (2018) posits that this situation presents a paradox. The absence of women in leadership is due to the fact that positioning women in key and demanding roles is not a priority. Consequently, there is no one in leadership advocating for women's interests. Normally, social movements apply pressure in such situations, but the CPC is less tolerant of these movements than it was during Mao's era and the early stages of the reforms. Feminist activism has now found a greater presence online, but regrettably, even in the digital realm, the space for voices to be heard is progressively shrinking (Wu and Dong, 2019).

Overall, the political status and constructed social image of Chinese women have changed dramatically over the past 70 years or so due to a variety of factors. However, they are still ensnared in an environment of evolving family obligations and gender imbalance. Unmarried women in contemporary China possess more agency over their

lives, but they also face a more intricate environment than previous generations. Although there may be limited room for the general public to actively participate in the feminist movement, women are gradually asserting their autonomy and attitudes in various ways. This is evident in the increasing age of first marriage and the consistently low fertility rate. The shift from the state's official narrative of 'women out of the house' to women's own voices questioning 'women back home' reflects a change in women's gender identities from external narratives to self-narratives. This is exemplified in women's self-definition of their gender identity as 'social labourers'. Women's social roles have undergone a fundamental reversal, and while there may still be a stubborn traditional gender order that presents challenges for women in the workplace, women's social roles will no longer be confined to the home. My research aims to provide theoretical and practical contributions to this current state. I will explore the gender experiences of unmarried urban women in the workplace, as well as their negotiation and coping strategies after facing oppression from patriarchal structures in the workplace. This will further enrich the narrative image of Chinese women.

The strong emphasis on gender is a key feature of feminism that distinguishes it from traditional positivism as well as from other contemporaneous post-positivist schools. Gender is at the heart of the feminist paradigm of knowledge. Feminist critiques of knowledge stem from discontent with gender injustice, and feminist conceptions of knowledge, in turn, seek to establish a gender-equitable paradigm of knowledge. They assert that gender and knowledge are mutually constructed in patriarchal cultures, forming a stable structure of social domination. Only the full intervention of women and feminism can dismantle this hierarchy of power and logic of domination, creating a wholly new social mechanism and blueprint for knowledge. Thus, feminist intellectual paradigms have never shied away from their political-ethical orientation, and their intellectual goals are often directly or indirectly linked to emancipatory aims. Simultaneously, gender is viewed as an undisputed theoretical perspective and analytical category in the process of social research because feminism posits the

centrality of gender to social relations in all institutions and cultures. This crucial aspect has been neglected by existing social theories as well as by positivism, which stands as the orthodox mode of knowledge.

Theoretical framework: Feminist approach

I've brought in materialist feminist perspectives as leading theoretical ideas of this research. In summary, social stereotypes of unmarried women are constructed, and this negative narrative has its roots in the oppression of the social gender order. The feminist framework is thus the most appropriate theoretical lens to understand and explain this phenomenon. The most fundamental contribution of feminism is the reinterpretation of the concept of gender, which criticises the biological determinism of gender and emphasises the socio-cultural construction of gender. Sandra Harding, a feminist philosopher, once summarised gender in feminist eyes in three meanings (Harding, 1986): first, individual gender, which is the core of gender identity, that is, the gender cognition in which people realise that they are men or women and associate certain phenomena with masculinity or femininity. The second is structural gender, that is, gender as an overarching characteristic of social organisation and structure. The gendered division of labour and the gendered segregation of occupations reflect this institutional gender, as well as the construction of almost all state systems, such as education, justice, religion, health care and so on, which reflect gender relations. Third, there is symbolic or cultural gender, that is, the normative connotations of being a man and a woman in a particular socio-cultural situation. The public-private gender division, for example, provides the ideology of domination that legitimises unequal power relations between men and women.

Since gender is the result of a joint shaping through processes of social institutional arrangements, cultural normative constraints and individual identities, it can be argued

that socially orthodox knowledge itself participates in the construction of the idea of gender, which in turn reinforces the power utility of knowledge. Therefore, feminism sees the critique of gender ideology and the critique of orthodox knowledge as two sides of the same coin with the same goal in mind. Feminist sociologists Stanley and Wise (1983) emphasise the need for feminist research to adopt a consciously feminist approach, conducted by women. This distinctive perspective is evident in the way gender is regarded as the most foundational organisational concept, forming the basis of power dynamics. It involves analysing and examining gender relationships within specific socio-cultural and historical contexts, while placing special emphasis on the value of the female experience and centralising it in research. The objective of feminist research is not solely to gain a different understanding of the world but to actively contribute to its transformation. As Abbott and Wallace (1996, p. 296) aptly put it, 'The relevance of knowledge lies in its capacity to heighten our awareness of our situation as women and furnish us with the tools for self-liberation'.

Smith (1987) provides a straightforward definition of feminist sociology as sociology focused on women, emphasising the everyday world as a research strategy. This particular kind of sociology brings forth women's experiences from various positions, social relationshipsor different aspects of the same relationship. It enables women to learn how to present themselves as speaking and perceiving subjects in a way that makes sociology reflexive – it pertains to ourselves, both as researchers and participants (Smith, 1992). Feminist sociologist Ann Oakley also emphasises that feminist research should be democratic and egalitarian, eliminating hierarchical power relations. It rejects any mode of interpretation that imposes the expert's views on the female subject. Feminist research aligns with the women's movement in its emancipatory ideal, namely, that academic research, social science and sociology should advocate for women, not merely discuss or analyse them (Oakley, 2000). This can only be achieved by establishing feminism's own intellectual paradigm.

Judith Cook and Mary Furneaux summarise the significance of gender in social

research in three ways. Firstly, the most representative feminist conception is that of placing women at the centre of research, making women and their relationships with men the focus of social research. Secondly, it highlights the importance of women's everyday experiences, an aspect often overlooked by traditional sociology. It identifies existing societies as characterised by the oppression of women and the reinforcement of male dominance.Lastly, it views the researcher as a gender within a network of social relations. This perspective profoundly influences not only the analytical and interpretative procedures of sociology but also the researcher herself. Feminism asserts that the purpose of knowledge is to challenge patriarchy and that it 'must be led and analysed in a way that can be used by women to transform their oppressed condition'. Feminism therefore emphasises the transformative power of knowledge and believes in the possibility of generating alternative knowledge that is different from oppression (Cook and Fonow, 1986).

Feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith (1987, pp. 6–7) introduces the concept of 'bifurcated consciousness' to describe this separation. She argues that there exists a false demarcation between the world as women perceive it and the world as it is depicted in official discourses. There is a significant disconnect between the experiences women live and feel in their everyday lives and the available conceptual and theoretical frameworks for examining this experiential world. This assertion presupposes that men and women do not inhabit the same social world and that male and female experiences are fundamentally incomparable in social life. Existing social research treats men's experiences and positions as natural representatives of universal knowledge, systematically excluding women from the entire body of knowledge and compelling them into silence. This reflects the ideological apparatus of male hegemony embedded in our cultural and intellectual structures. Thus, feminism, for the first time, elevates the role of gender in social life and social structures, as well as its impact on the construction of culture and knowledge, to an unprecedented level. The concepts she presents explain why men and women in the same social position experience it differently. It is therefore essential to explore the real-life experiences of

women at the micro-level in order to restore their voices.

Since the mid-1980s, there has been a shift in focus within feminist theory. Early writings aimed to trace the roots of women's oppression, often tending to view women's experiences and the causes of oppression as uniform. Materialist feminism, however, rejects attributing women's oppression to a singular cause and avoids the common tendency to amalgamate grand theories and make universal claims (Delphy, 1984). It is important to note that when I refer to 'materialism', I am citing Jackson's (2001) interpretation of material feminism derived from Marx's historical materialism. Her theory aligns with the strain of materialist feminism that emerged in France during the 1970s, particularly the variant associated with Christine Delphy. This brand of materialist feminism initially arose in opposition to traditional Marxism and other feminist ideologies. Alongside Delphy, it was advocated by Colette Guillaumin, Nicole-Claude Mathieu and Monique Wittig. They were considered radical feminists because their primary analysis focused on patriarchy rather than capitalism. They resisted the notion that patriarchy stems from capitalism, viewing historical materialism as a means to analyse the relationship between men and women as a social, rather than natural, construct.

Materialist feminism does not endorse economic determinism. As Delphy and Leonard (1992) remind us, one of Marx's original contributions was his refusal to conceive of the economy as an abstract system governed by its own internal laws. Instead, he saw it as a realm of social relations constructed through social activity. Materialist feminism underscores the social aspect, including social structures, relations and practices. However, it does not reduce all social elements to capitalism. In my perspective, patriarchal or gendered structures, relationsand practices hold the same material weight as capitalist ones, as well as those related to racism, colonialism and imperialism. Of course, all these factors intersect and interact in unpredictable and contradictory ways, making the social order a complex entity with no seamless unity. Adopting a materialist standpoint does not negate the recognition of differences

among women. On the contrary, a comprehensive understanding of these differences requires an examination of material social disparities and everyday social practices. Materialism also does not overlook matters of language, cultural representation and subjectivity but rather insists on contextualising them within social and historical frameworks. Crucially, materialist feminism does not attribute women's oppression to a single cause and avoids attempts to synthesise overarching theories and trans-historical, universal assertions (Delphy, 1984).

A materialist perspective inherently aligns with sociology. By reasserting the significance of the material and the social, it grounds us in our everyday social experiences (Jackson, 2020). This perspective encompasses subjectivity, recognising that our sense of self in relation to others continually influences our actions and interactions. Conversely, who we are is partly shaped by our position in terms of gender, class, race and other divisions, as well as the social and cultural contexts in which we find ourselves. When we shift our focus to the localised, everyday contexts of women's lives, it becomes evident that understanding the material and the social requires more than just examining social structures. We must also consider subjectivity and agency, delve into the patterns of gendered interactions in daily life and the institutional hierarchies within which they occur, scrutinise how such interactions are given meaning and influenced by the participants and explore the exercise of power and resistance at the micro level, alongside systemic domination at the macro level. Accounting for all these factors requires a level of social analysis that does not reduce every facet of our lives to the impacts of social structures. It allows us to recognise to what extent social structures themselves are perpetuated through human practices. This aligns seamlessly with the trajectory of my research. The challenges faced by unmarried urban women are multifaceted, and these women arenot conventionally portrayed as oppressed. They actively navigate these multifaceted pressures by exercising subjectivity and initiative. The materialist feminist perspective forms the theoretical framework of my study.

Current research on the lives of unmarried urban women

In this section, I will introduce phenomena similar to those observed among unmarried urban women outside of China. Then, I will summarise the mainstream research directions in the literature concerning the 'leftover women' phenomenon in Chinese academia, focusing on socio-cultural, social construction, economic and feminist aspects. Finally, I will present the direction of my research, emphasising its importance and significance by summarising and generalising the relevant literature.

Research on Phenomena Similar to 'Leftover Women'

Before delving into the research conducted on unmarried women in China, it is essential to note that similar stigmatisation of single women has occurred in other cultures. 'Leftover women' represent a specific group of urban single women, and this stigmatisation is a product of patriarchal societies (To, 2013). Researchers have examined unmarried women in various national contexts and found parallel studies on the stigmatisation of single women in other Asian countries. For instance, in Japan, there is a similar group referred to as 'loser dogs'/make-ai-anime, denoting single women over the age of 30 without children (Sakai, 2003). The social stigma here mirrors that of 'leftover women' in China, with the main distinction being the emphasis on the absence of children in the label 'defeated dogs'. Sakai argues that the cause of this social stigma lies in Japan's declining birth rate. There exists a conspiracy theory suggesting that the government aims to persuade women to return home to address the various social issues stemming from the declining birth rate. I find this phenomenon and its underlying causes to be quite analogous to the reasons behind the 'leftover women' public perception in China, possibly due to both societies being situated in East Asia and influenced by patriarchal viewpoints.

In Western cultures, particularly in the United States, the stigma persists (Morris et al., 2007), despite a growing number of adults choosing to remain single (DePaulo and Morris, 2005). However, Western society stigmatises single women to a far lesser degree than Asian cultures, and the era when society heavily stigmatised them is almost over. Western society is significantly more accepting of women who remain single at an older age. Here, 'single' encompasses those who marry later, remain unmarried or are divorced (Sharp and Ganong, 2011). Outside of Asia, the definition of a single woman varies, and the concept holds broader connotations. DePaulo and Morris (2005) contend that single individuals face a specific form of discrimination and stigma, referred to as singlism, which permeates various aspects of their social life, laws and social policies. Davies (2003) notes that women in their 20s and 30s also grapple with their single status. This age range tends to bring about stress for women. However, it is also a prime period for finding a partner. Once they reach their forties, expectations in partner-seeking tend to diminish (Sharp and Ganong, 2007; Byrne, 2003; Cole, 1999). This mirrors the situation of left-behind women in China. The definition of 'single' has broadened to encompass those who have never married, unmarried individuals with childrenand those in long-term relationships but not currently cohabiting (Lewis, 2001; Anderson and Stewart, 1995; Houseknecht and Gordon, 1994). However, being single remains a deficit identity, defined by what it lacks (Reynolds and Taylor, 2005; Reynold and Wetherell, 2003).

Studies have also explored whether women choose to remain unmarried.
. Stein (1981) categorised singles as 'voluntary temporary singles' and 'involuntary stable singles'. This classification sheds light on the nature of these single women. However, this study contains a loophole. 'Voluntary temporary singles' implies that single women do so willingly; however, their single status is temporary. 'Involuntary stable singles' are those who are stably single, but this status is not of their choosing. Stein (1981) overlooks those who are voluntarily single and prefer to remain stable. In China and all other countries worldwide, studies on stigmatised single women

('leftover women') almost universally agree that these women face significant pressure to remain single for extended periods.

Summary of Literature Related to Unmarried Women in Urban China

Current Chinese academic research on urban unmarried women predominantly centres on the study of the 'leftover women' phenomenon. This is primarily done by addressing questions regarding 'why this phenomenon occurs' and 'how we can address this issue'. Interestingly, at the time of this study, I observed that most of the papers published in Chinese tended to use quantitative research methods to explore the causes of the 'leftover women' phenomenon and propose corresponding solutions from a macro perspective, along with suggesting possible policy recommendations to resolve the issue.

Mainstream research on urban unmarried women in Chinese academia continues to view their singleness as a form of social deviation, treating this unmarried status as a problem in need of a solution. Consequently, it is evident that mainstream academics still employ the term 'leftover women' when referring to unmarried urban women. The existing Chinese academic literature tends to adopt a macro-level research orientation, broadly categorised into socio-cultural, social construction, economic and feminist approaches.

The first approach involves traditional cultural factors. Traditional Chinese culture and social practices serve to explain why urban Chinese left-behind women face such pronounced social stigma and pressure. Additionally, the marriage gradient presents challenges for highly qualified women seeking an ideal mate (Xu and Wang, 2003; Yan, 2003; Xu, 2000; Zhang, 1989).

The entrenched gender dynamics in Chinese society are reflected in the care provided to single family members by their relatives (Xu and Wang, 2003; Yan, 2003). China, along with the broader Asian region, has been heavily influenced by Confucianism, contributing to the establishment of a patriarchal social system (Liu, 2014; Yan, 2009). Throughout China's extensive history, it adhered to the belief of 'men dominate the outside, and women dominate the inside'. Under this patriarchal framework, women have traditionally been dependent on their families or attached to men. Men did not require women's assistance for their self-definition or sense of purpose, whereas women's roles required the presence of others for fulfilment. However, during the era of Mao Zedong, the perception of women underwent a dramatic transformation (Yan, 2009; Xu, 2000). During Mao's regime, women's presence extended into the workforce, and they were not confined to the home (Liu, 2014). Nevertheless, during this time, women's gender identities were assimilated, aligning them as closely as possible with the image of men. Subsequently, with the dismantling of China's planned economy, the country's political and economic landscape underwent drastic changes, causing the traditional image of Chinese women to crumble. I concur with the contrarian strategy outlined in 'Service Work and the Production of Distinctions in Urban China', which argues that 'with the transformation of the social, economic and political spheres in contemporary China, Chinese women have had to adapt to the new socio-cultural and redefine their identities'. The phenomenon of 'leftover women'is also influenced by this process. An examination of how these women present themselves will contribute to a greater understanding of their identity redefinition.

The concept of the 'marital gradient' provides a primary explanation for the marginalisation of 'leftover women' in the marriage market (Xu and Wang, 2003; Yan, 2003; Xu, 2000; Zhang, 1989). This gradient arises from socio-cultural and traditional gender norms, where men tend to seek partners they perceive as being of lower status, while women are inclined to 'marry up' (To, 2015). This perspective on mate selection can present obstacles for high-quality women in their search for an ideal partner. From this viewpoint, both single women and single men need to reevaluate

their existing criteria for optimal mate selection in order to address this issue.

As depicted in the chart below, female respondents anticipate that their future partners should score higher than themselves in attributes such as height, entrepreneurship, self-confidence, optimism, being easy-going and organised. They expect their partners to rank no lower than themselves in terms of family financial status, education, personal reputation, consideration and faithfulness. However, they have somewhat lower expectations regarding the attribute of 'being good at household chores'.
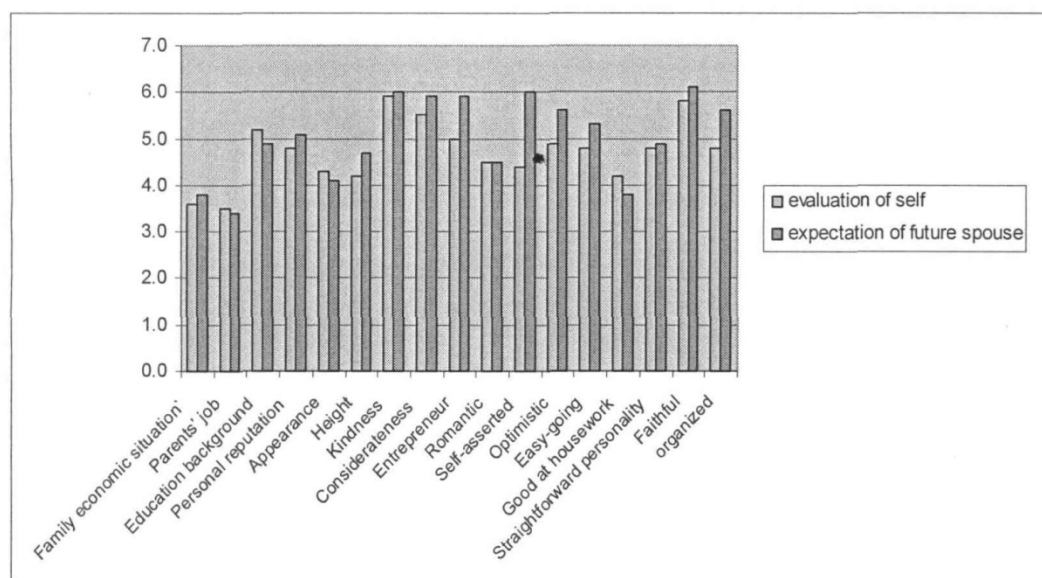
This shows that traditional patterns and approaches still hold sway for new independent women who largely adhere to conventional gender roles and divisions of labour. The pursuit of the superlative in gender relations, known as the 'marital gradient', persists, with the notion of 'women marrying up and men marrying down'.

The second approach contends that the concept of 'leftover women' is constructed by social media and that the social stigma against these women arises from public labelling with negative stereotypes, constituting a form of unfair gender communication (Gao, 2011; Yang, 2011; Left, 2012). These studies posit that marriage should be a personal lifestyle choice rather than an obligatory task. However, from a societal functional standpoint, if the social system is likened to a human body,

then the family serves as its smallest cell. In China, owing to the unique nature of the political system, the government places considerable emphasis on social stability. Marriage, as a means of establishing a family, holds significance for maintaining social stability. Furthermore, marriage directly influences personal happiness. Despite this dual significance for both society and individuals, marriage should remain a personal choice in modern society. Giddens (1992) highlights that this perspective differs from that of ancient societies; as societies progress, individuals have more flexible models for their intimate relationships. Increasingly, people are opting to marry later in life or even remain single throughout their lives. However, this shift affects the broader development of society. The phenomenon of 'leftover women' is a construct of public perception. The government released a statement on eugenics in 2007 (Yang, 2011), which coincided with the first use of the term 'leftover women' by authorities. Allowing these highly educated women to form families would undoubtedly be beneficial to eugenics. Therefore, the roots of the 'leftover women' phenomenon do not lie within the group itself. Instead, the essence of this phenomenon is the labelling of a disadvantaged group by a privileged one (Gao, 2011). This constitutes not only an unfair gender transmission but also stigmatises innocent single women. I align with this research direction, which forms the foundation of my study. The phenomenon of 'leftover women' is a concept conceptualised by a patriarchal society. The number of 'leftover women' is significantly smaller than the impact it exerts. The term is propagated by the government, which also sponsors extensive matchmaking events for single individuals, further reinforcing the belief that anyone unable to find a mate in their twenties must possess some inherent flaw. While my research shares this direction, the focus of these studies remains primarily on social policy, emphasising the functionality of marriage. Although these studies touch on the constructivist perspective, few delve deep enough to explore the macro-level causes and very few examine the real-life experiences of unmarried women in urban areas at a micro level.

The next approach adopts an economic perspective, with scholars asserting that this

phenomenon arises due to socio-economic development (Feng, 2014; Wang, 2010; Yeh, 1992), as the progress of society has made a celibate lifestyle viable (Klinenberg, 2002). Groups of single women have existed in different times and regions for various reasons. For example, the pattern of intermarriage under the caste system in India resulted in numerous marriages of women from superior castes who could not find suitable partners. In early 18th-century England, around 25 percent of noble women never married in their lifetime, as a woman's substantial dowry would have significantly diminished the wealth of the nobility. Nuns remained single for religious reasons. These single women emerged due to specific systems or because they lacked the capacity for independent existence as mandated by custom. They typically relied on their families or withdrew from secular life.

However, in the context of modern society, the so-called 'leftover women' in China differ from other historical groups of single women in two fundamental ways: firstly, their singleness stems more from an active choice than passive acceptance; secondly, they possess the ability to thrive outside the family. In essence, the capacity to work ensures women's independence (Liu, 2017). Employment holds pivotal significance for modern women. Engagement in work empowers women to achieve economic self-sufficiency, thereby averting the passive state experienced by traditional women who depended on the family for sustenance. At the same time, work bestows upon women social value and a sense of fulfilment beyond the confines of home life, enabling them to achieve psychological independence and exist as individuals in society (Jackson et al., 2008). This is particularly crucial for educated single women with a degree of social status and relatively high income, as work constitutes a significant pivot and an optional aspect of their daily lives. Moreover, financial independence enables 'leftover women' to live independently, laying the foundation for long-term singleness (Lynn and Roona, 2013; Klinenberg, 2000; Ronald and Hirayama, 2009).

In addition, the improvement in a woman's economic status has made her more

independent than before, creating different expectations for marriage (Lewis, 2001; Houseknecht and Gordon, 1994). Unlike in the past, when women married in pursuit of greater economic and social security, modern women are more likely to marry for romance or even for both reasons (Reynolds et al., 2007). However, this results in women spending more time selecting a mate. Furthermore, those women who choose to marry in modern society tend to exercise greater caution (Feng, 2014). In today's society, the costs associated with marriage are substantial, encompassing elevated property prices in China and increased educational expenses for future generations. The table below illustrates this, with the blue bar indicating the marriage rate and the yellow bar denoting the divorce rate. Against the backdrop of mounting marriage expenses, the divorce rate in China has been on an upward trajectory from 2012 to 2017. From an economic perspective, increased investment and risk can make women more circumspect in their decision to marry.
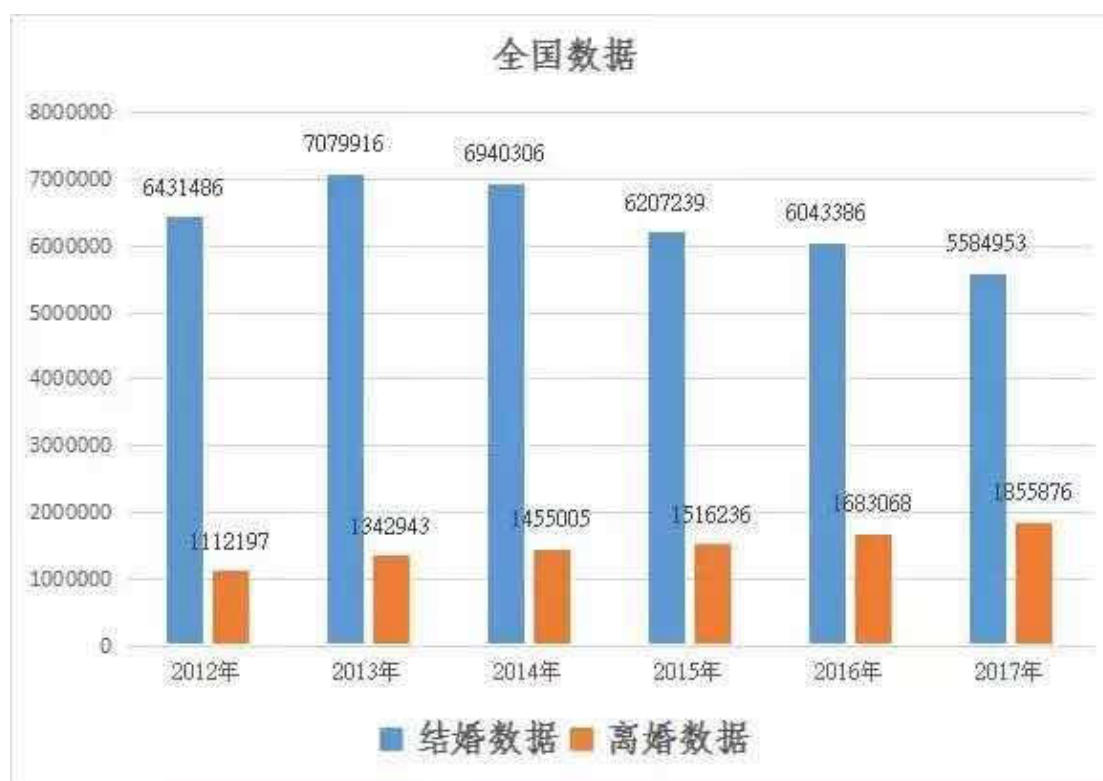
The final perspective is from a feminist standpoint. The theoretical framework of this perspective aligns with my research objectives. The key assertion here is that within a male-dominated society, the existence of the 'leftover women' phenomenon signifies

a form of gender dominance (Shen, 2010; Wang, 2010; Zhou, 2010). Same-sex marriages are not permitted under Chinese law. The discrimination against single individuals actually underscores the prevalence of heterosexual hegemony, evidenced by the fact that heterosexual marriage is regarded as the sole valid and logical path to marriage (Zhou, 2010). Those who choose not to marry are cast aside. In patriarchal societies, women's societal roles are consistently linked to the family. While men can attain social worth, women are required to invest more uncompensated labour within the family unit. With the burgeoning of self-awareness, women are increasingly reluctant to perpetually allocate their energies to the family and instead demand acknowledgment of their worth in the professional sphere (Zhou, 2010; Hochschild, 1979). When women fall short of fulfilling the expectations tied to their gender roles, they begin to face social stigma. This explains why unmarried women in China must contend with numerous detrimental stereotypes. Fundamentally, this stigmatisation of unmarried women constitutes a form of gender oppression. In terms of rectifying this issue, most researchers propose that 'leftover women' should lower their standards when selecting a partner. However, there is no analogous requirement for 'leftover men' (Wei and Zhang, 2010). I contend that distinct standards for different genders also constitute instances of gender discrimination.

Upon reviewing the prevailing literature on the 'leftover women' phenomenon within Chinese academic discourse, I discovered that existing studies have comprehensively outlined the origins and societal ramifications of this phenomenon at a macro level, while also proposing corresponding policy recommendations. The social construction and feminist perspectives advanced in these studies align with my research trajectory, providing me with a more holistic understanding of the causes of the phenomenon and the present state of public sentiment towards these unmarried women in Chinese society. However, a prevalent issue in these studies is their adherence to the conventional research paradigm of traditional social science, which predominantly relies on quantitative methods. Although they concentrate on women or so-called 'women's issues', they largely conduct research 'about women' rather than research

informed by women's subjective consciousness as advocated by feminism. While these studies concentrate on the 'leftover women' dilemma, their emphasis remains on mitigating societal issues and contributing to societal stability. They do not inherently centre on 'women' as the focal point of the research. Women's voices remain largely unheard in this body of literature.

Beyond 'leftover women'

Comparatively speaking, studies published in English present a more optimistic view of urban female singleness. Some researchers have put forth a different perspective, asserting that single women can also lead fulfilling lives. Trimberger (2005) emphasises the emergence of a new breed of single women in the United States. As she points out, marriage is not the sole path to happiness. Some single women may not choose singleness intentionally, but when they find themselves single for various reasons, they often explore alternative lifestyles and find contentment in their solo status. Being single does not equate to loneliness; they still have their friends and social networks. Trimberger (2005) suggests that newly single women are content with their lives, optimistic about the prospects of being single and satisfied with their accomplishments, relationships and identities. They are no longer viewed as outliers or eccentrics. These single women may or may not seek partners in the future. These choices represent their freedom; being single or not is merely a matter of opting for a different lifestyle. In order to ensure they can lead fulfilling lives, there are six characteristics of the new single woman.

First, new single women need their own living space. A similar study conducted by Lynn and Roona (2013) demonstrated that there are misleading and negative stereotypes about single women who live independently; however, single women can still find joy in living alone or having their own space. Under the trend of economic globalisation, unmarried professional women have more job opportunities, which

means that they have greater control over their lives.

Second, they have their own sources of income, ensuring financial independence. Third, they fulfil their physical desires. Fourth, the new single women enjoy engaging with the next generation. Fifth, they have close friends for support and emotional interaction. Finally, these new single women have a robust social network. These economic, physical and psychological foundations ensure that the new single women can savour their lives. This line of research aligns closely with my own. Unmarried women need not feel despondent due to their single status; it is entirely possible for them to lead contented lives. Contrary to the negative labels attached to unmarried women in urban China, these studies demonstrate that unmarried women may hold diverse perspectives and define their self-identity within different socio-cultural contexts, and they can positively navigate pressures from various societal levels. This underscores that women should be able to find their place in society, whether single or not, which also aligns with the direction of my research.

Moreover, papers published in English tend to favour qualitative research methods, delving into the day-to-day lives of individuals at the micro level to offer theoretical insights into their personal experiences. Even when the same author publishes on the same research topic in both Chinese and English, the focus tends to diverge.

Using Ji Yingchun as an example, her 2018 article on China's low fertility rate from a gender and development perspective was written in Chinese, although it integrated a gender perspective to dissect the intricate social mechanisms underlying China's low fertility dynamics. Nonetheless, the article's emphasis and ultimate objective are to gain a more objective and accurate understanding of the acceptance, impact and practical implications of the comprehensive two-child policy, as well as the long-term trajectory of China's fertility rate. By taking gender as a point of entry, her research essentially aims to address the country's demographic challenges, and consequently, the article's focal point remains on proposing solutions to these issues and supporting national policies. In contrast, her prior research on the persistence of early marriage

among educated individuals in China, published in English in 2014, and another English article in 2015 that examined transformations in families within East Asian societies, did not delve into theoretical practice or policy recommendations. In that same year, Ji (2015) published an English article detailing her qualitative research on 'leftover women' in Shanghai, where she first introduced the Mosaic Family Theory, a framework she continued to refine and expand upon in the subsequent years. In 2020, she released an article in Chinese on Mosaic Familyism: China's Changing Family System from the Perspective of Daughters' Retirement. Interestingly, in this article, although she concentrates on shifts in family dynamics, the article concludes with an exploration of the various ways in which elderly care practices have evolved. From her academic publishing style, it becomes evident that academic writing in the Chinese context leans more towards practical application, offering policy recommendations to address real-world problems, and is, in some respects, more outcome oriented. Meanwhile, writing in the English context is relatively less prescriptive and more process oriented. Although her research also centres on the topic of 'leftover women', her research is not directed towards'women'but rather focuses on demographic matters and family relationships.

The studies on unmarried women in China published in English focus more on their personal experiences than on the macro level, and these studies have laid the foundation for my research. What can be observed is that some of the papers, although they also use stigmatising terms such as 'leftover women', generally take a more critical approach and are more supportive of women. Fincher's (2016) study critiques the pressures on unmarried women brought about by the government's public opinion steering. Although it also highlights the impact of government opinion pressure on women, her study focuses on how the demand for housing in China exacerbates the wealth inequality between men and women. I think her starting point is apt. Marriage, as a social institution, safeguards property rather than emotions. As a result, it is important for women to protect their property in marriage. Although it may seem like dismantling the veil of romance in marriage, I find her research to be

practical in the context of real married life, providing guidance on how women can maximise their protection in marriage. The idea that women should protect their property in marriage also partially aligns with the views of my respondents on marriage.

Similarly, Gaetano (2014) conducted interviews with 14 highly educated professional women through field research in Sweden and in Beijing and Shanghai. However, her interviewees were selected based on different criteria than my study and included both married and divorced women. Interestingly, the respondents' ambivalence in choosing a spouse as demonstrated in her study showed some overlap with my findings. They all shared an ambivalence about their expectations of marriage, were uncertain about the necessity of a marriage grounded in material foundation alongside romantic loveand both pointed to parental intervention in their married lives. What she sees as 'leftover women' are the pioneers of China's 'emerging adulthood'. The discovery of renegotiating and potentially redefining women's identities by postponing the order and fact of marriage was very illuminating in my study of unmarried women's self-identification. However, her study did not delve deeply enough and only analysed the ambivalence of the respondents, whereas my study further categorised unmarried women into three different types based on the differences in women's views on mate selection in order to break the homogenised image created by social opinion.

Gui's study (2020) is highly overlapping with my research direction in that both explore the dilemmas that unmarried women encounter in their work and lives. Her study used qualitative research methods to explore the root causes of unmarried women's stress through in-depth interviews with 30 unmarried women in Beijing. Her study argues that women who marry later in marriage receive more attention and are surrounded by negative comments than men who marry later in life. The main sources of stress for unmarried women come from their parents as well as their families, but they do not rush into marriage just because they feel the pressure. The conclusion of

my study also asserts her findings.

Unfortunately, her study only describes the sources of stress for unmarried women in urban areas in a general way, which focuses on the pressure from their parents and the reasons for the pressure on them. She highlights the gap between parents' and single women's perceptions of gender roles, marriage and family. Her study suggests that parents have a more pragmatic view of marriage, placing a high value on its economic and reproductive functions, which was also reflected in my study. However, she suggests that these parents also believe that women are passive participants in the marriage market and can only passively wait to be chosen by men, which is not consistent with the findings of my study. In my research, parents did not believe that women should be passively chosen by men, rather most parents encouraged their daughters to take the initiative in choosing a mate, or even helped to introduce their daughters to potential mates. Gui's research was too limited to the family and did not explore in depth and in a multidimensional way the pressures that unmarried women face in other contexts due to their singleness and how they cope with these pressures. Based on her study, I delved into the attitudes of parents towards their unmarried daughters' singleness and the reasons for this, and also explored in depth the pressures on unmarried women in the workplace and their coping strategies.

There are also related studies that focus on the workplace experiences of unmarried women, such as Liu's (2017) study that provides the first ethnographic account of the experiences of young, highly educated professional women, hailed by the Chinese media as 'white-collar beauties'. Through participant observation in a company in Shanghai, as well as interview methodology, the study exposes the organisational mechanisms – the naturalisation, objectification and commodification of women – that exert gender and sexual control in the post-Mao workplace. While men benefit from symbolic and bureaucratic power, female professionals adeptly employ indirect power in games of dominance and resistance. Women's subversion is rooted in their

only-child upbringing, which shattered the foundations of patriarchy and fostered unprecedented ambitions for personal development. Gender as an inherent system of relationships and role-positioning is a key theme in her research, alongside internal and external cultural boundaries as markers of moral agency. This presents a new feminist investigation of agents of social change. Her research provides a new paradigm for gender studies in deconstructing women in the workplace, particularly the one-child generation in the world of work. There is an overlap in the types of people we interviewed, and her study serves as a model for mine in researching the experiences of unmarried women in the workplace.

The study most similar to mine was conducted by To (2015) to examine 'urban leftover women' in China. She explored the same theme and used the same research methodology as my study. She also employed qualitative research methods for field research in Shanghai. Through her study, it can be observed that most unmarried women in China still hold a traditional view of marriage as necessary. This conclusion aligns with my study. These women face discrimination in the marriage market, and if they want to get married, they have to balance between career and family. The most significant aspect of her study is the identification of four different types of single women and their strategies for choosing a partner. To (2015) categorises 'leftover women' as maximisers, traditionalists, satisfiers and innovators.

Maximisers are highly qualified women whose outstanding achievements in the workplace and high incomes deter most men from marrying them. Faced with this traditional restriction, enterprising women may choose what they perceive to be more 'enlightened' Western men, but this is likely to be opposed by their parents. Alternatively, and more acceptable to their parents, enterprising women may find a Chinese man with a better career, but if they do not, they may remain 'leftover women'. In order to avoid this embarrassment of celibacy, many successful career women look for a partner by hiding their income status from them, thus avoiding rejection from the start. Traditionalists are women who wish to marry a husband with

financial means. They are more traditional in choosing a mate and value a man's economic status. However, they are also formal with the opposite sex and lack proactive strategies, so they are likely to become leftovers. Satisfiers place less value on a man's economic status and seek someone who may not have a high income but believes in gender equality. Innovators are generally more outgoing and do not like to be tied down. They see marriage as a bondage to themselves and their partner that can hinder their pursuits. Therefore, they usually want their partners to be with them in a relationship other than marriage, such as cohabitation. This idea is still not widely accepted in Chinese society, and this life choice is likely to be strongly opposed by their parents. The type of categorisation she gave to the 'leftover women' was very similar to the situation of my interviewees, except that there were no innovators among my interviewees.

To summarise, in To's work (2015), unmarried urban women in China face many difficulties in their daily lives and in choosing a partner; therefore, they invent different strategies to cope with these difficulties. Her study really focuses on the women themselves. Not only does her study show the different types of unmarried women as a model for other researchers to follow, but it also demonstrates the subjectivity and agency of unmarried women through her study. Their status is dynamic, and they will adjust their mate selection strategy to find the right marriage partner. To's (2015) study focuses on unmarried women's experiences in finding their ideal mate. Her study mainly interprets the difficulties of choosing a mate in the daily life of urban unmarried women.

Inspired by To's (2015) study, this research categorises and creates a new typology of unmarried women of marriageable age in urban China into three types based on the respondents' values towards marriage and mate selection. To's (2012) study reveals that unmarried women in urban cities are well equipped in terms of their career and other aspects, and that they can succeed in finding an alternative mate if they adopt some sensible strategies and compromises in the secondary aspects of mate selection.

Her study focuses on mate selection strategies and since this research does not consider the single status of unmarried women as an urgent problem that needs to be addressed, this research does not focus on suggestions for mate selection strategies. Unlike her study, my research focus also endeavours to examine how urban unmarried women cope with the stress of being single in their daily lives. In addition to the criteria for an ideal partner, my project focuses on how they reconcile the intergenerational issues that arise from being single, as well as the opportunities and challenges they face in the workplace as a result of their unmarried status.

When it comes to research on mate selection criteria, in addition to the qualitative analysis studies mentioned above, Li (1989), through a quantitative study of marriage advertisements, provides a basic description of Chinese mate selection criteria and analyses the main factors influencing people's mate selection behaviour and the extent to which they influence it. The five major requirements for spouses in the adverts were age, personality and character, height, marital experience and education. From cross-cultural comparisons, Li (1989) found that there were some criteria that were more valued by the Chinese and less valued by other cultures, including age, heightand marital status, while other cultures valued religion, ethnicity and relationship more. Although her study (1989) was not specific to single women and was very early, the conclusions drawn from it about people's mate selection criteria in the context of Chinese culture are very detailed. Her views on mate selection and mate selection criteria were enlightening when I was doing my field research. In my research, I found that although her study was conducted at a very early stage, some of the criteria for choosing an ideal mate summarised in her study are still applicable in the process of choosing a mate for unmarried urban women today.

In summary, mainstream research in China still sees the phenomenon of 'leftover women' as a social problem that needs to be solved, and there is a large research gap in terms of methodology and theoretical perspectives in the study of unmarried women in urban China. Other literature published in English is more flexible and

varied in terms of methodology, and researchers are more tolerant of unmarried women in urban areas. The knowledge produced by these studies is also for women, not just for women as research subjects. This literature is more in line with the preconceptions and theoretical orientations of my study. However, after combing through this literature, I realised that no researcher had yet come to use their daily lives as an entry point to explore how unmarried women in urban China cope with the pressures of social, cultural and material collusion due to their single status in a stigmatised social context. By revealing unmarried women's gender experiences and practices of their own subjectivity in different social contexts of their daily lives, my research will contribute to the development of gender studies in China by complementing the research and theoretical gaps in related fields. At the same time, by revealing the real-life status of urban unmarried women, I will challenge the dominant discourse narrative and the inherent gender order that constructs unmarried women as 'leftover women'. In addition, I have found that field research studies on unmarried women in urban China have essentially focused on big cities. Although the existence of unmarried women in urban areas is an urban phenomenon, the existing research studies typically tend to focus on economically developed cities in the south, such as Shanghai and Hong Kong, and the most northerly city in China among the many studies is Beijing. In my study, in addition to Beijing, I also chose Harbin, which is geographically further north, to see if their living conditions are different from those of unmarried women in other cities. The location of my study geographically fills a gap that has also been filled by related research. Therefore, my study will have theoretical innovation and social practice significance.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explain why I want to study unmarried women in urban China through the phenomenon of 'leftover women' and the causes of the 'leftover women' phenomenon. By revealing the multi-dimensional pressures on unmarried women, the

current predicaments of unmarried women in urban China are shown. Then, I explain why marriage is so important in China from three dimensions: Confucian culture, social institutions and social policies, in order to illustrate the reasons for the stigmatisation of unmarried women. Next, in order to situate this study fully within its cultural, social, political and historical context, the changes in the construction of Chinese women's image are introduced as the historical and cultural background of the study. This section explores how women's social status, the norms of women's lives, normative femininity and feminist politics and movements have changed over time and at different points in Chinese history,in order to better understand the competing and colluding pressures that unmarried women in urban China face as their social status and social roles change. The reasons for and significance of materialist feminism as the theoretical framework for this research and significance are analysed in depth.Finally, the existing literature on the phenomenon and topic of 'leftover women' in urban China is discussed in greater detail, critically and in depth. By analysing and sorting out the background and classification of the current research on the topic, I found that there exists a large research gap in Chinese academia in terms of research methodology and theoretical perspectives on unmarried women in urban China. There are not enough studies using qualitative research methods and feminist theoretical perspectives, and mainstream research in China still regards the 'leftover women' phenomenon as a social problem that needs to be solved.In the English-language literature, the research methods used to study unmarried urban women are relatively flexible and diverse, and the researchers' views on unmarried women are more inclusive. However, there is still a lack of research on the daily life experiences of unmarried urban women. In order to fill this gap, this study takes gender as the entry point and material feminism as the theoretical perspective to explore how unmarried women in urban China cope with the social, culturaland material pressures associated with their single status in a stigmatised social context. By revealing unmarried women's gender experiences and practices of their own subjectivity in different social contexts of their daily lives, my research will contribute to the development of gender studies in China by complementing the research and

theoretical gaps in related fields.At the same time, by revealing the real-life status of unmarried women in urban areas, I will challenge the dominant discourse narrative and the inherent gender order that constructs unmarried women as 'leftover women'. I believe that by exploring the voices and real-life experiences of unmarried women, I can make a broader contribution to the development of gender and family in China and to the description of contemporary unmarried women's lives. In the following chapter, I will introduce and reflect on the methodology and research methods used in this study by demonstrating my research process.

Chapter 3 Researching the Daily Lives of 'Urban Unmarried Women' in Beijing and Harbin: Methodological Issues

In this chapter, I will introduce and reflect on the research methodology and method used in this study. Twenty-eight face-to-face, semi-structured, in-depth interviews (16 in Harbin and 12 in Beijing) were conducted with unmarried urban women aged between 27 and 42. After recruiting unmarried urban women as participants, I found that the data I obtained from these interviews was insufficient to fully cover my research questions. Unmarried urban women's identities and self-identities are largely embedded in their social and familial relationships, and during my interviews, I found that their daily practices were heavily influenced by their families. Therefore, I decided to continue recruiting parents of unmarried women in Beijing to obtain information from different perspectives and to explore intergenerational attitudes and patterns of interactions in response to their unmarried daughters' singleness to deepen the depth of the data. However, few of my participants' parents lived in the same city as they did, and it was difficult to recruit both participants and their parents, so I considered going to a matchmaking corner to recruit participants from their parents' generation. In the end, I recruited a total of 10 mothers of single women for further research (six in Beijing and four in Harbin). These mothers were not the mothers of my interviewees, but they were mothers with urban unmarried daughters. The primary research audience for this thesis remains urban unmarried women; my recruitment of parents at the matchmaking corner was primarily to enrich the data for a better understanding of the everyday practices of urban unmarried women. Chapter 5 focuses on thoese data, showing how single women negotiate their single status with their parents on a daily basis and providing insights into the distribution of marital stress and its negotiation across family relationships and the impact of certain generational differences on marriage. The main source of data throughout the thesis continues to be my interviews with the 28 single women. I have adopted a feminist stance in this study with the aim of exploring the competing and colluding social, cultural and material pressures that unmarried women of a socially desirable age experience in their daily lives and how these women negotiate them in different contexts. In turn, the real image of these unmarried women is restored, allowing them to reclaim their voices in the context of China's stigmatised society. Under the

macro-narrative, the subjective experience of individuals should not be ignored. The personal experiences and authentic voices of unmarried urban women deserve to be respected and valued. How these unmarried women cope with the pressures of daily life in different social environments also merits examination.

This chapter is divided into six sections, which detail how I conducted my research. The chapter begins with the research design, where I describe my methodological framework and the selection of research methods. The next three sections detail the research setting, data collection methods and process of recruiting participants in the fieldwork. The final two sections describe the methods of data processing after the fieldwork and the ethical discussion.

Research design

Methodological framework and choice of research method

Any social science research paradigm is based on the ontology, epistemology and methodology of society. According to some sociologists, the paradigms of social sciences can be divided into positivism, post-positivism, critical theory and constructivist theory (Lincoln, 1994). And any research paradigm contains the three fundamental issues: ontology, epistemology and methodology. These three are closely related to each other (Brown and Crompton, 1994). Social ontology is a discussion of the 'nature' of social practice – what is the substance and form of social reality and what is known for us? (Brown and Crompton,1994). Positivism and post-positivism consider social reality to be purely objective, recognising a so-called 'ontological reality', where any social phenomenon that is the object of scientific research should be regarded as a real and objective phenomenon. The historical realism of critical

theory holds that reality is subjective and full of meaning and that the so-called objective reality is nothing more than a real reality shaped by and constituted on the basis of social, cultural, political, economic and other social factors. Constructivism, in contrast, directly argues that the so-called reality is subjectively constructed in a social process, and thus there is no such thing as a static reality.

Social epistemology concerns the relationship between the researcher and the researched. In positivism and post-positivism, objects that are external to the researcher and have nothing to do with the subject of the research in terms of consciousness or value can either be fully known through 'confirmation' (positivism) or can be discovered by 'falsification' (post-realism). As for critical theory, although it still adopts a realist position epistemologically, this realism is limited by a specific history. Epistemologically, critical theory emphasises the inter-subjective relationship between the researcher and the researched. Emphasis is placed on the nature of the engagement and interaction between the subjects and the fact that the results of the research are filtered by the values of the researcher; the researcher is involved with the subject of the research. This involvement means that the researcher's emotions and value stance are all related to the research object and influence the outcome of the research. Constructivism, in comparison, due to its ontological emphasis on the principle of subjectivism, has a similar epistemological stance to critical theory – it emphasises the relationship between mutual subjects and the process of engagement. This process, despite co-constructing reality, is equally a process of constructing outcomes. Constructivism is more concerned with social practice and the construction of social order.

The methodology of social research involves the approaches used by the researcher to enable them to discover what they believe can be discovered. Influenced by epistemology and ontology, the philosophical underpinning of this study is constructivist theory. To explore the competing and colluding social, cultural and material pressures experienced by women who remain unmarried at and beyond the

socially expected age of marriage in their daily lives and the how they negotiate different scenarios, this study will use feminism as the research perspective and narrative analysis as the research method, along with a review of the relevant literature and the broader context of the theoretical framework of material feminism as the foundation. Not only will narrative be used as a qualitative research theme and text, but, more importantly, it will be used as a research resource. The focus of this study is not on the stories themselves, but on how the participants tell their personal experiences and why they tell them the way they do. The design of the semi-structured interview questionnaire and the recording of details in the fieldwork notes during the interviews were therefore particularly important.

According to Dew (2007, p. 433), 'methodology refers to the principles underlying a particular research methodology, as distinct from the "method" of collecting data'. Methodology determines the way in which researchers generate data for analysis (Carter and Little, 2008). Therefore, without a methodological framework, the rigour and value of qualitative research are diminished (Carpenter and Suto, 2008).

As women and their everyday lives are the focus of this study, a feminist perspective was the most appropriate theoretical and methodological framework for this study. Many have argued that feminist research needs to benefit women and not just be about women. Campbell and Wasco (2000, p. 783) argue that the ultimate aim of feminist research is to 'capture women's lived experiences in a respectful way, legitimising women's voices as a source of knowledge'. And this is precisely in line with my research objectives. According to feminist methodology, the research process is as important as the research outcome (Liamputtong, 2013). Conscious feminist methodology must provide a way for researchers to incorporate their own experiences as women and as academics into the research endeavour and to share their subjectivity with research participants (Moran-Ellis, 1996). As a researcher, my identity as a woman and the similarity of my educational background to that of my participants facilitated my investigation. More specifically, as a female researcher, I had

toconfront the gendered expectations that participants may have had of me. Female participants may have been more willing to talk to me about family, relationships and emotions because these are considered common topics among women (Munro, Holly etal.). Also, my 'unmarried' marital status may have made single urban women more willing to talk to me about their daily lives and how their single status influencedthem. My educational background is similar to that of the interviewees, which made it easier for them to trust me and share their experiences and feelings with me; in the same way, the comparable educational background and living environment made it easier for me to understand the public opinion environment in which they are living and the dilemmas of life that they are expressing.

Feminism deems that knowledge is rooted in specific socio-cultural situations (Haraway, 1991; Harding, 1991) and emphasises that the researcher and the researched are in a relationship of equality and reciprocity rather than mutual oppression (Ellis and Flaherty, 1992; Hobbs and May, 1993; Jackson and Ives, 1996; Smith and Kornblum, 1989). Feminism criticises the dualism of positivism as leading to errors in the research journey. Positivism assumes a subject–object dichotomy, where the researcher is seen as the one who knows, and the researcher and the researched – the knower and the known – become different camps in the research journey, with the researcher being privileged in the process (Halpin, 1989). Feminism, however, changes the subject–object dichotomy into a dialogue, whereby the researcher brings social influences into the research to produce situated knowledge (Bhavnani, 1993; Harding, 2004). By revealing why a topic is being researched and how each research design is decided upon and describing the socio-historical context in which the knowledge occurs, one can understand the different issues related to the topic. Thus, feminist research produces knowledge that is situational, subjective and power-laden. Within this theoretical framework, the researcher is obliged to reveal her subjective position in the research process. Thus, in my research, the power relations between my participants and me flow as my research process proceeds, but our power relations are generally equal.

Constructivism, as a different kind of epistemology from the traditional one, refers to a logic of thought that human beings do not statically recognise and discover the external objective world, but continuously construct a new world through the process of recognition and discovery itself (Spector and Kitsuse, 1987). In terms of social construction, the phenomenon of "leftover women" and social gender do not exist objectively but are socially constructed as a cultural phenomenon. Material feminism, on the other hand, is concerned with social structures, relations and practices in society but does not explain all social structures, relations and practices by capitalism. Material feminism is not a form of economic determinism, and as Delphy and Leonard (1992) point out one of the strengths of Marx's materialism is that he does not imagine the economy as an abstract system with its own internal rules, but rather as a sphere of social relations constructed through social activity. In this perspective, material reality is objectively present, but the process by which individuals interact with relations of production is constantly fluid. Women's gendered experiences are material realities, but through individual acts of practice, their experiences are continually constructed and reshaped within specific social contexts and relationships. At the knowledge-producing dimension, these two theoretical paradigms, although not identical, can complement each other as methodological approaches to understanding women's everyday experiences.

The self-reflexivity of the position of the role that the researcher should take in research has been an important topic in qualitative research (Pillow, 2003; Berger, 2015). In qualitative research, the object of the study is not only an individual but is also an understanding. Also, the researcher benefits by interacting with the object of the study .Therefore, the relationship between the researcher and the research subject becomes particularly important in this kind of research. This relationship includes the researcher's characteristics, life experiences, ideologies, perspectives in relation to the research problem, the mutual roles of the researcher and the researched and how the researcher and the researched interact during the research process. The researcher

must have their own views and assumptions about the research problem and a certain relationship with the research subject, and these views and relationships are of great significance to the construction of the researcher's identity and role positioning. Researchers with a constructivist paradigm believe that the so-called 'objective reality' is a product of the interaction between the researcher and the researched and that the researcher's understanding of the researched is a construction of the local reality at the time and a resonance and fusion of knowledge and meaning between the two parties (Schwandt, 1994). Therefore, the researcher should not endeavour to exclude their personal bias but rather make positive use of their own identity based on a full reflection of their role. The researcher's identity is an important source of providing hypotheses, inspiration and validity tests for the research, and it is an effective resource for the researcher to understand the reality constructed between them and the researched through mutual subjectivities. The specific form in which this relationship is manifested refers primarily to the question of the role of the researcher as an 'outsider' or 'insider' in relation to the researched. This question determines how both parties perceive each other and themselves (including how the researcher perceives themself).

Generally speaking, 'insiders' refer to people who belong to the same cultural group as the researched and who share common (or relatively similar) values, habits and behaviours. 'Insiders' usually share similar life experiences and tend to have more consistent perspectives and views. An 'outsider' is someone who is outside of a cultural group and has no affiliation with that group. 'Outsiders' and 'insiders' often have different life experiences, and the behaviour and thoughts of 'insiders' can only be understood through external observation and listening. Whether the researcher is an 'insider' or an 'outsider' to the research participants, their role can have both positive and negative effects on the implementation and outcome of the research. These influences coexist with the researcher's rolein each specific research project and cannot be ruled out by prior preparation. There is neither a uniform rule that applies to all research phenomena and research situations.

The positive impact of being an 'insider' during research is that it is easier to build emotional empathy with the people being studied, as 'insiders' are generally more empathetic to their behaviours and emotions than 'outsiders'. When constructing findings, 'insiders' may be more likely to consider local perspectives on the world and present findings with full respect for each other. However, as 'insiders' usually enjoy common ideas and ways of thinking, the researcher may be desensitised to the meanings implied by some of the language and behaviours of the researched. It is difficult for an 'outsider' in a study to appreciate the complex emotions and deeper construction of meaning within the researched person, and they may lack sufficient commonality in dialogue, so the researcher may not be able to understand the complexity of the researched person's emotions and deeper construction of meaning. However, due to maintaining a certain psychological distance, it is easier for 'outsiders' to see the overall structure and developmental clues than 'insiders' in a study. In this study, I, as the researcher, have similar life experiences and educational backgrounds to those of my participants, and I can often listen to and understand as an 'insider' the impacts of these urban unmarried women's daily lives due to their single status in the course of the study. At the same time, I, as the researcher, was a 'stranger' to most of my interviewees. In this case, it was often easier for me as an 'outsider' when my respondents confided secrets and details of their lives to me. As a result, my role was not fixed during the research process; I was not a complete 'insider' nor a complete 'outsider', and my position from time to time varied according to the research process and needs.

Narrative is a universal phenomenon in human society, as linguist Roland Barthes (1977, p.79) stated: 'Since the beginning of human history, all classes and all groups have had their own narratives, which are transnational, transhistorical and intercultural. It is there; it is life itself'. It can be argued that narrative is everywhere, and its forms are almost endless. Narrative permeates social interaction and self-expressionas an important way to construct the order of everyday life and form

personal identity and as a dynamic linguistic manifestation of both.

Since the 1980s, with the emergence of the far-reaching 'narrative turn', narrative research has become a hot topic in various fields of the Western humanities and social sciences. Following the post-structuralist and deconstructivist linguistic turn, the narrative turn has continued to emphasise the socially constructed functions of language and text, promoting narrative research in a variety of fields, including anthropology, sociology and psychology, and developing an epistemological 'narrative cognition' (Bruner, 1986). As an intersection of human experience, meaning-making and reality construction (Spiegel, 2005), 'story' has become the point of origin for such theoretical strands as identity, framing and feminism (Somers, 1994; Ringmar, 1996), fuelling a variety of research methodologies.

On the basis of the theoretical development of narrative research in the West, the preference for quantitative research in Chinese academia has led to a relative lag in the development of narrative research in local Chinese field studies, although some progress has been made in recent years. Cheng Boqing (2015; 2012; 2006) systematically compares the development lineage of Western narrative theory from the perspective of the evolution and historical direction of social theory and proposes that narrative is an important perspective for reflecting on the development trajectory of the entire sociological discipline. From the perspective of oral history, the relationship between narrative and the daily life of the underclass, the collective memory and the concept of the state has been examined (Guo, 2003; 2011; Guo and Sun, 2002; Fang, 2001). Ying Xing and others have suggested that narrativity is a source of legitimacy for qualitative research methods and has considerable advantages in gaining insights into the complexity of China's underclass (Ying, 2001; 2006; Cheng, 1999). Academics have begun to reflect on the methodological foundations of empirical research in Chinese society, proposing that the imagination of fieldwork should be unleashed by grasping 'narrative' to uncover delicate Chinese stories and gain insight into the complexity of Chinese society (Cheng, 2017; Ying, 2018). In this

way, narrative – a concept that wanders between the humanities and the social sciences – seems to have gradually escaped the fate of being expelled and compressed by social analyses and has assumed the heavy responsibility of exploring a sense of local experience. Therefore, I believe that this study's use of narrative analysis to explore stories that take place in Chinese socio-cultural contexts is also of significance to the development of the discipline.

In sociology, the use of narrative material far predates the analysis of narrative material, with the former dating back to the Chicago School of the 1920s and 1930s.Thomas and Znaniecki (1927) collected letters and autobiographies of Polish immigrants, using the life stories told by the immigrants themselves as an important record of their lives in order to present their situation. However, this type of research can hardly be called sociological narrative analysis. At best, narratives were regarded as a factual resource or documentary material and did not become independent objects of study in their own right. It was not until the 1980s that narratives were transformed from mere materials into a point of origin for innovations in social theory and methodology. Abbott (1992) notes that while narrative had long played a secondary role in the 'variable paradigm' of justifying variable relationships, 'revolutionary' attempts were made to develop process analysis and story analysis using narrative as the basis of sociological methodology. He argues that 'narrative methodology is a powerful response to sociology's longstanding neglect of process' (p. 429). Maines, in contrast, argues that many of the phenomena of interest to sociology are constructed from stories at all levels, that sociologists are themselves storytellers and that the opportunity for narrative sociology has arrived (Maines, 1993).

Whether or not this is as optimistic as Abbott or Maines, it is undeniable that narratology has permeated all levels of epistemology, methodology and research methods in sociology. When sociologists talk about narrative, at least four references appear: 'the concept of narrative as a node of social theory', 'narrative analysis as a research methodology', 'the narrative content of actors as qualitative material', and

'scholarly writing as a way of presenting research findings' (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Bruner, 1986). The third method can be largely categorised under qualitative research methods, such as interviews and oral histories, while the fourth method follows anthropology's interest in the 'tension between observation and reproduced form'. The primary methodology of this study is narrative analysis, using narrative as a research method.

I believe that just as narrative thought began in literature and history and sailed into sociology, narrative analysis in sociology is deeply marked by multidisciplinary origins. For example, sociologists have used a knowledge of structural linguistics as a basis for exploring the structure of narratives as texts and have combined it with sociological measurement tools in an attempt to reveal the linguistic codes of cultures in a structured way. It can be said that the former analyses 'stories', while the latter analyses 'storytelling'. The storytelling approach better demonstrates how unmarried women negotiate their single statuses in different contexts and in a stigmatised environment.

William Labov's (1997) model provided the first analytical tool to study narratives in detail at the micro level. Prior to this, narratives had been described and explained in sociology but without formal structural analyses. Defined as 'the retelling of past experiences by matching the literal order of clauses to the actual sequence of events' (Labov and Waletsky, 1997, p. 12), the basic structure of a narrative is a series of chronological statements. This pathway focuses on the constituent elements of stories, structural models and network representations, leading to a structural analysis of narrative networks.

While an in-depth study of story texts allows for highly sophisticated structural analyses, such in-depth decoding brings its own dilemmas. Elliot Mishler (1997) argues that the Labovian approach is not concerned with the role of the interview context in the narrative process but assumes that the story is there, just waiting to be

discovered. In real life, narrators rarely tell stories in chronological order but rather in the form of fragmentary dialogue. This structuralist approach, which focuses strictly on the order of clauses, does not fully account for the complexity of stories; in other words, structuralist narrative analyses select only the stories they can analyse. Similar criticisms have been made by regularist methodologists, who argue that everyday stories are shaped in a back-and-forth dialogue between narrator and receiver and that such analyses make no reference at all to the shaping of the story by the listener (Schegloff, 1997). It can be said that narrative event orientation analysis is a static reading of the story text, while the story is, in fact, a process of development and change from nothing to something, from shallow to deep, and the process and context of its emergence should not be ignored. Some scholars refer to this change from text to practice as the 'second narrative turn' (Gubrium and Holstein, 2007, p. 247). In this second path, the process of storytelling, and in particular the formal features of oral expression, are the focus of analysis. However, the aim of the analysis is not to return to narrative theory but rather to reveal collective memory, the 'presuppositions' of actors in everyday life that go beyond specific actions. In this sense, the ability to open a dialogue with classical sociological theory through the analysis of narrative phenomena determines whether narratives can contribute to empirical meaning in empirical research rather than being limited to the epistemological premises of empirical research. Therefore, a research approach that analyses narratives as resources rather than mere texts is more appropriate for this study.

It is important to note that all my narrative sources come from in-depth interviews. Narratives are my vehicle for understanding the everyday life of unmarried women in urban China, and I consider narrative analysis as a methodology for data analysis. Feminist materialist theory is the theoretical framework of this study, while narrative research is an important part of this study's methodology.

I have used a qualitative research approach as the methodological basis of this paper. I have adopted a qualitative research approach because qualitative research has

strengths in delving into the behaviour, experiences, understandings and knowledge of specific populations (Mason, 2002; Creswell, 2013). In addition, there has been limited research into urban Chinese unmarried women from sociological and feminist perspectives. Therefore, for such relatively unexplored topics, qualitative research can be used to gain experience in the research process, thus guiding the way for further research (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998; Van, Teijlingen and Hundley, 2001).

I proceeded to use semi-structured, in-depth interviews as a data collection method. Of the qualitative research methods, in-depth interviews are one of the most widely known and used by qualitative researchers (Kvale, 2007; Barbour, 2008; King and Horrocks, 2010; Bryman, 2012). Kvale (2007) states that through dialogue, individuals have the opportunity to get to know other people, describe their feelings and experiences and understand the world in which they live Interviews in social research are seen as specialised dialogues, and this was a useful tool that I needed to explore my research questions. In-depth interviewing methods can be either semi-structured or unstructured (Taylor, 2005; Bryman, 2012). In this project, semi-structured interviews were more appropriate for exploratory research questions. In addition, in-depth interviews can provide detailed answers, while the open-ended nature of semi-structured interviews allows for flexibility (Bryman, 2004).

In-depth interviews are often associated with feminist research (Edwards, 1993). This approach represents what Graham (1983) refers to as a feminine cognitive style and what Smith (1987) refers to as a feminine stance. Through in-depth interviews, women may be more open to telling their own stories or sharing their feelings. Tolman (1994) used personal interviews to explore girls' experiences of sexuality and feelings. Lee (1993) used in-depth interviews with boys and girls regarding their sexuality and how they experience their world. Thompson (2000) used in-depth interviews to understand girls' expressions of sexuality, love and romance. Some sensitive issues were not included in this project, but this was still the most appropriate research method for me. As Bryman (2012) points out, semi-structured,

in-depth interviews allow women to make their voices heard. In qualitative research, we could replace the word 'women' with many groups of participants. However, the purpose of this PhD project is to explore the daily life experiences of unmarried women in urban China to understand how they cope with the multiple pressures that their single status brings about by combining their social, cultural and physical environments. The homogenised negative stereotypes portrayed to them by the public media are broken down while restoring their true living conditions and allowing them to express their voices. This makes semi-structured in-depth interviews the most appropriate method for this study.

In designing the fieldwork, I had intended for focus groups to be a possible research methodology to elicit 'individual and conflicting perspectives' (Kavle and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 150). However, for both theoretical and practical reasons, including the 'sensitive' nature of the topic in a particular socio-cultural context, I ultimately felt that semi-structured, in-depth interviews with women would be the best option for 'data production'. During the fieldwork, I had intended to hold a focus group session, but after completing the first interview I quickly changed my plans. My first interviewee told me not to mention her personal problems in front of another woman whom she was going to introduce to me. She even called me a few times after the interview to make sure I would guarantee her anonymity. She said that there were some things that she could not talk about in her social circle, but because I was an outsider, she felt safe letting me know. Therefore, she considered some of her experiences to be very personal and did not want to cause gossip among others who knew her well. Her words made me realise that although group discussions can be good for discussing open-ended topics and allowing people to freely share their stories and feelings, they can also compromise anonymity. In addition, since my target group was professional women, they were all pressed for time. Thus, it was also difficult to arrange a time and place for focus group discussions.

As well as the semi-structured, in-depth interviews with women, I used an adjunctive

methodology to supplement or make sense of the data generated from the interviews. I maintained a research diary throughout the fieldwork and data analysis. The research diary provided an informal and safe space in which I could record my thoughts, questions, observations and feelings without having to worry about the style, grammar and language of the interviews. During the fieldwork, I recorded practical information in my research diary, such as interview appointments and the dates and locations of interviews, as well as background information about the women, my thoughts and impressions of the interviews, my observations during the interviews and emerging themes and ideas that I wanted to follow up on at a later date. During the analysis of the data, I used the research diary to record the initial themes that began to emerge after the first few interviews were conducted, brainstorming and exploring new ideas that evolved from the literature. The research diary was not only a rich source of data but also a good tool for tracking the development of my understanding of the themes.

The purpose of this research targeting urban unmarried women is to explore their daily life experiences in a stigmatised socio-cultural context. Thus by answering the following research questions, we can explore the competing and colluding social, cultural and material pressures experienced by unmarried women who remain unmarried beyond the socially expected age of marriage in their daily lives, and how these women negotiate these pressures in different contexts:

1. What are the reasons why unmarried women are single?

2. Do unmarried women feel stigmatised or pressured by their single status?

3. How do unmarried urban women cope with these pressures in different contexts?

In order to accomplish in-depth interviews better, it is necessary to design a complete interview framework around the research questions during the interview design (Guo, 2014; Wengraf, 2001). It will allow me to navigate through the interview process, as well as better improve the efficiency and quality of research conduct and enabling interviews to generate more sufficient narratives. The interview framework helped me to properly define the research questions and design the strategies to ensure that the

interview process remained on track with the purpose of the study and did not get sidetracked. In terms of the breadth of the interview framework, I ensured that the dimensions of the research were not neglected; in terms of the depth, I was able to dig deeper into the causes through timely follow-up questions. The process of framing the interview framework reflects the depth of the researcher's thinking about the research questions, i.e., which questions are suitable to be answered through in-depth interviews, and which dimensions can be explored to answer the corresponding research questions. As I am going to conduct semi-structured interviews, the preparation of a complete framework not only ensures the completeness of the research content, but also helps me to better organise my research mindset, so that the interview process is tightly focused on the research purpose. Because this study takes urban unmarried women as the research target, in order to explore their daily life experience in the stigmatised socio-cultural context. Therefore, in the design of the framework, on the one hand, I deepened my understanding of the participants' daily life experiences through the basic information of the participants and their feelings about their single status; on the other hand, I explored the coping mechanisms of the participants in different fields by restoring the different modules of their daily lives. The interview framework is shown in the table below:

Women's Daily Life Experiences	Basic information about the participants	Natural attributes: pseudonym, gender, age，Siblings
		Social attributes: Place of origin, Occupation, Education
		Emotional status: single or not
	Overall daily experience	Whether they feel stress
		Stress triggers: timing, channel, target, etc.
		Mate selection criteria and strategies
	Coping in different	Parents

	environments	Friends	
		Workplace	

Table 1. The interview framework

After designing the interview framework, I also pre-determined the direction of the follow-up questions in order to dig deeper into the sources of stress, coping strategies, and underlying reasons in the interviewees' daily lives, so as to make the narrative more complete. Since semi-structured in-depth interviews do not strictly follow any pre-designed model, I had to rely on my own judgement to deal with the interview questions. For example, when I judged that what the participants said was relevant to the core of the research purpose; when the participants' answers were not rich and concrete enough; and when the participants raised new findings, questions and perspectives I would follow up on the participants' answers. The specific directions are shown in the table below:

Scenario	Dimension	Direction	Question
Related to the core questions	Scenarios of feeling stressed	Examples of situations	Can you give me a specific example?
		Frequency of occurrence	How often does this happen? Why?
		Other examples	Are there other similar situations?
	Evaluation of experience	Specific perceived reasons	Why do you feel this way? Has this feeling changed over time?
		Comparison of Similar Scenarios	Did you have the same experience on different occasions, and why was it different?
		Surrounding	Do people around

		Comparison	you have similar experiences to you?
		Other Examples	Any other feelings?
	Single status	Reasons	
		Status	Have you ever thought about changing this status? Why?
		Strategies	
Insufficiently detailed and concrete responses	Conceptual clarification	Respondents' elaboration of certain definitions	e.g. What is your definition of marriage?
	Judgement clarification	Specific perception Source	
		Perception Definition	
	Emotions	Scene recreation	
		Explicit description	
	Conclusion	Causes	
		Frequency	
		Exceptions	
New discoveries, new problems	Refer to the above dimensions and tactics of questioning, and revert to the outline order after the deep dive is completed.		

Table 2 Directions of the follow-up questions

Research Setting

I conducted all of my face-to-face interviews in the northern Chinese city of Harbin and in the Chinese capital, Beijing. Harbin is the capital city of Heilongjiang Province in northern China, and according to China's Sixth National Census (2010), Harbin has

a resident population of approximately 10.6 million. Harbin is also my hometown, so I am very familiar with it, which helped me in my research. Overall, my social network in the city is quite extensive. Most of my relatives, classmates and friends live in Harbin, which provided favourable conditions for snowballing participant recruitment, especially in the Chinese social environment, where social networks are very important resources. Since Harbin is my hometown, I understand the dialect and customs there. This made it easier for me to build trust with the interviewees. In addition, I conducted interviews in Beijing (northern China). Large cities, especially provincial capitals, tend to have more well-educated, professional women than other regions (Edlund, 2005), so Beijing would provide more opportunities for me to find potential participants. There are some similar studies in China, but they are mainly focused on southern Chinese regions, such as Shanghai (Ji, 2016; Liu, 2016; To, 2015). This research sample setting can fill the geographical gap and help explore the gender dilemmas and daily lives of unmarried women in northern China.

Data sampling

The sample size for this study was designed to be around 30 with purposive sampling. Qualitative research relies heavily on purposive sampling strategies (Patton, 2002; Morse, 2006; Bryman, 2012). Purposive sampling refers to the intentional selection of specific individuals, events or circumstances because they can provide critical information not available through other sources (Carpenter and Sotu, 2008). The so-called 'unmarried women' in China are a specific group of single people. In order to study the experiences of these women, purposeful sampling was necessary. Furthermore, according to Patton (2002), the power of purposive sampling lies in the selection of information-rich cases for in-depth study, thus providing in-depth understandings and insights rather than empirical generalisations. Mason (2002) points out that sampling in surveys is about quality rather than size. The sampling process was flexible, and the number of participants to be recruited was uncertain.

Depending on the topic, questions and scope of my research, I planned to recruit approximately 30 participants. The focus of sample size in qualitative research is on 'flexibility and depth' rather than maximising the breadth of the study (Padgett, 2008; Small, 2009). I stopped sampling once the sample was saturated with data. After 25 interviews, the types of respondents tended to be repetitive, and no new significant ideas emerged. I then performed three more interviews to see if the data was saturated. No new useful data was provided. Therefore, I decided that I had enough data and ended the data sampling process.

The study population was selected on the basis of age, education and occupation. In terms of age, given the definition of 'unmarried women', participants had to be over 27 years of age. However, during the interviews, I found that 27 was a relatively young age for modern working women. People are more likely to accept professional women who are still single at this age, and women are not suffer from social stigma yet, so I did not get much useful data from these interviews. Therefore, after 10 interviews, I adjusted the minimum age to 30 unless there was a strong desire on the part of the participants to share their experiences. For the purposes of this study, a 'good education' meant that participants had at least a bachelor's degree. However, a well-paying job was a relatively vague criterion. Since income standards vary from city to city, a job that is described as well-paid in Harbin may only be considered average in Beijing. In addition, income is a relatively sensitive topic, and it is difficult to obtain accurate answers to such questions from participants. Therefore, 'good jobs' in this study refers to decent occupations that have a high social status in the public mind. For example, teachers and government workers may not earn as much as people in the business world, but they have stable careers that are decent jobs in the eyes of the public. Overall, participants needed to be, at a minimum, working women who were financially independent.

I initially planned to recruit participants through matchmaking centres located in Harbin and Beijing. This is because there are a large number of single men and

women there, which would provide a sufficient sample for the study. The matchmaking centres are not only for single women who want to get married but also a place for single people to show others that they are trying hard to find a partner. For example, some unmarried people may choose to sign up to a matchmaking centre but never show up in order to manage the nagging of their families. Also, people who identify as LGBTQ+ who do not want to 'come out of the closet' may try to hide their sexuality by pretending that they are trying to find a husband. I planned to ask the agencies' permission to approach their clients on the grounds of professional research and then collect potential participants by chatting to female clients who visited or hung out at the agencies (I did not plan to request client information directly from the matchmaking agencies). I also planned to use snowballing to supplement participants at the same time. However, I was unable to obtain permission from the matchmaking agency because the manager of the agency was concerned that my process of finding potential participants would disturb other clients. This manager also questioned my intentions for the study, believing that I might be an employee of a similar organisation trying to steal their clients. Consequently, I had to drop the marriage agency option as a source of data collection. At the time of the fieldwork, the social network snowballing strategy became my only method of collecting participants.

Snowballing is a technique used by researchers, whereby identified respondents refer them to other respondents (Vogt, 1999). I 'snowballed' my recruited participants by asking them to help me introduce potential respondents to speed up sample collection. Interestingly, during the data collection process, I had to emphasise to the contacts who helped me find potential participants and to the participants themselves that I was only doing an academic study and was not responsible for 'introducing people'.

Conducting Fieldwork

Recruitment of Participants

I used my personal social network in both Beijing and Harbin. The process consisted of selecting a few unmarried women with whom I was familiar, then asking them to introduce me to another potential respondent, and so on, until I had a sufficient sample. Some of my potential interviewees in this process were concerned that 'snowballing' might undermine their anonymity, so I continually emphasised the importance of confidentiality with my participants.

After obtaining the university's ethical approval, I began looking for women to interview.I started the fieldwork in December 2017. The fieldwork lasted for three months, with one month in Beijing and the rest in Harbin. Despite careful planning, my research did not go as smoothly as I had imagined, as I had difficulty finding participants. After abandoning my original plan to recruit the study sample through marriage agencies, I relied heavily on a 'snowball' sampling method. Considering my own social networks in Harbin and Beijing, I did not expect this to be the most difficult part of my fieldwork. However, I encountered a number of unexpected difficulties in the area where my research was conducted. First, I discovered that the unmarried women I knew who met my research criteria did not currently live in Harbin. I had to use the social networks of my relatives (my parents' generation) to find potential participants. However, most of the previous generation in China is deeply influenced by traditional Chinese culture, which maintains that it is natural and proper for adults to get married in accordance with social norms, i.e. the so-called 'men should be married when they grown up/男大当婚女大当嫁'. Most of them do not understand why some women choose not to get married or delay marriage. From their perspective, since they have to get married sooner or later, itis better to get married early. Especially for girls, it is seen as preferable to get married quickly after finishing their studies, as if they are crossing items off a list of life events. Therefore, they did not really understand the significance of my study and were reluctant to introduce potential interviewees. When I asked them to help, they would often start by

giving me advice, such as that I needed to find an ideal boyfriend as soon as possible and get married quickly after graduation, in case I became a 'sheng nǔ'. I received a lot of this advice, and it was really annoying. I remained silent and pretended to listen because I was afraid that if I started arguing with them, there would be no end to this dialogue. I needed these elders to help me find potential interviewees, and I must show respect to my elders in terms of ethical and moral relationships in China,so I was mostly at a power disadvantage in this process. In addition, the older generation is used to stigmatising unmarried women, with the perception that their single status does not conform to social norms and is disordered and abnormal. When I explained the purpose of my research and the criteria for potential interviewees, they thought that my research would 'expose their scars' and hurt these women, who are at a socially desirable age but still unmarried.

They have presupposed that the position of unmarried women should be one of vulnerability and misery. They believe that these single women are miserable enough without marriage, and there is no need to remind them that they are still single. Some of my relatives even thought my research would offend their friends and politely turned me down. Some of my relatives helped me find potential interviewees, but they were my relatives' work subordinates. The only reason they agreed to participate in the study was because they didnot want to rebel against their supervisors. Some of them did not even know what my research project was before we met. Therefore, interviews with these respondents were difficult. It was difficult to find unmarried women in China due to their small numbers. Even when I did find these single women, some of them were reluctant to talk. For example, one woman had an appointment with me but cancelled it the day before and was no longer willing to be interviewed. In addition, I began my research at the end of the year, whenall industries were busy and almost all potential participants were pressed for time. Sometimes their breaks overlapped so I had to conduct multiple interviews in one day, which was really tiring. I kept searching for interviewees by using the snowball method and valuing each potential participant. After conducting 15 interviews in Harbin, I decided to continue

my fieldwork in Beijing, where I used the same data collection method, but mainly through my friends by 'snowballing'. It was easier to find potential participants in Beijing, and I did not have to put up with advice from relatives. In the end, I conducted 28 interviews in Beijing and Harbin, including with women between the ages of 27 and 42.

Once an unmarried woman expressed interest in participating in the study, my contact or introducer provided me with their contact details. I contacted them in advance by SMS and WeChat (the most popular messaging software in China), explaining my study in detail and the questions that might be asked, allowing time for them to make a final decision on whether they would like to participate. Whenever I found a potential respondent, I asked them to read the information sheet carefully to ensure that they understood the study and then had them sign the consent form (Appendix 1).If the respondent had questions about my research after reading the information sheet, I would answer their questions in detail to make sure they fully understood the interview. I only asked respondents to sign the consent form if they agreed to participate. If the respondent agreed to participate in the study but refused to sign, I asked her to give verbal consent using a tape recorder. I also mentioned that the interviews would last for one to two hours and would be recorded with an audio recording device. The data collected would be transcribed and analysed by me for my research purposes only. If they decide not to participate in my research six months before the publication of the work, I will delete all data. In addition, I guaranteed their anonymity and allowed them to choose a safe location for the interview. After they confirmed this with me, we finalised the dates and locations of the interviews.

Thorne (2008, pp. 461-462) argues that the delivery of the consent form can also be seen as a manifestation of the researcher's attitude towards the interviewee, with the aim of respecting the autonomy and dignity of the interviewee rather than treating them

as mere research subjects. However, before the interviews began, I anticipated that some problems might arise during the process of signing the consent form. Document signing is a slightly sensitive behaviour in the Chinese social context (Du, 2016). During the interviews, I found that signing consent forms made some interviewees feel uncomfortable. In some cases, once the interviewees realised that I needed them to sign the informed consent form, their expressions became wary. Usually, their reaction was to scrutinise the consent form again (even if they had read it before), and then most told me that their verbal consent to be interviewed was sufficient and they were less inclined to sign. The group I interviewed were professional women with a strong sense of self-protection. Some of my participants noted that a signature is legally binding, and they were very cautious about anything that required a signature in case they were tricked or involved in criminal activity. As my research participants were recruited by snowballing, they were referred to me by our mutual friends or even friends of friends. I was virtually a stranger to them, so they were understandably wary. However, out of trust in the referrer, most of them eventually understood and signed the form after I explained in detail what the form was for and that I did not find anything suspicious after reading the form.

In keeping with Jaggar's (2008, p. 460) suggestion that the principles of feminist ethical research should respect the dignity and integrity of the researched person, for the few respondents who were genuinely reluctant to sign, I verbally informed them about my research and recorded their verbal consent to participate, rather than forcing them to sign the consent form. Conversely, and to my surprise, by signing the information sheet and consent form, some of the interviewees perceived my interviews to be quite professional, and they developed trust in me and felt more confident in sharing their personal issues. A similar phenomenon occurred when I asked for the interviews to be audio-recorded. The process of requesting an audio recording went relatively smoothly due to the preparation of the information sheet and consent form. After confirming with me that the audio-recorded information would only be used for

academic research and would not be publicly disclosed, they all eventually agreed to be audio-recorded during the interviews.

Conductingthe interviews

Interviews were conducted at the participant's workplace, a café, or any other safe public place suggested by the participant. Depending on the circumstances,interview topics included family background, occupation, emotions, friendships, relationships, experiences of social pressure and attitudes towards stigma. The interview questions were used only as a guide to enable me to remain flexible and sensitive to the specific circumstances of each interviewee. Overall, I viewed the interview guide as a starting point for the survey and the questions as a tool to allow the women to reflect on their experiences. I did not directly ask about any sensitive topics. However, when specifying the research plan, I anticipated that when interviewees shared their personal experiences in intimate relationships, it might lead them to reveal some sensitive topics in their lives. As a sign of respect, I ended the questioning in a polite manner so that the participants did not feel offended. I was concerned that some participants might become emotional when recalling past events. Fortunately, this did not happen in any of my 28 interviews.

While the snowball method is well suited to China's social structure, it has limitations. I am sure there exists a group of people who are single because of their sexual orientation, but my personal network does not include any lesbians (or at least they have not identified themselves as lesbians), so my data collection does not cover that group.

In addition, my interviewees were well-educated, well-paid professional women, and I, as the researcher, did not have similar social work experience as them. I was nervous about doing a good job of breaking the ice. The importance of building rapport in face-to-face interviews is well recognised in the field of women's studies (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005). Therefore, I began by indicating to the interviewees

that I was friendly and hoped to ease their anxiety about talking about their personal lives with me, a stranger. This strategy worked during the interviews. The length of the interviews varied slightly depending on the personality of the interviewee, the content of the interview and the atmosphere of the interview, with the average interview lasting an hour. I really enjoyed the interview process. Although my interviewees were difficult to find and schedule, once we met, most of them were more than willing to share their personal experiences and bring up interesting points during the interviews.

The interviewer's knowledge of the subject matter of the interview is crucial in determining the reliability of the interviewee's narrative (Glucksmann, 1994). Because, as a well-educated single female researcher conducting fieldwork, I shared a similar background and possibly similar life experiences with the interviewees, my status as an 'insider' greatly aided my understanding of these single women. In addition, respondents were more likely to develop trust in female researchers. Although I could be seen as an 'insider', my identity has been shaky and sometimes I have become an 'outsider'. This was particularly evident when interviewees talked about their workplace perceptions or experiences. However, there is benefit to being an 'outsider', as I am less likely to judge an interviewee or create gossip to affect her daily life.

I noticed that power shifted during the interviews. Oakley (1981) states that an interview is a mutual interaction. The researcher should open up to the participant by talking about themselves and answering the participant's questions, thus building intimacy. Although I was well prepared to discuss these topics, before the interviews, some participants asked me about my personal experiences, including my academic background, personal life and even my future career plans. However, sometimes they asked too much and were more interested in my life than the interview. To show respect, I tried my best to answer their questions and treat them politely. Because my participants were usually older than me, they tended to have more life experience. In

Chinese culture, one's position in the family and society is often determined by age and is a virtue of respecting elders. This tradition is also reflected in Liu's (2007, p. 18) study, where, as a latecomer, she 'did not express any dissenting views, played the role of a learning junior or daughter, was very humble and interested in listening to their stories'. With this unbalanced flow of power, I found it difficult at times to take the lead in the interviews, as the participants could be very sophisticated in the way they spoke.

The profile of the final recruits is shown in the table below

Table 3.Description of participants (unmarried females)

Pseudonym	Age	Educational Level	Occupational Field	Location
Luo Yazhi	27	Master	Journalist	Beijing
Wu	28	Master	Publishing	Beijing
Yuan	28	Master	Media	Beijing
Wang Wei	33	Master	News	Beijing
Min	28	B.A.	Marketing	Beijing
Yang	36	Master	IT	Beijing
Lee	27	B.A.	Publishing	Beijing
Han	29	Master	Presenter	Beijing
Cheng	31	B.A.	Accounting	Beijing
Song Yun	30	B.A.	Engineering audit	Beijing
Yang Shuang	30	B.A.	News	Harbin
Xin	29	B.A.	Engineering	Harbin
Meng	27	B.A.	Agent	Harbin
Feng	28	B.A.	Insurance	Harbin
Fang	31	B.A.	Insurance	Harbin
Yang Ping	42	Master	Engineering audit	Harbin
Mango	29	Master	Researcher in Laboratory	Harbin
Song Shuang	36	Master	Banking	Harbin
Wu yi	31	Master	Researcher in Laboratory	Harbin
Li Yingmei	33	PhD	Researcher in Laboratory	Harbin
Jiang Jianguo	30	Master	University logistics	Harbin
JiaJia	27	B.A.	Accounting	Harbin
Wu Lei	31	Master	Student adviser	Harbin

Jiang Xin	30	PhD	Researcher	Harbin
Feng Wei	31	PhD	University lecturer	Harbin

Recruitment of parents of unmarried women as a supplementary study

After recruiting unmarried women in Beijing as participants, I found that the data I obtained from them was insufficient to fully cover my research questions. The identity and self-identity of an unmarried urban woman are largely embedded in her social and family relationships, and during my interviews, I found that their daily practices are significantly influenced by their families. Therefore, to deepen the depth of the data, I decided to continue recruiting parents of unmarried women in Beijing and Harbin to obtain more information from different perspectives and to explore intergenerational attitudes and patterns of interactions towards their unmarried daughters' singleness. However, almost none of the parents of my Beijing participants live in Beijing, and it was difficult to recruit both participants and their parents at the same time. Therefore, I considered going to the matchmaking corner to recruit participants from my parents' generation. The problem of young singles in cities has been exaggerated in recent yearsby the media,so matchmaking corners in parks have sprung up and become popular in major Chinese cities. Although the parents at these dating corners were not the parents of my participants, they still provided excellent examples of parental attitudes and reactions to 'unmarried women' in cities.

Recruiting parents as interviewees was not my original research plan; I was only inspired to do so after arriving at the fieldwork site. However, I saw it as a great opportunity to observe how parents and unmarried women (or unmarried men) present their single children using posters, or how they present themselves on the dating scene, as well as their different dating strategies and standards. I believe that this will be very beneficial to my research on the interactions between parents and their unmarried daughters. Therefore, after completing my research on dating corners,

particularly the ones in Beijing parks, I continued my field research in Harbin. In recruiting parents of unmarried women to participate in the interviews, I used similar strategies and therefore the same ethical standards as in recruiting urban unmarried women were adopted. As obtaining additional ethical approval would require additional application time, limited by the length of the fieldwork, I do not consider it necessary in this case. During this process I ensured that I followed a consistent informed consent procedure and I rigorously ensured that all data from these interviews were anonymised. In this study, I used face-to-face in-depth interviews and participant observation. In the end, I recruited a total of 10 participants.

Participants' current residential address

Location	Number of Participant
Beijing	6
Harbin	4

Table 4: Geographic classification

To better understand parents' experiences, I first conducted unstructured interviews and participant observation at a Beijing dating corner. This study was conducted in January 2018. After research, I found that Beijing's most popular dating corner, called the Beijing Blind Date Corner, is located in the Temple of Heaven Park and that the events are held at irregular times, but usually on Tuesday and Thursday mornings during the winter months. Information on the time and location of these events is posted online. After determining the park where the dating corner is held and the time, I went to the park to observe the mechanism of the blind dates. The park is a famous Beijing attraction, and therefore an entrance ticket is required. The admission fee was RMB 10 yuan per person, with free admission for senior citizens aged 65 or above.

Within the park, the location of the blind date corner was not easy to find, and

although I asked the ticket agent for the exact location, it still took me a long time to find it. There were a lot of people at the event, but it was relatively quiet. During this period, I observed the posters of unmarried children displayed by parents attending the event and tried to recruit mothers of unmarried women as my interviewees. I initially only intended to recruit participants using the snowball method, but once I interviewed my first respondent, other people passing by became curious and joined the study, and the previous respondents also introduced some of the people they had met at the event. I recruited a total of six interviewees. I ensured that the respondents understood the purpose of my study and agreed to sign an informed consent form or at least give verbal consent. Fortunately, these parents were willing to share their stories, and the interview process did not require much of an icebreaker session. Surprisingly, these parents felt a strong need to share their life stories and feelings, so the interviews went very smoothly, and I was able to obtain a lot of useful data. The mothers were positive in sharing their attitudes towards their children being single and their daily lives. There were a few fathers present, but they were less willing to cooperate, so I did not recruit them as interviewees.

From observing dating corners in Beijing parks, it is clear that they are 'circles' with generally accepted norms and rules. They are battlegrounds for parents to choose potential partners for their children via CVs and introductions. It can be argued that although the dating corner is a public area, it is a relatively exclusive environment. If a young person tries to go there to find a partner for themselves, it is seen as a violation of the rules, as parents rely on their children's CVs from all over the world to select potential matches. While there is no specific rule against the younger generation showing up, it is common practice for them not to. However, if young people do show up, it is more direct and advantageous than a CV. Stealing potential resources from others naturally crowds out most of the regular participants; therefore, younger participants are not welcomed by mainstream participants. Younger generations are also less likely to participate due to their tight work schedules.

When first attempting to engage with parents in Beijing's Tiantan Park, they

cautiously asked me why I wanted to go to the dating corner, which was primarily known for attracting parents. Young people are seen as outsiders, and in addition, not all parents are able to participate in dating corners. Cities where blind dating corners are popular, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Hangzhou and Harbin, are large and medium-sized cities, so parents living in rural areas are excluded.

Participating parents are listed by age, occupation, marital status and place of domicile.

Pseudonym	Age	Working condition	Marriage Situation	Registered residence (hukou)
Ma	55	Retire	Married	Urban
Lee	56	Retire	Married	Urban
Liu	55	Retire(with part time job)	Married	Urban
Wang	58	Retire	Widowed	Urban
He	60	Retire	Married	Urban
Sun	59	Retire	Divorced	Urban

Table 5: Parents in Beijing

When I finished my interviews with single women in Beijing and my follow-up survey at the Temple Park dating corner, I took a break from fieldwork. In the summer of the same year, I returned to Harbin for a holiday and learned that the local TV station happened to be holding a large 'benefit for people and benefit for themselves' event,as per the advertisement, called the'Harbin Matchmaking Festival', which was a large-scale matchmaking corner event. Thinking that this event could enrich my research data, I chose the same participant observation and interview methodology as with the Beijing Park Matchmaking Corner and sampled data for three days (2018/08/21 to 2018/08/23) at the Harbin event. This time constraint was because, when I learned about the event, there were only three days left. Additionally, after conducting four interviews, I did not continue with participant recruitment as I felt

that no new themes had been generated. In this fieldwork, I did not set criteria for participants in advance. I simply recruited four participants randomly based on field conditions during the observation process and conducted unstructured face-to-face interviews with each of them for about 20 minutes.

Participants in the Harbin matchmaking corner included parents, single youth, bystanders and organisers, while the main participants in Beijing's matchmaking corners are parents of single youths. The Beijing activities are relatively regular, long-term and non-commercial (non-profit) activities organised by the parents themselves. There is no commercial promotion of such activities, and matchmaking corners in parks are relatively hidden and low-key, with few bystanders among the relatively regular group of participants. However, for the Harbin matchmaking activity, Harbin TV was a special organising body. Those who wished to participate had toregister and pay a membership fee to display their personal information, despite the organisers promising that it was a non-profit event and that it provided only a platform to publicly display information. However, before the event started, Harbin TV widely publicised it through different methods, such as billboards and radio stations, thereby attracting curious on lookers.

Pseudonym	Age	Working condition	Marriage condition	Registered residence (hukou)
Guo	50	Accounting	Unmarried	Urban
Zhang	51	Self employed	Married	Rural Household
Hu	55	Retired	Married	Urban
Zhao	56	Retired(part time job)	Divorced	Urban

Table 6: Participants in Harbin

The main participants in the Harbin matchmaking event were parents of unmarried women, and they displayed posters with information about their daughters. According to these posters, many of the unmarried women were highly educated, had good jobs and had high social status. I saw a similar phenomenon in Beijing parks, where the number of single women was four times that of men. Mate selection is a rational act of exchange where both parties get the most from their parents' efforts by exchanging tangible and intangible resources. In this context, so-called quality urban males seem to be particularly favoured. In Chinese society, influenced by Confucius' culture, parents' opinions have always played an important role in their children's marriages. In ancient China, parents arranged marriages for their children according to their own wishes, and children did not have the right to choose a partner for themselves. In contemporary China, parents no longer arrange marriages for their children, but their opinions still play an important role. In this large-scale matchmaking event in Harbin, the parents' opinions were mainly demonstrated through sifting through information, choosing mates for their children and excluding those they thought were unsuitable. The person who ultimately made the decision was the child.

It was observed that single young people should be the actual participants of the blind dates, but they seldom participate in person. Parents attending the Harbin blind dating event could be divided into two categories. The first included those who paid the membership fee and had a clear purpose, i.e. to find a suitable match for their children. Parents in this category had the right to introduce their unmarried children on a priority basis or to ask for information about potentially suitable matches. The second category was 'courting' parents. Although they could not display their children's information without paying the membership fee, they came with the attitude of observing the quality of the activities, as the basic information on the matchmaking posters was public. Of my four interviewees, three had paid the membership fee, while the other, Ms Hu, aged 55, came with the attitude of taking her chances. As she wasunsure that all the information on the event's promotional poster was true, she intended to check the website before deciding whether to pay the fee. At the end of

the interview, Ms Hu said she was planning to pay the fee even though she felt that the event might not be helpful.

Overall, the strategies of parents of unmarried females in Harbin were almost identical to those of parents of unmarried females in Beijing: they had little confidence in the success of such activities, but they were willing to take the chance, making it clear to their unmarried children that they would not compromise on their children's single status. Unmarried children in both cities showed a similar willingness to cooperate with their parents in matchmaking activities.

Interview transcripts

All interviews were conducted using notebooks and tape recorders to record fieldwork data, and the principles of data anonymity and confidentiality were followed. A tape recorder was also used to record interesting and meaningful everyday conversations between the researcher and the research participants (Burgess, 1984), and formal in-depth interviews were conducted with consent. The interview process was audio-recorded and then organised and combined with notes. As the content of the interviewee's responses, as heard by the researcher,'may depend on his or her mood and prior experience' (Rubin and Rubin, 1995), audio recordings can provide the researcher with unlimited opportunities to return to situated conversations 'to gain an authentic sense of emerging themes, interactional structures and patterns and related features' (Emond, 2005). When conducting the interviews, the researcher did not know what kind of stories would emerge and therefore did not have time to analyse the meaning behind each story. However, listening to the audio recordings provided another opportunity to savour the stories. That said, relying solely on the audio recordings may result in missed data, as the recordings do not capture visual information such as the participants' body language, behaviours and facial expressions (Silverman, 2013). In this case, notes can be used as an aid. For example,

sentences or phrases were used to record participants' facial expressions or gestures, which are details that may be helpful for the study.

In this project, in addition to the text and audio discussed above, the researcher's fieldwork experiences and self-reflections will also be considered meaningful data (Thorne, 1993), as they can show how their personal feelings influence the research, which is especially important for feminist research. Therefore, I kept a daily research diary, wrote weekly or monthly reports, read and reflected on the original field notes and constantly added comments and new ideas to the notes. In addition, I endeavoured to communicate regularly with my supervisor and to report on my research progress on a weekly basis to ensure that I was on the right track. The research diary was written in English and Chinese, and the weekly or monthly reports were written in English. Considering that English was not my subjects' first language, I conducted my fieldwork in Mandarin and produced field notes and audio-recorded materials in Chinese. However, my doctoral thesis was written in English.

Translation is very time-consuming, and translating the narratives directly into Englishwould take them out of the story context and semantics and would not be conducive to subsequent narrative analyses. Therefore, I retained all field notes and transcripts in Chinese and only translated research diaries, weekly or monthly reports, and anonymised information quoted in the final thesis.

I collected detailed demographic information about the participants, such as age, place of work, occupation and marital status. This provided me with background knowledge of the participants, which helped me select participants and analyse the data correctly. All names and information were completely anonymised. I also asked participants for their contact details, as I needed to contact them to discuss the time and place of the interview. I also needed their email or postal address in order to send them my work if they want to read the data and my PhD thesis or related publications.

After Fieldwork: Transcribing, Coding and Interpreting

After the fieldwork was completed, I began organising the data through transcription. The transcription process became another opportunity to recall the experiences of these women. In this process, my power as a researcher began to reveal itself as I became the person who interpreted the stories of the interviewees. It was not only the interviewees' stories that were important, but also the way in which they told them. Many researchers have mentioned problems with the transcription process, such as the deliberate omission of small details and the deletion of certain words in order to make the data look neat and understandable (Edwards and Ribbens, 1998). Other issues included missed facial expressions and the atmosphere of the interview, which were important for data collection. While some editing was required for clarity, I tried to include all the necessary details in the transcripts to avoid such problems.

Since the interviewees' native and everyday language is Chinese, I used Chinese in the interviews. Therefore, the transcripts were mainly in Chinese. Since English is not my native language, transcribing in Chinese helps me maintain the coherence of my thinking. Additionally, the topic of this study is rooted in the general background of Chinese society and culture, where many terms have special semantic or implied contextual meanings. If they are translated, then the original semantic contexts and meanings are lost. Therefore, there is no urgent need for translation at this stage, and I have not translated all the materials into English. I only began translating the relevant themes and citations from Chinese into English after the transcription was completed and specific research themes were generated from the data. This process was challenging because I believe that analysing a person's complete story is more conducive to gaining a deeper understanding of their behavioural patterns, so some of the quotes I chose were very long. Although this may be limited by my English level, some Chinese words, when taken out of context, are difficult to correctly translate into English. For example, *guanxi* (guanxi 关系) and *mianzi (mianzi 面子)*. I

explained the meanings of these words in Chapter 1 and added them to the glossary.

To protect the privacy of the interviewees, all data was transcribed by myself, and I gave all participants pseudonyms. All interviews lasted at least an hour and, in a few cases, over two hours. The transcription process was exhausting and time-consuming. However, the data gradually became clearer and more organised during the process. The idea of data analysis embodies transformation (Gibbs, 2007). Through the process of analysing, the researcher transforms a large amount of data into clear, understandable, plausible and even original findings. I used thematic data analysis, sometimes referred to as interpretive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006),as a way of identifying patterns or themes in the data analysed and reported (Ryan and Bernard, 2003; Carpenter and Suto, 2008; Bryman, 2012). This was the most appropriate method for me to explore the research methodology. The qualitative data analysis software Nvivo was also used in the thematic data analysis.

Transcription was the first stage of data analysis. By reinterpreting the interviewees' stories during the transcription process, I gained an initial impression of the research themes. After transcription, I read each interview transcript carefully and labelled and coded the topics and questions that appeared most frequently. I then categorised the interviews into different themes and data units. This helped me conduct further analyses. During the transcription process, some underlying key concepts or themes recurred, such as 'family background', 'relationships', 'career', 'emotions', 'friendships', 'experiences of social stigma' and 'attitudes towards stigma'. I therefore noted these potential codes and analysed them as such.

I used the Nvivo programme at the beginning of the data analysis. Initially, I uploaded transcripts to Nvivo and created codes. However, when I analysed specific codes, it was easy to lose the context of the citations. Data analysis in qualitative research is about deepening the understanding of phenomena by tracing the relationship between data categories and subjects. Thus, rather than following a strict procedure for data

analysis, the researcher needs to be alert, flexible and actively engaged with the collected data. Therefore, I abandoned Nvivo in favour of hand-coding in Microsoft Word. In the coding process I combined the interview notes from the fieldwork with listening to the audio recordings of the interviews to ensure that I could trace back from the tone of voice of the participant to the participant's state of being at the time of the narrative. Interviews are a particular form of man-made social encounter (Ribbens, 1989), and so I considered the interviews themselves as objects of study, exploring the state in which the narrator's story was being told. In other words, the stories told by the interviewees are not just mirror reflections of the external world, but interactive creations co-constructed by the speaker and the listener. Therefore, in analysing the narratives I wanted to explore not only what they said, but also why the stories were told the way they were (Riessman, 1993). Some themes were mentioned repeatedly and I categorised extracts related to the themes; some themes appeared more passionate than others when they were brought up and generated more narratives. Because I had already predicted that my interviewees' sources of stress would come primarily from parental, workplace, and peer pressure, and thus attempted to categorise the themes around these three directions first.

I used thematic analysis to analyse the data. After line-by-line coding, three major themes emerged. I then selected related concepts and sub-themes and attempted to make connections to the core themes. Only the most relevant core themes were used in this thesis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The core themes and the theoretical framework were combined to determine the research direction, theme and structure of the thesis. I extracted keywords and themes from the transcripts, used them to revisit the fieldwork notes and relevant literature and then categorised the most salient of them. Within this research, the most prominent keywords and themes were then categorised as follows: 'Mate selection criteria' constitutes Chapter 4, 'Intergenerational conflict constitutes Chapter 5; 'Career choices' and 'Challenges in the workplace' constitutes Chapter 6

Ethical Questions

China has neglected ethical considerations and provisions in social research. Referring to the lack of ethical concerns in social science research, Huang and Pan (2009) stated that researchers should conduct research within the framework of research ethics. In Huang and Pan's study, which considered the research environment in China, they emphasised three important principles of research ethics: informed consent, respect and equality, and do no harm and reciprocity (Huang & Pan, 2009). During the fieldwork, I strived to comply with these basic principles as well as the ethical requirements of the school. I respected local Chinese traditions during the research process, e.g. courtesy and respect for the elderly. I also tried to avoid cultural sensitivities, e.g. 'radical' political views, and avoided these topics altogether in my research.

I gave participants pseudonyms to ensure anonymity (Gibbs, 2007). Participants were asked to choose from a list of names or to suggest a pseudonym. However, some people did not want to know their pseudonyms; in this case, I chose it for them. If the chosen pseudonym matched someone else's real name, the pseudonym was changed, and the changed pseudonym was discussed with the involved participants. As I recruited participants on a 'snowball' basis, some of them may have known other participants. I mentioned this in the information sheet to ensure that participants were aware of this possibility and then left it up to them to decide whether to take part in my study. Simultaneously, I endeavoured to ensure that participants would not be identified in my abstract, and I redacted easily identifiable information to ensure 'internal anonymity'.

The power relationship between me as a researcher and my interviewees is also an

important ethical consideration. As my interviewees were recommended to me by my friends and by my parents' friends, there is a degree of social network. Those interviewees who were recommended to me by my friends (from the same younger generation) might be embarrassed to decline the interview. Although this restriction is not mandatory, interviewees may not be motivated to participate in the interviews by choice but rather as a favour to their friends. This phenomenon is also mentioned in Xie Xiaomei's Study of Privileged Young Women in China (2021), wherein many of her interviewees participated in the study to save face and show respect for their referrers. As for those participants who were introduced by my parents' friends (from the older generation), most of the relationships between them and their introducers were hierarchical at work or in familial positions of power. In this case, due to the inequality of power and status, it was difficult for them to refuse the referrals to participate in my research. Simultaneously, due to the relationship between me and the introducers, they may have been apprehensive about what to share with me and how to spend time with me during their interview. The power and social status held by the introducers were temporarily ceded to me to some extent during the interview process.

For example, Wu, a 31-year-old counsellor working at a university, was very engaged in the interview process, sharing many of her personal experiences and thoughts in depth. The interview went very well, but when she contacted me the night after, she said that she 'felt that she had been too involved in the interview process and that she kind of regretted saying too much'. She contacted me several times via WeChat (a commonly used chat software in China) and by phone, assuring me that she would not disclose the content of the interview to her introducer, the leader of her work unit. She was reluctantly reassured when I emphasised the anonymity of the interview. During the interview, it was clear that she was comfortable with a research process based on a purely respondent-researcher relationship, as evidenced by her commitment to share her story. However, because of her relationship with the introducer and my personal

relationship with the introducer, she was concerned that her anonymity would be compromised. In addition, in some ways, because of the unequal power relationship between her and the referrer, she was unable to force her way out of participating in my research, despite her misgivings. While I made it clear to her that she could opt out of the study if she still had misgivings and could ask me to delete all her data up to six months prior to the submission of my thesis, she ultimately chose to participate in the study.

Throughout her interview, another interviewee, Min, tried to pry into my personal relationship with the referrer, probing for familiarity between me and the referrer. I wanted to ensure that she did not say anything during the interview that she thought should not be said, so I showed her my informed consent form again and assured her that all data would be kept strictly confidential. Another interviewee used non-violent non-cooperation tactics, and although she participated in the study, she was unable to provide any insightful and substantive data because her responses were too fixed. Therefore, unfortunately, her data was ultimately invalid. The snowball method is indeed a proven strategy for collecting respondents in a relational society. However, this method does have a negative impact during the interview process due to the power inequality between the respondent and the researcher.

During my recruitment process, despite the fact that the aim of my research was to critique the phenomenon of urban 'leftover woman' stigmatisation, my participants were indeed a group of people affected by this negative designation, and it was difficult to completely avoid the term 'leftover woman'. While I, as a researcher, do not endorse or use this term directly, my introducers had their own definitions and understandings of this category of unmarried women. I gave only the three limiting criteria of age (over 27 years old), academic qualifications (bachelor's degree or above) and job (stable or well-paid), so the introducers had a wide range of choices in the recruitment process to select unmarried women who they thought met the three

criteria. Age and education were the more intuitive criteria in this case, but there was a wider range of options available for the criterion of decent work. 'Decent' can mean having a high social status or a job that has a good salary, and the current research on 'leftover women' does not give a fixed criterion in this regard. Thus, in this study, this criterion relies on the mind of the introducer, but I believe that this screening is also appropriate because their choices are usually jobs that are decent in terms of social common sense. In addition to these three fixed criteria, I do not want to discount that the introducers' definitions and labels of urban unmarried women's status are correct, and the interviewees themselves may have different definitions of their unmarried status. As part of my research questions, I cautiously discussed with my interviewees their definitions of their own single status. Indeed, all of the respondents in my study were aware of how the outside world defined them (stigmatised definitions), and they also made fun of themselves or joked about the 'leftover' status label. This negative public opinion affects different women differently, and I will further discuss how they define themselves in later chapters of my analysis.

Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the research methodology and approach used in this study. The chapter began with a discussion of cognitive and ontological theories, as they are the basis for the researcher to define the research paradigm and understand the study. I used the social construction theory approach and explained why the qualitative face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured interview method was most appropriate for my study. Next, I discussed how the feminist theoretical framework influenced my research design and choice of research methodology and where I, as a researcher, situated myself within the study. The next three sections detailed the research setting, data collection methods and the process of recruiting participants in the fieldwork, and I also provided a detailed explanation of the reasons for and

process of recruiting unmarried women's mothers. The final two sections described my approach to data processing after the data were obtained from the fieldwork, as well as some ethical discussions, including anonymity, power relations between the researcher and the researched and the identification of respondents.

Three analyses will follow this chapter. In Chapter 4, in order to restore the real image of unmarried women of marriageable age in urban China, I will introduce the different types of urban unmarried women and their criteria for choosing a spouse. Chapter 5 will explore intergenerationally conflicting views of marriage, based on a dating corner in a park, and Chapter 6 will analyse the root causes of urban unmarried women's workplace dilemmas from multiple dimensions, such as their gender experiences and the patriarchal nature of workplace relationships. The impact of gender on the careers of urban, unmarried professional women is revealed by demonstrating their experience and negotiation of workplace stress. How unmarried women cope with and navigate the dilemma between single status, marriage and career is also discussed and provides practical implications for further addressing workplace gender inequality. Ultimately, I will revisit my research journey, summarise my findings and further discuss the contributions and limitations of my study.

Chapter 4: Types of Urban Unmarried Women: Restoring the True Image of Urban Unmarried Women in China

Women being unmarried is very difficult to accept in Chinese social culture. As a girl growing up in China, my parents sometimes taught me that girls should behave or else it would be terrible if no one wanted them when they grew up. The underlying logic was to use the likelihood of girls remaining unmarried after they grew up as a way of intimidation or punishment. Similar ideas are often expressed in various Chinese mass media as well as in film and television productions. Because I heard this idea so often, I accepted it for a long time and did not think of arguing against it. It was not until I went to university and chose a relatively female-oriented major that my parents expressed some concern. They were not worried that my major would not suit me, but they felt that being surrounded by girls wouldn't be conducive to my choosing a mate. They feared that I would not be able to find a partner when I graduated from university, and it would delay my future marriage. I was shocked because I was under 18 at the time. They thought the best path for me as a girl was to go to a top university,

find a like-minded person at the university, get a steady job after graduation and then get married so I could be happy. In their mindset, marriage was an essential part of happiness in life. For whatever reason, the image of women who cannot get married at the right age seems uniformly the same mask of misery. Although my parents' perceptions have long since changed, I remember the shock when I first encountered this arbitrary misconception and reflected on it. It also shaped my interest and my research's direction into the causes and types of urban unmarried women.

In the context of the negative public opinion and environment created by the mass media with the stereotype of the 'leftover woman' marriage is portrayed as a necessary journey for women: an unavoidable life task that must be completed and thus closely linked to their well-being and fulfilment. If unmarried women do not get married 'on time' in order to fulfil this life task, they are labelled and stigmatised as 'leftover women' and are affected by this stigma to varying degrees. Most stereotypes and labels for unmarried women in the urban age are negative and include assumptions of strained relationships with their families of origin (not fulfilling their filial duties because they are not married) or falsely portray a frantic and desperate desire to get married; or simply attribute their singleness to being picky about whom they marry (excessive perfectionism) and denounce their chronically unmarried status as an incomplete life trajectory (Jiang and Gong, 2016; Du, 2013). These unmarried women are often blamed by the public and even their families for their single status, as they are perceived to be not putting enough effort into choosing a spouse or because of their overly demanding and perfectionist attitude while choosing a spouse (Gong, et al. , 2017). In reality, these urban women are single for a variety of reasons; however, they are often portrayed by the mass media as passively 'left behind' by the marriage market and, hence, pathetic and eager to get married. The reasons that the public media assume for these women's singleness and the state of their lives are far from the truth of their life experiences.

In To's work (2015), unmarried urban women in China face many difficulties in their daily lives and in choosing a partner; therefore, they invent different strategies to cope with these difficulties. Inspired by To's (2015) study, this research categorises and creates a new typology of unmarried women of marriageable age in urban China into three types based on the respondents' values towards marriage and mate selection. To's (2012) study reveals that unmarried women in urban cities are well equipped in terms of their career and other aspects, and that they can succeed in finding an alternative mate if they adopt some sensible strategies and compromises in the secondary aspects of mate selection. Her study focuses on mate selection strategies and since this research does not consider the single status of unmarried women as an urgent problem that needs to be addressed, this research does not focus on suggestions for mate selection strategies.

Based on my research, the image of these urban unmarried women should not be uniform. They choose to be single for various reasons and do so proactively rather than passively. This chapter is divided into three parts, firstly this chapter builds a typology of urban unmarried women based on the value orientations of their choice of spouse. Based on their attitudes towards marriage and the extent to which they feel stigmatised for being unmarried, these urban unmarried women can be categorised into three types: the realist, the romantic and the liberal. By exploring the overall characteristics – including their single status, their attitudes towards marriage, the extent to which their parents and the outside world influence them, their expectations of their gender roles in marriage and family, and their strategies for choosing a spouse – of these three types of unmarried women, this chapter provides a relatively comprehensive picture of unmarried women as influenced by their single status. This will help dispel the single and generalised stereotypes portrayed by the mass media and contribute to the theoretical redefinition of the negative concept of 'leftover women'; Then, by analysing the common basic criteria for choosing a spouse that exist among them, it reveals their view of spouse selection dominated by the tendency of choosing a spouse within a class based on economic conditions; and finally this

study redefines the connotation of 'leftover women'.

Types of urban unmarried women

Mead sees the self as something that does not exist objectively from birth but develops over the course of social experience and activity (Liu, 2002). The self is constructed differently from various sociocultural perspectives. In contrast to the collectivist culture of Asian countries, the individualist culture of Western societies tends to emphasise individual achievement and responsibility. It encourages its members to be independent of others, i.e. to position themselves in terms of their intrinsic characteristics and personal values and be individually orientated selves. However, collectivist cultures (Asia, Africa, etc.) identify the self in terms of the individual's relationship with others, which emphasises the influence of society on the individual; the individual's definition of self-orientation tends to relate to others, such as theirstatus, roles and social expectations, and can therefore be regarded as the socially oriented self (Gordon, 2003; Ji, 2015; Situmorang, 2005). With globalisation, the view of the self held by individuals in a monoculture has gradually changed. In the case of my interviewees, although they grew up in a traditional Asian culture, their self-perceptions subtly changed as they were influenced by Western culture and their level of education. In addition to their traditional Chinese socially oriented self-concept, they also exhibited different degrees of personally oriented self-concept depending on the particularities of their upbringing or the extent to which they were influenced by Western individualistic culture. Thus, my respondents' stress levels and attitudes towards marriage differed with their failure to meet social expectations. In fact, my interviewees highly regarded personal values and self-fulfilment while at the same time struggling to escape the traditional Chinese view of family and marriage. In practice, however, these two values are almost contradictory and conflicting; this is a

source of stress for my interviewees.

While the negative images portrayed by the public media unnecessarily stigmatise unmarried women of marriageable age and consequently put pressure on them, they also illustrate that staying single for a long time is not a popular choice in the current context of Chinese society. Echoing To's (2013) findings, this study also established that almost all participants still had a relatively traditional view of marriage as 'something they had to do in their lives' or at least 'they would not reject the possibility of marriage altogether'. In this social context, exploring why these women remain single is crucial. Subsequently, the following questions need to be explored: How do they really feel about their single status? Do they feel stigmatised or pressured because of their single status? Have their attitudes or behaviours changed over time? What does marriage mean to them? And what are their preferences in choosing a spouse? By summarising the answers to these questions, it is possible to divide the states and types of unmarried women into three categories to better understand their true state of life.

If seen through Goffman's (1971) theoretical framework of drama, the stories of these women are not necessarily accurate and complete pictures of their lives but rather the attitudes they are attempting to present to the researcher. However, the image they are trying to present is closely related to how they want the public to perceive them. To answer these research questions, the life journeys (or personal stories) of the so-called 'leftover women' are essential. Jackson (2001) highlights the value and necessity of a materialist feminist perspective that uses a social and historical context to understand the actual oppression of women. Per this approach, the stigma of unmarried urban women cannot be understood separately from their social interactions and the relationships in which they find themselves. Inspired by this perspective, the research focuses on women's everyday lives; as such, women's subjectivity and agency are considered in this study. By answering the research questions in this chapter, I attempt to give voice to unmarried women to confront and counterattack the false judgements

made against them from the outside. This chapter presents the actual image of urban unmarried women, or the image presented by these unmarried women, by sorting and categorising the types of unmarried women.

A synthesis of the literature reviews by Tung (1998), Lasswell and Lasswell (1987), Situmorang (2005) and To (2013) indicates that early Western scholars categorised unmarried women over 30 years of age into different types of singles profiles. In 1976, Schwartz identified six types of singles: professional, social, self, activist, supportive and passive; Staple identified four types of singles: free-floating, open-partner, closed-partner and married-like, based on their behavioural patterns in relationships with others or partners. In 1981, Stein classified singles into four categories based on the following two dimensions: ambivalent, which refers to the current situation as a voluntary choice but only temporarily; and wishful, which refers to an involuntary and temporary situationof being single. The ambivalent refers to the current situation as a voluntary choice but only temporarily; the wishful refers to an involuntary and temporary situation, with the person looking forward to ending the current single statusin the near future; the resolved refers to the single status as a voluntary choice with long-term stability; and the regretful refers to an involuntary choice and long-term single status. In contrast, To researched urban unmarried women in China and classified them as maximisers, traditionalists, satisfiers and innovators according to their chosen strategies when selecting a partner. Inspired by To's (2013) research, this study classifies Chinese urban unmarried women of the right age into three types, guided by the respondents' values regarding marriage and choice of mate:

Three categories of unmarried urban working women

Type	Realists	Romantics	Libertarians
Overall characteristics	Feel the anxiety triggered by stigma but can accept their	Feel the anxiety triggered by stigma but can accept their	Have not internalised the stigma and do not

	single status. Look forward to changing the situation.	single status for the time being. Tend to be positive about changing things and look forward to ending their singleness in the near future.	mind their single status.
Single status	Relatively long-term	Temporary	Relatively long-term
Attitudes towards marriage	Believe that marriages are inevitableand believe in romantic love but are more focused on the responsibility that comes with marriage. There are basic expectations regarding the financial conditions of the spouse.	Consider marriage necessary, but romantic love must be thefoundation. The expectations regarding the future spouse's financial conditions may be moderately relaxed, but minimum requirements exist.	Delaying marriage but not resisting it. Romantic love and marital responsibility are equally important. There are minimum requirements for the financial conditions of the spouse.
Gender roles	Expect equal family roles and are willing to give more to the family in moderation.	Expect equal family roles, but don't mind men being the main breadwinners in the	Expect equal family roles and hope their spouse's financial situation is not too far

		family either (i.e. the family role allows for slight asymmetry). Willing to make concessions for the family and take on more of the family's internal labour.	removed from theirs.
Strategies for choosing a spouse Parental factors	Passive mate selection Parents may feel anxious about their single status but can do so without pushing their daughters to choose a spouse. There are financial requirements for their daughter's future partner, but they mainly trust their daughter's judgement.	Active spouse selection Parents may be anxious about their single status but still have stipulated requirements for their future partner's financial condition.	Passive mate selection Parents are not overly concerned about their marital status and are happy to accept them as single but prefer they marry in the future. Parents object to their daughter's prospective partner having a lower economic status.

The reasons unmarried urban women are single are too diverse to be used as a primary basis for classification. Therefore, this study focuses on unmarried women's

perceived stress and stigma of being single, perceptions of marriage and coping differences. My study discovered that geographical factors impact the construction of social networks for unmarried women but are not fully correlated. Therefore their impact on urban unmarried women is not included in the categories of influence used to classify the types to which they belong. Moreover, the barriers between the three types are not fixed; the respondents' type may change over time and in response to changes in personal experience. During the study, I effectively approached 25 respondents in Harbin and Beijing; two of them had long-term partners, but their type characteristics could be classified as realistic, and therefore, I did not classify them separately. One respondent had a short-term partner but did not consider it a serious relationship, so I still defined her as single, which did not affect my classification.

Realists	13
Romantics	8
Libertarians	4

Type distribution of urban unmarried women

Realists

This type of unmarried woman comprised the largest proportion of my respondents; their view of marriage is reality-oriented. They clearly perceive the stigma attached to their single status but are reconciled with their identity. Although they feel anxious because of that, their coping strategies do not affect their lives too much. As a result, their status tends to be smoothly long-term single, looking forward to marriage but being passive in their mate selection strategy, i.e. not making extra social efforts to choose a mate. In contrast to the Romantic type, they are looking for romantic love and need financial support to do so.

Let me use Yang's story to demonstrate the basic characteristics of a 'realist'. Yang is the oldest of my interviewees and she has remained unmarried for the longest time. She also has a varied life experience, and her story generates a narrative rich enough to demonstrate all the characteristics of the type.

She has been single the longest of my respondents, has a deeper understanding of her single status and has more strategies for coping with anxiety. Not everyone can stick to their choices at her age. Many unmarried urban Chinese women get married in their 30s and may compromise for reasons such as pressure and the desire to have children of their own. In addition, the social environment was more demanding on single women in their 30s earlier than at the time of this study, which meant that she stuck to her choice despite more social pressure. Hence, I believe that her life experience provides a more comprehensive picture of the characteristics of realist unmarried women.

Yang is a 42-year-old engineer from Harbin. She is a short-haired, fresh-faced woman who looks slightly serious when not smiling. Due to her busy schedule, our interview was arranged for dinner after she finished work. She met me directly after work, so she was still wearing her work clothes. She appeared fully dressed in a suit, looking very smart, her entire mental state seeming very positive and cheerful. You could tell that her appearance was focused on enhancing professionalism or decency rather than femininity. She said she was fully aware of the stigma attached to her single status. She could feel the impact (both positive and negative) of her single status on her relationships with her parents, friends and colleagues. However, she could cope with this pressure well enough that she no longer minded it. Throughout the interview, she tried to explain that she was no different from married women of her age. It was apparent that she was aware of the differences in marital status between her and people of a similar age in her social network, and she acknowledged the differences in life status. However, in her daily interactions, she hoped that people would not pay much attention to her marital status and would see her as just an ordinary person leadingan everyday life. This also represents the attitude of my other interviewees,

who have delayed getting married, but this has not changed who they are. The public media constructs the group of 'leftover women' as abnormal, yet the trajectory of these unmarried women's lives is not really that different from anyone else's.

Interestingly, Yang described herself as an 'unexpected rebel' because she had lived a regular, regimented life since childhood; being single was the only deviation from her life plan. She felt she had never once been a rebel in all her years of being a positive role model in the eyes of her people. Still, she had never imagined that she would become a rebel in the eyes of everyone in her middle age because she was unmarried.

> I was always a good student in the traditional sense. I studied hard at school and listened to my teachers and parents. I got good grades, focused on my studies, and the school gossip was never about me. I was always a role model for other students at school. When I was studying, my parents and teachers asked us not to do things unrelated to our studies, and I always did the same. My hometown is a very small town. After completing my undergraduate degree at a local university there, I got into the best university in Harbin on my own, without relying on anyone's help. After graduating, I stayed there and, after years of work (in my 30s), bought myself and my parents a flat in Harbin, which is not easy for a woman struggling alone in a strange, big city. My parents have always been proud of me for that. My life is no different from anyone else's. I would even go so far as to say that I worked harder than many people and was considered a great success in my career. However, before I knew it, I was an unmarried 42-year-old woman. This is not an intentional act of rebellion on my part. I didn't give up on choosing a spouse, but the end result was never quite what I wanted, and I couldn't force it. I always thought I was just an normal person, but not so average regarding marriage.

Her account clearly shows that she was not deliberately seeking to be different or practising anything new in her daily life regarding marriage. She still wished to follow the traditional Chinese path of marriage but had only voluntarily postponed it for various reasons. But she is not an infidel.. Respondents of her ilk largely follow this path in life as well. For example, Li, a 33-year-old working in a biology lab, and Cheng, a 31-year-old working in accounting, both used the same word, 'rebellious' to describe their unmarried status. Li, in particular, once described how she was just living a normal, ordinary life, not expecting to be different because of her marital

status, but in reality, she was not that different. Respondents in this category were aware of the external labels placed on them but did not identify with them.

Realists feel stress and anxiety in their daily lives; sources of anxiety can be divided mainly into external and internal pressures. External pressures usually emanate from family and peers and, on rare occasions, from the workplace squeeze. Internal pressures arise from the conflict between their personal values and traditional views of marriage and not fulfilling their social role expectations on time. An important reason why they remain unmarried for so long is that they can cope well with these anxieties.

Fortunately for realists, there is relatively little pressure from external families. The influences from the family of origin can be broadly categorised into four groups: whether one child family, parental attitudes, economic factors and age factors. Although China introduced the one-child policy was in the 1980s, some of my respondents were born before the policy was implemented, and some in places where the policy was not properly implemented. As a result, some of my respondents were not the only child in their families. According to my research, there were seven respondents from non-one-child families, five of whom were realists, while the remaining two were romantics. My observation is that unmarried women from non-one-child families are less likely to be pressured by their families. This is because there are siblings to carry on the family line and to distract parents from their unmarried daughters. Yang is not from an only-child family; she has three siblings (an older brother and sister and a younger sister). All of her siblings are married and have children. Thus, in her family of origin, her generation has already produced enough offspring, so she is not pressured to continue the family line. Xin, 29, is an engineer with an older sister; her parents were greatly relieved when her sister gave birth, indicating that Xin would have children to take care of her in old age even if she did not want to marry in the future. Xin, 27, who works in the publishing industry in Beijing Lee is in a similar situation as she has a brother who is married and has

children; her parents are not concerned about her marital status at all, as they live with her brother and help look after his children and cannot spare energy for her marital status. Even respondents like Yuan, with one sister that too unmarried, feel lesser pressure from her parents because they believe that at least one of the two children would certainly get married, so they were not worried. This 'it's okay, we have alternatives' attitude made me realise the Chinese parents' persistence in expecting their children to produce the next generation. Suppose someone in the family of origin has already completed this life task, or there are family members who have the potential to do so. In that case, the pressure from the family is considerably less on the respondent.

Parental attitudes, financial factors and age factors are significant factors of external pressures on unmarried women. The three types of respondents in my study had parents from various work backgrounds, and there were no significant differences in the distribution of types. However, parents with more stable and lucrative jobs or those living in the city are usually more tolerant of their children's singleness if they have a better financial base. Unmarried women's own level of financial independence also affects their perception of stress. Unmarried women's perception of stress fluctuates as they get older. These three influences will be discussed in more detail later when analysing strategies for coping with anxiety among unmarried women.

The distribution of my respondents shows that the average age of unmarried women of the realist type is slightly older than that of unmarried women of other types. Relatively more women over the age of 30 are concentrated in this category. According to some literature, age 30 is an important milestone and cut-off point for women to reassess themselves (Blair-Loy, 2003; Thornton, 2013; Xie, 1995). My respondents in this category reported that their anxiety peaked in their 30s. Again using Yang's story as an example, her stress gradually emerged and peaked in her early 30s. She began to feel anxious and confused when she realised that as she got older, all her friends were getting married. And when she suddenly realised that she

had become one of the 'leftover girls' as others called her, she felt further depressed and put tremendous pressure on herself.

> No one forced me to get married; not even my parents made any comments about it, but I just put a lot of pressure on myself. Sometimes I wonder to myself, what everyone is experiencing, shouldn't it be happening logically for me too? But why am I not married yet? Besides, I did very well in my studies and was successful at work. I also felt a bit depressed when I wasn't successful in my family life.

Loneliness and the need for companionship were common reasons for needing a partner but not the source of her stress and anxiety. Her story was more about the frustration of not accomplishing what needed to be done at a certain point in her life at a specific time, the feeling of being out of control and the fear of being different from others who suddenly had no control over their lives. This is a typical 'Chinese' anxiety experienced by most of the participants in this study. In particular, my interviewees were urban, professional, unmarried women in charge of their daily lives. They rarely experienced this sense of loss of control in their own daily lives, thus exacerbating the anxiety that came with it. Under the influence of Confucius, the idea that certain things should be done at a certain age has been integrated into the value system of these single women. Yang's anxiety also reflects her anxiety at lacking control over her own life. In her life experience, she was rewarded when she tried hard in her studies and work. But in intimate relationships, it might require a certain amount of fortuity to meet the right person; she cannot anticipate or control this. This uncertainty and insecurity about the future also contribute to Jan's anxiety, which is also common to all unmarried women in this category.

Fortunately, realists are able to cope with this anxiety relatively well, and this is the basis for their ability to achieve a long-term stable state of remaining unmarried. Before analysing the anxiety management strategies of unmarried urban women, it is necessary to understand their expectations of marriage and family. Wu (2017) highlights that in modern Chinese society, the family is accorded unlimited instrumental responsibilities while simultaneously being expected to meet the

individuals' emotional needs and their needs for autonomy. In other words, from an individual rational perspective, the family is important for its instrumental attributes, such as safeguarding the quality of life, producing the next generation, and protecting against risks, while also enhancing the emotional attributes that arise from the intimate relationships within it. Regarding expectations and perceptions of marriage, the realist type of unmarried woman places more emphasis on the instrumental function of marriage than on intimacy. This type of respondent thus tends to counteract the anxiety that comes with being single by improving her ability to cope with risk.

One significant way they choose to protect themselves against risk is by acquiring real estate. The modern woman's crisis of self-identity is at the heart of the uncertainty and anxiety brought about by the fear of the unknown and risk (Feng, 2014). In Yang's case, being unmarried leaves her feeling uncertain about her future; this uncertainty triggers anxiety, affecting her perception of her identity. Property, a fixed asset, became a means of financial security for her future. At the same time, because of the symbolic and cultural significance of owning property in China, Yang also derives psychological and emotional satisfaction from purchasing a flat; being able to afford a house is one of the criteria for career success in the Chinese social environment. With more material resources at her disposal, she is more secure about her foreseeable future, is more likely to accept her single status and has much less anxiety. Having her own independent space also provides her with the material possibility of remaining unmarried for a longer period (Lynn, 2003).

In Chinese culture, a flat is associated with a variety of other values (Xu and Xia, 2014). For Yang, purchasing a flat proved her financial independence. Despite practical issues such as school districts and the 'hukou' associated with flats, for many Chinese, owning one means psychological security, stability and, in a way, a home. Jan bought her flat in her 30s, providing her psychological security and stability. It imbued her with a new sense of control over her life. She really felt that Harbin had

become her second home. Until then, she had considered herself adrift in a strange city, even though she had been studying, working and living there for almost ten years. The flat gave her the psychological security and stability she sought in a potential partner, considerably easing her anxiety about her single status. She also bought a flat for her parents in Harbin and even invested in two other properties. In the process, she has benefited financially and become more confident and satisfied with her life.

Li, 33, had the same experience; she was nervous about her single status in her 30s, but the anxiety became suddenly irrelevant when she took out a loan to buy her flat. She described the moment she got her first keys: 'It was like getting the keys to my life'. She felt ambitious, secure and confident about her future. Any anxiety about being unmarried was long behind her. She regained a sense of control over her life by buying a flat. This strategy works not only for single women who are not seeing anyone but also for unmarried women who have a steady boyfriend but are not married. Mango, 29years old, has a steady boyfriend of two years. She says that when they had been together for a year and a half, she was desperate to marry him, even though he was nother preferred partnerthen. Due to certain circumstances, they did not get married, and it was during this time that she purchased the property. After buying the house, she suddenly felt that marriage was not an urgent priority; when she settled down and reconsidered her relationship with her boyfriend, she concluded that he was not suited for marriage. Although she loved her boyfriend, his family entailed too many liabilities. His parents had poor health, and he had no pension insurance. The financial burden of marrying and raising the next generation would be too great. She was impatient to get married because she was keen to have a home of her own, but when she procured the property, she felt she owned a home. The house provided her with psychological and financial security, reducing the anxiety associated with being unmarried. She, therefore, put her decision to marry on hold and decided that she needed a more financially secure partner.

In addition, fertility is another critical factor in marriage. Especially in the Chinese

context, fertility and marriage are closely related (Greenhalgh and Bongaarts, 1987; Jone, 2007; Ji, 2016). For several interviewees, anxiety was also triggered by their desire to have their own children. For women, increasing age induces fertility-related anxiety. Several of my interviewees did not expect much from marriage – they just wanted to have their own children. But being single can be particularly difficult in Chinese society, dominated by public opinion, so my interviewees invariably abandoned the idea. Some accepted the status quo but did not rule out the possibility of single parenthood, while others chose to look after the relatives' children in the hope that they would provide for them in old age. This was the case with Jan, who had always wanted a child in her bloodline. This was not influenced by family heritage. She believed that the child would be a continuation of her genes and her life – a younger version of herself. If she died in an accident, the child would be a continuation of her life and would prove her existence in this world. She thought of this when she was in her 30s. Later, she thought that if she had a child, she would still be cared for when she was older.

> I was never the type of person who loved children in my twenties. I always found them noisy. I would only look after my brother's and sister's children, but without any real affection, just out of moral duty to the family. But when I reached my thirties, I suddenly had a passion for children and wanted to have one of my own. My parents were ill during that time, and I suddenly realised that it was still necessary to have my children to look after me in my old age. At the time, I was anxious to get married, but gradually, as I approached 40, I thought it would be impossible for me to have children of my own due to my health condition. I now take extra care of my brother's and sister's children so that if I am not married in my old age, I will have someone to look after me.

In a sense, this behaviour identifies the younger generation as having a duty to care for the older generation. It is an effective way to avoid the risks of old age.

With these strategies, the realist type of unmarried woman manages to keep her anxiety under control most of the time. With this perception of marriage, the realist's approach and criteria for choosing a mate are slightly different from those of other types of unmarried women. They are able to cope with their anxieties, maintain a relatively stable and peaceful life and are not eager to change the status quo. Therefore, they tend to be passive in their choice of spouse, i.e. they do not make

extra social efforts with the aim of choosing a spouse. They do not reject potential partners introduced by family or friends or blind dates, and if they meet a suitable potential partner, they tend to wait passively for the first step. While they focus on the instrumental responsibilities of marriage, they still need intimacy as a cornerstone. Their requirements for a future partner do not necessarily adhere to the traditional gender order of marriage, which requires a man to have advantages over women in various areas, such as a higher salary, a better job title or a higher level of education and a higher school of study. They do not deliberately reject suitable men younger than them, even if theyare not as affluent or successful as they are.They are willing to accept them if they have good prospects. They do not perceivethis as lowering their standards but feel that this helps balance the gender roles in the family, making the relationship more equal and mutually beneficial for both parties.

In contrast to To's (2015) findings, women of the realist type did not face discriminatory and restrictive control from men just because they had highly fulfilling careers or better financial conditions. I believe the reason for the difference with To's (2015) findings is the way unmarried women of this type choose their mates. This is because the women in her study were brave enough to step out of their social circles to choose a spouse actively. In contrast, my participants were passive in selectinga spouse within a network of acquaintances. In this model, both partners already had an initial understanding of each other, so men with discriminatory attitudes towards their work achievements would not approach the participants. This also initially screens out men who are not suitable for them. This model of mate selection may seem inefficient, but in practice, the success rate is relatively high. Although passive mate selection is far less likely to succeed than active mate selection, the realists are approached by people interested in them. They only need to filter the people they are interested in among them, avoiding the time wasted on ineffective socialising. However, they also run the risk of their social circles becoming too rigid, making it difficult to meet new people.

Realist unmarried women are able to control their anxiety most of the time and are satisfied to maintain a relatively stable and peaceful life, and are not eager to change the situation. As a result, they tend to be more passive in choosing a mate, i.e., they do not make extra efforts in socialising in order to choose a mate. They do not reject potential partners introduced by friends and relatives or blind dates, but they do not actively search for a partner. Based on this view of marriage, Realists have a slightly different approach and criteria for choosing a mate than other types of unmarried women. Although they focus on the functionality of marriage, they still need intimacy as a cornerstone. Their requirements for a prospective partner do not necessarily adhere to the traditional gender order of marriage, which requires men to have advantages over women in various aspects, such as higher salary, better job title or higher level of education and higher schools. They do not deliberately reject suitable men who are younger than themselves, even if they are not as wealthy or successful as they are. They do not see this as lowering their standards, but rather as helping to balance gender roles in the family and making the relationship more equal and mutually beneficial. In general, unmarried women of the realist type are relatively rational; their mate-choice strategy tends to be passive; and they value the functionality of marriage rather than considerations based purely on economic and social status.

Romantics

This type of unmarried women's view of marriage is intimacy oriented. They believe true love is the foundation of married life and desire it in their lives. The financial situation of their future partner is not their primary consideration, but there is a minimum standard that can vary moderately. They have a clear perception of the stigma attached to their single status but do not internalise this label. Unmarried women of the Romantic type undergo more anxiety than women of the Realist type.

This is because their age distribution is slightly younger than realists, and therefore They are at the age when they perceive the most pressure from the external environment ; this is also because they have a relatively higher level of dependence on intimate relationships. Although they feel anxious as a result, they also have their own measures to cope with the situation and tend to end their unmarried status sooner rather than later; they choose to be proactive in seeking a spouse, actively expanding their social circle and participating in various dating activities.

Let me share Song's story to give a glimpse of the basic characteristics of this type of unmarried woman. Her life story is chosen as the main focus of the narrative because it provides a comprehensive picture of the characteristics of this type. She is a 30-year-old accountant, and our interview took place at a café near her home, where she came straight after work. Song is a very easy person to get along with. She first contacted me after hearing about my research project, a rarity among my interviewees. In the early stages of our interview, she was able to share her story with me quite naturally without me taking the initiative. At the end of the interview, she insisted on paying for both of us simply because I was still a student. She had large eyes and long, dyed curly hair. She dressed in a more feminine style and paid attention to small details such as accessories; I could conclude that she took good care of her appearance. Her style of dressing also evidenced her active seeking of a spouse on a daily basis.

Unlike the realist type of unmarried woman, Song did not hide her desire for true love throughout the interview while also expressing her anticipation of marriage. She waswell aware of society's concept of a 'leftover woman' and did not try to avoid the awkward stigma attached to her. Undeniably, this stigma inflicted varying degrees of pressure on her at different stages of her life, and she felt nervous and anxious as a result. It is fair to say that the anxiety of being unmarried has been with her since she was 25, but she has been able to cope better with it over time.

Song is a sensitive person who takes relationships very seriously. She and her first love met when she was only 16 years old. They were high school friends. The first thing that attracted her to him was his physical appearance. He was tall and handsome. He also had a humorous personality. He had been a popular figure on campus and had many admirers, and she was captivated by him. It was a pure school romance; they had many mutual friends and shared many precious memories. They were together for ten years, and in a sense, they almost grew up together. Staying in a long-term relationship is not easy, and there were many difficulties, break-ups and reconciliations during those ten years, but she remained steadfast. When she was in high school and college, love was the dominant factor in their relationship. At that time, she believed that love could conquer all. Later, when they both joined the workforce, the reality made her realise that love does not conquer all and that their relationship may not be as strong as she had hoped.

The difference in their values became gradually apparent. Song considered her ex-boyfriend to be immature, which was reflected in many ways. For example, he was not sincere and responsible regarding his work and wanted to change jobs whenever there was a little pressure. As a result, he did not have a stable job for a long time. In everyday conversations, he had a naive and one-sided view of various things; Song had little in common with him. In addition, his health was not very sound. Almost every year, he would visit the hospital for various reasons. Rationally speaking, he was not the ideal marriage partner for Song. But because she still loved him, she was willing to try for their relationship.

For Song, it was difficult to quantify or describe her efforts to maintain their relationship emotionally. The main thing that reflected her determination to keep the relationship going was purchasing a flat. In Chinese culture, a flat is almost a necessary preparation for married life. Although the New Marriage Law prohibits the practice of 'bride price', this long-standing custom has been difficult to eradicate. Although the forms of 'bride price' have become more complex and varied over the

years, a house generally remains indispensable for married couples (Yan 2003; 2009). Yan (2009) observes a trend for newlyweds to leave the groom's father's family early and establish their own nuclear family in rural areas. The same trend can also be observed in urban areas. However, due to the rising cost of housing in China in recent decades, not all parents of grooms can afford to purchase a flat for the newlyweds as a modern 'bride wealth' (To, 2015). Therefore, buying a house with the financial support of both sets of parents is a more reasonable optionfor the newlyweds. Traditionally, a house should be provided by the groom or the groom's family. Still, with the shift in attitudes brought about by implementing the one-child policy, more brides want to buy a house with their groom, with some even willing to provide a house themselves. Song's planned to save for a house with her boyfriend without financial assistance from her parents. Both of their families were not wealthy, so they could not provide much financial support to buy a house. Song did not want to create an additional financial burden on both families. In addition, her family was better off financially than her boyfriend's, so she felt she was thoughtful and understanding of her boyfriend's difficulties. She took on two additional jobs to save money and constantly urged her boyfriend to find a better job with a more stable income. However, her boyfriend did not contribute to her efforts proportionately. His financial situation did not improve, and he did not have a stable career;nor did he display a positive attitude to working hard. She finally realised that his character might not develop any further and that unless he won the lottery, his financial situation would not improve much in the future. She was willing to sacrifice her life and lower her material requirements, but she did not want to raise a family in such a situation. That is why she finally ended the intimate relationship that had lasted ten years. Similar to Mango's situation, the flat gave her the stability to reconsider her relationship with her then-boyfriend. In Song's case, purchasing the flat became a litmus test for the relationship.

Song was single for a year before starting her next relationship. She had intended to be more cautious about dating because she then believed that she had no time to waste

before getting married at the age of 27. She could sense her parents' stress as a result of her single status; the fact that many of her friends got married that year also added to the pressure. Due to this situation, she became a little anxious and took the initiative to engage in online dating and other activities; however, nothing came of it. She later noticed that one of her colleagues was quietly looking after her both at work and in her private life. He was in his 30s and very mature. Eventually, she became emotionally attached to him, and they developed a close relationship. They shared many interests, and she found security in him that she felt she could tell him anything. His financial situation was average, as he was divorced and had a child to support. Nevertheless, she did not see this as a problem at the time. They were together for three years and had a fairly harmonious relationship; however, it ended because of his child. He feared that if they married, his child would resent being in a reorganised family; moreover, he did not want to have any more children. Despite the pain, she chose to end their relationship.

Romantic love as the main focus of a relationship, but with a necessary bottom line, is one of the main characteristics of the romantic type. Take 27-year-old JiaJia as an example: My view on love is influenced by the romantic TV dramas and romantic films I watched during my youth, and I always think that love should be hot and full of passion. However, I also critically accept the values of romantic films. I believe that love is a precious and romantic thing, but it cannot come first in the list of priorities, and if there are any irreconcilable conflicts between couples, even if I love each other more, I will definitely break up. Similarly, Luo (28), who says that she loves her partner unreservedly in every relationship she has been in but that she can end a relationship as soon as she thinks it is time to break up. Her point of view is: Every relationship I've been in has been very serious, and since we're breaking up, there must be some kind of principle problem in the relationship, so I can just give it up. I sometimes doubt myself, I love this specific person or the feeling of being in love? But no matter how I reflect on myself, I will always choose to let go when it's time to let go of a relationship.

Song's story indicated that she recognised the possible problems in each of her relationships at the outset; however, because she was emotionally attached to the other person, even when problems did arise in the relationship, she was willing to endure for the time being or compromise for various reasons until she could no longer tolerate her partner. This reflects her romantic relationship-oriented view of marriage, but it also indicates her refusal to yield to unlimited rational choices for the sake of love. She has her own set of standards and boundaries that change as her relationship evolves. Her choices reflect a reshaping of her attitude towards marriage and show how she gradually adjusts her relationship with feelings and reality in practice. As with other romantics, Song's decision-making process has been heavily in fluenced by age. In the Chinese social context, there is a gender double standard regarding ageing (Ji, 2015). Song's anxiety stems not only from the stigma of being unmarried at the expected age but also from the appropriate age to have children. Chinese society exerts different pressures on unmarried women and men of the same age. One of the main reasons why these women face more pressure is that in Chinese culture, the ideal age for them to have children is lower than that of equal-aged men. This, coupled with the fact that Chinese law links fertility to marriage, means that unmarried women cannot legally have children. For Song, being single for a long time reduced her chances of having children, and her anxiety about age translated into anxiety about having children. This standpoint was also shared by my other interviewees. Yang, for instance, had a similar experience of feeling anxious about having children;thus, she had a strong desire for marriage at the time. Nonetheless, she later found appropriate anxiety-coping measures.

According to my research, unmarried women in their early 30s are typically more stressed than those in other age groups. On the one hand, they are under pressure from their internal stigma as well as their reproductive anxiety. On the other hand, pressure from parents, peers and being single in the workplace gradually reaches its peak at this age. Consider the cases of Song and Yang. Although Yang is chronologically

older and has been single for a longer period, she should theoretically be the one who is more socially stigmatised. However, the opposite is true. Song's pressure is far greater than Yang's at this stage. Apart from differences in parental perceptions and tolerance, children in one-child families enjoy all of their parents' resources as well as attention but are under more parental pressure than daughters in multi-child families. Song's parents tried to avoid stressing her more, as they found that she was already actively trying to rectify the stigma attached to her by finding an ideal partner; however, they were also under pressure from friends and family because of her single status. This situation makes Song feel guilty for not living up to her parents' expectations, placing an additional burden on her. Furthermore, by the time these women reach their early 30s, most peers their age are likely to be getting married, strengthening the pressure they face. In addition to the anxiety triggered by events such as weddings, Song is also affected by changes in her circle of friends. Similarly, Jan went through such a period in her early 30s, but as she grew older and adopted different coping methods, her anxiety waned. At present, Song is experiencing peer pressure and is attempting to devise coping strategies. She is also encountering obstacles at work due to her single status. Although her second boyfriend was a colleague from another department, he was still connected to her job. After their relationship ended, she tried to change companies; however, she missed a well-known firm's offer, as it was unclear whether she would marry and have children soon after starting work. In general, society's expectations of women becoming mothers diminish as they move beyond the age at which they are fit to have children. Most companies assume that they will not have children by then; thus, being single reduces the restrictions on their work.

Even when anxiety is present, age pressure is only an important factor in unmarried women'sdecision-making process and not a decisive one in their choice of partner. However, influenced by this anxiety, romantics will tend to be proactive in their choice of a partner and expecttheir single status to change as soon as possible. For example, Wang, 33, chooses to look for potential partners on dating websites, while

Cheng, 31, prefers to actively participate in different types of offline activities. Moreover, Han, 29, loves photography and the outdoors. Since she expects to find a marriage partner who shares her interests and hobbies, she actively engages in various photography and outdoor gatherings organised online. She says that,while she would like to swiftly resolve her marriage concerns, she would prefer to have a partner who is not a good match. Although the narrative does not ask for financial information and only mentions hobbies, such detail denotes a potential partner's monetary requirement.In some cases, hobbies can be to determine a person's class. An individual who can afford professional equipment and pursue photography as a hobby will likely be financially secure. It is clear that, although romantics are oriented towards romantic relationships, they are also rationally weighing the basic economic conditions.

For Song, the emotional factor is important. When she loves her partner enough, she is willing to make appropriate compromises about his financial situation. Many of my interviewees described a similar circumstance. They had a general list of what they wanted in an ideal partner, but these criteria were dynamic within reason. If a future partner has some outstanding qualities, then some of their shortcomings in other, relatively less important areas may be acceptable. Although both Yang and Song are single, they represent different kinds of unmarried women. Yang represents the realist type who prefers to stick to her principles and is reluctant to start a new relationship until she is certain that the other person is the right one. This type is emotionally passive and tends to wait for a relative or peer to introduce her to a 'potential friend' or for the other person to pursue her. Song is also cautious about relationships but is willing to actively seek out opportunities to find her ideal partner, such as by actively attending blind dates and monitoring potential partner opportunities in the workplace. Her caution is reflected in her willingness to hold the line in the dynamic compromise of a relationship and her courage to give up when her line has been crossed.

Song's single status is the result of her volition and subjective initiative. She does

experience stress due tobeing unmarried but does not fit the negative stereotype presented by the media. She addresses her anxiety in a number of ways, including (a)taking the initiative to expand her social network when she thinks she should be in a relationship,(b) attending various dating events to expand her social circle and increase her chances of meeting a suitable partner as well as (c) developing new hobbies to distract herself and reduce her anxiety. Hence, she wanted to participate in my project and be involved in as many varied activities as possible; my research was a new experience for her. At the same time, she wanted to share her anxiety over being single with others. She could not tell her family,as they had already endured unwarranted criticism because of her status, and she did not want to burden themany further. She also could not share it with peers or colleagues who might have mutual friends with her ex-partners. Talking about her life and her situation with a researcher whom she did not know was a good way to keep her from worrying and ease her anxiety. In addition, she hopes that by participating in this study, she will learn about the current situation and thoughts of other unmarried women.

The romantic unmarried woman tends to change the status quo as soon as possible. Her relationship behaviour evolves with age, reflecting the dynamic development of her opinions in practice. In her plans, marriage remains a priority. To manage the stigma of being single, she always presents an image of independence and honesty in front of her family and other acquaintances, limiting her ability to express some of her anxieties. Although Song stressed in the interview that she was not in a hurry to date, she eventually revealed that she hoped to marry within two years.

Libertarians

The liberal type of unmarried woman is the least represented in this study, butits existence is critical to my overall research, offering a new perspective on the redefinition of the urban unmarried woman and challenging the negative image

portrayed in the media under the traditional Chinese cultural narrative. This type of unmarried woman is a cross between the realist and romantic types in terms of their perceived marriage orientation. They are arguably the most demanding, expecting both romantic love and marital responsibility, but they approach marriage with the most ease. Liberals understand the labels placed on their single status by the outside world, but they neither identify with nor do they internalise them; hence, they are not anxious about their unmarried status.

Fortunately, despite the negative attitudes towards 'leftover women', not all unmarried urban women are stigmatised. While this optimistic view of single women is not mainstream, it does exist and provides a new perspective on what we can expect from their lives. It is also important to explore how they maintain a positive attitude. Being single does not mean they are alone; they still have their social networks,which include family and friends. Sometimes, they can even benefit from their single status.

Take Fang as an example. I first met her when she was a 31-year-old, state-owned insurance company work practitioner. I interviewed her in her shared office (we had privacy, as her colleague was out on an errand). She was dressed ina uniform, wore no make-up and appeared slightly tired from work. Fang was very comfortable with her single status. She was surprised when I explained to her that when I recruited her, her introducer was somewhat hesitant as they were concerned that the research topic, which was studying the daily lives of unmarried women, might offend her. She had not expected that mentioning someone's single status would be considered offensive. In her experience, being single was not a source of shame. She also did not considerit an inconvenience. On the contrary, she believes that her status has brought her many benefits. For example, being single has enabled her to focus more on her work, which has led to her current position (the highest position in her age group). She takes great pride in her career development, as evidenced by the fact that many of her more experienced colleagues still use four-person offices, whereas she already has a two-person one – a rare advantage in her work system. Fang believes that in China,

when women marry, they are obligated to devote more time to their families, including childbirth and household chores. If she were to marry, her work and life situation would almost certainly take a turn for the worse. Moreover, compared with the couples she knows, she thinks her life is like living in a fairy tale; thus, she does not envy their lives or feel ashamed of being single. In contrast, she enjoys it.

> Now, I have more time to spend with my parents and be with them, and I can spend more time meeting up with friends or travelling. What's more, I even have time to develop new hobbies. For example, I have just started to learn the piano, which was my dream as a child. Once I get married, I will have more family responsibilities and stuff to worry about, and I don't think I will be able to live like this anymore. I'm going to get married sooner or later anyway, but it would be nice to take the opportunity to enjoy the freedom and convenience of being single for a few more years.

Chinese social opinion has kept Fang from completely rejecting the possibility of marriage. However, she believes that marriage will negatively impact her at this stage, such as bearing the heavier burden of life pressures and responsibilities. Thus, she currently does not pursue it. In another interview, Luo, an unmarried woman in the same category as Fang, described marriage as 'the icing on the cake…it's better if you have it, but it's okay if you don't'. 'Being married or not is not a fundamental change for me; it doesn't necessarily make it better, so I'm not particularly motivated to do it. Marriage is not particularly important to me in life,' she added. Both Fang and Luo believe that marriage is not a necessity in life, and a lack of motivation for marriage is another major reason for these unmarried urban women's single status. After having a 'good' social status and material life as well as a job that reflects their values, unmarried urban women approach relationships and marriage from the 'will it make my life better?' perspective. They desire the intimacy of support and companionship in a marriage, not just material advancement.

The liberal type of woman receives more support than pressure from their social network. This emotional scaffold from their networks enables them to realise the possibility of being single without stigma. In the Chinese cultural context, unmarried

people in their 30s have always been considered as not fulfilling their filial obligations. Fortunately, Fang's parents placedminimal pressure on her. Although they were from ordinary working families and did not receive a good education, their parents (Fang's grandparents) were not traditional authority figures; rather, they had a relatively equal, close and almost friend-like relationship with them. Thus, Fang's parents always respected her opinions. Fang believes that she is not subjected to undue pressure from her parents, not only because they respect her ideas but also because theyexperience less external pressure than other parents; it is also highly likely that they are more tolerant of Fang. Her grandparents died a few years ago, and the rest of her parents' family moved to other cities, resulting inless contact between them andallowing her parents to feel less judged by their relatives about her single status. In addition, her parents are the type who are unaffected by the opinions of their friends, most of whom did not pay much attention to her single status (or her parents did not care that their peers noticed). In general, there was hardly any pressure from them about her being single. Fang, like her parents, did not consider her status to be a stigma; therefore, she neither internalised it nor put pressure on herself.

Fang's single status is possible because she is closely connected to and supported by her family. She and her parents enjoy each other's company, and she receives adequate emotional support at home. In addition, because she still lives with them, she saves money on rent and does not have to do all of the housework herself. This results in some financial convenience and enables her to save time and energy that would otherwise be spent on chores. This monetary and emotional assistance also ensures a good quality of life and makes marriage seem less important. Although daughters cannot carry on the family name (which is legally allowed, but due to cultural traditions, children usually inherit the father's name), the role of daughters in one-child families is similar to the traditional role of sons, in that they are functionally the same in terms of supporting their parents in their old age. In this context, Chinese society's preference for sons has gradually diminished, while the status and treatment of daughters in one-child families have significantly improved (Wanget al., 2013).

This attention, however, is double-edged. When parents are enlightened, they can be strong spiritual support in the lives of unmarried women; however, when they are heavily influenced by traditional culture, unmarried women will struggle with their parents' excessive attention. This reflects the intergenerational clash of attitudes between unmarried daughters and their parents in a transitional society. Luo, for instance, has had a different experience from Fang. Luo's parents were so controlling and traditional that she had to leave them and relocate to another city to work. Herindependence and privacy allowed Luo to remain single as she wished (Lynn and Roona, 2013; Trimberger, 2005). When both parties have their own space, the relationship is harmonious.

Emotional support from friends is also crucial to the emotional experience of liberal unmarried women. It is important to acknowledge that they feel peer pressure on occasion. To illustrate, Luo noted that many of her friends were married and felt that her social network had narrowed. Several of them are married with children, spend more time with their families and socialise as a married couple. Thus, despite the stressful work and high cost of living in Beijing, she prefers to stay in such a big city where she is subject to less peer pressure. She also believes that the urban culture in big cities is more inclusive. She fears that if she returns to work in her hometown (a small city in Sichuan province), her single status will make her an outlier among her peers. Although she misses them, only a few of her friends back home are single; she still communicates with those who are married with children, but their interaction has diminished over the years. She also perceives less social support from her friends back home. Life in Beijing is relatively faster paced, with stronger interpersonal boundaries as well as less energy to focus on and judge others' private lives (Feng, 2014). In addition, since Beijing has a higher concentration of resources and more job opportunities than smaller cities, there are more unmarried women of working age there. As a result, urban unmarried women consider the city to be a desirable place to live. A similar situation can be found in Hong Kong, where women commonly delay marriage due to educational and career commitments. Hence, peer pressure on single

women is much lower than in many mainland cities (Chan et al., 2009). Fortunately, Luo does not feel lonely due to the nature of her work, in which she meets many new friends with identical hobbies and often organises activities in her spare time.

Fang, who lives in Harbin, shares Luo's feelings and believes her circle of friends has slowly shrunk over time. However, because she has known them since she was a child, she remains close with those who are still single, spending much time together. This and her family's emotional support are more than enough for her. She did not work with many people her age, and most of her colleagues were older than her. At the start of her career, her colleagues were keen to introduce her to someone. However, their attempts were unsuccessful. Over time, they shifted their focus as new single colleagues who were younger than her came along; the pressure Fang felt over being single in the workplace also diminished. Overall, she experienced peer pressure, but the emotional support she received from her close friends outweighed the negative effects.

Fang has had a few emotional experiences. Because she is accustomed to being single, she does not feel the urge to change this state. She is elated with her current work and life situation, and her single status is the result of her choice rather than a passive compromise. As such, she sees no need to be ashamed of herself. However, her work does not require her to interact with clients, and nearly all of her colleagues in the department are women. Thus, her social circle is quite small, and she finds it difficult to meet new people. Most of her male friends are married or in a stable relationship. She is similar to Song in that she employs a passive strategy when choosing a spouse. Her friends and colleagues occasionally introduce her to potential partners, which she accepts, but she hardly takes the initiative to broaden her circle of friends.

Fang's preference for a spouse has not changed, but her criteria are dynamic and evolve as she ages. When she was much younger, sheused to think that the person she wanted to marry would give her security (which meant financial security and an

ambitious personality); she now prefers someone who shares her interests, which will reduce conflict and make their life together happier. She believes that her change in outlook is related to both her changing economic circumstances and her spiritual needs. For her, a quality marriage requires two people who are complementary to each other. She had an immature personality when she was younger, so she tended to admire mature men. Now that she is more mature, she hopes to find someone with a positive personality who can inspire her to enjoy life. She has no age restrictions for her future partner; she does not think negatively about having a younger partner, as younger men may be able to offer more emotional value. Moreover, economic status remains an important component in this process. Her potential partner's financial status may be lower than hers but not significantly ('moderately low' has a relatively broad meaning). Since she has remained single despite her shift in attitude, this simply reflects a change in her marriage expectations. Due to the nature of Chinese society, Fang could not postpone marriage indefinitely. At the time of the interview, she was 31 years old. She does not think that her criteria for choosing a spouse will substantially change, but her selection strategy may alter in a few years.

In summary, although my three different groups of unmarried urban women share the same social identity – determined by their marital status, they feel differently about being single and thus have different coping strategies for their singlehood and choice of spouse. Contrary to media stereotypes, they remain single for different reasons, the majority of which are their own choices, rather than being forced out of the marriage market. They are anxious about what being single entails and not because they are single. Instead, they are concerned about the stigma and the pressure that it entails. These single women are more worried about meeting their and others' expectations.

In my study, it was found that the stress and mate selection criteria of unmarried urban women were not entirely related to geographic factors. Compared to the respondents working in Harbin, the participants working in Beijing had less support from their social networks, even though they were less exposed to social opinion because they

worked in a larger city. Their feelings of stress come from the three dimensions of social culture, family life, and material life, and the influence of city location is not significant. When they have enough support from their social networks, the stigma is greatly reduced. Although they certainly feel the pressures of being single, they do not want to be overly noticed by others as a result. In addition, they do not want to unduly show their anxiety for fear of adding to the stigma attached to them. The status of these three types of unmarried women is not fixed, and their attitudes towards marriage may change depending on their stage in life or as they are influenced by external circumstances. To illustrate, Yang, who used to be a romantic in her younger years, is now a realist. The boundaries between these three types are fluid, and an unmarried woman's type may shift between them as perceptions change.

Common selection criteria for a spouse

Different types of unmarried urban women have different marriage expectations, and their specific criteria for choosing a spouse vary. When I analysed the data on mate selection criteria, I found several recurring themes that were shared by these different types of unmarried women. These criteria can be seen as commonalities in urban unmarried women's mate selection preferences and as the bottom line of their mate selection criteria. By collating the commonalities in their preferences, it is possible to better understand the basic expectations of urban unmarried women concerning marriage. These three criteria are summarised because I found three high-frequency words (and their synonyms) that were frequently mentioned by different types of participants. These terms, in turn, encapsulate the direction of their choice of spouse. These three directions are roughly defined as 'responsible', 'feeling' and 'compatible'.

Li (1989) and Xu (2000) used a combination of interviews and questionnaires to conduct a quantitative study on the choice of spouse among a group of unmarried

women with higher education (urban university students). A quantitative study of marriage recruitment advertisements was performed. This provides a basic description of contemporary Chinese people's spouse selection criteria and analyses the main factors that influence a person's spouse selection behaviour as well as the extent to which they influence it. In a marriage advertisement, the five main requirements for a spouse are age, personality and moral character, height, marital experience and education. From the cross-cultural comparison, it was found that some criteria were more valued by the Chinese but less valued by other cultures, such as age, height and marital status; other cultures tended to value religion, race and relationships.

However, as social transformation and socio-cultural development have occurred, there has been a convergence of different cultures' mate selection criteria and views. This fusion was reflected in the study participants' views on choosing a spouse. Unlike the specific, quantifiable financial criteria listed by the unmarried urban women's parents as they engaged in a 'blind date corner in a park' event, the seemingly simple and vague criteria given by the participants in this study were more difficult to meet. The parents' criteria for dating someone include household registration, property and income, all of which are material and can be measured concretely (Sun, 2014; Yang, 2011). These conditions stem from the parents' concern for their children, as only by using these predictable indicators can they quickly determine whether the other person is financially reliable and trustworthy. This is the impact of China's marketisation process on people's preferences and ways of choosing a spouse. It is not that the respondents in this study did not care about material aspects; rather, their ideas about the materiality of their ideal partner were implicit in the seemingly vague criteria for selecting a spouse. In terms of finances, these ambiguous standards are their bottom-line requirements for choosing a mate.

With societal modernisation, there is a general trend towards a greater need for romantic intimacy (Xu, 2000). This does not mean, however, that more educated people are less concerned with each other's socio-economic background, such as

education, occupation and income. Such individuals tend to identify with the compatibility model, have higher expectations of their future partners and choose their mates more carefully. They are not only concerned about their partner's socio-economic background but also their personality and degree of compatibility as a couple. Based on their feedback, the respondents do not necessarily desire marriage to improve their material quality of life, but they also do not want it to be too costly. They are willing to endure public criticism forstigmatising unmarried urban women without lowering their standards due to their marriage requirements and expectations. For them, marriage is not just a task to be completed on time; it is also closely linked to their happiness.

For Wu, one of the critical aspects she 'looks for in a partner is whether they are responsible and committed'. The 'responsible' theme pertains to a future partner's sense of family responsibility – their ability and willingness to assume such duties. Marriage is a two-way commitment that expects and requires the other person's contractual spirit. When choosing a spouse, responsibility is often associated with family; this indicates that an individual expects their partner to be a family-oriented person who is financially and characteristically reliable. At the same time, responsibility implies an expectation that the woman's partner is capable and responsible in all respects and an implicit assumption that they will take care of her to a certain extent. This care is not necessarily monetary but can also be in terms of life quality or providing emotional value, reflecting women's perspective on gender-role division and unmarried women's expectation of a risk-resistant function in marriage.

Luo also said that she could not say exactly what she wanted in a partner, only that there should be a 'feeling' between them. In this study's context, the 'feeling' theme is inextricably linked to 'liking', indicating the expectation that both partners will be able to build a romantic relationship. Urban unmarried women hope that romantic love can foster intimacy between two people. This demonstrates the emotional attributes that unmarried women seek in marriage. Personal aesthetics are highly

variable and cannot be quantified in the same way that one's financial income, height or weight do. Moreover, such emotionsare easily influenced by time, external circumstances and practice. Therefore, this criterion is difficult to specify and meet. A certain amount of luck is needed in practice.

'I'm not looking for a big love affair, either; I just want to get married when two people get along', says Wang. The 'getting along' category describes the couple's compatibility pattern. This definition is linked to romantic, intimate relationships. Because such relationships are not easy to find, some unmarried women are willing to lower their expectations and simply get along with a potential partner. The expectation is that they will be able to establish a trustworthy teammate relationship. Being comfortable with another person, for instance, is sufficient. This standard is easier to meet than a romantic relationship, which entails specific requirements about each other's personalities, hobbies, etc. The two people must share something in common, such as a similar hobby or life plan. It also implies that unmarried women expect their future partner to come from a similar family or educational background. Common hobbies and common educational backgrounds etc. are ultimately material and behind these lie the classes they represent. This reflects the fact that my respondents' expectations of marriage tend to favour intra-class marriages. While women do not expect to make an upward class leap through marriage, they do expect to at least maintain their social status after marriage.

According to mass media, one of the reasons for urban unmarried women being single is that they are too selective about who they marry. Before conducting this study's data analysis, I tried to refute this argument, but the results revealed that urban unmarried women are indeed meticulous or cautious in their choice of spouse. Nevertheless, they are not being demanding; they neither expect their partner to be extremely affluent nor need him to be considerably better than them in every aspect. Rather, they require a certain financial standard from their partner to ensure that their standard of living does not greatly decline after marriage. If that were their only

financial requirement, they would not be perceived as highly selective; however, with soft requirements such as personality, hobbies and even a romantic relationship factored in, they appear to be so. Their criteria for choosing a spouse are not too stringent, but they are detailed. This finding was revealed in To's (2012) study. Urban unmarried women are well equipped in terms of career, etc.; with some reasonable strategies and compromises in the secondary aspects of spouse selection, they can successfully find a spouse to choose. As this study contends that unmarried women's single status is not a pressing issue, it does not focus on the proposed spouse selection strategies. A comprehensive analysis of the three common criteria for choosing a spouse considered by different types of unmarried urban women reveals that their views on spouse selection are still dominated by the trend of choosing a spouse within a class based on economic conditions. They have expectations of romantic relationships and do not want to take financial risks in marriage.

Redefining urban unmarried women: Beyond 'sheng nu'(shen nu /prudent women/慎女)

The plight of unmarried women in urban China is a result of multiple and intersecting social pressures and discrimination. Such women delay entering marriage due to their insistence on their self-perceptions and marriage requirements and thus face constant stigma from the outside world. They are plagued by false and negative stereotypes under the pseudo-proposition of 'leftover women'. This study explores the overall characteristics of the different types of unmarried women, including their single status, attitudes towards marriage, parents' and society's degree of influence, gender role expectations in marriage and family, as well as strategies for choosing a spouse, by analysing their narratives to provide a relatively comprehensive picture of unmarried women as influenced by their single status. The pseudo-concept of 'leftover women' can be redefined by breaking down the single, generalised stereotype that the media portrays.

Some scholars suggest redefining the term 'leftover women', which has a negative connotation, as 'blooming women' (Fincher, 2014), based on the life status of unmarried women. This refers to a state in life in which women can treat their age as if it were irrelevantand instead take pride in growing in age and wisdom, organising a full life, having their social circles, being optimistic, taking relationships as they come, not forcing themselves into marriage as well as acting with confidence. This redefinition strikes me as very reasonable and apt. From the perspective of gender equality, the 'leftover woman' is portrayed as a highly morally stigmatised, materialistic and egotistical group of older unmarried women; however, in essence, it is a deliberate construction of gender inequality, as women become increasingly independent and equal in economic, spiritual and behavioural terms, and men feel pressured to do so. Therefore, the media's communication of the 'leftover women' issue is not so much a solution to women's marriage problems as it is a gendered discipline for a specific group of women based on the standpoint of traditional gender views and media profitability. The concept of the 'blooming woman' removes the stigma and better reflects the life status and positive attitudes of urban unmarried women. It provides the basis for a discursive struggle against the stigmatisation of unmarried urban women.

According to my research, urban unmarried women can also be redefined as 'shen nu' (prudent women/慎女) in terms of the participants' attitudes towards marriage and family. This refers to the fact that they are more cautious in their approach to marriage and their standards than others. Today, late marriage has become a life choice for an increasing number of urban women, whose demands on the quality of their marriage far outweigh the pressure imposed by their marital age. They believe that rushing into marriage without psychological preparation is not only irresponsible but also a failure to another person. It is an expression of self-responsibility as well as responsibility for others.

In current Chinese society, the traditional family, in the guise of a 'reproductive community' or 'economic cooperative', is being replaced by the modern 'emotional-psychological-cultural community'. The formerly family-based marriage has evolved into one based on the freedom of both sexes to make their own decisions, with spouses choosing more freely (Liu, 2015). The ability to achieve emotional satisfaction and spiritual pleasure between spouses has become the primary factor in marriage, and the relationship between them has increasingly become the main axis of family life. Focusing on the quality of marital and family life and pursuing the richness and enjoyment of emotional life has become a major theme of marital and family life in today's Chinese society. As modern women gain the economic means to live independently, their demands on the quality of marriage have risen. Marriage is a model consisting of two components: material and spiritual; if either of the two elements is not fulfilled, they can choose not to marry. As my participants conveyed, if lowering their standards is tantamount to lowering the quality of marriage, what reason is there to get married? It is only natural that such an important decision as marriage should be approached with care.

When choosing a spouse, my participants tended to weigh all of the other party's characteristics and conditions and carefully select the one that best suits them. Regardless of the type of unmarried urban women, they tend to have a highly rational view of marriage and love and are principled in their choice of a spouse, preferring to go without than accept shoddy option. Several of these women place a high value on their partner's loyalty in relationship matters; others insist on their partner sharing their interests, while some hope that their partner's personality and temperament are compatible with their own. Because of their discretion in selecting a spouse, I believe they will have a high degree of stability in their marriage once they have chosen a suitable partner. In their selection, they have an 'I would rather stay single if I cannot find the right one' attitude, trying to find a partner who is close to their hearts and harmonious with their personalities rather than being satisfied with the traditional role of a housewife and sexual tool who is dependent on her husband. Marriage, for these

women, is a means to become a better person. They expect not only a faithful, reliable partner and a relatively secure home base but also actively seek opportunities to collaborate to fulfil their potential in life. Their new marriage values and ethics are progressive and can serve as a good example to society while also helping to accelerate the modernisation of marriage and family life in China.

Conclusion

In contrast to the stereotypes presented, this chapter creates a typology of urban unmarried women based on their attitudes and expectations towards marriage as well as the extent to which they perceive themselves to be stigmatised for being single based on the values that orient their choice of spouse. These urban unmarried women are classified into three different types: realist, romantic and liberal. The distinctions between these three types are not fixed, and their typology may change over time as personal experiences and perceptions of marriage shift. Different types of unmarried urban women have different marriage expectations and specific standards for choosing a spouse; however, they also share basic criteria that reflect their persistent views on marriage and their caution in selecting a partner. It also reveals their predominant view of mate selection based on the tendency to choose a mate within a class based on economic conditions.

This chapter shatters the general negative stereotype portrayed by the media by restoring the true image of unmarried women influenced by the factors of their single status and thus redefines the adverse concept of 'sheng nu' (leftover women/剩女) as 'shen nu' (prudent women/慎女). By removing the misrepresentations and gender stereotypes from the pseudo-proposition of 'leftover women', I presented unmarried urban women's new view of the family and combated their stigmatisation.

To's (2012) study reveals that urban unmarried women who are well equipped in

terms of career and other aspects can be successful in finding another spouse with some sensible strategies and compromises in the secondary aspects of mate selection. To's (2012) categorization is similar to mine in the sense that both consider the categorization in terms of attitudes toward marriage, mate selection strategies, gender roles, economic values, and parental factors. My categorization of unmarried women reveals their value orientation towards marriage, while To's study focuses on categorizing unmarried women and then developing appropriate mate selection strategies. Our types do not seem too far apart, but each type is different and specific. Both 'Satisficer' and 'Innovator' in her type are not minding the financial condition of the future partner, which is different from my study. Since this study does not consider unmarried women's singleness as a pressing issue, it does not focus on suggestions for mate selection strategies. A comprehensive analysis of the three common criteria for choosing a spouse for different types of unmarried women reveals that their view of spouse selection is still dominated by the trend of choosing a spouse within a social class based on economic conditions. They have expectations of romantic relationships and are not willing to take economic risks in marriage.

The original contribution of this chapter is to provide a new research direction and theoretical perspective for the study of urban unmarried women in China by establishing a new typology of urban unmarried women; to reveal their dominant view of mate choice based on the trend of choosing a mate within a class on the basis of their economic conditions; and to challenge the traditional gender narrative through the redefinition of the connotation of 'leftover women', providing a new theoretical foundation for the study of urban unmarried women, while at the same time supplementing and enriching the relevant literature on gender and family studies in China. The next chapter presents the intergenerational conflict between unmarried urban women and their parents as well as analyses its causes using 'the blind date corner in a park' as a stage.

Chapter 5 Intransigent Parents: The Blind Date Corner in Urban China

While in the previous chapter I established a new typology of unmarried urban women in terms of values orientated towards marriage and mate choice, this chapter will focus on the pressures on unmarried urban women from the family, the intergenerational conflicts and the negotiation process between the two generations. As discussed earlier, the family is an important part of the perceived sources of stress for unmarried urban women. This is because these women's anxiety is not due to their singleness but rather comes from a multifaceted intersection of social pressures, including family. In order to examine the impact of unmarried women's single status on their daily lives, their interactions with their parents need to be looked at. One's choice of spouse is an inextricable topic in unmarried women's families and is at the centre of marriage and family in real life. Social changes in mate choice behaviour not only reflect the shaping of the individual by society but also provide a perspective on the specific characteristics of the individual's behavioural choices in a macro-context. The normal idealised process of choosing a spouse is a natural process in which a man and a woman, each on a voluntary basis, achieve a certain degree of mutual attraction through a series of emotional ties and maintain an intimate relationship, thus entering into a marriage smoothly. However, in reality, due to social changes and other factors, the generational differences within the family are too large. Differing viewpoints and awareness of the meaning of choosing a spouse between generations, with contradictions and gaps between the intergenerational expectations of choosing a spouse and reality, have led to intergenerational tensions within families. In response to the social phenomenon of the 'unmarried urban woman', some parents have taken the initiative and chosen to intervene and make marital choices on behalf of their unmarried daughters.

Using the blind dating corners in the parks of Beijing and Harbin as an example, I think these locations may be a new attempt by parents to find suitable spouses for their daughters.They are concerned about their daughters' single status and seek to address the issue on their behalf. This behaviour shows the parents' uncompromising attitude towards their unmarried children's status. Though this results in the overstepping of boundaries on the subject of choosing a spouse, unmarried daughters do not reject their parents' attempts to do so. They voluntarily chose to temporarily cede a part of their own subjectivity in order to cooperate with their parent's actions. Therefore, I believe that studying the blind dating corner phenomenon provides insight into the intergenerational conflict between parents and their children's views of marriage.It also shows how parents attempt to solve their children's marital problems on their behalf and highlight the interaction and negotiation process between the generations on the topic of marriage, offering an effective entry point for understanding the pressures that unmarried urban women face at home and how they deal with it.

The study of blind dating in parks also helps to clarify the changes in the way individuals choose their spouses and the criteria for such, as well as the intergenerational differences in the concept of spousal choice, influenced by the Chinese market's economic transformation. First, in order to understand the importance that parents place on the marriage of their daughters, it is necessary to explore the importance of marriage in China. In this next chapter, I will explain why marriage is still so important in modern China, the specific intergenerational conflicts between parents and their unmarried daughters, and, finally, shed light on the matchmaking strategies of urban parents. We will also look at the criteria used in choosing their daughters' spouses by examining the process of parental matchmaking on two blind dating corners in Harbin and Beijing.

Functions of the marriage in China

To better understand why Chinese parents are so concerned about their daughters' marital status, the importance of marriage and family needs to be explained. Marriage still has great significance in China from the traditional cultural and economic point of view. In Chinese culture, marriage is a major event for every family and all involved. Previously, marriage was considered to be for ensuring the continuity of the family lineage, shouldering the responsibility for ancestral heritage and future generations. This was influenced by thousands of years of agrarian culture in China (Fei, 2008). One of the concepts of Chinese parenthood is to *raise children for old age*. In modern society, social insurance covers the most important function of old age. Theoretically, when people enter old age, they do not need to rely on the support of their children. However, is this concept still applicable in today's Chinese society? Unfortunately, despite the nationwide spread of old-age insurance, most retired residents cannot survive on this alone. Relying on family support is still the most reasonable option (Wang, 2006; Feng, He&Zhang, 2011).

	Systems	**Insurance participant**	Type of insurance
old-age protection	**Endowment insurance (pension)**	Retirement system for institutions and establishments (Danwei).	Civil servants, public institutions
		Basic endowment insurance for urban workers	urban worker
		Endowment insurance for urban residents	Urban residents over 16 years of age

		New Rural Pension Insurance	Rural residents over 16 years of age
	old-age benefit	Preferential treatment for old age	60 years and over
		Old Age Allowance	80 years and over
		"Five Guarantees" system	An incapacitated elderly person who has no legal breadwinner or no source of income.

(Tabel 1, Framework of the old-age social security system in mainland China)

For decades, the Chinese Government has been committed to promoting a social welfare and security system.For the retired generation, old-age security is the most important part of their daily lives, and it is their main concern compared with other social security. China has a long tradition of honouring the elderly. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the pension system was gradually improved, and a modern pension insurance system was established. It can be divided into two main stages of development: the period of the traditional pension insurance system from 1950-1985 and the period of transition of the pension insurance system from 1986 to the present (Report on China's Social Welfare Development Indicators, 2010-2012). The reform of the pension insurance system began in 1986. The goal of the reform was to meet the requirements of the socialist market economy system and to suit all types of enterprise workers and urban self-employed workers (China Social Welfare Development Index Report, 2010-2012). Specifically, the method of payment was changed from a defined benefit system to a defined payment system, and the source of funding was changed from the individual never paying anything to being shared by the government, enterprises and individuals, among other things. Following this, the rural residents' old-age insurance system was launched in 2009 and extended

nationwide in 2011. During the same period, welfare conditions for the elderly - including services for the elderly, cultural and recreational programmes, and welfare facilities - were also managed and developed by the Government. The State is vigorously promoting this programme, and many people are benefiting from the dividends of this policy.

However, in China, pensions from various schemes are completely inequitable (Wang et al., 2014). The retired generation will still have a sense of insecurity about their future due to the different participation rates in urban and rural pension insurance, as well as the different levels of pension security standards in different regions. Taking the participation rate of urban and rural old-age insurance and the level of old-age security standards (yuan/person/month) in 2012 as an example, Beijing's urban and rural old-age insurance participation rate was 73.45%, and the old-age security standard was 722.32 yuan/person, while the participation rate of Heilongjiang (Harbin's province) was only 52.35%, and the urban and rural old-age security standard was 247.74 yuan/person (Report on the Development Index of China's Social Welfare, 2010-2012). This was insufficient to sustain daily life. As different regions had different levels of economic development, the level of old-age security was relatively different. Therefore, it was understandable that Chinese parents insisted on raising children for old age. Raising the next generation was no longer just about continuing the family line; raising children to guard against old age was also an important factor. According to Wang et al. (2014), there are significant differences in pension entitlements and conditions among older urban residents, older rural residents, enterprise retirees, institutional retirees and retired civil servants. Pensions alone are insufficient for most residents. Following China's substantial pension reforms for enterprise workers, the household savings rate of urban residents has continued to rise (Feng et al., 2011; Ji et al., 2017). Even relatively affluent urban residents have had to choose a variety of options, including using their savings to protect their lives after retirement. By parents, I mean the parents of unmarried women. Most of these parents live in cities and have their own pension insurance and family savings. They are better

off financially than many of their peers; however, these financially well-off parents also have their own concerns about retirement (Zhao and Zhao, 2018). This is why women are now urged to marry early. Unlike cultures that perpetuate the family lineage (in this case, traditional Chinese culture, where men are expected to take more financial responsibility for the family), in modern society, women are also capable of taking care of their parents financially. Nonetheless, given their own state of financial experience and the intensification of an ageing society as a whole, parents can also be concerned about their daughters. If their daughter stays single and childless, she will lose the financial support of her family in the future when she is too old to support herself.

Some parents have health insurance and endowment insurance, but the presence of their children is still more reliable in their eyes. Although numerous urban parents with pensions and health insurance already have some financial security, they still fear that their pensions will not be paid. In addition, medical insurance does not cover all illnesses and does not provide 100 per cent reimbursement. Although China is already popularising pension and medical insurance, some elderly still do not apply for such insurance due to various factors and have to rely on their children's support. Children may not always be in a position to help their parents or provide for them financially; however, in the long tradition of Chinese culture, children are the main parental support. This means that, in addition to financial support, the presence of children can bring solid moral support to parents (Yu, 2012). Marriage and family are established life tasks for the older generation. In their view, it is only when their children get married at the right age, have children and enter a new stage of life that they have finally fulfilled their parental responsibilities. In addition, China has always had a huge gender gap in terms of labour force participation, employment sector and income (Zhan, 2005). From an economic perspective, single women will have to bear more financial pressure after retirement due to the gender gap in pensions. Therefore, parents will also worry about their unmarried daughters on an economic level.

The Confucian tradition emphasises the continuity of family. The Chinese concept of *many children, many blessings* also reflects the Chinese people's strong sense of responsibility for the family. Yang (2011), in his study of the problem of old age in Chinese society, summarises the intergenerational relationship between parents and children in China as a kind of "responsibility ethic". This responsibility is mainly reflected in the intergenerational imbalance, which means that parents who are deeply influenced by this traditional concept not only have to raise their children to adulthood but also have to help their children get married and start their own families. When their children have offspring, the parents, if they are still in good health, have to help them take care of these children. Under the bondage of family obligations, Chinese parents bear unlimited responsibilities. Here, I use the concept of responsibility ethics to illustrate that the Chinese regard their children's marriage as their life's work. It is because of the strong "responsibility ethic" of Chinese parents that they attach so much importance to their children's marriage.

Conflict and coping between parents and unmarried daughters

China's social structure is characterised by collectivism. The family structure in China is much more complex compared to the family structure in Western culture. Family rules and family concepts are different. According to Wu (2018), the harmony of the family and the normal maintenance of family relationships are very important to Chinese people. Considering the significance of family to Chinese people, we should understand family not only as the most basic social unit but also as a basic state of existence. In our parent's generation, influenced by traditional Chinese culture and faithful followers of the traditional view of marriage, the inability of individuals to fulfil their familial duties was seen as an act of transgression.

In terms of the values of the parents' generation, marriage and family are unavoidable personal choices and, to some extent, the earlier, the better. On the contrary,

unmarried daughters residing in urban areas tended to adopt a more modern lifestyle and value system, leading to different family structures and marriage expectations. Marriage was no longer the only option for many, and improving their quality of life became their main goal. They were not rejecting marriage; they just aspired to have a better quality of married life. At this level, the intergenerational conflict between parents and children became a conflict between two different lifestyles and values.

When a family's daughters failed to fulfil the family's expectations of getting married 'on time', they became the target of parental bashing (Yan, 2003). Certain Chinese parents believed that their children did not want to get married because they were unstable, naïve, immature or selfish.

Her reluctance to get married had something to do with her immaturity. But she couldn't go on like that. After all, she wasn't young anymore. She was happy with her current situation, but the whole family was anxious. She couldn't be that selfish. She would settle down eventually after marriage (Hu, 55).

According to my research, these women were single for reasons contrary to their parents' expectations. These women had a clear understanding of their current situation. In addition, they were very rational and responsible and made plans accordingly. Young people living in fast-paced and competitive big cities face greater pressure at work. With long and intense working hours, it was often difficult for young people to step out of their comfort zone and meet new people.

> After a long day of work, I didn't want to say another word. I was so tired that Ididn't even have the energy to eat. I was not in the mood to chat or go on a date at all because I didn't even have time to talk to my family and friends. On my days off, I just wanted to be alone, enjoy my independence and do what I liked. To recover my strength for the new week (Yuan, 28).

Yuan was drained at work. High-intensity work and limited social networks greatly

reduced these women's chances of meeting potential mates. That may be why blind dates, an outdated introduction that seemed similar to arranged marriages, were not as strongly resisted by respondents as I expected. My research showed that most respondents believed that blind dates were also an effective way to expand their social circle. They felt that this method broadened their networking resources to a certain extent, effectively providing them with more potential targets. What really worried them was the large number of low-quality random introductions from relatives and friends that did not meet their expectations and disrupted their normal lives.

If the lack of time and energy to maintain a relationship was one of the factors causing young people in big cities to remain single, the most important factor was their lack of money.

> Beijing is too big and densely populated, and although it's easy to get around, the traffic jams are really bad. If a couple doesn't work in the same district, it could be like a long-distance relationship. My ex-boyfriend and I were usually too busy to see each other after work on weekdays. We could only [meet] on weekends, but there were very few times when we weren't [working] overtime at the same time. But this is the norm of life in Beijing, where the pace of work is always very competitive. Overtime was not mandatory, but if I didn't work overtime, my salary was reduced. We'd also considered living together to cut down on expenses, but we're both too far away to get to work. The relationship was too difficult to maintain, so it slowly faded, and he became my ex (Zhi,33).

Many young people working in big cities like Beijing and Shanghai come from smaller cities with relatively few opportunities. Because of the high property values in big cities, most choose to rent an apartment. That means a large portion of their salary will be taken up by rent payments, making it unlikely that they would have much in the way of savings. According to Chamon and Prasad (2010), the savings of the younger generation were mainly used for housing and education. Given the average price of flats in major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, it was almost

impossible for the younger generation to buy property with their salary and savings without relying on their family's financial support. Under those circumstances, it is difficult for young people to rely on their savings to get married and buy a flat.

Many of my respondents were happy with their current status. They were not anxious about being single but about their parents.

> Someone is pursuing me, but I don't think he's the right person for me. As a high-income woman working alone in the city, I am quite happy with my current situation. I'm ready to live like this. But I'm worried that my parents will be unhappy. (Kim, 30)

Parents see their children's marriage as their responsibility. Jiang (60) claims that "if her daughter marries, her life will be complete, and there will be no regrets". Jiang's terminology is interesting because she used the word 'complete' to describe life after marriage. Her semantics presupposes that the individual who exists outside of marriage is incomplete and flawed. She also assumes that neither she nor her daughter will have regrets once she marries. In her understanding, marriage seems to be a task that must be completed or a race that ends when the finish line is reached. However, the younger generation has a different view from hers, and marriage is seen as the beginning of a new task, the entrance to a marathon.

One of my interviewees felt that marriage was just the beginning and that there was still some way to go before the parents fulfilled their mission in life.

> I am well aware that getting married is just to fulfil my parents' demands. Once my boyfriend and I get married, my parents will ask me to have a child as soon as possible, but I still have work to do. Especially now that the country has opened up the policy of having two children when I have one child, my parents may ask me to hurry up and have a second so that the two could be together and, therefore, less lonely. They thought that if I had a second child at a young age, my body would recover faster then I would have more energy to take care of my child. Although my parents agreed to help me take care of my child, as a mother, I am

bound to put in more energy. During this period, I will go through pregnancy, labour, breastfeeding and recovery, especially if I have a second child, and I will have to lose almost three years of my working life. This delay in my golden time will have a great impact on my work. Therefore, marriage for me means having children and a change in life status. It also means I will sacrifice my personal career pursuits. In addition, the cost of raising children in China is too high now. I don't dare have children. More importantly, the responsibility of having children is too great for me. Raising a child is not like a game where you can always start over again, and a child is a choice you can't regret. Parents need to be mature enough, and I feel like I'm still a baby inside. I don't think I'm ready (Han, 28).

I think Han's view is closer to reality than Jiang's. Before Chinese children enter the free nine-year compulsory education, there are many items, such as milk formula, nappies and expensive private kindergartens, that require parents' savings to cover. After several previous scandals, there was a crisis of confidence in Chinese baby formula. Many parents with financial means choose to buy imported milk powder for their children. Similarly, young parents tend to send their children to early childhood education classes when they are one year old. Early childhood education classes are private, for-profit organisations (usually chains) that provide premises, specialised equipment and professional teachers to enable young children (0-3 years old) to develop intellectually through a variety of activities. The cost is high; however, parents are willing to send their children for training. In the process, parents not only have to pay a lot of money but also spend time with their children in training. This means that one of them must sacrifice their working hours or choose to hire a nanny to take on that responsibility. On the one hand, parents are willing to send their children to expensive and ineffective early education classes for the sake of their children's future development; on the other hand, this is a result of social comparison (Xu, 2015). Parents project their anxiety about job competition onto their children. If their friends' children go to early childhood classes, they feel they must send their own children too, in case their children are not as smart or sociable as others, and the

result of not attending early childhood classes is that they may lose at the starting line. Just because the younger generation is reluctant to get married doesn't mean they are selfish, but they are more cautious. Marriage has a different meaning for this generation, especially for young women.

This also reflects the overall transformation of Chinese society. In recent decades, Chinese society has undergone rapid transformation and development. The parents of these unmarried urban women usually grew up during the Maoist era. Their upbringing and social background are completely different from the younger generation who grew up under the one-child policy. Therefore, the conflict between these two generations is essentially a conflict between the two values and lifestyles over such issues as whether to marry or not and what is suitable for marriage, which is also a reflection of various social problems and social unrest during the period of social transition. Even for the more independent and autonomous young people of this generation, it is very painful and difficult to completely give up their relationship with their parents or to completely disregard the pressures of life and public opinion. Intergenerational conflicts and suffering in a society are often difficult to eliminate quickly.

Under this intergenerational conflict, some parents choose to take the initiative to find suitable partners for their daughters themselves in order to solve their daughters' singleness problem. An important factor in parents' willingness to go to the dating corner in the park instead of their daughters is the promotion of the one-child policy. In urban matchmaking corners, basically, there is only one child in the family who participates, and all the parents' attention and all their hopes are pinned on this child. The relationship between the only child and the parents is much closer. As a result, the parents are more affected by their daughter's single status, and the daughter is more disturbed because of her parents. In the previous section, we have concluded that unmarried urban women are only postponing marriage for various reasons and are not choosing to give up. They are simply slowing the pace of their lives a little. Parents

are worried about their daughters' single status, while daughters are worried about their parents' attitudes and ideas. Both sides conflict, but there is a consensus on the outcome of marriage. The parents choose to match their daughter because they want to solve the problem for their daughter. In contrast, the unmarried daughter decides to cooperate because both sides are communities of interest, and both sides essentially want each other to be happy. The choice to go to the park dating corner is the parents' response to their unmarried daughter's single status. However, the daughter chooses to cooperate in order to avoid another conflict between the two sides while not giving up the possibility of choosing a spouse.

Parental Initiatives (Blind Dating Corners in Beijing and Harbin)

The emergence and operation of dating corners is a social phenomenon worth studying. This product with Chinese characteristics combines public anxiety, prejudice and desire. It is full of contradictions, power and control (Sun, 2013). The success rate of dating corners is actually very low. However, many parents still get emotional satisfaction from it, which reflects a series of social needs. As a place for parents to find blind dates for their children, dating corners can visually reflect parents' requirements and attitudes towards their children's marital status. The threshold of entry to matchmaking corners is high, as most singletons tend to be conditional. Although there are no mandatory criteria or fixed rules, when the candidates' criteria are unrealistic, they will automatically withdraw because they cannot stand the pressure from the people around them. These criteria have been gradually developed over a long period. The average level of the dating corners varies slightly from city to city, but the singles who stay in the dating corners are generally middle class, better educated, with higher incomes, and own a flat. There are also more single women than single men in this group, meaning that most parents have unmarried daughters.

When there is an imbalance in the ratio of men to women, the shortfall in the marriage market will dominate, with more choices and initiative. Take the matchmaking angle in which there are significantly more parents looking for a match for their daughters than for their sons. There are fewer single women than men in the city, but most of the parents investigating the matchmaking angle are looking for marriage for their daughters, and this singular imbalance in the gender ratio suggests, to some extent, that marriage affects women much more than men in China, at least for the parents of single women. Based on my fieldwork in Harbin and Beijing, I will explain the reasons for parents' concerns, the potential rules and the implications of matchmaking angles.

What do parents fear when they come to the dating corner?

The dating corner is a "circle" with universally accepted norms and rules. It is the main battleground for parents as they select potential mates for their children through resumes and introductions. It could be argued that although the dating corner is a public area, it is a relatively exclusive environment. If a young person wanted to go there to find a partner for themselves, they would be considered breaking the rules, as parents rely on their children's CVs from all over the world to select potential targets. No specific rule prohibits the younger generation from showing up; it's just a convention. If young people do show up, it's naturally more straightforward than a CV. Stealing potential resources from others naturally crowds out most of the regular participants; thus, younger participants are not popular with mainstream participants. The younger generation is also unlikely to participate because of their tight work schedules. When I first attempted to approach parents in Beijing's Tiantan Park, I was cautiously asked why I wanted to go to the Matchmaking Corner, which is known primarily for attracting parental participation. Young people do not make up the majority of the group and are considered outsiders; not all parents can participate in a matchmaking corner. Cities where matchmaking corners are popular, such as Beijing,

Shanghai, Tianjin, Hangzhou and Harbin, are all large and medium-sized cities. After a series of "market elimination mechanisms", the dating corners in these cities have gradually developed common selection criteria.

The standard varies slightly from city to city but is generally for highly educated, high-income matchmaking. Anything below that average price is squeezed out of the market. In other words, matchmaking corners have gradually developed a market access mechanism.

These market access mechanisms are not entirely fixed. Each region or city has a set of local default rules. In the case of Beijing and Harbin, the basic requirement for access to dating venues is that the children have their own flat. This means that parents will not live with their children after marriage. These parents are expected to have their own homes to ensure their children's independence. In terms of traditional Chinese culture and flat prices, flats are purchased mainly by parents for their children. However, those who can fulfil this condition are not in the majority in the city. Parents with access to matchmaking corners can afford two flats and have *a city household registration*. Most of them have a high level of education (at least high school or above), relatively high social status (technical experts, state cadres, managers) and belong to the urban middle class. Their children, primarily white-collar workers, belong to the young urban middle class.

The 'educated youth'/知青/zhiqing is a special group created under a specific historical background (Jin,2014;Wang,2016;Zhou, 2020). The term 'educated youth' was originally intended to refer to educated youth or youth with higher education, but in China it refers specifically to educated young people who were voluntarily or forcibly sent down from the cities to the countryside to work as rural farmers from the 1950s until the end of the Cultural Revolution, and the majority of these people actually received only a middle school or high school education. The majority of these people actually received only junior or senior high school education. From the 1950s to the end of the 1970s, more than 17 million young people migrated from the cities to

remote rural areas to build farms, which not only changed the fate of a generation, but also had a profound impact on Chinese society (Wang,2016). The migration of people from rural areas to the cities has been limited by the dual system of urban and rural areas, i.e., the 'hukou' system, which has been in place since the founding of the Communist Party to restrict the movement of people (Jin,2014;Zhou, 2020). Residents with urban 'hukou' enjoy benefits such as education, employment, and social welfare. These are not enjoyed by residents with rural 'hukou'. The special policy of 'educated youth' going to the countryside was created under such a system. It makes it impossible for 'educated youth' to return to their hometowns, having lost their urban 'hukou' and forfeiting all the benefits and rights enjoyed by urban 'hukou' residents.

Some of the parents who met these criteria belonged to the ' educated youth who returned to the city, and some of them witnessed the impact of the movement. Going uphill to the countryside and experiencing the 'Cultural Revolution' was a common experience for this generation, and they felt its impact in every way. Even if they did not experience it first-hand, almost all of them had loved ones who were affected. The movement created a shared trauma and memory of an era. Some policies became an obstacle to the rise of a generation of educated youth (Jin,2021). In 1967, 16.47 million urban youth born between 1947 and 1959 participated in the "Going to the Hills and Going to the Countryside" movement and were no longer educated. Only after the resumption of the college entrance examination in 1979 that 550,000 educated youth were admitted to Chinese universities, and they finally had the opportunity to re-enter education(Jin,2021). From 1980 onwards, the threshold for university admission was raised, and this generation of educated young people could only choose night universities, distance learning and junior colleges to receive their education. By 1983, a university degree was the basis for most jobs, but very few people eventually crossed the class line(Jin,2021, Wang, 2008).. As society developed, the importance of academic qualifications became more and more prominent. Guo Moruo noted that 'no good education means no good job and then no good income'.

As a result, there was a 'wave of layoffs' of several educated young people whose education had been delayed, and the sudden loss of what they considered to be secure jobs caused them physical and mental stress(Wang, 2015). This loss of control over their destiny has filled this generation with unease.

At the same time, this generation also fears being "delayed" in marriage (Gu, 2015). Most educated young people who went to the countryside got married there in a hurry, without any prior emotional experience, and thus lost the opportunity to return to the city forever. At that time, although no policy explicitly stated that these young people could not fall in love or get married, job recruitment and entrance examinations required only unmarried young people. According to young people's thinking at the time, falling in love and getting married meant that they had to stay in the countryside for the rest of their lives. Those who were lucky enough to pass the college entrance examination and return to the city and those who were lucky enough not to take part in the 'going to the mountains and going to the countryside' movement witnessed the fear of others who stayed in the countryside, and they experienced the effects of the 'wave of layoffs'. In their minds, the sweetness of marriage and love could not dilute their fear of being unable to control their own lives or eliminate the instability brought about by the market economy and society.

The single life of these parents' children is an uncontrollable and unstable one. Therefore, these parents walk into the dating corner with natural anxiety, not so much to worry about their children's marriages as to find a more stable and less "delayed" life for their children.

Ms Zhao, a 60-year-old woman living in Harbin, said:

> The place where I went to the countryside back then was very remote and the conditions were very harsh, and I never did farm work before as a city girl, so it was too hard at that time! I regretted it as soon as I arrived there, and dreamed every day of going back to the city. By the time people my age started to fall in

love and get married I was not in the mood to think about it, first of all I was tired and had no extra strength to think about it, and secondly the mountain village I was in at the time was geographically remote, and to go to another village you had to go over a mountain. I was the only 'educated youth' in that village, and I was thinking that I couldn't find a local man, and that I would want to go home later. I was almost 30 years old, and in those days it was rare not to get married at that age. In the end, I had no choice but to find my ex-husband and get married. We didn't really like each other back then, but we were the only two educated youths in the area. We quarrelled for half our lives, but finally got divorced. We had no choice at that time, but nowadays young people have more opportunities than we did back then, and their conditions are much better. I think my daughter will be able to find a better man than the one I found back then!

Zhao does not urge her unmarried daughter to get married because after the failure of her own marriage she does not believe that marriage is the key to happiness in life. But she wants her daughter to have the power of choice and to be in touch with potential partners. She didn't have control over her life when she was younger, but she wants her daughter to have as many choices in her life as possible.

Blind dating corner deal

The road to a stable marriage is ultimately paved with the criteria for choosing a partner. These criteria often reflect parental attitudes and needs towards marriage in the corner of matchmaking. According to Fang (2011), the 'educated youth'/Zhiqing generation generally follows the traditional gender rule of 'men dominate outside and women dominate inside' when looking at marriage. The reason why money, housing and other factors are not dominant is that these factors have been largely '*danwei*'

'solved' under the planned economy, i.e., everyone's salary is almost the same, there is no distinction between rich and poor, and flats are distributed by the '*danwei*' 'rather than the market.' At that time, trade unions and other organisations would hold regular get-togethers to create opportunities for single people to get together. Young people also set up dating sites in parks. But in today's society, the most common measures have become money, houses, cars, image and appearance, diplomas and other visible things. The impact of contemporary culture on the generation that lived through that particular era has been tremendous. They are aware of leapfrogging and upheaval in the wave of laid-off workers. They were fully aware of the importance of knowledge and diplomas, so they did not believe that children with more advantages than they had would not be able to find suitable mates. Taking advantage of what they consider very important conditions, these parents go to the places they used to frequent when they were in love and seek what they consider 'safe marriages' for their children.

There is an unspoken rule in the marriage market in large and medium-sized cities that children should be married with a flat, as flats play an important role in Chinese marriages. Flats are linked to *hukou (household registration)*, education for future children and many other benefits. Generally, most children's matrimonial homes are purchased by the man's parents, at least to pay off the mortgage. After the marriage, the husband or the couple pays for the flat. Nevertheless, this condition is promoted in matchmaking corners. The parents who gather in the dating corners are not in a bad financial situation, and although many women's families can afford a flat, men still need to have their own.

My family can afford a flat for my daughter. Isn't it normal for a boy to have a flat of his own? Responsible parents must consider this when their children grow up and one day get married. As a parent of a girl, I already have a flat for my child. Shouldn't parents of boys do the same thing? You can't expect a man to take advantage of a woman's flat. What's important is that I want to leave my daughter a place of her own so she'll have somewhere to go in the future when they argue. (Fung, 60)

Hukou (registered permanent residency) is also a bottom-line issue in the dating corner, especially in Beijing. Beijing is a mature city with a large existing non-agricultural hukou population that played a central role in the planned economy of the Maoist era. As a developed city, the seat of the national government and one of China's economic and cultural centres, Beijing has attracted some of China's most qualified and talented immigrants. This has led not only to a natural increase in the *hukou* population but also to a steady but relatively small flow of migrants, with local governments selecting and recruiting China's best and brightest through competitive *hukou* relocation policies. However, the majority of Beijing's migrants have not been able to obtain inward migration *hukou*. Since the 1980s, the growth of this temporary population has created a large institutionalised class of temporary workers, contributing to the development of Beijing's construction and service industries. This temporary labour migration has become increasingly permanent, suggesting a significant divergence from the provisions of the temporary *hukou* permit. This divergence has been followed by a greater distribution of citizenship rights in education and social security programmes and a reduction in the *hukou/non-hukou* division. However, the basic institutional divisions remain and continue to influence migration and settlement patterns in Beijing (Yang, 2013). The *hukou* system in modern societies is not only a means of social macro-regulation but also reflects the social identity that individuals are institutionally assigned.

In the absence of comprehensive conditions or under equal conditions, migrants will be considered only if their personal conditions are better than those of locals. The *hukou* issue is important because it involves accessibility to social resources, but more importantly, parents who lived through that particular era are aware of the value of *an urban hukou*, which is closely related to people's social identity. This is reflected in the operation of matchmaking corners, where parents from out of town are in the minority and are often rejected by local parents. Typically, local Beijing parents only want to find a local mate for their children. In contrast, most parents in Harbin insist

on having a *city hukou*, which is a privilege for larger cities (such as Beijing) if they are not local. Cities with special political and economic status, such as Beijing and Shanghai, are privileged. *Hukou* in these cities are more valuable and harder to obtain than those in other cities and have a lot of added value. Having a *hukou* in a city means having access to resources such as healthcare and education, especially in Beijing. If people don't have *a hukou*, they can't even buy a car, and many things are restricted. Parents look for local *hukou* because, apart from wanting potential targets and their children to grow up in similar environments and thus have more in common, it is also more convenient to visit both parents during holidays. A *hukou*, especially in Beijing, is more difficult to access as a privileged city and a symbol of competence.

When I observed dating corners in Harbin and Beijing, I found that various rules were formed from the interaction between parents and children and between parents and outsiders and that this interaction also determined the power relations of the various subjects in the dating corners. At a dating corner in Harbin, I saw a well-dressed woman on a blind date for her daughter. She came early and loudly every day to introduce her daughter, but not many people actually asked her for specific information about her daughter. At that time, the mother of another girl said to me privately,

> Look at her behaviour and style of dress, talking so loudly. There seems to be no appearance of culture, so such a mother cannot raise a daughter. Also, it will be difficult to get along with such a mother-in-law. If I had a son, I would not let my son marry her daughter.

As you can see here, parents not only choose potential mates for their children, but also for potential in-laws. If the parents seem to be of good character and well-dressed, then their children tend to be asked more questions. These popular parents have significantly more initiative than other parents.

Less popular parents have their own coping strategies. They are more likely to join

forces with other less popular parents to promote their children and to whisper bad things about popular parents to other parents. Sometimes, they also liaise with agencies. There are usually two types of matchmaking agencies in Matchmaking Corner: those that are free and those that charge a fee. The free agencies are usually people who want to help other parents after their child's matchmaking success. Most of the time, their children may not find their partners from the dating corner, but they still come to share their experiences and try to help other parents find potential partners. The advantage they have over commercial agents is that they are free. They are also usually local and have helped other families communicate information; they are aware of all the general families in the community. These agents are also the centre of attention in the group. They have a great deal of information and can help parents make connections. Commercial intermediaries also have a place here. While they don't know as much about the families in the community as the parents who are matched for free, they have more resources based on the company's data. The advantage of relying on commercial intermediaries is that it puts parents in touch with resources outside of the community, saving them the hassle of standing in the park all the time. However, some parents do not trust the intermediaries very much: 'Having chosen this path, I still want to be able to choose the right partner for my child on my own' (Hu, 55).

By observing the dating corner, it is clear that there are far more parents of girls than boys. According to the Beijing Park Business Organisation (2018), there are about 6,000 registered members, of which about 5,000 are women. The CVs of these women show that the average age of women is about four years younger than that of men. It can be seen that parents of girls feel anxious earlier than parents of boys. In this case, parents of boys generally have more initiative than parents of girls. On the one hand, boys' parents are more likely to brag about their sons and walk around the park looking for a suitable mate. On the other hand, girls' parentstend to keep a low profile, putting their daughter's CV out for enquiry. Some girls' parents even chose parks far from their homes to minimise the likelihood of meeting someone they knew.

They are proud of their daughters' work achievements and think they are good at what they do, but they still don't want their acquaintances to see them at the dating corner. Although they dared to come out to find a mate for their daughters, they did not want to make a fuss so as not to lose "face". Even in the context of garden matchmaking, the shadow of China's traditional gender order can still be seen. There are also some vulnerable groups in the matchmaking corner. Generally speaking, non-local *hukou* expatriates and parents who do not have a house in Beijing are considered disadvantaged. However, no matter what kind of parents or intermediaries they are, they are considered outsiders to the local matchmaking corner, so when scammers show up, parents sometimes contact the park or police station to evict them.

At the same time, a game between parents and children is involved in matchmaking. If the children are financially independent and can pay off the flat loan, they have more say in the family. But if the children remain dependent on their parents, they are not yet fully financially independent. Therefore, they will need to compromise in working with their parents to go on a blind date. Finally, those with more resources stand at the top of the pyramid.

Blind dating corners are inefficient but still popular.

Although blind dating corners are common in all large and medium-sized cities, they are inefficient. People have heard of parents who have succeeded in finding partners for their children, but few have actually seen such cases. The chances of success are very low, and Sun (2012) found the same in a dating corner in Shanghai. However, if blind dating corners seem so inefficient, why is this activity still popular?

Sun (2012) attributes this phenomenon to intergenerational and market-based factors, arguing that the essence of 'white hair sending black hair to black hair' is that the so-called 'Mao's children' are attempting to help 'Deng Xiaoping's generation' solve

their marital problems. Both generations have 'their own fears and loves'. Parents of the post-50s *Zhiqing* generation have had difficult personal experiences that have created collective anxiety about their children's marriages, and 'attempts to solve emotional problems in a market way' are doomed to failure. His findings are consistent with mine.

As a public space, a dating corner is where anxious parents gather to exchange information about their children (Sun, 2012). It is a place that functions with a clear goal. Often, appropriate publicity and widening the search is a good way to achieve this goal if parents want to do so effectively. However, as mentioned above, the dating corner is a relatively complex circle: it is a public space, yet it is relatively closed and highly exclusive. People in the circle secretly guard against strangers who do not belong to the dating corner and rarely do any publicity. In other words, they welcome participants with the same purpose and are exclusive to onlookers who come to observe. Fixed matchmaking corners are usually in parks once a week, but the staff is not fixed. For example, Beijing's Tiantan Park has matchmaking sessions every Thursday morning, and other parks have similar sessions of varying sizes at other times. Some parents would choose a suitable park for their children to participate in the matchmaking corner depending on the time of the day and the distance from their accommodation. Participants are mobile, but my interviewees explained that they would see some familiar faces after a few visits. Some parents chose to put up posters in public places for their children to find their ideal mates, but they still conducted their activities in a relatively low-key manner. When I conducted a survey in Beijing's Tiantan Park, it took me a long time to identify the location of the dating corner. Information about the hours and activities is public, but the park is large and many tourists and elderly people come to the park for exercise. There were no clear signs in the park pointing to the location. When I approached the reception desk for help, they could only tell me the approximate location. When I eventually arrived at the location, I only found a group of elderly people doing morning exercises there. When I asked some of them for directions, they replied that they had been doing morning exercises

here every day for several years, but no one knew where the Matchmaking Corner was. In the course of asking for directions, a few old people made fun of me and asked me if I had come for matchmaking. Interestingly, I eventually found the matchmaking place less than 200 metres away from the group exercisers. Despite the fact that there are daily group exercise sessions and the weekly matchmaking corner has been organised for several years, some of the elderly are unaware of its existence. The actual matchmaking corner is not a particularly large space, nor is it limited to one corner. This low presence speaks volumes about the low profile of the matchmaking corner. It can be seen that although the Blind Date Corner is in a public park where there is no access restriction, the circle is, in fact, relatively closed. This also explains why the Blind Date Corner is inefficient in selecting potentially suitable blind dates in Beijing.

Mate selection is an important cultural phenomenon, the criteria and process of which are an important part of this study. In the context of the Park Matchmaking Corner, this model is not so much a reproduction of the traditional arranged marriage model of ancient China as it is a visual way for parents to express their attitudes. This mode of choosing a spouse is a complex series of rational and emotional decision-making processes, as well as a joint decision-making process between parents and children. This process can be conceptualised as a 'screening phase' and an 'engagement phase'. The 'screening phase' refers to the process whereby parents select a set of ideal candidates for their daughters through their profiles before engaging in formal contact with their daughters. Parents and daughters may have different choices of ideal partners, so this double-screening model minimises the level of conflict between them and makes it easier to reach a consensus. However, this process has some disadvantages, such as narrowing down the range of mate choices, which explains the inefficiency of matchmaking corners.

At the "screening stage", the parents' screening criteria are worth exploring. As mentioned above, parents have some general criteria for their daughter's ideal mate.

How do parents choose for their daughters, and do these criteria change during the process? According to ecosystem theory, individuals are considered to be embedded in a series of interacting environments, and their growth and development are influenced by the system's structure, such as the direct and indirect environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). This theory provides a sound theoretical logic for forming parents' normative preferences for their daughters' ideal mates. Specifically, parents' upbringing directly influences their judgement of their daughters' ideal mate preferences, but this criterion is not static and involves a dynamic process. Under the influence of environmental factors, parents constantly change the criteria in their representations of their daughters. The change in parents' views is mainly influenced by two aspects: the parents of unmarried women who grew up in a special era have a distinctive imprint of the times, and they have their own set of values, but their standards gradually change in their long-term dealings with their daughters after synthesising some of their ideas. In the process, the daughters' views on choosing a spouse are also close to their parents' standards, which thus reduces the possibility of intergenerational conflict in this regard. In addition to the love of parents for their children, the process of choosing a spouse also reflects a transfer of power.

> Now that the child has grown up and she has her own ideas, we can't care so much. I used to think my daughter must not marry outside the province or find a family for commercial business. It's too unstable. But she doesn't see that as a problem, and her biggest request is not to accept anyone younger than her. We don't know why she's doing this, but after all, it's her marriage, and as long as she's happy, it's fine. If she does marry out of state, we can move there too. (Ye, 58)

Although the potential partners are chosen by the parents for their children, it is up to the daughters to decide whether to meet or not and whether to continue the relationship after the meeting. Parents cannot force two people to get married, even if the parents' criteria for a potential partner change based on their daughters' attitudes and criteria, such as education, real estate, etc. The criteria mentioned above still exist,

and it is a rational decision of the parents. Sociological theories generally agree that women in most cultures tend to be upwardly mobile through marriage and that parents are only demanding these hard and fast criteria to ensure that their daughter's quality of life does not decline after marriage; it does not necessarily require that their daughter crosses classes through marriage (Schwarz and Scott, 2010). At the same time, they can be irrational; that is, their decisions are also influenced by the external environment, in this case, mainly other parents on the campus. Parents gradually adjust their daughters' profiles and mate selection criteria based on the profiles of other parents. According to Ye (58), parents sometimes secretly upgrade their own daughters' profiles when they see additional glimmers in other people's profiles. They also dismiss potential ideal mates outright because of other parents' performance. Ye has commented on another parent:

> Her son is really well-endowed, but she's so hard to get along with. As a mother-in-law, she must be even more difficult to get along with. If a mother-in-law in a family is difficult to get along with, then no woman can marry into that family even if she is good. In this case, the daughter-in-law will have a hard time after marriage. This is a pity because she seems to have a good son. But no one wants to marry their daughter into such a family. It is like getting your own daughter into trouble. (Ye, 58)

The Blind Date Corner means more than just a place for parents to choose potential mates for their children. Compared to the ostensible protagonists (their single children), the dating corner means more to the parents. The generation of parents who grew up in China's planned economy was heavily influenced by the traditional marriage culture and followed the life course theory. Once they realise that their offspring are in danger of deviating from the mainstream, they naturally develop a sense of anxiety. These parents put pressure on their daughters, consciously or unconsciously, by going to matchmaking corners to convey their attitude towards their children's singleness. The parents I interviewed at the Matchmaking Corner were not the parents of the participants I recruited, but their attitudes and emotions were shared

to some extent.

For parents, communicating with parents in similar situations can ease their anxiety about their daughters' singleness; it acts as a mutual support group, letting parents know they are not alone. Some parents even learn more about their daughter's living situation after connecting with other parents, thus easing intergenerational conflict. It's also a social place in a sense. Since dating corners are inefficient, especially for female parents who are more inclined to open up their daughters' profiles and wait for others to enquire, parents have a lot of time to socialise with the people around them. Although most parents do not intend to socialise intentionally, matchmaking corners have unknowingly become a social platform. It was winter when I collected data in Beijing, and the temperature was very cold and windy. Many parents stood in groups chatting not far from their children's profiles. When I tried to approach one respondent to talk about the cold weather, she replied that the programme only took half a day and that it was better to come out and talk to people than to stay at home alone. She also thought that she might just be lucky to meet a boy who was right for her daughter (Meng, 56). Even a mother whose daughter was already married (her husband was not from the matchmaking corner) would occasionally join them to chat with her 'old comrades'. By joining the Matchmaking Corner, parents also felt that they gained some control over their daughters; some parents knew the chances were slim, but they believed that doing so would help their children find suitable partners. At least it's a chance worth trying. With their children working so much and them being retired, it made sense for them to help their children who didn't have enough time to choose their ideal mate. Upon retirement, some parents suddenly feel that they have lost the pursuit and meaning of their lives and are left in a state of confusion. Parents' retirement may lead to a reorganisation of the power structure within the nuclear family (Yan, 2003). At this time, parents may also attempt to gain a sense of control when engaging in matchmaking.

Parents of unmarried urban women generally grow up with a strong sense of

confidence in their work and a busy schedule that makes them feel that their lives have value and meaning. When they suddenly have a lot of free time after retirement, some of them panic because they have no purpose in life. They understand that their daughters have little hope of success at the dating corner, but they still choose to go there. Apart from showing their daughters how they feel about being single (although they don't want to pressure their daughters, they still want their daughters to find a life partner instead of enjoying their singleness), they also want to prove that they are still useful and valuable people.

In Chinese research on family and marriage, it has long been customary to treat the choice of marriage as an unexamined prerequisite and not to marry as a social problem (Yan, 2009; Xu, 2000). As a result, studies on marriage rarely ask respondents: Why do you want to get married? Have you ever thought about not getting married? If we look around the world, calls for a crisis in the family and debates about the future of the family began at the end of the last century or even earlier, as the function of the family has changed, traditional family values have declined, and there has been an emphasis on individual emotions and autonomy. Although the issue is still debated in academic circles, the increasing diversification of family and marriage forms worldwide is a clear trend. Changes in family and marriage patterns in Chinese society over the past 30 years show the same trend (Xu and Wang, 2003; Yan, 2003; Xu, 2000). In addition to the nuclear family, diversified forms such as single-parent families, Dink families, empty-nest families, divorce, cohabitation and singleness have emerged and developed. For the younger generation, the decision to marry or not to marry has become a personal process that requires questioning, thinking, weighing and choosing in an era of risk and pressure but which celebrates individuality and diversity.

The intergenerational conflict between parents and children around the issue of marriage is real. It is clear that parents choose to go to the dating corner in the park to

market their daughters because their daughters' choice not to marry is not valid for them. Parents of unmarried women are unwilling to accept the possibility of their daughters being single for a long period of time, so the fact that parents choose to go to dating corners in parks that have a very low success rate is a sign of disapproval of their daughters' single status. According to Goffman's (1974) theoretical framework, in this intergenerational interaction, the child and the parent act as spectators for each other, changing their behaviour at any time in response to the other's behaviour in order to convey the information they need the other to know. With both parents and daughters aware of the extremely low success rate of the dating corner, the parents' anxiety and disapproval of their daughter's singleness influenced their decision to go to the dating corner in order to divert their own attention from this anxiety and to demonstrate their disapproval and intransigence of their daughter's singleness. At the same time, the daughter's anxiety was not caused by her singleness but by her parents' anxiety about her singleness. Supporting their parents to go to the dating corner in the park was rooted in their desire to alleviate their parents' anxiety and to show them that they had not given up on marriage.

In my interviews with mothers, I have explicitly asked my interviewees if their daughters know that they are dating for them. What was their daughters' attitude towards this? It seemed to me that it would be challenging for the daughters to display their basic information and photos in public. But the mothers' responses were interesting and fell into two general categories. One was that the daughters were very supportive (Ma, Lee, Zhao, Hu); the other was that the daughters didn't stop it and didn't have a problem with it (Liu, Wang, He, Sun, Guo, Zhang) as long as their mothers were happy. Although there were no daughters who created resistance to their mothers' behavior, the variability of such responses is worth discussing. It seems to me that the daughters in the second category simply want to show obedience to their mothers and do not have a strong desire to choose a spouse. The daughters in the first category who supported their mothers were also not necessarily motivated by the intention of choosing a spouse, but were more likely to be cooperating with their mothers.

> After I retired, my daughter encouraged me to look around for something to do," said Ms. Ma, a 55-year-old resident of Beijing, "My daughter is busy with her work, so I came to the dating corner when I had time to try my luck,

thinking I could help my daughter. My daughter is also quite active, every time I go back she also took the initiative to ask me if I have found it. In fact, she did not take much action to look for someone on her own, but she showed quite a lot of support for me. Although in the end there is no result, but there is nothing wrong with it.

In fact, the mother herself understands that the probability of solving the problem through the dating corner is extremely low, and also knows that her daughter is actually just cooperating with her, but this is enough for her. The dating corner is not the key to solving marital problems, but has become a medium for intergenerational emotional interaction.

In my interviews with urban unmarried women, I asked them about their attitudes towards such matchmaking corners in parks. Most of the interviewees expressed understanding and support for their parents' behaviour, while some said they did not care. For example, 31-year-old Ms Ching, an accountant, thought that the probability of success at the dating corner in the park was very low and that it was unlikely for her parents to find a suitable partner for her there. However, she thinks they should be allowed to go if they want to because if she stays single and does not allow her parents to make an effort, then she will look like she has given up on marriage, which is unacceptable to her parents.

A clear preference for intra-class mate selection based on economic conditions, i.e., 'the right family', can be detected by observing parents' mate selection criteria for their children in the dating corner. While reflecting the parents' solidified concept of mate selection, it demonstrates the diversity of their methods of mate selection. Interestingly, I also came up with the same mate choice criteria in the previous chapter when analysing the mate choice criteria of unmarried women. That is to say, despite the fact that social changes and other factors have led to large intergenerational differences within the family, parents and children have different understandings of what it means to choose a spouse, and there are contradictions and gaps between intergenerational expectations and the reality of choosing a spouse, which has led to intergenerational tension within the family due to the problem of

unmarried women's singleness in the urban areas. However, the criteria for choosing an ideal mate are the same between the two generations. This shows that the intergenerational conflict in unmarried urban women's families is not a dichotomy. Parents' feelings and thoughts are influenced by the socio-cultural environment in which they grew up and are held hostage by the gender division of labour and norms. Diverse emotional expression should not be limited by an 'dichotomy' position (Zhang, 2007; Zhang, 2008). The essence of park dating is that parents of unmarried children represent their children to seek an ideal future partner in the mundane market mechanism, trying to solve emotional problems in a market way. Although the success rate is extremely low, I think this is no less refreshing. More than a matchmaking corner, it fulfils the need for their own parents to socialise. And the conflict between parents and their unmarried daughters is eased during this interaction. Although this strategy is not useful in solving the single status of urban unmarried women, it can alleviate the pressure that unmarried women receive from their parents due to their single status in their daily lives by diverting their parents' excessive attention from their daughters. The process of parents going to the dating corner for their unmarried daughters reflects the intergenerational dislocation of the subject of choosing a mate and the misplaced function of choosing a mate. Although the unmarried daughters are still the ones who make the final decision, this reflects the unmarried women's compromise in the family. They choose to cooperate with and accept their parents' actions and reconcile their relationship with their parents by temporarily giving up part of their subjective rights.

Conclusion

The research in this chapter shows that in modern China, the marriage still plays an important role in the social system. However, with the rapid transformation of society, the lag in the development of social concepts has resulted in a cognitive developmental mismatch between parents and daughters in their views of the family and marriage, resulting in intergenerational role-expectation deviations and

role-playing disorders and role-identity shifts. As a result, there is an intergenerational conflict between parents and their unmarried daughters due to their daughters' single status. This conflict is one of the main sources of daily stress for unmarried urban women. In the intergenerational interaction, parents do not compromise with their children but try to solve the problem actively, and try to help their daughters solve the problem by going to the dating corner in the park not only choosing a spouse for their children but to show their own attitudes and stances on their daughters' singleness status; the younger generation of women will also avoid the conflict by temporarily yielding the subjectivity of choosing a spouse and will choose to co-operate with their parents in order to reduce the conflict and pressure from their parents.

The second half of this chapter describes the functioning of the dating corner and the criteria and process of mate selection that parents choose for their children. It is found that the park blind date corner serves as a venue for parents to choose a mate in lieu of their duty to choose a mate and that the place means much more to the parents than to their unmarried daughters. Compared to the popularity of the venue, the success rate of blind date corner is close to none. However, parents of unmarried women used the platform venue to socialise with their peers as well as to express their personal stress. Although the platform did not fulfil the parents' function of choosing a mate for their unmarried daughters, it was effective in reducing parents' anxiety and subsequently easing intergenerational conflicts, which in turn alleviated the stress of unmarried urban women from within the family. The innovation of this chapter is that it combines the social phenomenon of 'blind dating corner' and 'urban unmarried women' to analyse the causes of intergenerational conflicts and provide a solution path, which provides a new perspective on marriage and family research and lays the foundation for reconstructing harmonious family relationships for urban women. In the next chapter, I will discuss the experiences and negotiations of unmarried women in the workplace in relation to work-related pressures (including getting married and staying single).

Chapter 6 –'Ambition and Loss': The Professional Lives of 'Unmarried Women' in the Urban China

After the previous chapter explored the intergenerational conflicts and paths to resolution among unmarried urban women due to their single status, the gender experiences of unmarried urban women in the workplace will be discussed in this chapter. In a social environment where unmarried women are stigmatised, it is worth exploring whether their single status impacts their work life and how they cope with. As discussed in the previous literature review chapter, Chinese women's political status and constructed social images have changed dramatically over the past 70 years or so due to various factors but are generally still trapped in an environment of changing family obligations and gender imbalance. Modern women have experienced three main patterns of identity play: the traditional female identity and Socially shaped identities, being a good wife and mother; the new female identity, being as successful as men in those respected fields; and the dual identity play, taking on the dual responsibilities of family and career. The shift from the state getting 'women out of the house' through the official narrative to women themselves questioning the voice of 'getting women home' reflects the change in women's gender identities from the narrative of the other to the narrative of the self and is manifested in women's

self-definition of their own identities as 'social labourers'. They value their social identity shaped by social relations more than their gender identity.

Women's social roles have been fundamentally reversed since then. Although there is still a stubborn traditional gender order to make things more difficult for women in the workplace, women's social roles will no longer return to the family. Instead, the role expectations of women in the workplace at the present stage are predicated on a dual role, i.e. to take on the dual responsibilities of family and career. Gender inequality in the workplace has led to specific oppression of women in the workplace as 'women' rather than simply as 'workers'. By combining a literature review of the changes in women's status and their relationship to work at different times in Chinese history as a framework, it is possible to understand better the position of modern women in the workplace in society.

At the present stage, the oppression suffered by unmarried urban women in the workplace stems mainly from the conflict between their own gender and social roles. The single status gives women more freedom to choose their careers, but most Chinese women's expectations for the future include becoming mothers and wives. Therefore, even if women are single, this expectation of motherhood still affects their future careers, and the effects of this internalised gender are far-reaching, impacting not only single women's career choices but also their gender experiences in their working lives. Simultaneously, the public expects the same of single women, which, in a way, creates a dilemma for their careers. Unlike the context of private family relationships discussed in the previous chapter, the world of work supposedly places more emphasis on efficiency and professionalism. However, even in the professional work field, the single status of female employees still affects the daily working life of single women. In China, professional women tend to consider more factors than men when choosing a career. After officially entering the workplace, single women also encounter more obstacles because of their single status. Fortunately, single status is not entirely a negative factor for women in the workplace. Traditional culture

presupposes that women are the victims of gender relations and can only play the role and persona of the weak and the victimised, but in fact, women can also join in the construction of relationships as subjects, and they have the power to define their own relationships with others. For new women in the workplace, they are no longer the weaker sex but rather gain confidence in gender relations, expand their resources and develop their careers. Especially when women in the workplace see their singleness as a resource to be utilised, they would benefit from singleness to compete in the workplace. Although women generally have to work harder than men to succeed in the Chinese employment environment, this direction can change the gender order.

This chapter explains how gender and singleness affect women's workplace gender experience by exposing the workplace's patriarchal nature under the perspective of material feminism; the construction of women's identities in the workplace and the importance of work for unmarried women are shown in this section; the following section reveals the dilemmas of unmarried women in the process of choosing a career due to the internalisation of gender roles; unmarried urban women' different gender experiences in the workplace, including role presentation and benevolent gender bias in the workplace, are discussed. Finally, I analyse a new direction of research on how urban working women can use their single status as a resource in the workplace to exert their own subjectivity and use their singlehood to benefit from the patriarchal nature of the workplace, which in turn contributes to the reshaping of gender relations in the workplace.

The patriarchal nature of the workplace

The industrialisation of modern societies has created a huge demand for labour. While capitalism and patriarchy are different forms of domination, they reinforce each other in many ways. For example, the organisation of production is divided into public and private spheres and these spheres are gendered in ways that benefit both

(Liu, 2016). Capitalism profits from this because women's labour in the private sphere allows for the reproduction of workers but at no additional cost to the capitalist, and women's responsibilities in the private sphere marginalise women in the public sphere and are a source of cheap labour, with a consequent drop in wages. At the same time patriarchy profits from capitalism's exploitation of female employees because it maintains women's dependence on men in the private sphere. Women have the right to enter the public sphere, but access to good jobs is often prioritised for men. It is no coincidence that women are harassed in the workplace and picked on in the public sphere, reflecting a paradigm of power relations in which the patriarchal system assists capitalists in maintaining boundaries.

Meanwhile, women – whether they need to combine motherhood with the workplace because of society's need for a successor labour force (which requires women to take on reproductive responsibilities) or give up motherhood to pursue their careers – have a high probability of being at a disadvantage in the workplace and need to consciously or unconsciously hide their 'femininity' to have a fairer chance at competing for the job. In most occupations, men are more likely to have an advantage. The advantages of single women in the workplace mentioned in this chapter refer to their advantages over married working women with or without children, not to any advantages over men. What can be seen is that men generally have an advantage over women in the workplace in China's employment environment, except for specific occupations that require femininity, such as nursing and early childhood teaching. In a sense, the advantage that single women have is more in the fact that they are not mothers and can compete with male workers in the workplace as a labour force.

The public tends to view the plight of women in the workplace as the result of choices made by women themselves due to biological factors (motherhood). However, in a gender-unfriendly workplace environment, this 'consensus' is a misunderstanding caused by a game of capital, social culture and individual subjective choices. Compared to the previous generation of women, contemporary Chinese women have

much more control over their lives. Concurrently, however, they face a more complex environment. Modern Chinese society requires women to work and be independent. Yet, while many professional women work hard to pursue the life their mothers and grandmothers dreamed of, they suddenly realise they are still expected to play the traditional roles of submissive wives and nurturing mothers.

Most of the interviewees in my study have experienced these obstacles in the workplace or predicted that some of them are imminent. In a sense, most of the career dilemmas of single women workers stem from the contradiction between their gender identity (or their future gender identity) and their status as labour force. Modernisation has given Chinese women more opportunities to develop and expand their careers. Still, at the same time, the traditional role of Chinese women in caring for the family and taking care of household chores has not declined. This is reflected in the perceptions of most interviewees, who have internalised this traditional female role to varying degrees. Compared to fathers in Western countries, Chinese fathers are less involved in childrearing and housework (Ji, 2015). Most of them are willing to take on more domestic tasks. Although they are single now, marriage is almost a natural choice in their future life plan. Marriage and motherhood are almost inevitable in their life journey, so they worry about marriage and motherhood even when single. They also have preconceptions about the role they will play in marriage. With a clear vision of the future, they make 'rational' choices based on their expectations. After formally entering the job market, they would also keep adjusting their employment plans in the light of work and social realities. Unfortunately, my research shows that single urban women are more or less affected by being single in the workplace. However, they also react in various ways when their single status impacts their work life. Simultaneously, obstacles are not the only way singleness affects working women. To some extent, being single has allowed them to be more focused on their work and have more flexible working hours, all of which have positively impacted their work. Balancing the opportunities and challenges of being single is difficult for these women in the workplace.

Why single status affects the working life of Chinese professional women

The traditional gender division of labour and social roles are still firmly embedded in women's social relations in the workplace and constantly impact them. Modern society places increasing demands on women. Women are expected to be independent economically and at work but, at the same time, to take on traditional gender roles of caring for others (Gerson, 2002). The incompatibility between traditional and modern expectations often creates a dilemma for working women. Young women, in particular, face additional conflicts between their high professional ambitions and family responsibilities (Gerson, 2004). In addition, women's traditional roles as mothers and wives are still valued more than their professional achievements; women's employment is questioned if they earn more than their husbands, but caring for children and doing other household chores are still considered to be their basic nature (Coltrane, 1989).

While discussing gender role perceptions and the work–family interface, many of my participants moved back and forth between traditional and modern ideologies. This cognitive dissonance is due to society's inconsistent messages to women. Connidis and McMullin (2002) introduced the concept of 'structural contradictions' to describe situations where individual choices are limited by structural arrangements. According to Connidis and McMullin (2022), these 'structural contradictions' can lead to considerable personal stress and ambivalence. As my participants pointed out, Chinese society today 'demands too much' from women. Even though women are entering the labour market at a very fast pace, society has not lowered its traditional expectations of women. Women are now expected not only to run the household but also to support the family. As a result, different social norms and value systems send conflicting messages, placing women in an ambivalent and uncomfortable position caused by the incongruity between inclusion and exclusion.

Gender roles are socially constructed. In traditional societies, women's identities are often synonymous with being wives, mothers and carers. None of my 28 participants were married, but they all thought they would one day be wives and mothers. It is also believed that women who work experience negative work–family spillover effects (Pleck, 1977) that limit their professional roles. As more women entered the labour market, family structures changed, but traditional gender ideologies did not. The public–private sphere dichotomy is intertwined with the male–female opposition. Although more female full-time workers are entering the labour force today, rigid gender role segregation still exists. As Ridgeway (2009) argues, gender is a contextual identity, and gendered organisational structures are difficult to change.

To better understand the plight of women in the workplace, it is necessary to understand why women's marital status affects their professional lives. According to Goffman (1990), people can consciously manipulate their social behaviour to achieve desired outcomes through appropriate role-playing. Often, people adjust their behaviour to meet public expectations of their roles. The content of role expectations is not fixed, and people's perceptions of certain roles alter as times change. Family ideology is closely related to the definition of the ideal woman.

Placing the changes in the development of child-rearing in China in the context of historical development helps to understand the changes in the ideal woman's definition. Parenting may appear as a private family matter, but it is, in fact, closely related to the productivity level and social policies of society as a whole. Pre-modern families valued the number of children because families had to cope with high mortality rates. Simultaneously, the nuclear family did not entirely bear the responsibility of raising children. Fei (2012) explains the traditional Chinese concept of parenting as a shared parenting model centred on the patriarchal family with the participation of the regional community. It is a 'free-range', 'rough' and low-cost parenting model. In this model, children often become the main source of income for

the family at an early age, and the family can easily benefit from childrearing. During the Mao's era, the important value of women was in nurturing the next generation. At that time, Chinese families largely adopted the child-rearing model described by Fei Xiaotong. Concurrently, to implement the employment policy of equality between men and women, the government was committed to promoting the development of child-care institutions so that women could get out of the home and into society, thus improving their social status and increasing the internal benefits of the family. The ideal woman of this period worked for the same pay as men (this refers to equal pay for equal work, i.e. entering the public sphere to earn money like men, which can be achieved under ideal conditions, although this does not exist in real life) and one who was a co-breadwinner, not just a good wife and mother. At that time, women's more important social role was to build the country with men and contribute to socialism (Croll, 1983). As a result, it was common to leave children in the care of others or childcare organisations (Zheng, 2019).

Subsequently, the one-child policy was introduced in 1979, and since then, couples could only have one child. From then on, once a child is born, theywould become the centre of the family. At that time, Chinese urban families began to take on the characteristics of modern families, such as focusing on the quality of their children and investing time and money in their development. During that period, the cost of raising children was balanced with the family's benefits, and the internal and external grants of childbearing were taken care of by the inertia of state policies (the government continued its previous population welfare policies) (Zheng, 2019). In addition, at that time, China's *hukou* system was relatively strict (Ministry of Civil Affairs of China, 2016), population mobility was fairly weak and interpersonal networks were quite stable, belonging to the society of acquaintances. Parents could raise their children with their cousins. Back then, the image of the ideal woman began to change again; the ideal woman accompanies her children and cares about their education.

With China's reform and opening up, the economy entered a period of rapid development, and the social structure was transformed. As a result of the *danwei* system reform, the deregulation of the *hukou* system and housing reform, Chinese cities rapidly shifted from a social model of acquaintances to one of strangers (Ministry of Civil Affairs of China, 2016). Concurrently, due to the insecurity of the local environment (caused by frequent population movements), children required full-time adult supervision (Tong, 2000). At this stage, intensive parenting becomes the dominant parenting style, and almost every parent is committed to investing much time and money in raising an only child to make it 'successful'. However, childcare is always considered the mother's responsibility. As a result, childcare costs for Chinese families have increased significantly, and in urban families, the costs outweigh the benefits (Zheng, 2019). Having fewer children does not mean less time and money for childcare. There is a contradiction between parents' need for time to earn money to cope with rising childcare costs and their need to spend time with them for deep companionship. In addition, the fast pace of urban life does not leave enough time for women to be 'good mothers'. Simultaneously, women in modern society are more than just mothers. Although Chinese society needs women to train the country's future labour force, the external benefits of childbearing have been repeatedly stressed. However, at present, the cost of raising children far exceeds its benefits. In unison, the internal benefits of women choosing motherhood as the subject of childbearing are quite low, and they also have to accept the stagnation of their careers brought about by childbearing. With the development of society and the influence of individualism, urban women have begun to emphasise their self-worth and pursue career achievements and personal hobbies. This individualism is still incomplete; otherwise, these single women would not be under much pressure and emotional distress. Due to multiple factors, the image of the perfect urban woman in the new era is often that of a 'superwoman' with a successful family and career. This arduous goal puts enormous pressure on modern urban women.

The above cultural context is the changing image of the perfect woman in the city,

which is partly a result of the public's expectation of the perfect working woman's role (now known as the superwoman). Women often suffer and make more sacrifices to fulfil this role expectation. My participants had a clear understanding of this situation and responded rationally. The rationality referred to here is not derived from the rational choice theory, which emphasises goal seeking and purposefulness. Routine, purpose and judgement constitute important dimensions of agency but do not reflect its full complexity (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Furthermore, human agency is a time-embedded process of social participation based on the past but also orientated towards the future and the present. The agency dimension of social action must be captured in its full complexity (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). The concept of agency helps explain single women's different career choices. My interviewees might have had better choices if they had simply wanted to pursue their interests, and the factors that influenced their decisions were complex and varied. I use the word 'rational' to describe their responses because my interviewees often used it to differentiate themselves from other women when reviewing past and present actions and predicting the future. Although their decision making was not necessarily based entirely on rationality, it was a continuous process of rationalising their behaviour.

The impact of marriage and childbearing on working women is obvious (and usually negative). My interviewees were relatively well educated, had some work experience and possessed a clear understanding of future marriage and childbearing's impact on their career plans. Based on the Chinese context, it is believed that marriage and motherhood are women's vocation (Fei, 1976). Even in modern society, all women still default to having children in the mainstream Chinese view. Although reproducing offspring requires the participation of both men and women, childbirth, breastfeeding and other nurturing behaviours should be undertaken by women due to biological reasons. This means that women need extra maternity leave, and it also indicates that productivity may suffer during the period when young children are breastfeeding. With this combination of multiple factors, women with children will be marginalised in competitive industries and private companies (Liu, 2017). Although my

interviewees were single and did not immediately face the risk of marginalisation due to childbearing, they also had concerns about their future after seeing other professional women's situations after giving birth.

Williams (2004) argues that in Western culture, the 'wall of motherhood' has become a major barrier to their work. She describes a series of stereotypes contained in the 'wall of motherhood'; when a woman without children is out of the office, it is assumed that she is out of the office for work, but if a mother is out of the office, it is often presumed that she is trying to solve the problem of caring for her children. The manager and his colleagues may assume that pregnant women and new mothers are under the influence of the feminine haze, supposing they would be compassionate, emotional, gentle and non-aggressive. However, these traits often have nothing to do with their professional temperament and do not even help them in their work. If these women were to tear off the labels of these temperaments – if they remained strong, calm, decisive and fully committed to their work – colleagues might criticise them for being poor mothers. Although Williams describes the situation in the USA, the 'wall of motherhood' is equally applicable to the workplace environment in China. According to Cullen and Pretes (2000), liminality is the relationship between the centre and the margins constructed among different groups or individuals with high flexibility. Marginality is relative; any individual or group can only produce centres and margins through comparison and connection. Marginalisation is thus an expression of a network of relationships that express degrees of difference in wealth, group, prestige and psychological status. However, such marginalisation can lead to a stereotype effect whereby people develop unrealistic expectations or perceptions of members with particular identities (Ellemers and Barreto, 2006). When people focus on a single attribute of a particular group, other attributes of said group are likely to be overlooked, thus affecting its social-role positioning. For example, in the workplace, once a woman gives birth and returns to work, her attributes of motherhood are magnified. Her colleagues and supervisors will automatically assume that she will devote more energy to her family than to her career, thus marginalising

postnatal women in terms of career opportunities, such as promotion. Periods of absence are likely to result in women losing the career resources they already have or returning to the workplace with fewer resources; as a result of being distracted by their families, working mothers are also at a disadvantage when competing with men of their age and are less likely to be promoted. In addition, due to the constraints of traditional Chinese family ethics, most women still believe that they need to take responsibility for household chores and childcare due to long-term socialisation and internalisation. Some women have taken the initiative to psychologically marginalise themselves from the workplace. This is not to say that they are not conscientious in their work; they just may lack a sense of commitment to their careers compared to men. Career development must take much time and energy. However, human time and energy are limited. When family becomes the first choice, women's career development is bound to be sacrificed to some extent.

> I knew that after I got married, I would spend more time with my family. That's how everyone lives. When two people start a new family, one of them has to make more sacrifices. I am prepared for this, and I can accept it. There are different divisions of labour in the family. However, I also have my own career to pursue. I still want to do more of what I want to do when I am young and free and work on my career so that I don't regret it in the future. To be honest, I don't want to get married so early. My parents understand my situation, but sometimes, they can't help but push me a bit. Let's see how far I can go. (Mango, 29 years old)

In this context, Mango believes that marriage requires sacrifices and compromises to maintain a quality family life. She consciously internalises gender roles. To maintain a functioning family, both spouses cannot concentrate on their work concurrently, and she naturally sees herself as the one making sacrifices. This resultsfrom her socialisation and her expectations of her role in family life. She makes it her duty to make sacrifices and compromises for her family, and although she may regret sacrificing her career, she does not believe that she should not have to make such sacrifices. This is a terrible phenomenon. The public takes it for granted that women

make sacrifices for their families, and women themselves unconsciously internalise such sacrifices as expectations of their roles.

The public has different expectations of men and women in the workplace. Zhang Quanling, a well-known Chinese entrepreneur, had this to say about successful Chinese women entrepreneurs in an interview in 2019:

> I get asked the same question in almost every interview:'How do I balance career and family?' And it's a struggle for me because very few successful male entrepreneurs are asked the same question. Why do men only need to be successful in their careers,while women who don't have a family of their own (single) or don't take on the responsibilities of motherhood and wifehood are questioned and blamed? This is an added pressure on working women. I personally hate this issue. It may seem harmless, but it is essentially an invisible and heavy mental and cultural pressure that forces women to think more about whether they should choose to work and whether they can maintain a good balance. This restriction limits women's ambitions in the workplace and adds to the extra guilt they feel towards their families. You ask me this question because you think I should be balanced; you want to know if I am. This is not an isolated phenomenon. I've been asked this question countless times.

The question itself is biased. Public opinion is seldom biased against men because their wives take part of the responsibility for them. By asking this question, the reporter has already positioned Zhang's social role as someone's wife rather than an independent career woman. Compared with men, the social positioning of professional women is always limited by family ideology. Even when entering the public sphere, women are more often referred to as family figures.

Meaningful workplace: Women's social identity construction

Work is an important part of modern urban life. The intergenerational entanglements

between unmarried urban women and their parents are mainly in the emotional life of mutual dependence, while the workplace determines the material life of professional women.

Occupation has a profound impact on single urban women. It not only provides single women with economic resources and makes single life possible but also realises the reconstruction of urban women's identity. In the process of urbanisation, more women have gained economic independence. Their primary identity no longer comes from their families (Yan, 2001). They are no longer just other people's daughters, wives or mothers, but by acquiring a position in the workplace, they succeed in placing themselves in the social relations of production and, thus, in taking their place in society.

Based on my study, the families of origin of unmarried urban women may come from different social classes – some from middle-class families and others from working-class families. What remains unchanged, however, is that women from working-class families are mostly well educated, have good job opportunities and are highly likely to make the class leap as a result. If they lose their jobs, they will lose their social status, as they do not have the patronage of their original families or husbands to help them stay in the same social class.

> My parents are both ordinary labourers working in an ordinary small city, and I stayed in Beijing after I had got into a good university. I have so many memories of this city, and I love the way of life here. But it is too hard to stay. Being too busy working, I have no time to find a boyfriend. I love this city, but I won't be able to stay here if I don't work in Beijing. Work in Beijing is becoming more and more stressful and competitive. I don't know how long I can hold on. If I can't hold on, I will have to go back home. (Zhi, 33 years old)

Women from middle-class families are more likely to be better educated and able to work to ensure that they do not move downwards and can even move further upwards. Work is, therefore, particularly important to these highly educated single women. Respondents' career choices and paths can reflect their social class mobility. Class

mobility is a dynamic change in social class structure, and the process of this dynamic change is the result of multiple identity reconstructions (Li, 2004).Since the 1980s, breaking the restrictions on identity reconstruction imposed by structural factors, such as the *hukou* system and class in the planned economy era, education has become the most effective way to equip people with the most comprehensive resources (Liu, 2001). Education facilitates the reconstruction of personal identity, thus providing people with opportunities for upward mobility. As an entry threshold for most occupations, better-educated women are more likely to find decent jobs in big cities, reconstruct their identities at work and achieve upward social mobility. Meanwhile, in a contemporary Chinese society, where social classes are becoming increasingly closed and stable, the dominant class maintains its own boundaries through various means, while the marginal class lacks mechanisms to express its interests and finds it difficult to obtain more resources (Li, 2012). Under such circumstances, identity reconstruction is hindered, and class solidification occurs. Therefore, identity reconstruction is the micro-embodiment of class mobility. For single women who are upwardly mobile through education, work means more. Therefore, when these well-educated women face work-related difficulties, they are more cautious.

For modern Chinese working women, marriage and childbearing are almost unavoidable problems, so they try their best to solve this trouble rationally by choosing a career. Women can pick their careers, but their selections are limited by many social factors and their own expectations of future gender roles. Although women try to fulfil their role expectations by choosing a career, this creates a career dilemma for them.

The dilemma of choosing a career for unmarried women under the influence of gender roles

When choosing a career, women who value their social role as future mothers, as well

as their career aspirations, are faced with difficult choices. Influenced by various values, people will have different preferences when deciding on a career. Focusing on one's marital status is one of the most typical Chinese phenomena, which stems from the traditional family-oriented Chinese culture. Chinese culture tends to prioritise family values and subordinate personal values. When the two are in conflict, the latter is usually subordinate to the former (Li, 2019). This is especially true for women. Women need to consider more factors when choosing a career, such as the nature or demands of the job.Research done by To (2015) shows that most 'unmarried women'in China still hold traditional views on marriage and believe that marriage is necessary. These women are discriminated against in the marriage market, and if they want to get married, theymust balance their career and family.

China has a special economic system, and private enterprises have only flourished in recent decades. State-owned enterprises (SOEs) and private enterprises are two very different work environments. In SOEs, promotion is based on length of service, and once a job offer is made, the position is usually permanent, whereas in private companies, promotion is based on work results, with greater emphasis on efficiency, and positions are contractual. As a result, positions in SOEs are usually more stable than in private firms; salaries in SOEs are usually not as high as those in private firms for the same position, but the benefits are better, and career progression in SOEs is usually slower. In my research, it can be observed that women are more likely than men to be influenced by their job nature and the environment when making career choices. Take one of my interviewees as an example; she works in a TV station (*danwei*):

I have been working at this TV station for four years, which is not too long and not too short. My family and friends think I'm crazy because I've recently been thinking about quitting my job and giving up my establishment. You should know that it is very difficult to get into this television station, and even if you do, there are very few staff members with the official establishment. Those who don't have

connections have to wait for years before they get their official establishment and benefits. My boyfriend has also worked at this TV station for four years. Honestly, he's more capable than me, but he's still waiting for an establishment. I've been working here since I graduated from college. Because of my family connections, I was officially hired as soon as I started school. The benefits here are really good. Although the salary is not as high as commercial TV stations, there are a lot of benefits, and the pace of work is slow. The maternity benefits are very high, especially for women, and working here allows a lot of time to take care of your family. I am a very ambitious person. In my first year working here, I felt I couldn't waste my time like this. I am still young and want to learn more. So, I applied for a part-time postgraduate programme and just graduated this year. But I feel more and more that I can't learn anything new working here. I only have to work three days a week now. I even know my work plan for the next 10 years. I mean, I'm still young, and this semi-retirement feeling is not the life I want to live. It's really frustrating when I realise that my former friends are getting ahead and I'm always standing still. Now there is a job opportunity in a private TV station that I would like to try. I know that working there will be exhausting, but my career will definitely get better. I'm really in a dilemma right now. My boyfriend has asked me to marry him, and if I say yes, we'll probably get married next year and then have a baby the following year. But once I get hired by that private TV station, I'll be busy for the next five years, and the work environment won't allow me to have kids. That means I would have to give up my current work environment as well as my current boyfriend. Plus, I know that once I quit my current job, those benefits will be gone forever. It really bothers me. Due to the fact that I'm close to 30 years old, I should get married and have children, but after I have children, I won't have the chance to develop my career. If I were a boy, I would not hesitate to fight for the opportunity, but now I am in a really difficult situation. (Xie, 29 years old)

It is clear from Ms Xie's story that she encountered a dilemma based on her

expectations of her future status at work as she tried to balance her career development and her expected future family role. This is not to say that men have never experienced this kind of career entanglement; in the Chinese social environment, women are usually more influenced by their family roles than men and are more likely to bring their family roles into their career planning. This is consistent with the internal logic of Xie's example above; i.e. they both expected that their career development would most likely be affected by their marriage, and in their descriptions of their marriage, they both consciously assumed a sacrificial role. To some extent, married life negatively affected my interviewees' career plans and even limited their career development. Even so, they did not reject marriage and chose to be single for the sake of their careers. They simply chose their careers and sought career advancement as much as possible because they were already destined to get married one day and accepted that their careers would be limited.

Chinese SOEs have better welfare benefits than most private firms (Lü and Perry, 1997; Bray, 2005). The ′danwei′ system is like a society of acquaintances compared to private enterprises (Bray, 2005). This stable, low-intensity (allowing women enough spare time to care for their families) and high-standard social-welfare work environment is well suited for women who value their role as mothers. However, the `glass ceiling' of *danwei*is also very obvious, i.e.limited upward mobility and uncompetitive pay.

In addition, people working in *danwei* have less competitive pressure and work with greater peace of mind and stability. *Danwei* jobs are relatively less mobile, so employee relationships are stable over the long term. This means colleagues are highly likely to work with the same people for many years. In the *danwei* system, the network of personal relationships is even closer. Most departmental colleagues know each other directly or have some kind of interpersonal network. In this system, authority comes not only from affiliation but also from age differences. Even in the same position, the older generation usually has more authority. The interaction

patterns of those working in this system usually differ from those working in the private sector. For example, women working in *danwei* usually dress plainly (*di diao*) to avoid comments from others (Li, 2002). Their interaction patterns are discussed further below. In this work environment, employees sometimes make judgements about others in the workplace. Especially in Chinese social ethics, the younger generation is easily influenced by the older generation. The older generation has more moral authority, and in this work environment, the boundaries of personal relationships become blurred. The older generation will show their care and closeness by advising the younger generation on their private life, but this can put extra pressure on single women. In this context, single women working in *danwei* tend to be more vulnerable to pressure from their colleagues due to their status.

The nature of the work influences single women's career choice (in the institutional system or private companies) based on expectations of future roles, as does their desire to choose a partner in their field of work. The work environment and intensity are also key factors for single women who still need to find a partner. One of my interviewees who works in a laboratory complained that her social circle is too small, that it is difficult to make new friends outside of work, that she despairs at the fact that almost all of her co-workers are women and that her job deals with animals. She is considering finding a new lab job with more male colleagues (Zhao, 29 years old). Furthermore, it was not only about whether they were looking for a partner in the workplace but also whether they had the time to look for a partner outside of work. For example, Zhao, one of my interviewees, who works for a newspaper, put it this way:

> For the first three years of my career, I had to work night shifts, which resulted in me having the day off. This time difference made it difficult for me to find a possible partner, as I lost contact with many old friends and didn't have the time or energy to meet new people and socialise. Eventually, I moved to a regular position (still in the system, just to a different department). After that, I finally started to have a stable relationship.

In some male-dominated industries, single women are a relatively disadvantaged group. Women, especially single ones, struggle to integrate into the group. For example, male employees will use swear words and sexually implying jokes to communicate during work breaks. In this case, single women are highly likely to be criticised if they use the same language to communicate with their colleagues. This makes it difficult for single female employees to integrate into the group and puts them in a vulnerable position of being on the receiving end of ridicule. Byrne (2019) argues that in order to integrate into a male group, swearing is more effective than learning the rules of football; however, even though females can integrate into a male-dominated group using swearing, it still has the potential to damage their social image. The results of Byrne's study also very accurately describe the awkward situation of women in the workplace. The traditional Chinese image of women, especially single ones, is still reflected in everyday language's 'clean' standard. Although swearing is not exclusive to men, the consequences of swearing for women are still more serious than for men. For men, swearing is a sign of unruliness and masculinity, while for women, it is a sign of physical and mental incoherence, untrustworthy personality or lack of education (Byrne, 2019).

This is especially true in industries dominated by men. Han, who works in Harbin 29, said:

> I tried to fit in when I first started working in the industry, but there were more men in the industry, and sometimes they didn't think too much of me when they spoke, and they would occasionally swear. I felt that they swear even when they are happy, as if swearing is the only way to express their emotions and even to show their closeness and familiarity. I don't really fit in. I thought at first it might be because I was new, but then I realised it seemed to be because of the way I spoke. I haven't talked like that since I was a kid, and I wasn't comfortable learning it. In the end, I didn't use profanity to fit in, but accidentally gained their approval by drinking. I've always been a good drinker, and I became famous

after I puked up all the males in our office at a staff party. I somehow fit in with their circle.

As you can see from Han's story, male-dominated work spheres have a set of social codes within them. It was necessary for her to socialise with them in a 'masculine' way in order to gain acceptance. Along with swearing, drinking was a way in which her colleagues could be recognised. In this kind of industry, a woman has to be recognised by her colleagues in some commonality in order to be judged as one of a kind. Only if she is judged to be one of a kind will she be accepted into the group.

But sometimes this strategy doesn't always work. Shuang, a journalist, experienced the opposite when she felt offended by her male colleague's sexually explicit jokes. Whenever she was offended, people blamed her for being too sensitive to make jokes, leaving her feeling frustrated. She thinks: 'It's obvious that the other person is wrong, but why does it seem like I'm the one who's in the wrong in the end? This kind of environment puts the person who can't fit in at a disadvantage. Later, when she tried to return the favour with the same joke, she was accused that women shouldn't joke to such an extent that she spent a long time at work in a depressing mood. It was only after she switched to a workgroup with more girls that her feelings slowly improved.

Workplace gender experiences of unmarried urban women

Workplace role presentation–dress code for unmarried women in the workplace

The single status of unmarried women affects not only their career choices but also the working lives of professional women who have already chosen a career. Although the workplace is supposed to be professional, the etiquette of these single women's interactions with their colleagues varies greatly depending on the nature of the work,

the work environment and whether they are looking for a partner in the workplace. Due to their single status, they are subjected to varying degrees of stress and obstacles at work, but fortunately, being single as a resource can also benefit them at some point in their working lives when they exercise their subjectivity to empower themselves to utilise this resource. As a way of coping, women deal with these effects through image management and self-presentation in the workplace.

Dress codes are easily overlooked in everyday life yet are an important part of interactive rituals. They are also a visual way to reflect attitudes about self-presentation. Professionals' dress codes are a good entry point for observing women's self-presentation and role management in the workplace. According to Collins (2013), interactions (or rituals) are a source of social motivation, and the image that each person presents in society is gradually formed through social interactions with others. People's presentations in the world of work also shape an idealised self, with workers essentially presenting a 'front stage' performance of themselves to create a desirable impression on their audience. Except for those working in laboratories, who were required to wear uniforms, my participants were generally free to choose their own clothing. Depending on the nature of their work, they generally had different clothing choices. For example, single women working within the system are more likely to be judged by their older colleagues (who are more authoritative in Chinese culture) because they are younger and single. As a result, they tend to dress inconspicuously in this work atmosphere and culture. This is a sign of respect, compromise and dress etiquette in this work environment. Women working for private companies tend to work in more professional environments, where their colleagues are busy with their own work and do not constantly judge one another or care about what their colleagues think. However, they pay attention to their choice of accessories, which are not as expensive as those worn by their supervisors. While women who have direct contact with clients at work may need a specific dress code to look professional, most of my respondents did not have direct contact with clients and, therefore, had more freedom in their choice of clothing. Furthermore, this

dress code etiquette is not set in stone. Without a potential partner, these women preferred comfortable clothing over dressing up.

> When I first started working, I was passionate and curious about what I was doing. I was very excited because I could be a very professional-looking elite. Before I started work, I went around the company, and everyone looked very elite, so I bought very sophisticated-looking clothes. For the first month of work, I also paid a lot of attention to my clothes and make-up. Then, when I started working, I realised that the work was very time-consuming and that my colleagues didn't care what they wore. Those who looked elite were not in our department. Then, slowly, I didn't pay much attention to what I wore at work. Where we work, most of the employees are women, and the few men are married, middle-aged men. Considering we've all known one another for so long, there was no need to beautify myself. In the end, I don't even wear make-up (Lo, 28 years old)

In this case, over time, Luo changed her dressing strategy. She does not work at *danwei*, and she does not intentionally dress down. Her dress code changed gradually as her attitude towards her job and colleagues altered. Her enthusiasm for the job faded, and there were no potential suitable candidates among her colleagues. This resulted in her dressing more casually at work. The modification in her dress code and behavioural patterns reflects a change in her attitude. This suggests that she has given up on the idea of choosing a mate in the workplace.

Similarly, in addition to examples of a gradual shift away from dressing over time, there are also instances of a gradual emphasis on dressing. For example, the oldest of my interviewees, 42-year-old Yang Ping, works in the construction industry.

> There are so few women in our industry that many people think I'm unprofessional because I'm female. Because my name sounds masculine, my employers tend to pause, intentionally or unintentionally, when they meet me for the first time (because they assume I'm supposed to be a male employee). I don't say much about this situation; I just do my job. In fact, our industry doesn't have

any dress code for women, but after I turned 30, I decided to dress formally at work to make myself look more professional. Honestly, I used to be more casual and neutral at work and in my daily life, but then, I started wearing some formal, feminine suits at work. It was a way to show my respect for my work and to make others pay more attention to me and respect me more. And I succeeded in this strategy, and after that, I carried out my work much more smoothly.

Yang Ping tries to reduce sexism in the workplace by dressing professionally, thus making others respect her more. This shows that dress code is an important tool for impression management for women in the workplace.

Yang's strategy of projecting a professional image by managing her dress code is clearly successful, as is Wang's, who has managed to avoid many harassment targets by managing her avatar on her work account. Since she usually works from home and does not have direct contact with her clients, many of them can only see her picture in a dialogue box. At first, her avatar was light-coloured and seemed approachable, but when people contacted her, it tended to make her seem frivolous. Later, she changed her avatar to a photo of her in a dark suit, which gave her a professional but aloof first impression, and no one bothered her anymore.

The above are all cases where the workplace has benefited from image management. However, some unmarried women are exploited as a resource because of their single status. Feng is the only unmarried woman in the office, so she is told to wear a daily suit to work, while everyone else is allowed to wear loose casual clothes. Feng says she has to get up 20 minutes early every day because she needs to put on make-up. The leader requests this because their work requires them to take photos with clients in the office occasionally. It was time for someone to be the face of the office in the photographs. All the married women refused to be photographed, and the leaders also preferred unmarried women with a good image to represent the office. Therefore,she became the only one in the office who wore a suit to work every day. She said there used to be another unmarried woman in the office, and they took turns to be in charge.

Then, that girl got married soon after, and now she must always wear formal. She felt that just because of her unmarried status, her leaders exploited her as a resource, and, in turn, she became vulnerable in the small-scale production relations of the office.

Unmarried Xin has a similar problem in that when her married colleagues dress up neatly, no one ever pays much attention to it. However, because she is not married, every time she dresses a little differently than usual, someone would rush to ask her why she dressed up or suddenly speculate that she was having a date after work or if she was getting ready to choose a mate in the workplace. Another example is Jan; although she dresses in formal attire and tries to project a professional image, her single status turns her sexuality into a resource, and being single can make a woman more vulnerable to sexual harassment in the workplace.She often has to tell well-intentioned lies to protect herself, making up that she has a boyfriend in another city. When her colleagues learn she has a boyfriend but is not married, they pay much less attention to her appearance.

However, being single and unmarried can benefit the workplace on some levels. Apart from the sales industry, where appearance may be a supporting factor, being single in most industries means women have more time to focus on their work. This may be beneficial to their job development (Liu, 2016).

Unmarried women's invisible barriers in the workplace: Benevolent sexism

With the popularisation of feminism's concept, gender prejudice and sex discrimination have been widely criticised by society and the public. It has become difficult to see explicitly and openly disparaged professional women in the workplace, but another kind of hidden prejudice against women is still prevalent in daily life, public opinion and interpersonal interactions, causing veiled but fatal lethality to

women's career development, i.e. well-intentioned gender prejudice.

Gender bias is a preconceived and unjust attitude based on gender differences. However, Glick and Fiske (1996) found in retrospect that objective devaluation and subjective favourability of women often go hand in hand; while denying women's abilities and rights, men seek emotional intimacy with them and are more willing to reach out to them; i.e. there are both negative and positive cognitive appraisals and emotional experiences of women. Accordingly, they put forwards the ambivalent sexism theory, which states that to maintain both patriarchal power and reproductive needs, gender prejudice not only includes aversion to and derogation of women who are against the traditional role norms but also involves affirmation and praise of women who conform to the traditions; the two sides of this ambivalence can be distinguished as hostile sexism and benevolent sexism (Glick and Fiske, 1996; Glick, Diebold, Baileywerner, and Zhu, 1997); They are co-existing and complementary conceptions of consciousness in the same individual, pointing to the 'bad woman' who violates traditional gender role norms and the 'good woman' who conforms to them to jointly maintain patriarchal social structures (Glick et al., 1997; Sibley and Wilson, 2004; Glick and Fiske, 2004; Glick, Diebold, Baileywerner, and Zhu, 1997; 2004; Glick and Fiske, 2001). This theory clearly demonstrates and expands the dimensions of gender bias, and since then, BS has received much attention from researchers.

Well-intentioned gender bias refers to a category of attitudes that are subjectively and emotionally supportive of women but that restrict them to traditional gender roles. Such attitudes are often difficult to recognise as prejudice because of the subjective good intentions of the holders, but they reinforce gender inequality by limiting women's role images and relegating them to a position of weakness. Such prejudices are deceptive, appearing as positive attitudes and patronising behaviours towards women but essentially limiting women's social roles and space for development. This concept also explains the promotion dilemma of unmarried urban women in the

workplace, where male managers may give female subordinates more verbal praise and less difficult tasks than male subordinates out of subjective good intentions, but in reality, such well-intentioned gender-biased behaviours motivated by love and care for women diminish female employees' opportunities to grow in challenging tasks (Biernat, Tocci, and Williams, 2012). Male managers are not intentionally trying to limit women's advancement in the workplace out of malice; in fact, they are simply releasing goodwill towards a group that is on the weaker side. This 'patriarchal protection' type of goodwill often limits the career advancement of unmarried women in the workplace. Through my research, I have found that the source of this patriarchal protection does not have to be limited to men in terms of biological sex. Even without taking sexual orientation into account, once female managers include themselves in the patriarchal management system, there is a great likelihood that they will exert this 'protection' over female subordinates in workplace relationships. This *bona fide* gender bias is ultimately derived from gender role bias.

Take Xie, who works in a TV station, as an example; her profession is special, and she needs to travel a lot to do interviews to collect more first-hand materials and produce more interesting programmes. However, since she is the youngest employee in the office and an unmarried woman, her leaders always feel it is unsafe for her to travel. Therefore, the task of following the film crew on business trips was rarely given to her. As a result, her professional skills were never promoted, and she did not produce many successful and hugely popular programmes in her years of work. Therefore, she was frustrated.

I believe this theory can be a good way to show the gender experience of unmarried women in the workplace and explain the dilemmas and limitations of unmarried urban women in a patriarchal workplace. Much of the sexism that arises from gender inequality in the workplace in modern society is not put out in the open. It is secretly hidden in the daily life and interactions of the workplace. Many unmarried urban women are very ambitious and have their own career plans, but because of this

patriarchal care, their career development is unknowingly restricted. The nature of these limitations is particularly insidious and difficult for women to realise.

Despite the negative effects, sometimes there are ways for unmarried women to counteract BS in the workplace. Since this kind of sexism refers to the fact that managers love women subjectively but restrict them to traditional gender roles in the workplace, unmarried women can also use this characteristic to their advantage, e.g. by presenting themselves as 'good women' who conform to gender role norms in the workplace to achieve their goals. Yang, who works in the construction industry, has made her professional image more feminine and professional after the age of 30 by wearing suits more feminine than her previous neutral attire. This strategy worked for Yang because the construction industry is male-dominated, and the patriarchal nature of the workplace is more pronounced.

> Yang says：I used to dress in a more neutral style, and I only valued comfort in my choice of clothes. When I was in school, I didn't have many boys chasing after me and I didn't think I had any femininity. I didn't change my style of dressing to look good at the beginning, but just to look more decent and professional. As a result, I didn't expect to be treated like a girl for the first time, probably because I was so different from what I used to be, so it was obvious that my male collaborators took care of me as a girl for the first time. The business that used to take several times to complete was now completed in one go, and my work became much easier to carry out.

Moreover, her strategy does not apply only to male leaders. Although female leaders in their industry are far fewer than their male counterparts, she has found that her female leaders have also become 'easier to communicate with' after her image management programme. According to her experience in the workplace, when she became more feminine in appearance, she was more easily understood by her colleagues who did not have a conflict of interest with her and even had a much

smoother time in dealing with clients. Although this might be because she had more work experience, I think that this behaviour of appearing closer to the social role norms of a 'good woman' also helped her to gain and benefit from the benevolent gender bias of her colleagues and clients in the workplace. She could also make such obvious gains through image management because she had previously dressed too neutrally, so the before–after contrasts were more pronounced. However, unmarried women need to be aware of the extent to which this can be done because if it is too close to social role norms, it will emphasise traditional gender roles in the workplace, which is not conducive to the reshaping of the gender order and carries a risk of limiting women to gender roles.

Reconstruction of gender relations in the workplace: When singleness becomes a resource available to women themselves

Traditional culture presupposes that women are victims of gender relations and can only play the role and persona of the weak and the victimised. However, in fact, women can also join in the construction of relationships as subjects, and they have the power to define their relationships with others on their own. For new women in the workplace, they are no longer the weaker sex in gender relations but gain confidence in relations, expand resources and develop their careers. This is especially true for women in the workplace, who see their singleness as a resource they can utilise to their advantage and benefit from their singleness to compete. Unmarried urban women would then abandon traditional gender roles and redefine their social roles in the workplace as purely competitive.

There is a general consensus in many studies about women's experiences of discrimination in the workplace and the reality that women are at an increasing disadvantage in China's marketisation process (Li, 2011; Li, 2013). The previously discussed issue is that unmarried women have an advantage over married women in

the workplace, but due to their status, it is difficult for them to be competitive in the workplace, even with ordinary men. To cope with this inequality in the labour market, many unmarried women emphasise their professional status as workers in the workplace, taking advantage of their single status to devote themselves to their work and maximisetheir time tomaximise their career success. In the process, their social role is simply that of competitors in the workplace. Commitment in the workplace is difficult to quantify or concretise, and the literature search suggests that 'business travel' is a visual window to explain commitment (Maslach et al., 2001). Business travel is a common phenomenon in the modern workplace, and the frequency of abroad business trips is increasing with the growing economic interaction between regions. In many companies with incentive systems, employees who travel frequently receive higher earnings and more promotion opportunities (Deng, 2012; Tong, 2012).

There is a direct impact of business travel on income. Two mechanisms are included. One is the pay-for-performance incentive mechanism. Business travel, as an indicator of work input in the labour market, means that workers need to invest more energy, accompanied by additional outputs, in addition to the daily work input of nine-to-five, so in a market economy dominated by 'performanceism', workers who travel frequently will inevitably receive the corresponding monetary performance incentives. Second is the compensation mechanism of allowance incentives. Travelling on business trips means that workers must leave their familiar environment, especially those who travel frequently and for long periods. If they travel to remote and arduous places, they may even have mental illness. The more frequent and longer the business trips, the more time they spend away from their families. This upsets the work–family balance and reduces the amount of housework and care for family members. In addition, travelling on business trips adds to the extra cost of living for workers. As a result, employers usually compensate workers (e.g. travelling and fieldwork allowances).

There is an indirect effect of travelling on income. Two other mechanisms exist. One

is the human capital enhancement mechanism. Business travelling means moving long distances, new work environments and tasks and the acquisition of new work skills, a situation that objectively promotes the accumulation of human capital in the workplace. Therefore, in the long run, business travelling is an opportunity to enhance human capital, which has a lasting impact on future career development and income acquisition. Second, it is a social network expansion mechanism. Business trips provide workers with opportunities to build social networks, including connections with mainstream classes or peers and colleagues, and these opportunities reinforce the heterogeneity and network resource content of workers' social networks. As networks of occupation-related relationships become more enriched, workers become more irreplaceable in their own organisations, acquiring a more secure position and substantial occupational shelter (Bian, 1997), increasing their bargaining power with their own employers. Even if this network of peer relationships does not lead to increased earnings for workers in their own organisations, such networks can link workers to the wider labour market, e.g.through access to more occupational information and occupational mobility (e.g. jobhopping) to improve status and earnings. In either of these two cases, this will ultimately translate into an increase in workers' wage incomes.

Gender differences in business travel

Although China once had the world's highest female labour market participation rate (Yang, 2014a) and an increasingly egalitarian intra-family division of labour and intra-family relationships (Yang, 2014b), patriarchal values are being challenged to re-emerge in China during the transition period, in contrast to the egalitarian trends in some European, American and Asian countries (Yang, 2014).

The traditional division of gender roles between men and women is still prevalent in Chinese society, and there is a clear and solid social divide of labour between men and

women; within the same family, men have the instrumental responsibility of earning market income and supporting the family, while they should focus on career development in the public sphere (i.e. the labour market). According to the vast majority of the population, men should invest more time and energy in their work. It is, therefore, natural for men to travel, even frequently, to meet the demands of the workplace, and this is a sign that they are 'productive', 'capable' and 'promising' and that they should be encouraged and supported.

In contrast, women bear the emotional responsibility of taking care of their families, and the concept of 'family first, career second' guides them to invest their energy and time mainly in the private sphere (i.e. the family), with their work being only a supplement to their lives. Particularly when the family's material and time resources are limited, women tend to actively adopt the 'either/or' family strategy, which reduces their willingness to participate in the labour market and their motivation to achieve a career and even leads some women to withdraw from the labour market altogether, interrupting their career trajectory (Cai and Wang, 2004; Yao and Tan, 2004;Cai and Wang, 2004; Yao and Tan, 2005). This coincides with the findings of many Western studies that family responsibilities affect women's labour force participation in the market (England et al., 2004). At this point, reducing workplace commitments becomes a voluntary choice for most women. Of course, for another segment of women, following traditional gender roles is not an autonomous choice but is conditioned and guided by the wider patriarchal culture; during the socialisation process, men and women acquire and internalise traditional gender roles and gradually develop a set of norms that differentiate between men and women, and when individuals do not comply with the traditional gender roles and norms, they are subjected to punishment and pressure from society (Wang, 2015).

For example, if a married woman travels for business, especially if she travels a lot, she is perceived as 'uncaring', 'unfeminine' and 'ambitious' and is vulnerable to suppression and pressure from others and even her culture (Zuo and Bian, 2001). As a

result, these women are forced to 'engage in gendered activities' and 'display gender' (West and Zimmerman, 1987) in their daily lives and are compelled to reduce their input in the workplace. Whether it is an active choice or passive acceptance of traditional gender role models, comfortable and stable jobs that do not require exposure to the outside world, overtime or travel and are within commuting distance are usually 'good jobs' for the vast majority of women (Cheng, 2015), which also explains why some women (such as my participants) struggle about jobs that require frequent travelling in the early stages of their career choice (Xiao, 2015).

Some of my interviewees were very positive, like Luo, who thought that her single status would be a good fit for her career and that they would compete aggressively with men for promotions and raises, as well as business trips. She also thinks that since she is single at the moment and her family does not live in the same cityas her, she might as well go on business trips as many times as possible when she has so much free time. Even if she does not get a promotion in the short term, she can at least get a good salary. Although this was not her previous career plan, she felt that she would have to grab the opportunity if she could. Mango, who used to love travelling, was also very active in getting the opportunity to go abroad for exchange research. She describes how after she travelled for three months, she just wanted to stay at home andnot go anywhere, preferably not move at all, when it came to her holidays, and taking part in activities like travelling could no longer be thought of.

Generally, men are more willing to accept business trips than female workers in all sectors. When travelling on business trips, girls often feel a little awkward because of the different gender of their companions. This is because sometimes the company only reimburses the cost of one room, and the travelling colleague is often a boy. When my interviewees encountered similar problems, they always responded with the most professional and breezy expressions, saying they did not care. However, in reality, they were certainly embarrassed.

Business trips are a great opportunity for promotion, and my interviewees were more than happy to take the initiative to progress in their jobs. At the time of my interviews, both Luo and Mango were in the critical period of their promotion visits. Unfortunately, however, none of my interviewees were successful in their subsequent promotion appraisals. Basically, they won over the married women on the same expedition as them, but both ended up losing to their male competitors. The stranglehold that the capital market and patriarchal society have on women is irresistible. However, they did not give up; at the time of writing this thesis, all the interviewees were still working, and no one had given up their social identity to return to their family identity. Although they have failed to be promoted at this stage of their careers, they will continue to take advantage of their single status to actively participate in the workplacecompetition and promote the balance of the gender order through practical actions.

Overall, this chapter adopted a materialist feminist perspective to examine the gendered experiences of unmarried urban women in a patriarchal workplace, and in this study, my participants were not only the women or men mentioned in the abstract but rather actors in a complex structure of social relations, including gender relations. This avoids one of the strikes in women's studies, which is the sexist tendency to replace all relationships with gender and mask all social variables with gender. In addition, the unmarried urban women – the subject of this research– are no longer passive objects bound in a network of gender relations and social structures but rather subjects in gender relations that are constantly adjusted in response to social change. Although this subject is still fundamentally bound by the unspoken rules of gender relations and gender order, in unison, some unmarried professional women are constantly breaking the rules and creating opportunities in the dynamic practice. This attention to the dynamic change of gender relations and the process of unmarried women's subjectivity presents a counter-conventional practice and attempt of unmarried women's gender role in urban cities.

Conclusion

More women are realising their self-worth in the field of social labour, which contributes to the advancement of women's political status. However, gender inequality and female alienation are still widespread in the contemporary society that advocates gender equality. This chapter adopted a materialist feminist perspective to study the gender experience of unmarried urban women in the patriarchal nature of the workplace; a literature review of the changes in women's status and their relationship to work at different periods in Chinese history was used as a framework to clarify the gender meanings of the current stage of the Chinese working women; the roots of unmarried urban women's dilemma in the workplace, which this section cuts through from a gender perspective, were analysed in detail. Afterwards, through the women's identity construction at work, I explained the importance of work for unmarried urban women; simultaneously, by presenting the impact of gender internalisation on unmarried women's career choices, this section revealed the significance of gender for the careers of unmarried urban professional women; I then discussed how unmarried women negotiate among singlehood, marriage and career and go on to detail the different roles, including role presentations in the workplace and benevolent gender bias, such as the different gendered experiences of the workplace for unmarried urban women. Then, I concluded by offering new directions for practice that use singleness to leverage women's subjectivity to reconfigure gender in the workplace. This study will provide preliminary theoretical references for establishing a new gender order in the workplace and further solving the problem of gender inequality.

Generally, the real-life double-role tension is much higher for working women than men, influenced by traditional gender norms. The gender experiences suffered by both married and unmarried working women are similar. Unmarried urban women have an advantage over married women in the workplace but not as much as an average male. Relatively speaking, the biggest advantage for unmarried women is the absence of

realistic family burdens in the practice. However, the internalised gender norms are already influencing the career choices of working women from the beginning of the career selection process. The reality is that whether a working woman gives up one of her roles or struggles to combine both, it can cause physical and mental hardship for the woman in the midst of it all. This study will serve as a starting point for reflecting on this work ethic in anticipation of other subsequent researchers who can continue examining how women in the workplace balance their social and family roles. Women's experiences in the workplace will enrich the practice of feminism in the local sense in China and provide important lessons for the practice of gender equality in China and the international community.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

Introduction

This study explores the competing and intersecting social, cultural and material pressures experienced by women who remain unmarried beyond the socially expected age of marriage in their daily lives. It seeks to understand how these women negotiate these pressures in different contexts. Adopting a material feminist perspective, this paper is grounded in qualitative research using in-depth semi-structured interviews. Through the snowballing technique, I conducted 38 face-to-face interviews in Beijing and Harbin with 28 urban unmarried women aged 27–42 in different occupations. Additionally, I interviewed 10 mothers of 'unmarried women'(six in Beijing and four in Harbin) to further enrich the research. I have focused on three key issues in this study. Firstly, I establish a typology of unmarried women to reveal the different life statuses of urban unmarried women as well as their requirements for choosing a spouse. I then analyse the intergenerational interaction and negotiation process between unmarried women and their families. Finally, I present the gendered experiences of unmarried urban women in the patriarchal world of work and their practices of subjectivity.

In this concluding chapter, I will start with a self-reflection on this research. Then I will present the main findings and contributions of my research on urban unmarried women's daily life under the social stigma in China. Finally, I will discuss the

research limitations and make suggestions for future research in the last section.

Self-reflection

In the course of my research, I have insisted on a feminist epistemology based on the concrete life experiences of urban unmarried women and avoided engulfing life practices with abstract and obscure theories and data. The methodological focus on open and two-way interactive in-depth interviews balanced the power relationship between the researcher and the researched. At the same time, this study insists on using feminist methodology to target the gender blindness of the mainstream positivist academic system, insisting on making the researched the subject, improving the quality of life of the researched as the ultimate goal of the study and respecting the voice of the subject as the mission of the researcher. Looking back at my research journey, this study has been thoroughly enjoyable since I have benefited not only as a researcher but also as a female individual owing to my continual self-reflection during the research process.

Social research is essentially the process of generating knowledge. There is no such thing as neutral reading, nor is knowledge free of value judgements (Harding, 1986). Knowledge is a product of socio-cultural construction and the result of discourse and production in a particular time and space. My study candidly presents the knowledge production process involved in my own research, sharing my values as a researcher, my academic backgroundand the antecedents and consequences of the entire study with my participants. The production of knowledge is a dual hermeneutic process.Participants construct and organise their own experiences based on their own worldview and reading perspectives, while the researcher engages in a secondary level of interpretation. When confronted with my interviewees' interpretations of their daily lives, I, as a researcher, must engage in critical and in-depth analysis that is simultaneously participant centred. This is because my interviewees are not static

research subjects but rather constitute subjective communities that are continuously engaged in self-reflection and interpretation. Therefore, I am constantly reflecting on my position and role in my research.

During the fieldwork, because I was an outsider to my participants' circle of life, they were more comfortable sharing with me the difficulties they encountered in their families or at work, which might be topics that their relatives or friends did not know about. For example, my interviewee, Luo, told me that she never shared with her family or friends the setbacks and opportunities she encountered in her field of work. She always felt a little awkward sharing her ambitions for her job with people she knew well because she did not know if she could realise them. On the other hand, she prefers to handle the frustrations and stresses she encounters at work on her own because she does not want to worry her family and friends. However, she has no such limitation when it comes to sharing with others. Also, the researcher's gender affects the participants' representational stance and patterns. My participant, Li, expressed that she was not good at discussing relationship-related topics in front of the opposite sex, as this made her shy. Therefore, she asked the introducer about my gender in advance and was relieved to learn that I was a female researcher. At the same time, she also thought that when we belonged to the same gender, I would be able to understand her gender experiences at home and in the workplace better than a male researcher. At this point, I became the insider in the study, working to construct new knowledge with the participants. In the process of constructing new knowledge, I became more skilled at shifting positions as a researcher.

Feminism insists that the ultimate goal of fieldwork is to improve the life situation of those being researched. The researcher should value the research process as an opportunity for self-improvement and inform the researched about the research findings and any new developments at an appropriate moment (Smith, 1992; Oakley, 2000).This displays basic respect for the researched. Interestingly, during the course of my research, even though I made it clear to my interviewees that my research was

conducted through face-to-face in-depth interviews, they would not have the opportunity to encounter one another. Some of my interviewees were willing to participate in the research project because they believed that sharing information about their own experiences would help dispel myths in other people's lives about being unmarried (e.g. Yang, 42), while other participants joined my project with the intention of learning from me about the thoughts of other participants. In my study, my interviewees were all subject to socio-cultural and material-social complicity in their single status, and while they all played an active role in their own subjectivities to cope with the pressures of the different dimensions, they were also curious about whether other unmarried women were in the same situation in their lives. When they found unmarried women with similar gender experiences to theirs, they felt that their social identities were not alienated because they were unmarried and that they were not alone. This helped them to reconcile with their internalised gender, which in turn reduced the stress they were under due to being unmarried. This also reflects my interviewees' active subjectivity and positive attempts to improve their living conditions.

While changing the researcher is not a common desire in feminist research, it is a common outcome (Oakley, 2000). Many feminist researchers have been profoundly changed as individuals as a result of their awareness, including the reconfiguration of the conceptual framework of a phenomenon and the radical correction of one's worldview (Weitzman, 1985). As I mentioned in the introductory chapter, I am interested in the real-life situations of people who remain unmarried for a long period of time, and I personally do not think there is anything unusual about being unmarried or single. I believe that women can enjoy their lives in their unmarried status. However, due to the influence of traditional Chinese gender narratives, as I approached the age of 30, I slowly began to feel anxious about the double pressures of gender and age on unmarried women, and I sometimes wondered whether I could withstand these pressures. As my research progressed, I realised that each of the women for whom this study was designed had their own individual personalities. At

the same time, the meaning of gender is not fixed when viewed through a material feminist lens. While it is true that urban unmarried women are subject to complicit pressures from the social, familial and workplace aspects of their lives, they do not necessarily have to act as victims. They can respond positively by exercising their own subjectivity and self-empowering themselves in practice in order to reconfigure their place in society. Their life experiences and statuses show me the possibilities of different lifestyles. In particular, Yang, 42, whose life experience of remaining unmarried for a long time but still living a rich and colourful life, allowed me to reconcile myself as a 'potential insider' with my own internalised gender and the ensuing gender conditioning. This research has helped me to reshape my own perspective on the pressures associated with being unmarried and has given me the courage to remain unmarried. It has helped me to reshape my internal gender order so that I am no longer afraid to experiment with different life situations.

The original contribution of this study lies in giving voice to unmarried women from a materialist feminist perspective. By exploring the gendered practices of urban unmarried women in their daily lives, this study reveals the complicit pressures from society, family and the workplace that they are subjected to due to their unmarried status, as well as their coping processes when they exert their subjectivity. By establishing a typology of unmarried women to break down the negative stereotypes attached to them, along with redefining the connotation of 'leftover women' to challenge China's traditional gender order, this study creates a more supportive public opinion environment for urban unmarried women. In China, feminist movements are often driven by men and state power, and there is a notable absence of grassroots women-led movements shaping gender discourse. This study is dedicated to promoting gender equality in China, improving the public opinion environment for unmarried women and allowing gender studies to go beyond gender and into the complex multiple social structures and ever-changing social contexts. Furthermore, this research fills a theoretical and research gap in the exploration of unmarried women in urban China. In conclusion, I will now highlight the key findings and

contributions of my research.

Classification of unmarried urban professional women

The image of urban unmarried women differs from the homogenised stereotypes that have been portrayed. One of the original contributions of this study is the creation of a typology of urban unmarried women based on their attitudes towards marriage and the extent to which they perceive themselves to be stigmatised for being unmarried. This is founded on the value orientations regarding their choice of spouse. This study integrates findings from Tung (1998), Lasswell and Lasswell (1987), Situmorang (2005) and To (2013). These scholars indicated that early Western researchers had classified unmarried women over the age of 30 into different types of single faces. Schwartz, in 1976, based his categories on the singletons' life priorities, identifying six different types: professional, social, ego, action, supportive and passive. Staple, focusing on the behavioural patterns of singletons in their relationships, identified four categories: free-floating, open partner, closed partner and marriage-like. Then Stein, in 1981, focusing on whether it is a voluntary choice and whether it is expected to be a stable lifestyle, classified singles into four categories: ambivalent (refers to the current situation as a voluntary choice but only temporary), wishful (refers to the involuntary and temporary situation of singleness, with the expectation of ending the current situation in the near future), resolved (refers to singleness as a voluntary choice and a long-term stable lifestyle) and regretful (refers to an involuntary choice of singleness and a long-term type of singleness). On the other hand, To researched unmarried women of age in urban China and classified them into maximiser, traditionalist, satisficerand innovator based on the strategies they used when choosing a partner. This study builds on previous research and is inspired by To's work in classifying Chinese urban unmarried women into three types, realist, romantic and liberal, based on the respondents' values about marriage and mate selection.

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The realist type of unmarried women comprised the largest percentage of my interviewees, and their view of marriage was reality oriented. They have a clear perception of the stigma in their lives due to their single status; however, they have reconciled with their identity. Although they may feel anxious about this, their own coping strategies do not significantly impact their lives. As a result, they tend to be stable long-term singles who are looking forward to marriage but adopt a passive approach in their mate selection strategy. They do not make extra social efforts for the purpose of choosing a mate. In contrast to the romantic type, it is not that they do not expect romantic love. In fact, they look forward to romantic love and also need the corresponding financial support; the romantic type of unmarried women's view of marriage is intimacy oriented. They believe that true love is the foundation of married life, and they long for true love in their lives. The financial condition of the future partner is not their primary consideration, but there is a minimum standard that can be moderately adjusted. They have a clear perception of the stigma attached to their single status in life but do not internalise the label. Unmarried women of the romantic type experience more anxiety than those of the realist type. This is due to the fact that they have a slightly younger age distribution than realists, placing them right at the peak of the perceived external wave. In addition, they tend to have a relatively high level of dependence on intimate relationships. Although they may feel anxious, they have their own ways of coping with this, as they are prepared to end their unmarried status as soon as possible. Therefore, they choose to be proactive in their choice of spouse, actively expanding their social circle and engaging in various dating activities.

The liberal type of unmarried women is the least represented in my study, but its existence is of great significance to my overall research. It offers new perspectives for redefining urban unmarried women and challenges the negative portrayal of them by the media within the traditional Chinese cultural narrative. This type of unmarried women combines elements of realism and romanticism in their perception of marriage.

It can be said that they have the highest expectations of marriage, seeking both romantic love and marital responsibility, but they maintain the most relaxed attitude towards it. Liberals acknowledge the labels placed on their single status by outsiders, but they do not identify with or internalise them, resulting in a lack of anxiety about their unmarried status.

To's (2012) study reveals that urban unmarried women who are well equipped in terms of career and other aspects can be successful in finding another spouse with some sensible strategies and compromises in the secondary aspects of mate selection. To's (2012) categorization is similar to mine in the sense that both consider the categorization in terms of attitudes toward marriage, mate selection strategies, gender roles, economic values, and parental factors. My categorization of unmarried women reveals their value orientation towards marriage, while To's study focuses on categorizing unmarried women and then developing appropriate mate selection strategies. Our types do not seem too far apart, but each type is different and specific. Both 'Satisficer' and 'Innovator' in her type are not minding the financial condition of the future partner, which is different from my study. Since this study does not consider unmarried women's singleness as a pressing issue, it does not focus on suggestions for mate selection strategies. A comprehensive analysis of the three common criteria for choosing a spouse for different types of unmarried women reveals that their view of spouse selection is still dominated by the trend of choosing a spouse within a social class based on economic conditions. They have expectations of romantic relationships and are not willing to take economic risks in marriage.

To summarise, although the three different types of urban unmarried women groups share the same social identity, as defined by their marital status, they nonetheless have distinct feelings about their singleness. Consequently, they adopt different strategies to cope with their singleness and in choosing a spouse. Contrary to media stereotypes, they remain single for varying reasons, primarily due to their own choices rather than

being forcibly excluded from the marriage market. Their anxiety does not stem from the fact that they are single but rather from the stigma and pressure associated with it. These single women are more concerned about meeting the expectations of others and themselves. In my study, it is evident that the stress and criteria for selecting a mate among urban unmarried women are not strongly correlated with geographic factors. Participants working in Beijing, compared to those in Harbin, had relatively less support from their social networks. This was despite being less exposed to social opinions due to working in a larger city. Their stress originates from three dimensions: social culture, family life and material life, with the influence of city location being less pronounced. When they receive sufficient support from their social networks, the stress induced by stigma significantly diminishes. Although they do feel the pressure of their singleness, they do not seek excessive attention from others as a result. Additionally, they prefer not to overtly display their anxiety, fearing it may exacerbate the attached stigma. The status of these three types of unmarried women is not fixed. Their attitudes towards marriage may change based on the different stages in their lives or when influenced by external circumstances. For instance, in Jan's life experience, even though she now identifies as a realist, there was a period in her much younger life when she aligned more with the romantic type. The boundaries between these three types are fluid, and an unmarried woman's classification may shift among them as perceptions evolve.

Common criteria for choosing a spouse

Different types of unmarried urban women hold varying expectations of marriage and employ different criteria for selecting a spouse. Existing literature on the mate choice criteria and reasons of the tertiary educated population in China primarily analyses Chinese people's mate choices quantitatively, often by examining marriage advertisements or by studying people's views on marriage through a combination of interviews and questionnaires. Li (1989) and Xu (2000) conducted a quantitative

study on the mate choice criteria of the tertiary educated unmarried female population (urban university students) by examining marriage advertisements. This provided a basic description of contemporary Chinese mate selection criteria, analysing the main factors influencing a person's mate selection behaviour and the extent of their influence. The five main requirements for a mate in the adverts were age, personality and moral character, height, marital experience and education.

In contrast to the findings of existing research, I identified several recurring themes when analysing the data on mate selection criteria that were common to these different types of unmarried women. These criteria can be seen as shared preferences in mate selection among unmarried urban women, as well as the minimum standards in their mate selection criteria. By compiling these shared preferences, we can gain a better understanding of the fundamental expectations that unmarried urban women have for marriage. These three criteria are summarised because I discovered three high-frequency words and their synonyms that were frequently mentioned by different types of participants. These words neatly encapsulate the directions of unmarried women's mate selection criteria. These three directions can be broadly defined as 'responsible', 'feeling' and 'compatible'.

'Feeling' pertains to romantic emotions; 'responsible' entails the ideal partner being willing and capable of taking on family responsibilities; 'getting along well' defines patterns of amicable interactions. This definition has relevance to intimate relationships grounded in romance. Given that romantic relationships are not always easy to establish, some unmarried women are willing to adjust their expectations and opt for a harmonious coexistence. The hope is to establish a teammate-like relationship based on mutual trust, even if it has not reached the level of a romantic partnership. For example, meeting the standard of being comfortable with each other. This standard is more attainable than that of a romantic relationship, which involves specific requirements about the other person's personality, interests and so forth. It requires two people sharing something in common, such as similar hobbies or shared

future plans. It also implies that unmarried women anticipate their future partner to have a similar family or educational background. Elements like common hobbies and shared educational background ultimately have a material aspect, and behind them lie the social class they represent. This reflects my respondents' inclination for marriages within the same social class. While women do not anticipate a significant upward mobility in class through marriage, they do expect to at least maintain their social status after marriage.

One of the reasons often portrayed in the mass media for urban unmarried women remaining single is that they are too selective when choosing a partner. I attempted to challenge this assertion before analysing the data for this study. However, post-study, it was observed that urban unmarried women do indeed exhibit a high degree of selectiveness or caution in their choice of spouses. Nonetheless, this selectiveness is not excessive. They do not anticipate their partner to be an exceedingly wealthy magnate or surpass them significantly in every aspect. Instead, they require their partner to meet a certain financial standard to ensure their quality of life does not drop too drastically. While this financial criterion alone is reasonable, when combined with the softer criteria of personality, interests and even the development of a romantic relationship, it might appear somewhat selective. They do not have lofty standards for spouse selection, but they do have a range of expectations. This was also noted by To (2012). Urban unmarried women are actually quite well-established in terms of their careers and professions. With some thoughtful strategies and a willingness to compromise on secondary factors when choosing a partner, they can successfully find a compatible mate. Given that this study positions the single status of unmarried women as a concern that does not require immediate resolution, it does not delve deeply into suggested strategies for selecting a spouse. A comprehensive analysis of the three common criteria considered by different types of unmarried urban women reveals that the inclination to choose a partner within the same social class, based on economic circumstances, still prevails in their perspective on spouse selection. They desire romantic relationships and are wary of taking financial risks in marriage.

Redefining urban unmarried women: Beyond 'sheng nv'

The plight of unmarried women in urban China encompasses multiple and intersecting social pressures and discriminations. They delay marriage due to their insistence on self-understanding and the prerequisites of marriage. Consequently, they are consistently subjected to external stigmatisation. Under the construct of the pseudo-proposition of 'leftover women', unmarried women are burdened with false and negative stereotypes. Through the analysis of subjective narratives of urban unmarried women and an exploration of the comprehensive characteristics of various types of unmarried women – including their single status, attitudes towards marriage, levels of parental and external influences, expectations of their marital and family gender roles and strategies for choosing a spouse – this study reinstates the authentic image of unmarried women, influenced by their single status factors. The pseudo-concept of 'leftover women' can be redefined by dispelling the one-dimensional and generalised stereotypes propagated by the mass media.

Some scholars have proposed redefining 'leftover women', which carries a negative connotation, as 'blooming women' based on the life status of unmarried women (Fincher, 2014). This term applies to women who view age as inconsequential, taking pride in their advancing years and wisdom. They know how to orchestrate a fulfilling life, possess their own social circles, think positively and optimistically, take relationships as they come without undue pressure and exude confidence in their actions. I believe this redefinition is very reasonable and fitting. From a standpoint of gender equality, 'leftover women' have been depicted as a demographic of older, unmarried women who face substantial moral stigma, pursue materialistic interests and are excessively self-absorbed. Yet, fundamentally, this portrayal stems from a form of gender inequality intentionally constructed by men experiencing pressure due

to women's increasing independence and equality in terms of economy, spirituality and behaviour. Therefore, the media's coverage of the 'leftover women' topic is less about addressing women's marital relationships and more about subjecting a specific group of women to gender discipline based on traditional gender norms and media profitability. The concept of 'Sheng nu' sheds the stigmatising aspect of the term, offering a more accurate representation of the life status and positive attitude of unmarried women in urban settings. It provides a foundation for a discursive challenge against the stigmatisation of urban unmarried women.

According to my findings, the participants' attitudes towards marriage and family indicated that while they were aware of the stigma associated with their unmarried status and sometimes used the term 'leftover woman' in a humorous manner to describe their situation, they did not truly define themselves as such. This study argues that urban unmarried women should be redefined as 'shen nv' (prudent women/慎女). This term reflects their cautious approach in handling their personal marital matters. Nowadays, marrying later has become a life choice for more and more urban women who seek a quality of marriage that surpasses the pressure exerted by societal norms regarding the age of marriage. They believe that rushing into marriage without being psychologically prepared is not only irresponsible towards themselves but also a disservice to their potential partner. It is an expression of responsibility towards oneself as well as others.

By reinstating the authentic image of unmarried women under the influence of the single status factor, this study dismantles the single and generalised stereotype perpetuated by mass media. It then redefines the negative concept of 'sheng nv' as 'shen nv' (prudent women/慎女). In doing so, it presents a fresh perspective on marriage and family for unmarried urban women, dispelling the misrepresentation of the pseudo-proposition of 'leftover women' and the gender stereotyping of unmarried women, thereby combating the stigmatisation of unmarried women. The original contribution of this study lies in providing a new research direction and theoretical

perspective for the study of unmarried women in urban China. This is achieved through the establishment of a new typology of unmarried women in urban areas, revealing their prevailing view of mate selection based on economic conditions and the inclination towards mate selection within the same social class. Additionally, it challenges traditional gender narratives by redefining the connotation of 'leftover women'. By redefining the meaning of 'leftover women', this study challenges the traditional gender narrative, offers a new theoretical foundation for the study of urban unmarried women and simultaneously complements and enriches the literature on gender and family studies in China.

Intergenerational family conflicts and negotiation processes

Family is an important component that influences the perceived sources of stress among unmarried urban women. According to research on family and marriage in the context of China, it has long been customary to treat the choice of marriage as an unexamined prerequisite and the lack of marriage as a social problem (Yan, 2009; Xu, 2000). Further, the anxiety experienced by unmarried women is not the result of their own single status but rather of multiple and intersecting social pressures, including the family. To understandthe impact of unmarried status on the daily lives of women, their interactions with their parents need to be examined. Spouse choice is an inextricable topic in unmarried women's families and is at the centre of marriage and family in real life. Social changes in mate choice behaviour reflect not only how individuals are being shaped by society but also the perspectives of individuals' behavioural choices in the macro-context. The ideal process of choosing a spouse is considered to be a natural process in which a man and a woman, each on a voluntary basis, achieve a certain degree of mutual attraction through a series of emotional ties and maintain an intimate relationship, thus entering into a marriage smoothly. However, due to social changes and other factors, the generational differences within a given family tend to be too large. Intergenerational differences in the understanding of the meaning of

choosing a spouse and contradictions between the expectation and reality of choosing a spouse have led to intergenerational tension within families. In response to the social phenomenon of 'unmarried urban women', some parents have chosen to intervene by selecting ideal partners for their unmarried daughters.

Ji (2015) conducted a qualitative research on 'leftover women' in Shanghai wherein the author proposed for the first time 'the mosaic family theory'. She argues that China's social structure is characterised by collectivism and that family structures in China are far more complex than those in Western cultures. Tradition and modernity coexist and intertwine in family relationships as in a mosaic. The Chinese family is metamorphosing from the patriarchal, patrilineal family with a traditional Confucian hierarchy into a mosaic model of traditional-modern hybridity, intergenerational intimacy and symbiosis of familism. My outcomes validate these findings in that in my participants' families, the family relationships tended to be complex, with intimate but conflictual intergenerational relationships. None of the study participants was non-marriageist, and while they only chose to put their marriage on hold for the time being, their parents were nonetheless unwilling to compromise.

Taking the dating corners in the parks of Beijing and Harbin as an example, I think this is a new type of attempt made by parents to find suitable spouses for their daughters given their disapproval of their daughters' single status and attempt to solve this problem. Such behaviour shows the parents' uncompromising attitude towards their unmarried children's single status. Although this results in the parents overstepping in the subject of choosing a spouse, unmarried daughters do not reject their parents' attempts to do so. Here, they voluntarily chose to temporarily cede a part of their own subjective rights in order to co-operate with their parents' actions. Therefore, I believe that the park dating corner demonstrates the concept of intergenerational conflict between parents' and children's views of marriage, how parents try to solve the marital problems on behalf of their children and how the interaction and negotiation process between the two parties on the issue of marriage is

an effective entry point for research on intuitive pressures that urban unmarried women are subjected to at home in their daily life due to their single status and how they negotiate it. The study of matchmaking in parks also highlights the changes in the way in which individuals choose their spouses and the attendant criteria for doing so, as well as the intergenerational differences in the concept of choosing a spouse, under the impact of China's economic and market transformation.

Parents choose to visit the dating corners in the parks to market their daughters because their daughters' choice not to be married does not hold up for them. Parents of unmarried women are unwilling to accept the possibility that their daughters will be single for a long time, meaning the parents' action of visiting the dating corners, which have extremely low success rates, is a sign of disapproval of their daughters' single status. According to Goffman's (1974) theoretical framework, in this intergenerational interaction, the child and the parent act as spectators for each other, changing their behaviour at any time in response to the other's behaviour in order to convey the information they need the other to know. With both parents and daughters aware of the extremely low success rate of the dating corner, the parents' anxiety and disapproval of their daughter's singleness influence their decision to visit the dating corners to divert their own attention from this anxiety and demonstrate their disapproval and highlight the intransigence of their daughter's singleness.At the same time, the daughter's anxiety is not caused by her singleness but by her parents' anxiety about it. Meanwhile, the unmarried daughters support their parents'desire to visit the dating corners mainly to alleviate the latter's anxiety and show them thatthey have not given up on marriage.

In my interviews with urban unmarried women, I asked them about their attitudes towards such matchmaking corners in parks. Most of the interviewees expressed support for their parents' behaviour, while some said they did not care. For example, 31-year-old Ms Ching, an accountant, thought that the probability of success at the dating corner in the park was extremely low, and that it was unlikely for her parents to

find a suitable partner for her there. However, she believes that they should be allowed to go if they want to because if she stays single and does not allow her parents to make the effort, she will look like she has given up on marriage, which is unacceptable to her parents.

A clear preference for intra-class mate selection based on economic conditions (i.e., 'the right family') can be detected by observing parents' mate selection criteria for their children in the dating corners. The parents' solidified criteria of mate selection is reflected by the diversity of their methods of mate selection; interestingly, the same mate selection criteria can be observed when analysing the criteria adopted by unmarried women. In other words, despite the fact that social changes and other factors have led to large intergenerational differences within families, differences in the understanding of the meaning of choosing a spouse between parents and children and contradictions between the expectations and realities of choosing a spouse, the criteria for choosing an ideal mate are consistent between the daughters and their parents.

These data indicate that the intergenerational conflict in the families of unmarried urban women is not a dichotomy. Parents' feelings and thoughts are influenced by the socio-cultural environment in which they grew up and are bound by gender divisions of labour and norms. Diverse emotional expressions should not be limited by an either/or 'dichotomy' position. The essence of dating corners is that parents of unmarried children act as a 'proxy' for their children to seek an ideal future partner using a mundane marketing mechanismand resolve emotional problems. Although the success rate is extremely low, this phenomenon is no less refreshing. Going beyond merely serving the purpose of matchmaking, the dating cornerfulfils the parents' need for socialisation and eases the conflict between themand their unmarried daughters. Although this strategy is not useful in finding suitable spouses for urban unmarried women, it can alleviate the pressure that unmarried women receive from their parents in their daily life by diverting their parents' excessive attention away from them. The

process of parents visiting dating corners for their unmarried daughters reflects the intergenerational dislocation of the subject of choosing a mate and the misplaced function of so doing. Although the unmarried daughters are still the ones who make the final decision, they make a compromise for the family. They choose to co-operate with and accept their parents' actions and reconcile their relationship with their parents by temporarily giving up a part of their subjective rights.

This study describes the mechanism underlying the park matchmaking corner, as well as the criteria and process of mate selection that parents adopt when looking for a spouse for their child. The park dating corner serves as a venue for parents to choose a mate in light of their duty to do so, and the place has far more significance for parents than for unmarried daughters. Compared to the popularity of the venue, the success rate of matchmaking is close to zero. However, parents of unmarried women use the venue to socialise with their peers, as well as to express their personal stress. Although the platform does not fulfil the parents' need for a mate for their unmarried daughters, it is effective in reducing the parents' anxiety and subsequently easing the intergenerational conflict, which, in turn, alleviates the pressure exerted by the families on their unmarried urban women. This chapter combined the social phenomenon of 'matchmaking corner' and 'urban unmarried women' to analyse the causes of intergenerational conflict and provide both a solution and a new perspective on marriage and family research, thus laying the groundwork for reconstructing harmonious family relationships among urban women.

Gender-based experience of unmarried urban women in the workplace

Chinese women's political status and constructed social images have changed dramatically over the past 70 years or so due to multiple factors, but they are generally still trapped in an environment of changing family obligations and gender imbalance (Winckler and Greenhalgh, 2005; Evans, 2008; Hershatter, 2007; Song, 2018). The modern woman's identity can be classified into three main types: traditional female identity and socially shaped identities–becoming a good wife and

mother; new type of female identity–becoming as accomplished as men in their respective fields; and dual identity play–taking on the dual responsibilities of family and career. The shift from the state 'getting women out of the house' through official narratives to the women themselves questioning the voices to 'get women home' reflects the change in female gender identity from the narrative of the other to the narrative of the self, as manifested in women's self-definition of their own identities as 'social labourers'. Women's social roles have been fundamentally reversed since then. Although there is still a persistent traditional gender order that makes things more difficult for women in the workplace, women's social role will not return solely to the traditional female role. Instead, the role expectations of women in the workplace at the present stage are predicated on a dual role, that is, to take on the dual responsibilities of family and career. By reviewing the literature on changes in women's status and their relationship to work at different times in Chinese history as a framework, the position of modern women in the workplace in society can be better understood.

This study found that the oppression suffered by urban unmarried women in the workplace at present stems mainly from the conflict between their gender and social roles. Single status gives women more freedom to choose their careers, but most Chinese women's expectations for the future include becoming mothers and wives. Thus, even if a woman is single, this expectation of motherhood still affects their future careers, and the effects of these internalised gender-based expectations are far-reaching, affecting not only single women's career choices but also their working lives. At the same time, the public expects the traditional gender role of single women, resulting in a dilemma facing unmarried women. Unlike the context of private family relationships discussed in the previous chapter, the workplace has more emphasis on efficiency and professionalism. However, even in the professional work field, the single status of female employees affects their daily working life. In China, professional women tend to consider more factors than men when choosing a career. After officially entering the workplace, single women also encounter more obstacles

because of their single status. This notwithstanding, single status is not entirely a negative factor for working women. Traditional culture presupposes that women are the victims of gender relations and can only play the role and persona of the weak and victimised. However, women can also join in the construction of relationships as subjects, and they have the power to define their own relationships with others. The modern women in the workplace are no longer the weaker sex in gender relations but have confidence in such relations and are able to expand their resources and careers. This is especially the case when women in the workplace see their singleness as a resource to be utilised, benefitting from their singleness when competing in the workplace. In China's employment environment, although women generally have to work harder than men to succeed, this is a direction that can change the gender order in the workplace.

Patriarchal nature of the workplace

This study echoes the findings of Liu's (2017) first study on unmarried women's workplace experiences, where young, highly educated professional women were hailed as 'white-collar beauties' by the Chinese media, revealing the patriarchal nature of the workplace. The industrialisation of modern society has created a huge demand for free labour. Men, who are physiologically free from reproductive obligations, occupy more positions of power and dominate public discourse because they are suited to the demands of industrialisation. Women, on the other hand, either have to combine motherhood with their career because of society's need for successors in the labour force (requiring women to take on reproductive responsibilities) or give up motherhood to pursue their career, with a high probability of being at a disadvantage in the workplace, while needing to consciously or unconsciously hide their 'femininity' to have a fairer chance of competing for the job. In most occupations, men are more likely to have an advantage. The advantages for single women in the workplace mentioned in this chapter refer to their advantages over married working

women with or without children, not over men. Generally, men have an advantage over women in the workplace in China's employment environment, except for specific occupations that require femininity, such as nursing and early childhood teaching. In a sense, single women have the advantage over working mothers as they can better compete with male workers in the workplace as free labour force.

The public tends to view the plight of women in the workplace as the result of choices made by the women themselves due to biological factors (motherhood). However, in the gender-unfriendly workplace environment, this 'consensus' is a misunderstanding that can be attributed to the interplay of capital, social culture and individual subjective choices. Contemporary Chinese women have far more control over their lives than their counterparts in previous generations. At the same time, however, they face a more complex environment. Modern Chinese society requires women to work and be independent, yet while many professional women work hard to pursue the life their mothers and grandmothers dreamed of, they realise that they are still expected to play the traditional roles of submissive wives and nurturing mothers.

Dilemma of choosing a career facing unmarried women

Work is an important part of modern urban life. While the influence of parents on urban unmarried women is mainly emotional, the daily work of modern women is closely related to their daily life. Occupation has a profound impact on urban single women. It not only provides them with economic resources and makes single life possible but also enables the reconstruction of urban women's identity. In the process of urbanisation, more and more women aregaining economic independence. Their primary identity no longer comes from their families (Yan, 2001). They are no longer just other people's daughters, wives or mothers, but by acquiring a position in the workplace, they succeed in placing themselves in the social relations of production and in securing their place in society.

However, the long-standing traditional gender ideology has not automatically faded away with the rapid socio-economic development and change. The traditional gender-based divisions of labour and social roles are still firmly embedded in the social relations of working women in modern society and have an impact on the workplace. Modern society demands more from women; they are expected to be economically independent by working alongside taking on the traditional gender role of caring for others (Gerson, 2002). The incompatibility between traditional and modern expectations often creates a dilemma for working women. Young women, in particular, face additional conflicts between their high professional ambitions and their future family responsibilities (Gerson, 2004).

When choosing a career, women who value their social role as future mothers alongside their career aspirations are faced with difficult choices. Influenced by various values, people have different preferences when choosing a career. Focusing on one's marital status is one of the most typical Chinese phenomena, one stemming from the traditional family-oriented Chinese culture. Chinese culture tends to prioritise family values and subordinate personal values. When the two are in conflict, the latter are usually subordinated to the former (Li, 2019). This is especially true for women. Women need to consider many factors when choosing a career, such as the nature or demands of the job. My findings are similar to those of To (2015), that is, most 'unmarried women' in China still hold traditional views on marriage and believe that marriage is necessary. These women are discriminated against in the marriage market and if they want to get married, they have to balance between career and family.

In the present study, it was found that at the time of choosing a career, some unmarried women expected to enter a high-competition, high-yield industry to realise their career aspirations and achieve success. However, they were constrained by internalised gender roles and had to make a difficult choice between a stable but

low-paying career (which was perceived to be more suitable for women) and a highly competitive and high-paying job for the sake of their future marriages and families. This dilemma does not exist for their male colleagues.

Workplace role presentation

The single status of unmarried women affects not only their career choices but also the working lives of professional women who have already chosen a career. Although the workplace is supposed to be professional, the etiquette of these single women's interactions with their colleagues varies greatly depending on the nature of their work, the work environment and whether they are looking for a partner in the workplace. Due to their single status, they are subjected to varying degrees of stress and obstacles at work; however, as a resource, being single can also benefit them at some point in their working lives when they exercise their subjectivity to empower themselves to utilise this resource. This study found that unmarried urban women choose to cope with these workplace influences through image management and self-presentation in the work environment.

Dress codes are easily overlooked in everyday life but are an important part of interactive rituals; they are also a visual reflection of attitudes about self-presentation. Professionals' dress codes are a good entry point for observing women's self-presentation and role management in the workplace. According to Collins (2013), interactions (or rituals) are a source of social motivation, and the image that each person presents in society is gradually formed through social interactions with others. People's presentation of themselves in the workplace also serves the purpose of shaping an idealised self, with workers essentially presenting their 'front stage' performance to create a desirable impression on their audience. With the exception of those working in laboratories, who were required to wear uniforms, the participants in this study were generally free to choose their own clothing. Depending on the nature

and of their work and the status of their role, they generally chose a variety of clothing. This study shows how unmarried women are affected by their single status in the workplace and how they exercise their subjectivity through image management to positively cope with the stressors facing them.

Invisible barriers facing unmarried women in the workplace: benevolent sexism

Another innovative contribution of this study is the introduction of the concept of 'benevolent sexism', which sheds light on the dilemmas facing women in the workplace due to their gender (Biernat, Tocci & Williams, 2012). With the popularisation of feminism, gender bias and sexism have been widely criticised by the public. While working women are not necessarily explicitly and openly demeaned in the workplace, well-intentioned gender bias is still prevalent in daily life, public opinion and interpersonal interactions, exerting a hidden but lethal effect on women's career advancement. Such attitudes, which are often difficult to recognise as prejudice due to the subjective good intentions of their holders, reinforce gender inequality by limiting women's role images and relegating them to a position of weakness. While the original concept refers specifically to well-intentioned gender bias exerted by men against women, this study found that the source of this patriarchal protection is not limited to men. Irrespective of sexual orientation, female managers are highly likely to exert such 'protection' over female subordinates in workplace relationships once they have included themselves in the patriarchal management system. This benevolent sexism is derived from gender bias. This bias is deceptive and manifests itself in positive attitudes and loving behaviours towards women, restricting women's social roles and space for development.

To some extent, this prejudice is not bad, and there are ways for unmarried women to counteract it in the workplace. This kind of sexism refers to the fact that managers have subjectively good intentions but restrict women to traditional gender roles in the

workplace; however, unmarried women can use this aspect to their advantage in the workplace by presenting themselves as 'good women'who conform to gender role norms in the workplace and ultimately achieve their goals. For example, Yang, who works in the construction industry, revamped her professional image after she turned 30to portray a more feminine appearance by wearing more feminine attire than her previous neutral clothing. This strategy worked for Yang because the construction industry is a male-dominated industry, and the patriarchal nature of the workplace is more pronounced. Her strategy appeals to both male and female leaders. Although there are far fewer female leaders in her industry compared with their male counterparts, Yang found that her female leaders have also become 'easier to communicate with' after the image management. According to her experience in the workplace, when her appearance was more feminine, she was easily understood by her colleagues who did not have a conflict of interest with her, and she even had smoother interactions with clients. Although the success of her strategy could be attributed to the fact that she gained experience in the workplace over time, I believe that this strategy of appearing closer to the social norm of a 'good woman' figure also helped her benefit from the benevolent gender bias of her colleagues and clients in the workplace. One of the reasons she was able to make such obvious gains through image management was that she previously dressed neutrally, meaning the before and after contrast was pronounced. However, unmarried women need to be aware of the extent to which this can be done, because if their image is too close to the social role norms, it will end up emphasising traditional gender roles in the workplace, which is not conducive to the reshaping of the gender order in the working sphere.

Reconstruction of gender relations in the workplace

Traditional culture presupposes that women are victims of gender relations and can only play the role and persona of the weak and the victimised. However, from a materialist feminist perspective, women can also join in the construction of

relationships as subjects, and they have the power to define their relationships with others on their own. Unmarried urban women are willing to abandon traditional gender roles in the workplace and redefine their social roles as purely competitive professionals.

There is a consensus in many studies regarding women's experiences of discrimination in the workplace and the reality that women are at an increasing disadvantage in China's marketisation process (Li, 2011; Li, 2013; Liu et al). The previously discussed issue was that unmarried women have an advantage over married women in the workplace, but not over men. To cope with this inequality in the labour market, many unmarried women emphasise their professional status as workers in the workplace, taking advantage of their single status to devote themselves to their work and maximise their time to maximise their career success. In the process, their social role is simply that of competitors in the workplace.

This study adopted a material feminist perspective to examine the gender experiences of unmarried urban women in a workplace that is patriarchal in nature. The subjects of this study were actors in a complex structure of social relations, including gender relations. This strategy allowed the study to circumvent the main pitfall of many women's studies, namely, the sexist tendency to replace all relationships with gender and to mask all social variables with this concept. In addition, unmarried urban women, who are the subject of this paper, are no longer passive objects bound in a network of gender relations and social structures, but rather subjects in gender relations that are constantly adjusted in response to social change. Although this subject is still fundamentally bound by the unspoken rules of gender relations and gender order, women are constantly breaking the rules and creating opportunities in dynamic practice. The dynamic changes in gender relations and unmarried women's subjective rights reflects the counter-conventional practices and attempts of unmarried women in urban cities.

Overall, this study argues that it is crucial to create a healthy public discourse on gender and encourage gender equality throughout society. Working women experience far more tension in their dual roles than men due to traditional gender norms. The gender biases suffered by both married and unmarried women in the workplace are similar. Urban unmarried women have an advantage over married women in the workplace, but not over the average male. The main advantage for unmarried women is the absence of realistic family burdens. However, the internalised gender norms influence the career choices of working women from the beginning of the career selection process. Whether a working woman gives up one of her roles or struggles to do both, she has to face physical and mental hardships in the midst of it all. This study aimed to serve as a starting point for reflecting on work ethics in the hope that other researchers will continue to explore professional women's work–family dynamics. Data on the experiences of women in the workplace can enrich the practice of feminism in China and provide important references for the practice of gender equality in China and the international community.

The feminist movements in the context of the Republican bourgeois revolution, the New Culture Movement, and the communist context in the People's Republic of China have all gained sufficient attention (Hershatter, 2007; Tong, 2006). Specific historical stages had different themes and demands for the women's movement, but the liberation of women from social and family oppression has always been one of the ultimate goals of the Chinese feminist movement. Although the social status of Chinese women has improved significantly compared to the historical situation, the overall gender experience of women remains structurally oppressed and unequal. Historically, the large-scale feminist movements in China have been state- or male-led, top-down reforms, and there has been a lack of female-led, bottom-up, effective feminist movements. Moreover, due to the peculiarities of China's authoritarian system of government, the state is wary of bottom-up women's movements. Feminist movements at the political level are perceived as a threat to state rule, and the public space for women's movements is constantly being reduced (Wu and Dong, 2019). The

new generation of feminist movements thus requires women to make their voices and demands heard in the public sphere at the cultural level in the form of networks and so on.

Despite the fact that unmarried women in urban China are already in an economically privileged position, they are still subjected to multi-dimensional oppression from social opinion and their families because of their unmarried status. It is gratifying to note that the awakening of women's own 'discursive consciousness' can be clearly observed. Women are now active participants, consciously constructing their own social identity to express themselves and their demands, demonstrating a discursive self-awareness. My research demonstrates the gender practices of urban unmarried women, challenges traditional gender narratives, contributes to the theory and practice of women's resistance in the new era, and further enriches the narrative image of Chinese women.

Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research

This study has two main limitations. First, due to sample limitations, this study only recruited a sample of heterosexual unmarried women and their parents, failing to recruit women from the lesbian community, making the data less comprehensive. It was not possible to compare the similarities and differences in gender experiences in the daily lives of unmarried women of different gender orientations. This would be an interesting line of research for a follow-up study. Meanwhile, there were no non-marriageists in the study sample; they simply chose to put marriage on hold for the time being. Even Yang, who has been unmarried for the longest period, was open to marriage. I believe that subsequent research on this topic can fill the research gap in the literature pertaining to this group of women.

Another limitation of this study was the limited time available, which meant only

urban unmarried women from the middle class were included, making it impossible to form a framework for comparison between different economic classes and social strata. However, this limitation also leaves room for future research. The existence of urban unmarried women is an urban phenomenon, and these women already belong to a privileged class. Future research can build on this study to explore the gender experiences of unmarried women outside the middle-class realm to refine the direction of research in this area and promote gender equality and improvements in traditional Chinese gender narratives.

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Appendices

Research questions

1. How old are you?
2. How is your family background? (Are they middle class or working class? Have they divorce? Are you the single child in your family?)
3. How long have been single?
4. The reason why you keep singleness?
5. How many relationships do you have before?
6. What's your opinion about marriage?
7. Do you feel the social stigma? And what's your attitude about it?
8. How do you feel about social pressure?
9. Does singleness affect your friendship or interaction with others?
10. What's your parents' attitude about your singleness?
11. Do you feel difference in the working place?
12. What's your attitude about being single?
13. How do you feel about being single?

	Participant description

Name	Age	Educational Level	Occupation
Luo Yazhi	27	Master	News
Wu	28	Master	Publishing
Yuan	28	Master	Media
Wang Wei	33	Master	News
Min	28	B.A.	Marketing
Yang	36	Master	IT
Lee	27	B.A.	Publishing
Han	29	Master	Presenter
Cheng	31	B.A.	Accounting
Song Yun	30	B.A.	Engineering audit
Yang Shuang	30	B.A.	News
Xin	29	B.A.	Engineering
Meng	27	B.A.	Bidding
Feng	28	B.A.	Insurance
Fang	31	B.A.	Insurance
Yang Ping	42	Master	Engineering audit
Mango	29	Master	Researcher in Quarantine Laboratory
Song Shuang	36	Master	Banking
Wu yi	31	Master	Researcher in Quarantine Laboratory
Li Yingmei	33	PhD	Researcher in Quarantine Laboratory
Jiang Jianguo	30	Master	University logistics
Jia Jia	27	B.A.	Accounting
Wu Lei	31	Master	Student adviser
Jiang Xin	30	PhD	Researcher
Feng Wei	31	PhD	University lecturer

Table: Demographic data of the 25 interviewees

CONSENT FORM

RESEARCH TITLE: The self-representation of Single Women in Urban China

This form is for you to state whether or not you agree to take part in the interview process for the research title above. Please read and answer all the questions. Please feel free to ask me for clarification if you have any questions or concerns.

Have you read and understood the project information sheet 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 the information you provide may be used for PhD research and future publications?
YES ☐   NO ☐

Do you agree to take part in the study?
YES ☐   NO ☐

Do you agree that the interview be audio recorded?
YES ☐   NO ☐

Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from the study up to the date the work is published after the completion of the interview?
YES ☐   NO ☐

Do you agree that the researcher may archive your data in the UK Data archive?
YES ☐   NO ☐

Do you understand that the researcher will anonymise your name and disguise your personal information in her thesis and future publications?
YES ☐   NO ☐

Do you understand that your friends might identify you even through the researcher anonymises your name and disguises your personal information in her thesis and future publication?
YES ☐   NO ☐

Your name (in BLOCK letters):
……

Your signature:

………

Your contact Details:

………

The researcher's name:

………

Date: ………………………………………………………

知情同意书 – 采访

项目题目：中国剩女的自我呈现

研究参与者请填写此表格来表达是否愿意参与研究，请认真阅读并回答下列问题。如果您有任何问题请询问研究者。

1. 您了解此研究内容并阅读了项目信息表吗？

是　　否

2. 您了解您有机会提问吗？

是　　否

3. 您了解您所提供的信息研究者将予以保密吗？

是　　否

4. 您了解您所提供的信息将用于研究者的博士论文和相关学术研究的发表吗？

是　　否

5. 您同意参与此研究吗？

是　　否

6. 如果同意接受采访，您同意此次采访全程录音吗？

是　　否

7. 您了解在采访结束后您在论文发表之前都可以随时退出此次研究吗？

是　　否

8. 您同意研究者将研究数据提交给英国数据档案馆么？

是　　否

9. 您了解研究者会在论文中将您的信息匿名处理么？

是　　否
10.您了解即使研究者在论文中匿名处理您的信息，您的朋友可能仍然会识别您么？

是　否

姓名: _____

签名: _____

您的联系方式: _____

研究者姓名: _____

日期: _____

Research Information Sheet

What is the research title?
The self-representation of Single Women in Urban China

Who is the researcher?
My name is Siyuan Dong and I am a PhD student at the Centre for Women's Studies, University of York. I am conducting this study to collect data for my PhD thesis.

What is the research about?
My study focuses on Single Women in Urban China. My research aim is to contribute to the knowledge on personal experiences of 'leftover women' in China and provide a more neutral view of them to challenge negative stereotypes. I am going to conduct all interviews face-to-face in Harbin. I intend to invite 30-40participants.

Why is the research being carried out?
The situation regarding the 'leftover women' in China has been a subject of wide public concern. The public media is always trying to stick a negative label on these single women and stigmatize them. However, the studies about 'leftover women' in China were mainly conducted to seek reasons and causes rather than consulting the 'leftover women' themselves. The term 'leftover women' is the product of social stigma and social stereotyping. It is therefore important to study how these women see themselves.

Do you have to take part?
Your participation is completely voluntary. If you agree to take part but later change your mind, you are still free to withdraw for any reason and at any time up to the date the work is published. If you decide to withdraw, I will destroy all the data relating to you.

What do you need to do if you take part?
An informal conversation with the researcher. The interview is designed to last one to two hours, and our dialogues will be audio recorded. The interview will be conducted in Chinese. You can decide where our interview takes place (For example, in your flat, the researcher's flat or a café/tea house). I will ask you some questions about your experiences as a Single Women and family background, career, friendship, relationships, experience of social pressure, and attitude to stigma, etc.

What will happen to your data?
The information you provide in the interview will be transcribed into Chinese. Parts of my fieldnotes and short parts of the interview transcripts will be translated into English and used in my PhD thesis and related academic publications. I will ensure confidentiality and anonymity in my research. You names will be anonymised and any other details that identify you will be removed or changed. If you are introduced to me or introduce me to someone else, it is possible

this could undermine your anonymity and you need to aware the importance of confidentiality regarding others you know who are taking part in my research. I will take care to ensure, as far as possible, that you are not identifiable by using additional safeguards such as disguising your occupation and hometown, etc. All the data will be stored safely, and only my supervisor and I can see the original data. If you agree, I will archive my field notes and transcripts in the UK data archive after I complete my research. During the whole process of this project, you can ask to read your information in the field notes, transcripts of the interviews, PhD thesis and related publications. My research has been reviewed and approved by the Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology (ELMPS) Ethics Committee, University of York. If you are concerned with any ethical issues in my study, please email the ELMPS Ethics Committee or my supervisor.

I sincerely invite you to participate in my research on the self-representation of Single Women. If you have any questions about my project before, during or after my research, please feel free to contact me. Your participation is much appreciated and thank you very much for your cooperation.

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The Chair of ELMPS Email:
tony.royle@york.ac.uk

项目信息表

项目题目是什么？
中国剩女的自我呈现

谁在做研究？
我是董思源，是一名英国约克大学女性研究中心在读博士生。我的这次研究是为博士论文提供材料和数据。

研究内容是什么？
我的博士论文旨在研究中国剩女的自我呈现，
意图发现在日常生活中剩女们将如何与他人交往以及如何展示自己，我将采访 30-40 位符合剩女标准的单身女性，请你们谈谈自己作为剩女在日常生活中的与其他朋友，亲人，和工作环境中的日常交往经历，例如：家庭背景，作为剩女是否对自己的工作产生影响，是否感受到过污名化，社交和成长经历等等。

为什么需要做这个研究？
在中国的大众媒体的渲染下，剩女已经成为了一个污名化的群体。大众对剩女已经形成了一种负面的刻板印象。人们热衷于谈论这个话题，仿佛成为剩女是一件十分可怕的事情。城市中的大龄单身女性们遭受着来自方方面面不合理的关注和压力。探究剩女的真实生活并聆听她们意见，这促使我开展对当代中国城市中但大龄单身女性生活的研究并聆听她们自己的故事。

您需要参与这个研究么？
参与这个研究完全出于自愿。如果您决定参与这个项目但是后面又改变主意，在论文发表之前您可以随时选择退出。如果您决定退出本项目，与您相关的数据都会被彻底删除。

如果您参与这个研究我需要做什么？
您会和研究者进行一次一到两小时的聊天。我们的聊天内容会被录音。可以由您来选择采访的地点（例如：您家，研究者的家，咖啡店或茶楼）。我会问一些关于城市大龄单身女性生活的问题，关于家庭背景，作为剩女是否对自己的工作产生影响，是否感受到过污名化，社交和成长经历等等。

怎样处理您的信息？
我们在采访中的谈话内容将被记录成中文。部分我的观察笔记和小部分采访内容将翻译成英文并作为博士论文和相关学术论文的数据。我会保护您的个人信息和隐私，我会使用化名，所有与您有关个人信息将会被移除或处理，以确保在研究中不泄露您的身份。如果您是通过朋友被介绍给我的或者您将我介绍给了其他人，可能会增加您被辨认出的可能性。我将会通过模糊您的家乡和工作等来额外保护措施来进一步确保您的匿名性。有关您个人信息的数据，只有我和我的导师可以阅读，所有的研究数据我都会妥善保管。
在征得您的同意后，我将在研究结束后把笔记和采访数据存入英国数据档案中。在我的博士研究期间，您可以随时要求阅读我的笔记、采访记录、博士论文和相关出版物。这项研究已经通过了英国约克大学经法管政社科伦理委员会的批准。如果您有任何疑问，欢迎您邮件联

系英国约克大学经法管政社科伦理委员会或我的导师。

真诚地邀请您参与这项关于中国剩女的自我呈现的研究。如果您在参与在这个项目之前、期间或之后有任何疑问，请随时和我联系。非常感谢您的参与和配合。

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Glossary of Key Terms

'Leftover women' or 'Sheng nǚ' / 剩女：high-income urban women who are over 27 years old, single and well-educated

Hukou / 户口：Household Registration

Danwei / 单位：Unit (national-owned company)

Zhengchang /正常：normal， ordinary

Feeling/ 有感觉：romantic feeling

Responsible/ 负责任，有担当 being willing to and capable of shouldering responsibility within family

Picture of Blind Date Corner in Bejing Tiantan Park