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“Leftover? No! I am a victorious woman”:

Exploring the identity of sheng nv in contemporary China

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This thesis is dedicated to my beloved grandmother, Zhu Baoyun.

谨以此文，献给我最爱的奶奶 朱宝云。

Abstract

There has been a significant rise in the number of well-educated, highly paid, and independent unmarried women in China in the last decade. They have been officially defined as 'leftover women' (sheng nv) by the Ministry of Education and the All-China Women's Federation. This increasing number of single women is surprising given the social status of single women, a highly problematic role in the culture. In China, there is a high value attached to marriage and motherhood. This study explores the constitution of the 'leftover women' phenomenon from outer and inner tiers, both the external forces and the women themselves and further investigates the identity construction of 'leftover women'.

The research starts with an exploration of the interplay between gender, politics, and media and finds that 'leftover women' discourse is not based on demographic or social realities, but serves as a political campaign in the light of anxieties about changing gender dynamics and power structures. Despite the popularity of the term 'leftover women' in media and political discourses, the voices of these women are rarely heard. The research was guided by the communication theory of identity (Hecht, Warren, Jung, & Krieger, 2005) as a theoretical framework, and a phenomenological inquiry (Van Manen, 1990) as methodology. Based on interviews with 26 Chinese 'leftover women', this study explores their lived experiences in relation to the meaning of singlehood, striving for completeness, their negotiation on relationships and their choices. In their own voices, the term 'victorious women' is a homophonic replacement of the term 'leftover women'. The double meaning of 'leftover women' and 'victorious women' with the same pronunciation 'sheng nv' implies the complexity of their identity construction and negotiation.

This research finds that their identity goes beyond marriage and/or motherhood. 'Leftover women' are actively challenging and transcending dominant social identities of women and creating an alternative idea of womanhood through valuing independence and chosen connections with others. It shows a composition of self that represents a paradigmatic shift in the view of woman from a passive, dependent object with little control over the direction of her life to womanhood as an active agent, as autonomous yet connected to others in accordance with what she values. This shift, I

argue, is the essence of the ‘leftover women’ phenomenon, as an increasing number of women are choosing not to get married in contemporary China.

The single identity moves from how a sheng nv defines her singleness, seeks her completeness, and negotiates her relationships and choices to sheng nv as a joint force that creates new forms of womanhood. This communal identity can become a new social identity for Chinese women. The evidence from this study strongly suggests that being an ‘outsider looking in’ can be a powerful standpoint to initiate the change of self at the personal level, enacted level, and relational level allowing transformation of dominant social identity of women and new forms of womanhood to announce themselves.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (expect where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extension has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institute of higher learning.

Signature of candidate

Christina (Chao) Zhang

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Chapter 1 Introduction: befriending 'leftover women' – who they are?

After graduating with my Master degree in UK, I returned to China, where I was greeted with concerns about my marital status. When people discovered that I was single, they commented that I needed to 'hurry up' or just blatantly asked 'why you don't have a boyfriend?' At first, I thought it was just me, but then I realised that my peers were experiencing this as well. Being single is seen as a deviant status in a society where marriage and parenthood are the norms. We almost become public property, subject to personal questions, even from complete strangers.

Born in 1990, I grew up in a rapidly changing China. As the only child, I watched my mother care for the household, comprising of me, my father and my father's parents. She also worked as a middle school teacher. I saw how much she sacrificed for the family, giving up her job when my father was transferred to another city. She gave up a promotion to take care of me in my senior year and help me prepare for my university entry examination. I listened to her when she told me about educational qualifications and financial independence being my ticket to a new life. Later, before I started studying for a Master's, I spent a month with my aunt who worked full-time at home. She always told me that I would not be a real woman because I had no husband and children.

My younger aunt lived on the other side of the country. I spend half of the summer with her before starting my PhD. She is a single woman running her own farm. She is a poultry instructress for the Department of Agriculture, drives at high speeds along country roads in Inner-Mongolia, travels abroad at least twice a year and reads a book every evening. To me, she is a real woman.

Observing the lives of the women of the previous generation in my family, there are many different ideas about what it is to be a woman in China. I started my PhD when I was 24 years old – I am now turning 27 and becoming a 'leftover woman'.

1.1 Problem statement and purpose

Census data shows that there has been a significant rise in the number of unmarried women in the whole world (United Nations, 2012). The increase of singleness in the

Western world has been attributed to social, cultural and economic changes, but not much is known about singleness in the rest of the world. This study takes a look at unmarried women in the Eastern World, particularly in China. As can be seen in the table 1, the number of unmarried women has tripled in China - from 8.7% (age 25-29), 1.4% (age 30-34), 0.5% (age 35-39) in 2000 to 21.6%, 6.4%, and 1.8% in 2010, respectively (United Nations, 2012). China has shown the greatest increase over the last decade, but such figures are still lower than other Asian countries, such as Japan (60.3%, 34.5%, 23.1%), Singapore (54.1%, 25.1%, 17.1%), and Korea (59.1%, 19.0%, 7.6%) (United Nations, 2012).

Table 1. Never-married rate of China, Japan, Singapore and Korea in 2000 and 2010

Country	2000			2010		
Ages	25-29	30-34	35-39	25-29	30-34	35-39
China	8.7%	1.4%	0.5%	21.6%	6.4%	1.8%
Japan	59.1%	32.0%	18.8%	60.3%	34.5%	23.1%
Singapore	42.5%	19.5%	15.1%	54.1%	25.1%	17.1%
Korea	40.1%	10.7%	4.3%	59.1%	19.0%	7.6%

In China, this phenomenon has taken a unique turn: unlike their male peers, who are called ‘diamond bachelors’, unmarried women who are well-educated, highly paid, independent and over 27 are labelled ‘leftover women’ (Fincher, 2016). Derogatory terms like ‘leftover women’ also exist in other countries as informal insults. However, in China, ‘leftover women’ has become an official term first proposed by the All-China Women’s Federation (ACWF), then defined by the Chinese government and disseminated by Chinese media. For these organisations, the message is that ‘leftover women’ are a social problem that have a detrimental influence on social stability and the quality of future population. White (1987) argues that it is important to comprehend the role of culture to grasp shifts in the meaning of terms in the modern world. Cultural backgrounds and their effect on people need to be examined to gain an understanding of women’s single lives, as women’s experiences of, and perceptions on, singlehood are rooted in culture.

In China, the term ‘leftover women’ has become part of an official vocabulary. The Chinese media have been promoting it widely, describing young unmarried/single women as ‘leftover women’ and referring to a social crisis of a growing number of these women who cannot find a husband and who have a detrimental influence on social

stability and the quality of the future population. Despite its wide usage in the media and political discourse, the voices of these women are rarely heard. This silence is a starting point for this research, which is the exploration of the identity of 'leftover women'. In the interviews, instead of internalising the negative meanings connected with leftover food, these women refer to 'victorious women' – the same phonetic transcription of 'leftover women' but with a positive meaning. The term 'leftover women' and 'victorious women' are homophones with the same pronunciation of 'sheng nv'. The contradiction of the double meaning of 'leftover women' and 'victorious women' illustrates the complexity of their identity formation. This positive interpretation of 'sheng nv' might also contribute towards the increasing number of women willing to be single and identified as such.

Only a small number of studies (e.g., Byrne, 2000; DePaulo, 2007; Macvarish, 2006) have specifically examined the way in which women construct their singlehood and how they have been marginalised by society. The findings of these studies suggest that being single is seen as a troubled, almost pathological identity for women. At the same time, there is evidence that single women are discovering strengths and opportunities for self-development. There is a need for research that will make the composition, maintenance and negotiation of the identity of 'leftover women' more visible through their understanding of singlehood, their experience of seeking completeness and their negotiation of relationships. Their voices should be heard and respected.

The Chinese national and cultural identity relies on a number of core institutions. The most important one is family. Another concern of the thesis is the effect of the ideologies of marriage and motherhood on the social identity of women. Ideas about what it is to be a woman in China are shaped by familistic ideologies. Participants in this study have been born in 1980s, when social change was instigated by the implementation of the open-up policy and the one-child policy, a period capturing the tensions between traditionalism and modernity. Taking the ages into account, a coincidence can be found that the first generation of 'leftover women' and the first generation of one-child are the same group of people. Familism and collectivism framed the old order, individualism framed the new. Familism is an ideology where the marital family is treated as a social, cultural, political and economic unit that is opposed to individualism (Yang, 1998). The autonomy for women is based in individualism, which is

regarded as key to realising one's full potential (Yang, 1998). An individual's relation to their family is arguably more significant for women than men. Mediating between familism and individualism remains a challenge in Chinese society.

Womanhood is traditionally and culturally viewed as only acquired through marriage and motherhood. This socially approved conception is built upon gender differences and being in dependent relationships with other people. However, womanhood also has internal aspects, or the individual's sense of oneself as a woman, her sense of identity. In the absence of empirical investigation, it is hard to determine the effect of ideological formations on identity composition in China. The effect of public ideologies on private or social identities on individual identity from personal, enacted and relational aspects are notoriously difficult to pin down, but to understand a phenomenon concerning social change, a focus on identity is necessary.

In order to appreciate what it means to be a woman in China and to establish if dominant ideologies continue to prevail, I discussed identity issues with a group of 26 women who meet the definition of 'leftover women'. They are unmarried, independent, well-educated and highly paid – they therefore do not conform to dominant social identities for women. Within the hierarchy of gender identities and in the context of familistic ideologies, to be a single woman is to be in a marginal place. As defined as 'leftover women', the single female identity has been the object of stereotypes and stigmatisation. In contrast, 'diamond bachelors' have been labelled untroubled and living lives of unrestrained freedom, pointing to gendered stigma.

The concept of woman as the 'other' is central to feminist theories on women's identity (Woods, 2005). Not only is being a women the 'other' when compared to men, but single women are also the 'other' to married women. This brings attention to communicative interaction in the process of identity composition; I argue that an analysis is required that is sensitive to the personal, enacted, relational and communal consequences of social interaction on the individual. Women engage with responses on the level of the self, refashioning, changing, or reinventing her social identity and reverting with her unique response to it (Barlow, 2004). This is a view of the person not manipulated by forces outside her control, but as a person in relationships with others, who makes decisions, who refers to her own values, who has the capacity for being herself and for

who acts on her own behalf. This is a view of woman as responsible for, and capable of, compromising her own single identity.

What are the consequences for the identity of individuals when their identity is outside the approved model? I wish to establish how 'leftover women' are resisting dominant social identities and look for evidence of new and alternative identities for women from women's accounts. I argue that a general focus on identity issues demonstrates that transformations at the level of the individual are occurring, transformations that have collective consequences and significant implications for our understanding of womanhood and what it is to be a woman in contemporary China. Just as 'leftover women' are shaped by the historical-cultural climate, they also contribute to the changing historical-cultural landscape.

1.2 Theoretical framework

Identity is generally seen as a complex concept (Cox & Lyddon, 2007). However, despite an extensive scholarship on identity, no standard definition has provided a comprehensive picture of the dynamics of communication that form the conception of identity. Identity construction was first understood as being composed of multiple tiers in relation to an environment (e.g., Hogg & Abrams, 1988) and then as a continually developing procedure concerning the negotiation with interpersonal and social interactions (e.g., Kellner, 1992; Winn & Rubin, 2001). Although identity has been seen as a multi-dimensional concept, there is no standard definition that reflects the full picture of the dynamics that compose identity.

Social identity theory views identity construction as a product of social categorisation, such as ethnicity, gender and class. Individuals internalise these by aligning themselves to ideas within categories that reflect their values, attitudes and behaviours (Hogg, 2007). While it provides a methodical exploration of the social aspects of identity construction, the theory does not consider micro-level attributes. On the other hand, identity theory is built on the perception that people possess and express multiple roles across different social contexts (Stets & Burke, 2000). It asserts that social roles are internalized and the relationship between society and individuals shape people's role identity. However, it has been argued that research concentrating upon roles neglects

the communal aspect of identities (Hecht, Ribeau, & Jackson, 2003). Although research on social roles sees identity as formed by social interactions, it ignores the role of communication in identity formation, how role and identity are communicated and how identity is formed through communication (Baldwin, Faulkner, & Hecht, 2006).

Built on social identity theory and identity theory, the communication theory of identity (CTI) takes a unique mechanism – through communication, individuals internalise social relations and roles as identities and the identities, and vice versa, all of which are acted out as social behaviours (Jung & Hecht, 2004). The CTI advances the understanding of the relationship between communication and identity by conceptualising identity as an intrinsically communicative process instead of regarding it as the mere product of interaction (Baldwin et al., 2006).

CTI emphasises communicative and relational aspects of identity and expands the understanding of identity as a multi-layered concept that individuals and communities socially construct themselves (Hecht & Baldwin, 1998). It takes interpretive and dialectical approaches. The interpretive approach centres on investigating "the member's taken-for-granted, in and out-group assumptions about culture and communication" (Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993, p. 15). This approach is useful as these women's voices have been ignored or muted in the process of understanding Chinese culture. In addition to this, the dialectical approach focuses on understanding the complexity of identity and how identity reflects society (Hecht et al., 1993). It includes paradoxes, ambivalence and contradiction. It is important to pay careful attention to dialectical tensions that exist in an individual's identity in this research.

To understand the complex communication process of identity, CTI proposes that identities can be explored via four frames: the personal, enacted, relational and communal (Hecht et al., 1993). The personal frame is concerned with people's understanding of themselves. The enacted frame refers to messages which express identity. The relational frame focuses on one's identity in relation to one's other identities as well as others' identities. The communal frame examines shared identity of a group of people. The four frames allow the investigation of identity from multiple perspectives, revealing a more holistic viewpoint of the identity of Chinese 'leftover women'. These four layers pinpoint the location of identity and can be seen as ways to

'interpret reality' as they can provide an opportunity to conceptualise identity through acquiring robust results concerning the inter and inner relationships of identities at a range of levels. This represents the complexity of identity in the real world. They are intertwined and interpenetrated to "create dialectical tension requiring identity negotiation" (Hecht et al., 2003, p. 27).

1.3 Research questions

Under the guide of CTI as theoretical framework, this study explores the phenomenon of 'leftover women' in order to answer the main research question (RQ) in relation to the communal frame.

Main RQ: what constitutes the phenomenon of 'leftover women'?

The analysis is structured in two tiers: an outer layer based on external forces and an inner layer based on the women themselves. The outer layer is viewed as a political campaign organised by the government and the All-China Women's Federation rather than a reflection of social reality, and is given context through demographic statistics, policy orientation and media representation. The inner layer – the core of this phenomenon – explores the increasing number of single women. Under the guide of the four frames of CTI, three sub-research questions concerning personal, enacted and relational identity frames are answered through the voices of the women:

Sub RQ1: what does being single mean for a Chinese 'leftover woman'?

Sub RQ2: how does a Chinese 'leftover woman' seek completeness?

Sub RQ3: in what ways do the relationships of a Chinese 'leftover woman' with others contribute to her choice?

1.4 Methodology

In order to answer these research questions, phenomenological inquiry has been adopted as methodology of this study. Giorgi (2009) explains that phenomenology is a philosophy that seeks to understand anything that can be experienced through the consciousness from the perspective of the person undergoing the experience; in this study, it is the voice of 'sheng nv'. It is also a qualitative methodology that serves to

rigorously describe, interpret and criticise the meaning of the what is taken for granted in the world (Nelson, 1989); in this case, it is the public understanding of 'leftover women'. Phenomenological inquiry allows for an inductive exploration of the complexities of the experiences of Chinese 'leftover women'. It is important to understand that phenomenology is not interested in an objective analysis of the social phenomenon that excludes the experiencer. Phenomenology is based on the reasoning that nothing can be known, or spoken about, that does not come through consciousness (Giorgi, 2009). A qualitative approach is necessary to gain insights into the similarities and differences of the identity formation and negotiation of 'leftover women'.

Van Manan (1990) describes phenomenology as the study of the world as it is experienced pre-reflectively, before we categorise and conceptualise any information. Application of this approach allows for an intimate understanding of what phenomenon means and how it is experienced. The fundamental question that phenomenologists try to answer is "what is this or that kind of experience like?" (Van Manen, 1990, p.9). In this regard, phenomenological research is the study of the essence of a shared experience (Husserl, 1962). It allows for an understanding of a phenomenon as it is seen through the eyes of the people who have lived it (Patton, 2002).

Phenomenology, as the "theory of the unique" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 6) illuminates the heterogeneity and distinctiveness of the experiences of a minority group by giving them the opportunity to voice to their own lived experiences in an unconstrained manner (Nelson, 1989). It not only offers a discursive space for recognising diverse lived experiences, but also affords an opportunity to capture insights into the first-person experience and the distinctiveness of human behaviour (Wertz, 2005). Phenomenological inquiry is effective to capture the experiences of 'sheng nv' to "allow the cultural perceptions to emerge from their own words", and to increase understanding of complex communication processes (Hecht, Ribeau, & Sedano, 2000, p. 35). By increasing awareness of "the consequential in the inconsequential, the significance in the taken-for-granted" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 8), such an inductive methodology reveals the nuances of identity enactments (Viruell-Fuentes, 2006). It is important to note that phenomenologists do not make claims about the universality of an experience. Instead, they attempt to capture its richness and uniqueness, and may seek generality within a specific context (Wertz, 2005). The phenomenological inquiry

method is particularly suited to articulating the diverse experiences of 'leftover women' while considering their commonalities at the same time.

The study is based on 26 face-to-face, semi-structured and in-depth interviews with unmarried Chinese women who are 27-36 years old, highly-educated and well paid. The researcher and participants are co-creators of knowledge as per phenomenological inquiry. This ultimately breaks down issues of power and authority traditionally embedded in the researcher's role and redistributes power more evenly amongst all parties involved in the interview process (Hesse-Biber, 2007). To accomplish this, the type of face-to-face, semi-structured and in-depth interview is a reflexive, dyadic approach. With this type of interview, the focus remains on the participant and pursues the same basic inquiry with each interviewee while leaving some conversational freedom. As for data analysis, the interactive process of phenomenological inquiry has three synergistic stages: collecting descriptions of lived experiences (description), reviewing descriptions to reveal essential themes (reduction) and discovering how the essential themes collectively reflect the principle of the phenomenon (interpretation).

1.5 Original contribution

A focus on the management, organisation and negotiation of a stigmatised identity is useful in understanding resistance to the dominant, patriarchal order. I suggest conducting an examination on the process of identity composition from the viewpoint of the individual, in particular one who is in a marginalised social position to better understand their stigmatised identity. In this thesis I explored how 'leftover women' manage to compose a coherent identity and strive for an acceptable social identity in a familistic society. With evidence of transformative identities, it could lead to an alteration of the dominant social identity. They compose an identity that refutes sexual difference, marital status and inequality but embraces independence, completeness and relational connectedness. This identity challenges the dominant gender identities and the meaning of womanhood in Chinese society. A focus on identity reveals identity as an inherent communicative process through which 'leftover women' reinterpret and redefine the dominant social identity for women and find alternatives of womanhood.

I provide a reconceptualisation of autonomy that includes a relational element and a reassessment of women's attachments. I also argue for a broader interpretation of choice to include freedom to choose, valuation preference and a decision informed by the values, plans, priorities and relationships which support a lifestyle and is involved in identity composition.

This research shows that 'leftover women' are proactively creating an identity that is not based on marriage and motherhood, but upon their experience of being single in China. This is a personal achievement for women, who actively challenge and overcome dominant social identities for women and create alternative ways to attain womanhood. Identity for 'leftover women' is not a matter of being defined in a relationship to others, such as wife, as mother, as daughter, but rather by oneself in chosen relationships with others. This is a composition of self that represents a paradigmatic shift in the view of woman from a dependent object with little control over the direction of her life to an active agent, who is autonomous, but connected to others in accordance with that which she values. This shift, I argue, is the essence of the 'leftover women' phenomenon – the increasing number of women who choose not to get married. It represents a change in women's identities, which began in the 1980s through awareness and collective work associated with the humanism movement, facilitated by legislative, political and economic reform and through developments in technology.

This research extends the communication theory of identity (CTI) in four aspects: transverse and longitudinal tenet, new levels of relational frame, identity gaps within frames and identity gaps management model. I propose to include a transverse and longitudinal tenet that communication is continuous. This belief highlights that communication is a vehicle of identities, relationships and society that goes on across time and people. Identity needs to be conceptualised within the continuity of communication to understand its changes. Moreover, CTI focuses on identity negotiation from the individual's perspective. However, given the nature of the relational and communal frames, where the individual's concept of self is impacted by relational others, it is imperative to also take into account the responses of the other individuals in the relational frame or the community member in the communal frame.

There are two new levels of relational frames that emerge in my research: counter-identities and perceived ascribed identities. In addition to the four levels of relational frames, people identify themselves in relation to their counterparts and through social, cultural, or status similarities and differences with others. The roles of others become means of comparison to oneself and are connected to the creation of counter-identities. In addition to this, and relevant to the first level of relational identity, perceived ascribed identities emerge from the interviewees' transcripts. The perspectives of others influence how they define themselves and help to constitute their identity. The identity gaps between perceived ascribed identity and other identities create uncertainty.

This research reveals that identity gaps emerge within each four identity frames. Even with the gaps within each frames, these can still coexist to constitute identities because interpenetration can exist with dialectical tensions not only between and among frames, but also within the four frames. The ambivalence and reconciliation within the frames can be seen as a source of dynamic and fluid nature of identity.

Single women can alter their identity to respond to dominant discourse. The personal and enacted frames are internal, as individuals determine who they are and how they want to communicate that identity to others. The relational and communal identity frames are external because they involve relationships and collectivises. The internal and external nature of the identity frames result in individuals possessing different levels of agency over the various frames. I suggest that the amount of agency individuals hold over any particular identity frame is positioned on a most to least scale of personal, enacted, relational and communal identities.

1.6 Outline of the following chapters

Chapter two is concerned with historical and contemporary context of gender ideology and the phenomenon of 'leftover women'. It positions this research on the longitudinal construction of gender ideology in Chinese history. It argues how the traditional ideologies of marriage and motherhood still influence today's society and explains why the emergence of 'leftover women' only happened after the 1980s. The term 'leftover women' is argued to assist with gender discrimination based on the gender equality framework. Later, the chapter contextualises the phenomenon of 'leftover women'

within demography, politics and media. It explains how ‘leftover women’ became part of the official vocabulary defined by the Chinese government and the All-China Women’s Federation (ACWF). Based on the analysis of demographical statistics and political papers, I argue that the derogatory label itself is a social issue and provide explanations for the role of the ACWF and mainstream media in the political campaign of ‘leftover women’. The inner and outer layers of the phenonmenon of ‘leftover women’ explain why the phenomenon of an increasing number of single women has become phenomenon of ‘leftover women’.

Chapter three and chapter four concern the design of the study, in particular, the theoretical framework and methodology. Starting from chapter three, the primary focus of this research moves to the inner-layer – the phenomenon of the increasing number of single women itself. As a new phenomenon, the subject of Chinese ‘leftover women’ has rarely been explored. It is necessary to visit the theories of identity and studies of unmarried/single women in order to provide some direction and insight into the research of ‘leftover women’. This research employed Communication theory of identity (CTI) as a theoretical framework. It helps reveal how ‘leftover women’s identities are communicated and constructed on multiple levels. The four identity frames proposed by CTI are used as the theoretical framework guiding this research. Four main themes have been extracted from literatures on single studies: adult development process, treatment of choice, autonomy and single stigma and stigma management. At the end of chapter three, research questions are stated to further explore these themes.

Chapter four details methodological choices and the processes of the empirical research. It introduces phenomenological inquiry as the methodology. Before it illustrates how the phenomenological inquiry has been applied to this research in a synergistic three-stage process, it explains the key assumptions of phenomenological inquiry. It emphasises the significance of face-to-face, semi-structured in-depth interview as the method and specifies how it was conducted and thematically analysed. It concludes with a discussion on the reliability of the study.

Chapter five, six and seven present findings of this research in the structure of the identity frame suggested by CTI in terms of personal, enactment and relational identity respectively. Chapter five is concerned with women’s views of themselves based on

individual meaning and personally held values. The significance of a focus on values for both observing and composing identity is argued. Independence emerges as a core value of the identity of 'leftover women', which aids autonomy. After the benefits, challenges of single independence and their way of managing vulnerabilities attributed to single life are also discussed. Being single in China is still seen as a stigmatised social identity for women and I show that this is largely concerned with marital status, reproductive behaviour and sexuality, core attributes of female gender identity in China. Stigma management is examined for indications of resistance to dominant social identity for women.

Chapter six elaborates the process of how 'leftover women' construct their understanding of gender, in particular by striving for completeness within themselves. The evidence is presented of tension between the gender identity and single identity. It explains how 'leftover women' manage the tension and form perceptions on marriage and having children. I present women's accounts of whether they represent themselves as choosing to be single or not and the extent to which singleness informs women's idea of themselves. Independence is distinguished as a core value of single lifestyle and the basis for their perceptions of marriage and having children.

Chapter seven focuses on women's relationships with others, particularly those that are symbolic of dominant social identities for women. I argue that single identity can be seen as relational-autonomous, a conceptualisation that captures the tension of balancing the desire for independence and yearning for human connection. This asks that the concept of autonomy is not understood as being in relationship with others, but as being in a chosen relationship with others.

Chapter eight discusses the findings of chapters from the communal frame to provide the answer to the main research question from the inner layer – the experiences of the increasing number of unmarried women in China. It argues that 'leftover women' fundamentally challenge the structure of conventional gender relations based on hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity. The identities of 'leftover women' is not only defined through relationships with other people, but by oneself and one's chosen relationships. This construction of the self represents a change in the view of women, a shift which is indicative of the transformative potential of communal identity.

In valuing single identity, ‘leftover women’ refuse to be labelled as the ‘other’. Women’s concerns with transforming the stigmatised social identity of singleness is also discussed as is creating the potential to transform how we think about what it is to a woman in contemporary China.

Chapter nine reflects on the limitations of this research to provide direction for future research. It then presents the political and theoretical implications before reinforcing the significance of this research.

Chapter 2 Cultural background – how they got here?

This chapter explores the origins of the 'leftover women' phenomenon, linking it to traditional gender ideology and contemporary demography, politics and media. It illustrates the role of gender throughout Chinese history and how traditional beliefs still influence today's views of marriage and motherhood. It discusses the recent emergence of 'leftover women' phenomenon and explains how the term was introduced into the official vocabulary of the Ministry of Education and the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF). Based on statistical analysis and political overview, I argue that the label is indicative of a larger social issue and highlight the role that the ACWF plays in the 'leftover women' campaign. How the mainstream media represents 'leftover women' is also discussed. This chapter splits the 'leftover women' phenomenon into two layers - the external force concerning the definition and the proliferation of the term 'leftover women' and a phenomenon of the increasing number of single women. It demonstrates how the increasing number of single women in China has spawned the creation of the term 'leftover women'.

2.1 Gender ideology in historical contexts

This first section discusses the roles of women in ancient China based on Confucian ideology and includes an overview of gender relations and the historical root of gender inequality. The second section looks at the economic, social and cultural changes caused by the open-up policy and one-child policy in terms of the improvement of the status of women and the legislation concerning women's rights and gender equality. The term 'leftover women' is argued to be discriminatory based on the definition of gender inequality provided by the United Nations (UN).

2.1.1 Perpetuated traditional gender ideology in ancient China

In ancient China, women were subordinate to men and this was deemed natural as men were foundational to the patriarchal and patrilineal family structures that were necessary to maintain stability in a feudal society (Peng, 2014; Stacey, 1983). Confucian ethical ideology has defined the mainstream gender discourse since the Han Dynasty

(Peng, 2014). Throughout history, men were praised for strength and courage while women were applauded for obedience (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

The superior position of men was solidified by a series of institutions in ancient China. Patriarchal systems were based on blood ties and a lineal primogeniture model to redistribute state or family power and property (Ebrey, 1993). Social relations were divided into family and state, father-centric and emperor-centric respectively. In the family, all powers, including economic, legal and religious rights, were under the father's control. Women were unable to achieve economic independence or a social identity and were forbidden to own property or inherit land or other assets. This led to the loss of their social status and the role in the national economic sphere. Their labour was no longer part of public social work, but belonged to private property. Women's roles in the family were limited to caregivers and child-bearers and excluded from political or social affairs and formal education. Under the legal view of gender roles stipulated in the 'three obediences and four virtues', Chinese women were in subordinate position from the cradle to the grave (Gao, 2003). They have to be obedient to all the males throughout their lives: first to their father before marriage, then to their husband and to their son, if widowed.

The legal and social status of women in ancient China was improved with the evolving family roles from a daughter, to a wife and eventually to a mother. Daughters had limited personal freedoms and there were strict rules relating to their behaviour, diet and clothing. Before marriage, the law emphasised that women accept and adhere to their subordinate status (Stacey, 1983). Daughters had no autonomy in marriage, as it was arranged by parents, and a woman's status would change with her residence when she married. Unlike men, whose identity did not change as a result of marriage, the women's identity is altered fundamentally, from subordination to their fathers to submission to their husband and parents-in-law. 'Spilled water' is the metaphor used to describe married daughters, which emphasised female's status in the male's patriliny. In ancient China, the dowry and gifts offered as a prerequisite to marriage reduced the custom to a transaction. The wife was left with neither input on the family property nor the right to inherit her husband's estate.

Among the traditional female roles in the male-dominated ancient China, only mothers were highly respected due to the filial piety emphasised in Confucian philosophy. A mother's rights and interests were protected by the law as both a mother and father were legally recognised as a single entity. Due to the legacy of the matriarchal system and the mother's role in carrying on the family lineage, the mother was not subject to male oppression (Ho, 1994). However, despite this, she was still regarded as inferior to the patriarchal head of the family.

In summary, there was no place for gender equality in ancient China. With the feudal legal system and the Confucian ethical system constructed a patrilineal, patriarchal and patrilocal society. The legal structure stipulated rights for men and obligations for women relating to marriage, family and property. Marriage was an inevitable life course, deeply rooted in Confucianism for the continuation of family lines.

Women had no rights or formal education and consequently marriage and having children, assisting her husband and raising a family became a woman's fundamental existence (Peng, 2014). The respect granted to the matriarch was the ultimate reward for these undertakings. It can be argued that the Confucianism ideology and legal structure benefited married women at the sacrifice of unmarried women, older women at the expense of younger women and women with children had superior status over those without. It was therefore impossible for 'leftover women' to emerge in ancient China.

2.1.2 Improvement of women status and legislative deficiency

The 1911 revolution, which ended the feudal political system, was the first time that the long-last patriarchal relationship and male-centred system was thoroughly challenged in China (Li, 2005). With Western values and models of democratic political and social systems exposed, politicans (e.g. Sun Zhongshan, Huang Xing) and scholars (e.g. Hu Shi, Chen Duxiu) blamed the feudal cultural roots of Confucianism for China's weaknesses. They searched for a political revolution and alternatives to modernisation of traditional Confucian practices, values, family structure and social order to build on such ideology. Women's emancipation was a crucial part of the May Fourth Movement and the Communist movement. The republican government legislated women's rights regarding education, employment, property, and marriage (Siu, 1982). However, the main target

of revolutions and movements initiated by male progressive activists was to construct a sovereignty and a republic. Women's liberation was a source of transformation and modernisation but rights and interests of the women were only appendices of the innovation and policies were hardly implemented (Chen, 2011).

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) promised to guarantee the equality between females and males to stimulate women's enthusiasm as women were recognised as valuable allies to support the revolution and build socialism (Zheng, 2016). The new government not only legislated same rights for women and men (White Paper, 1994) but also fundamentally reversed the financial inequality through the agrarian revolution and legally imposed it through the 1950 Marriage Law and Land Law. Before the late 1970s, the CCP disseminated Marxist ideologies that promoted egalitarian gender roles and modernised Chinese families within a Communist political economy (Davis & Harrell, 1993). Mao Zedong's famous statement that 'women can hold up half the sky' promoted women's self-emancipation, liberation and was the slogan to mobilise women to participate in restructuring the economy (Zheng, 2016).

Since the Reform and Opening-up in 1978, social changes brought on by rapid economic development have altered the family and social roles and the value of women. Increased opportunities have awakened the collective female consciousness (Li, 2005). New policies and new legislation were implemented to protect women's rights and interests. As the number one priority basic state policy, the one-child policy advocating 'late marriage, late childbirth, fewer and better children' was enforced in 1980. The purpose of the policy was to reduce the number of people competing for resources in Chinese society and ensure a higher standard of living for all (Fong, 2004). When the sole child was a daughter, she received an education, welfare, inheritance and avoided male competition for these resources (Fong, 2004). This resulted in a self-perpetuating cycle where women's presence and success in the workplace strengthened their economic role and continued to open up further opportunities for other women to do the same (Koo, 2014).

Taking the ages into account, a coincidence can be found that the first generation of 'leftover women' and the first generation of only child are the same group of people.

Due to the opening-up policy and the one-child policy, the status of women has been improved economically, culturally and socially. Daughters are now empowered to be independent, highly-educated and financially secure. Since the implementation of the open-up policy, the state has become aware of increased promotion of gender equality internationally, which has made it harder to ignore the progress made with women's rights in other countries. As a consequence of these advancements, the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) was established in 1978. It was built to unite and mobilise women to participate in the economy and social development, to represent and protect women's rights, to promote gender equality and children's rights and to provide policy support for the CCP and government in national organisations (Wang, 2005).

The origins of the ACWF are based in the state's goals for national prosperity and efforts to enforce gender equality policies. The promotion of women's rights grants more powers to the ACWF and supports gender equality policies. China ratified the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1980. In 1995, the Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing, resulting in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The Declaration proposed to take all necessary measures to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and remove all obstacles to gender equality, the advancement and empowerment of women. The Platform for Action aims to remove barriers to women's participation in all spheres of public and private life through their equal share in economic, social, cultural and political decision-making. Following this conference, the Chinese government stated that gender equality would become a national policy. It was the first time that the Chinese government committed to gender equality on the international stage.

The constitutional principle of equality between women and men is now a high national priority. Human rights were first included in the Constitution Amendment in 2004. Ten years after the Fourth World Conference on Women, the legislative body passed an amendment to the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests (LPWRI) in 2005. Article 2 was added, stating:

> Gender equality is the basic national policy of the state. The state takes the necessary measures to gradually improve the systems for the protection of women's rights and interests and to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women (LPWRI, Article 2).

Article 2 established the legal status of gender equality as a national policy. It is the first application of the notion of anti-discrimination in Chinese law (Yuan, 2006). However, there is a caveat in the article concerning progressive realisation: the use of 'gradually improve' implies that the notion of gender equality as a fixed state cannot be achieved in a short period of time. Such an 'escape hatch' offers security for the state, giving them the right to defer or delay their efforts indefinitely (Felner, 2009). The flexibility that this phrasing grants the government should still include some obligations on the state.

Domestic legislation excludes a definition for discrimination against women, leading the CEDAW committee to express concern that China is still unaware of the meaning of substantive equality and the importance of this definition and that the lack of a specific legal provision might mean that the Convention's definition will not be applied.

The Chinese government's definition of 'leftover women' disregards the definition of discrimination against women given by CEDAW – that irrespective of a woman's marital status, any exclusion made on the basis of sex which has the effect and purpose of impairing the recognition, enjoyment and exercise by women is discrimination (CEDAW Article 1). The CEDAW committee is concerned about the prevailing attitudes that devalue women and violate their human rights (CEDAW, 2010). However, the CEDAW committee's (2010) reports only discuss illegal sex-selective abortion and a disparate sex-ratio that favours sons. Subjects such as marital status, marital choice, stereotypes and stigmatisation of 'leftover women' were not included.

Even with legislation enforcing gender equality, limited state efforts were taken. For example, CEDAW requested that state parties take all appropriate measures to ensure equality of men and women (CEDAW Article 16). In the case of 'leftover women', the ACWF and the government's valuation of women based on their marital status impairs women's human rights in social, cultural and civil life.

It is therefore necessary to have a comprehensive definition of discrimination against women, not only to ensure the protection against both direct and indirect discrimination, but to grant appropriate enforcement mechanisms and sanctions to

ensure the prohibition of sex and/or gender discrimination. It is helpful to measure whether the existing domestic legislation accords with the basic requirements of the definition of discrimination. Moreover, this definition also hinders legislative or legal action. When the law does not specify whether conduct constitutes discriminative behaviour, the definition of discrimination is the basis for the judgement.

2.1.3 Current situation of gender inequality and substantive equality

Even though the Chinese government has emphasised the importance of gender equality, their actions – or lack thereof – tell another story. Instead of appointing a supreme authority or an independent arbitrator, legislation is an instrument for the CCP's policies (Li, 2005). In the 2017 Global Gender Gap Report, China ranked 100 out of 144 countries (Hausmann & Tyson, 2017). It is explained that gender inequality is not only rooted in culture and tradition, but also in the Chinese legal framework (Hausmann & Tyson, 2017). Gender inequality affects income, occupation, labour force participation and political participation. For example, as can be seen in the table 2 below, the salary gap between women and men increased by 10.2% and 23% in the last two decades and urban and rural workplaces are dominated by males (National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), 2010). The employment rate for women aged between 20 to 59 was 15.1% lower than that of men (NBS, 2010). The amount of women in state power accounts for less than 20% of officials (Tang, 2011).

Table 2. Income and employment inequality in 1990s and 2010s

	1990s			2010s		
	China	Urban areas	Rural areas	China	Urban areas	Rural areas
Women's average income in % of men's average salary						
	—	77.5%	79%	—	67.3%	56%
Employment rate for people 20-59 years old						
Women	84.3%	77.4%	87.1%	73.6%	60.8%	84.4%
Men	95.7%	91.9	97.4%	88.7%	81.1%	94.3%

It is striking when comparing statistics from the 2010s with data from the 1990s. The salary gap between women and men increased by 10.2% and 23% in the last two decades in urban and rural areas (NBS, 2010, 1990) and the employment rate for urban women has decreased by 16.6% (NBSC, 2010, 1990). The employment rate of urban women in 2010s was 20.3% lower than that of their peers, but in 1990, the rate of

women who lived in urban areas was 14.5% lower than men. While the gender gap in employment is narrowing throughout much of the world, China's gender gap in the labour force has increased in the past 20 years (Hausmann & Tyson, 2017).

As the organ responsible for promoting gender equality, the ACWF's policies concerning gender inequality are circumscribed by state-wide goals, political configurations and political norms (Li, 2005). The tensions between the ACWF versus state-wide goals and international versus domestic political pressures are understated. The pursuit of gender equality is subordinate to the national policy and the central government's policy, never becoming the CCP's priority (Wang, 2005) . Realisation of gender equality cannot be a priority for CCP because the state is an entity reliant upon many actors to accomplish multiple goals at the same time (Stetson & Mazur, 2010).

The extent to which the Chinese government concedes to the international standpoint on substantial gender equality is unclear. One meaning of gender equality can be prioritised over another. For example, policy efforts providing women with opportunities to work can be a beneficial form of equality. However, if these policies lead to the destabilisation of the family, they may be considered a negative form of equality by the government in terms of social stability. It is therefore necessary to review the meaning and principles of substantive gender equality.

The interpretation of gender equality has at least four distinct phases: equality of dignity, opportunity, rights and outcome (Fredman & Goldblatt, 2015). Equality of dignity means that men and women can equally show and realise values and dignity. It is the basis of all equality and the first step to eliminate discrimination on the ground of sex. Equality of opportunity should include both equal opportunity and the same starting point. The former refers to each person having the same opportunity to make progress. The latter means that everyone begins with equality and the same chance to compete with other people. Equality of rights is at the core of gender equality which means women and men have equal rights in politics, economy, culture, education, marriage, family and so on. These rights are established by legislation. Yet equality before the law is only equality at a systematic level and not the actual equal rights. Equal rights might not be true equality in substance. Equality of outcome should be the final state of gender equality. It is not a pursuit of equal outcomes, but is equality in terms of

dignity, opportunity and rights on the basis of sustainable development (Fredman & Goldblatt, 2015).

For example, in the 2011 Amendment to the 1980 Marriage Law, it was stipulated that in the case of divorce, a house belongs to the party who made the down payment either before or after marriage. This indirectly discriminates against women and deprives them of property titles. Despite the fact that all citizens are equal before the law, it is evident that the end of a marriage of an employed husband and a housewife can result in the divorced man holding the valuable property when considering the ingrained male ownership of houses in Chinese culture (Adelman, 2011). While a divorced woman has no compensation, regardless of her contribution to the family, her husband is entitled to any property bought for them by their parents. It is not difficult to see how the 2011 Amendment could influence the financial situation of Chinese women. Moreover, owing to certain traditions and practices in rural areas, women are still unable to hold or register land in their names and risk losing land ownership upon divorce. This new Amendment unjustly favours men who have already dominated the institution of marriage and provides unequal treatment to women (Wang, 2011).

Researchers understand gender equality across four dimensions: remedying disadvantages; addressing stigma, prejudice, humiliation and violence; transforming structures; and facilitating participation (Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Fredman & Goldblatt, 2015). The first phase redresses disadvantages relating to a woman's social status, marriage and reproduction. Resolving disadvantages can eradicate the 'worse-off' results and secure the 'level-up' treatment of all, as gender equality can only be achieved once disadvantaged groups are better off. Equality must be pursued as factual equality rather than formal equality. It focuses on disadvantaged social groups and is concerned with achieving social justice. Actual equality requires the legislator to act in the interests of women. The key to legislation that protects women's rights should make up for the equality women lost due to their disadvantaged status. To promote substantive equality, it is necessary to consider diverse actions that eliminate women's disadvantages. Treating women more favourably than men does not violate the principles of substantive gender equality if it is used to remedy discriminative disadvantages experienced by women (Fredman & Goldblatt, 2015).

The second phase aims to address stigma, prejudice, humiliation and violence to covert the ascribed identity to the main identity by overturning the notion that identity is constituted by how other people see someone or a group. Any mistreatment on the grounds of gender is inequality. The third phase recognises that gender inequality oppressing women is entrenched in societal and institutional structures. Rather than requesting females to comply with social norms, it asks for transformative behaviours, such as redistributing power and resources and remedying structures that perpetuate women's lowered social position (Fraser, 2009). The fourth phase emphasises the significance of the female voice. Substantive gender equality requests state actors to listen and reply to women's voices instead of enforcing top-down policies. Women's voices are one of the primary concerns of this thesis. These multi-dimensional frameworks interact with each other to create a comprehensive response (Fredman & Goldblatt, 2015).

It needs to be awknowledged that emancipation of women is always a by-product of social movements and policies, but the effectiveness of discourses are in the hand of the reformers. It has been argued that under the current system and leadership, there is no possibility to have an independent feminist movement in China (Angeloff & Lieber, 2012; Wang, 2005). Outside of the regulatory frameworks of the CCP, there is limited space left for other forms of feminist movements. The increasing number of single women in China and their rejection of the label of 'leftover women' may trigger a new wave of feminism.

2.2 Contextualising 'leftover women' in demography, politics, and media

Since the implementation of the opening-up policy and the one-child policy in the 70's and 80's, China has undergone a significant change over the past four decades. The growth of population has slowed down and economic development has flourished. Along with globalisation, traditional value systems in China have been greatly influenced by Western culture and values (Wang, Chen, Zhao, & Zhou, 2015). Chinese citizens have to decide whether to conform to traditional values or to accept new ones. For the past four decades, the most subverted cultural change in China is the idea of marriage (Zhou, 2011). The increased number of unmarried women over the last 20 years is a reflection of this.

This section explores the 'leftover women' phenomenon in the social context. After explaining how the term 'leftover women' became part of everyday vocabulary, it argues that the label 'leftover women' itself is a social issue and the definition of 'leftover women' is not a reflection of social reality. It investigates the political and media discourse about 'leftover women' with a focus on the role that the ACWF played in the campaign and demonstrates how the mainstream media represents 'leftover women'. It then explains the two-tiers of 'leftover women' phenomenon .

2.2.1 Defining 'leftover women' – women cannot be leftover

In 2007, the ACWF defined the term 'leftover women' as single women over 27 years old. Later that same year, the Ministry of Education released a list of newly coined words that reflect transformations occurring in society in 'the Report on Language Situation in China'. 'Sheng nv (leftover women)' became one of the 171 new words that year.

> Leftover women refers to those who are over the general social thought of marriageable age but still unmarried. Generally, it refers to those single women who over 27, highly educated, well-paid, and independent (Li, 2007, p. 12).

When portrayed in the media, 'leftover women' have three traits: they are highly educated, highly paid and independent. Yet, their unmarried status triggers negative sentiments, such as often being likened to leftover food. Unmarried and single women are terms used interchangeably in this thesis as this is how it is used in the official definition of 'leftover women'.

Similar terms to 'leftover women' are found in other Asian countries. For example, 'underdogs/loser dogs' is a metaphor used to describe Japanese single women, insinuating that they're lost the game of life. In Singapore, 'Christmas cake' is a metaphor for the situation of unmarried women beyond a specific age because Christmas cake is not enjoyed after the Christmas. In Korea, single women who live in the urban areas with tertiary education and a good job were labelled as an 'old maid'.

Unlike these other countries, 'leftover women' has become an official term first proposed by the ACWF in China and not just adopted by the general population, then defined by the Chinese government and proliferated by Chinese media (Fincher, 2016). Chinese authors see the impact of the growing number of 'leftover women' which

ranges from causing mental to physical illness (Zhang, 2011), unhappiness (Guo, 2013; Zhang, 2011) , breaking the marriage market (Wu & Liu, 2014; Wang, 2011), to damaging the quality of next generation (Gong & Li, 2015) and engendering the stability of harmonious society (Yang, 2011). More specifically, 'leftover women' challenges the Chinese family system (Fang, 2016). It can also lead to an increasing number of illegitimate children and mistresses (Deng, 2011). The growing number of 'leftover women', scholars argue, can also cause a decrease of fertility rates, which could slow the speed of modernisation (Zhang, 2013). The unrealistic expectations of 'leftover women' can create a demand in the market that results in increased housing prices, which proves that the increasing number of 'leftover women' affects social production costs (The Lancet, 2011).

However, is this the case or is the label 'leftover women' itself a social issue? It is necessary to look at the demographic characteristics. The number of Chinese women who have never married has tripled between 2000 and 2010 – from 8.7% (age 25 to 29), 1.4% (age 30 to 34), 0.5% (age 34 to 39), to 21.6%, 5.4% and 1.8%, respectively (United Nations, 2012). Such numbers may present a snapshot of the current situation of 'leftover women', as presented in media and political discourses that a social crisis in a growing number of 'leftover women' who seemingly cannot find a husband. However, the figures are significantly lower compared to other Asian countries, such as Korea (59.1%, 19.0% and 7.6%), Singapore (54.1%, 25.1%, 17.1%) and Japan (60.3%, 34.5%, 23.1%) (United Nations, 2012).

What also needs to be noted is whether there is an overpopulation of unmarried women compared to unmarried men and whether they are actually a social problem as indicated in media, political discourses and scholarships. According to the Sixth National Population Census (2010), the sex ratio (male/female) of marrying age who are unmarried born in the 1970s and 1980s are 1.36 (136/100) and 2.06 (206/100) (NBS, 1980, 1990). The average sex ratio at birth in the last decade is still over 1.6 (160 boys/ 100 girls) (NBS, 2010). In 2004, the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference published a white paper with the conclusion that over thirty million bachelors cannot find wives (Yan, 2013). Nearly ten percent of Chinese men born in 1980s will be single/unmarried forever (Jiang, Feldman, & Li, 2014).

This data suggests a growing gender imbalance in China: millions of men are unable to find wives. The country's cultural preference for males, combined with Chinese government's one-child policy, has resulted in the severe imbalance of sex ratio (Yan & Li, 2012). Some may argue that 'leftover men' mainly live in rural areas (e.g., Zhang, 2013), however, the average sex ratio of 20-39 year olds living in all prefecture-level cities (the second-level administrative divisions of China, under province) is 1.25(125 male/100 female) (NBS, 2010). Specifically, the sex ratio in large cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou is 1.19, 1.17 and 1.11 respectively for the same demographic in all prefecture-level cities.

Therefore, it can be seen that even in large cities with a large number of highly-educated and well-paid single women, the number of unmarried males exceeds that of females. For the 20-39-year-old age group, the sex ratio of postgraduates is 1.09. If women have their pick of men in the current marriage market, why are they stigmatised with the derogatory 'leftover women' label?

2.2.2 The ACWF's role in the 'leftover women' campaign

As the largest non-government organisation representing Chinese women's interests, the ACWF's proposal of the term 'leftover women' proves that it is no more than an "organ of the party-state that takes on the project of making Chinese women into statist subjects" (Wang, 2005, p. 520). It is a branch of the CCP, executing government policies (Barlow, 2004). Under the top-down version of state feminism, changes in gender relations are only mobilised through the organisational levels of the ACWF. The CCP, through the ACWF, defines the causes, methods and visions of change. It serves as the state protector of women's equal rights, welfare and interests (Howell, 2001, cited in Wang, 2005) and uses its power to represent the state-approved version of feminism (Wang, 2005). The ACWF's priority is to cooperate with government policies rather than protecting women's rights, thereby perpetuating "the project of making Chinese women into statist subjects" (Wang, 2005, p. 250).

Not long before the first appearance of the term 'leftover women' on the ACWF website, the State Council promulgated a political article of 'Decision on Completely Reinforcing Population and Family Planning Work to Solve the Population Problems' as a resolution for demographic pressures (The Central Committee of the Communist

Party of China (CCCPC), 2007). The article discussed the imbalance of the sex ratio and lack of quality of the general population, which is said to not "meet the requirements for the nationally synthetic power competition" (CCCPC, 2007, p.2).

The State Council identified "improving the quality of Chinese population" as the key objective for the ACWF and appointed the ACWF as the main executor of the policies on population and family planning programme (CCCPC, 2007, p.4). One could argue one of the reasons why the ACWF is at the frontline of the 'leftover women' campaign: to pressure so-called high quality single women to marry and have children for the sake of improving the quality of the general population.

The ACWF's standpoint on marriage and family is contained in the proposal 'Seeking the Most Beautiful Families' presented by the president of the ACWF in the 12th National People's Congress, stating that "family is a fundamental part of building a harmonious society and a happy life" (Liu & Zuo, 2001, p. 73). It was consistent with the Chinese President Hu's vision for a harmonious society. To explain the concept of a harmonious society, the state prioritises maintaining stability at all costs by "cracking down on various social ills, which are a poisonous tumour in a harmonious society and must be eliminated" (Hu, 2012, p. 39).

The media and government's propaganda promote marriage and government sponsored matchmaking (Greenhalgh & Winckler, 2005). It is stated in many CCP and government publications that 'marriage and family form the basic cell of society' and 'a harmonious family is the foundation of a harmonious society (People's Daily, 05/27/10). It is therefore in the interest of the government to encourage all women to marry in order to achieve the basic building blocks of a harmonious society.

It is necessary to solve the social issue of 'leftover women' due to the increasing number of single women which goes against the construction of the harmonious family. The ACWF attributes their 'leftover' status to their high expectations for potential partners (To, 2013). Government sponsored matchmaking events are arranged by the ACWF with the goal of helping women to find marital happiness (Fincher, 2016). Merriman (2015) finds that nearly all articles with 'leftover women' as a keyword on the ACWF website all focus on negative traits, so while "the outward appearance may be positive or encouraging […] in reality is 'anti' rhetoric (p. 38)".

In March 2007, one day after International Women's Day, the ACWF reposted a column:

> Pretty girls don't need much education to marry into a rich and powerful family, but 'leftover women' with an average appearance will find it difficult. These kinds of girls hope to further their education and develop their career to increase their competitiveness. The tragedy is, they don't realize that as women age, their worth is less and less, so by the time they get their MA or PhD, they are already old, like yellowed pearls. No one would want them. (The ACWF, 03/21/07 cited in New York Times in English, 10/12/12)

The ACWF blames educational and career aspirations for the emergence of 'leftover women'. Some features published on the ACWF's official website include: 'Overcoming the Big Four Emotional Blocks - Leftover Women Can Break out of Being Single'; 'The Startling Plight of Leftover Women'; 'Eight Simple Moves to Escape from the Leftover Women trap'; 'Do Leftover Women Deserve Our Sympathy''. Most publications on the ACWF's website belittling 'leftover women' have been republished almost verbatim, multiple times over the years on other mainstream media, such as Xinhua News Agency, China Daily and People's Daily.

This campaign is reminiscent of the affirmative label of 'Iron Girls' which praised women's role in the labour force from the 1950s to the 1970s. The term 'Iron Girls' refers to women who were independent, capable and successful. The label promoted the state's political ideology that 'men and women are the same'. It mobilised women entering "traditional male occupations to serve as a reserve labour force and to compensate for the labour shortage caused by the outflow of men's labour" (Jin, 2006, p. 629).

The purpose of the 'Iron Girls' campaign was to increase the productivity rather than to create gender equality. It has been argued that the campaign not only overlooked the difference between females and males, but also masculinised women (Zhou & Guo, 2013). Political slogans like 'women can do the same as men', used men as the standard to define and evaluate females. Regardless of the political intentions of the 'Iron Girls' campaign, it subverted traditional female virtues and the gendered division of labour. It challenged the gender construction, which is why it became a milestone for women pursuing gender and societal equality (Li, 2005). The 'Iron Girls' campaign became a

political stage where Chinese women can acquire recognition from society (Jin, 2006). The image of 'Iron Girls' has become "an inspirational role model for a whole generation of young women" (Jin, 2006, p. 630) who struggle for autonomy and a life based on social and gender equality.

This suggests that labels given by the CCP and/or government to specialised groups in China can have political meanings. The government's 'Iron Girls' campaign 40 years ago encouraged women to do men's jobs because a larger labour force was needed to increase productivity (Jin, 2006). The label of 'leftover women' could therefore be another government campaign, this time lead by the ACWF to pressure and stigmatise single women to compel them to get back on the traditional track; from the government's perspective, this would resolve the imbalance of the sex-ratio, maintain societal stability and enhance the quality of the future population.

2.2.3 Media representation of 'leftover women'

The Chinese media have played a crucial role in turning 'leftover women' into a household term. The label has replaced the actual description of what these women were: 'unmarried women over the average age of marriage'. Mainstream media put 'leftover women' in opposition to social values. Along with the ACWF, they characterise single/unmarried women as 'unchosen' and ask them to shoulder the responsibility for their own 'leftover' status (Gong, Tu, & Jiang, 2017) rather than concede to other social factors.

Chinese media have double standards for treatment of single women and single men (Gong et al., 2017). 'Leftover women' are accused of overvaluing themselves, lacking female virtues and being nit-picky. They are featured as frustrated old maids without experience of love or as unhappy and lonely spinsters (Liu & Zhang, 2013; Liu, 2010; Wei, 2010). A misogynistic agenda is propagated by media that idealises the traditional gender female roles and norms (Gaetano, 2014).

In the mainstream media, unmarried women are presented as in a marriage crisis that is attributed to their personal achievements. Educational and professional successes are depicted as abnormal. Similarly, the marriage rate in China remains largely universal. However, the media representation of 'leftover women' presents marriage statistics as

a cause for anxiety. Therefore, instead of a reflection of social reality, the discourse of 'leftover women' is a process of myth-making to preserve patriarchal gender constructions.

The mainstream media in China are party-run, and divided into national, provincial and local levels. Media channels typically served as a mouthpiece in disseminating the China Communist Party's agenda. Although provincial media institutions compete for ratings, resources and revenue, they are supervised by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television of the People's Republic of China (SAPPRFT). SAPPRFT directly regulates state television, radio and independent production companies via powers granted in the 'Propaganda Discipline (PD)' and 'Guidance of Public Opinion (GPO)'. The basic regulations in PD and GPO is that media must publicise the party's policies, political views and facilitate public understanding of these policies. If public opinion differs from the CCP on any matter, the media are responsible for correcting public opinion. It is therefore not difficult to understand why mainstream media are perpetuating these depictions of 'leftover women' to further push the party's agenda.

Chinese movies and TV series concerning 'leftover women' follow the same storyline where a protagonist is forced to abandon her personal goals in order to get married and start a family (Dou, 2014; Wang & Zang, 2014). The shows depict the final outcome as a happy ending, asserting that women are most fulfilled when they value family over their personal ambitions. In these TV series, plot and characterisation relies upon historical trends, fictional fantasy and social policing that would be familiar to a Chinese audience to facilitate gender normative expectations for Chinese women (Li & Tan, 2014; Cheng, 2011). These programmes imply that 'leftover women' face a crucial choice: to conform with traditional marriage practices, or accept everlasting singlehood. Social pressure is manifested through the protagonists' mother as an acceptable agent in enforcing compliance to the image of the ideal woman (Fan, 2015). For example, a mother's hesitancy in admitting her daughter's age and education level implies that age and higher education are shameful qualities that devalue women. Such plots legitimise marriage as a requirement for Chinese women.

Men are under less pressure to marry at an early age, allowing them to devote a longer period to their career and personal development. These TV series or movies suggest that, despite a desire to reject social expectations, women will ultimately find happiness through adhering to traditional preferences and by mediating their personal goals in order to do so.

In China, TV Dating Show has been a popular type of TV programme since 2007. Contestants are in danger of becoming 'leftover women' and these dating programmes ultimately support gender stereotypes, linking marriage to womanhood (Yan, 2010). For example, the index on career development is viewed as detrimental to marriage prospects and urge women to marry early or risking of becoming unwanted. Such testimonies, along with the perspectives of male participants, presents marriage as women's primary role; it attacks educational achievement as shameful or abnormal. They communicate that it is the responsibility of women, not men, to mediate their unrealistic marriage expectations (Li, 2011). Criticism that equates age with desirability also make it explicit that women face the threat of social sanctioning when they do not comply. TV dating programmes point to the precarious role the media play in policing post-socialist femininity, reinforcing male privilege and conveying the new gender mandate (Luo & Sun, 2015).

Through perpetuating appropriate roles for women, the 'leftover women' discourse works to police women who defy traditional gender roles. Through dating shows, the mainstream media thrive through strategically tapping into the political imperatives over the gender imbalance as a result of the three decades of the country's one-child policy while playing upon women's personal and social anxieties (Luo & Sun, 2015).

When the 'leftover women' is used in mainstream media, it not only berates single Chinese women, but also makes single women under 25 years old – those who have not even reached the defined age of 27 for 'leftover women' – panic about becoming unmarriageable (Gaetano, 2014). While some reject the idea of 'leftover women', others subscribe to it. Such terminology pressures potential 'leftover women' to adhere to traditional gender roles, meet restrictive social expectations and mediate personal achievements and marriage. Media maintains marriage as intrinsically connected to womanhood – placing marriage, and by extension the home and motherhood, as a

women's primary duty (Feldshuh, 2018). Chinese media keep imposing and presenting single women through derogatory stereotypes, strengthening "the link between domesticity and female identity" (Gong et al., 2017, p. 11).

Stereotypes facilitate the negative depiction of a group of society in the media (Means Coleman & Yochim, 2008). However, as a concept, a stereotype is reliant on discourse that signifies a present and identifiable constructed image. A stereotype is adept at drawing attention to how individuals and groups are presented, but the concept may not function well in capturing the meanings associated with absence, omission, or even an inclusion that is not so problematic and negative. In the case of 'leftover women', the mass media, television in particular, is replete with negative portrayals and stereotypes, but the voice and the story told by the 'leftover women' themselves are missing.

The concept of symbolic annihilation facilitates a deeper look into the Chinese media's representation of 'leftover women.' Tuchman (1978) argued that females suffer from symbolic annihilation through omission and condemnation by the mass media. Symbolic annihilation highlights the ways that unfair treatment in the media can contribute to social disempowerment and absence in the media can erase groups and individuals from public consciousness. In the case of 'leftover women', not only is the existence of this particular group hidden from public view, but it has been reinforced and perpetuated by the stereotypes of 'leftover women' though mass media. While the voice of 'leftover women' is muted, their invisibility is felt not only through non-representation of women's voices and viewpoints, but by the manner in which they are represented. The representation of 'leftover women' reflects the biases and assumptions of those who define the public agenda. Despite measures to address gender inequality, the power to define public and media agendas is still mainly a male privilege (Gallagher, 2001).

2.2.4 Two layers of 'leftover women' phenomenon

After contextualising 'leftover women' in demographic statistics, political application and media representation, it is clear that the phenomenon of 'leftover women' has two layers. An outer layer manipulated by the external forces concerning the definition and the proliferation of the term 'leftover women'. An inner layer is consisted of a phenomenon of the increasing number of single women. The former discourse of 'leftover women' initialled by the ACWF and Chinese government, which is promoted

and perpetuated by the media, distanced the phenomenon away from the increasing number of single women themselves, acting to spread gender inequality through political campaigns to control the social order and maintain power. When viewed as reflective of discourse on 'leftover women', research on media representation has revealed that media can both construct and reinforce the interpretation of the term 'leftover women', even though such representations do not match social reality (Gong et al., 2017; Merriman, 2015; Liu & Zhang, 2013).

The 'leftover women' discourse created by the ACWF and the Chinese government, then promoted by mainstream media, operates through complex mechanisms, including social, indirect sexism and oppression policing (e.g., Feldshuh, 2018) to preserve the existing social order through establishing normative gender expectations. Moreover, linking ideas can be seen in the discourses of 'leftover women' where the view that women in higher education and in successful careers are a threatening social force.

The discourse of 'leftover women' normalises rigid concepts of gender and traditional femininity. The proposed gender roles behind the discourse of 'leftover women' maintain the current situation of social order and power relations. Within a societal environment, feminine qualities are emphasised and qualities traditionally viewed as masculine, such as educational and occupational ambition, are seen as incompatible with the ideology of marriage and family. This represents the patriarchal culture of Chinese society, which frowns upon independent professional women who do not submit to the traditional female domestic roles (To, 2015). 'Leftover women' is a discourse answering to context-specific gender expectations in the case of an increasing number of Chinese unmarried women. For women who do not conform to sexualised and reductive images of femininity, being leftover is both a threat and used as a strategy to encourage uniformity of behaviour.

The expression 'leftover women' is a language policing tool: not only insulting on a personal level, the term is also a sexist statement that refers to the social expectation of women to marry. Concern about the age of women becomes a recurring theme and gender norms are reinforced via plot and characterisation of 'leftover women' in movies and television programmes. Social policing restricts the acceptable gender role spectrum and puts forward that 'leftover women' should be responsible for solving this

issue with the threat of social sanctioning. The risk of being labelled a 'leftover woman' intends to encourage compliance with traditional gender roles and femininity.

It is clear that the term 'leftover women' is not a reflection of social reality. Instead, the portrayal of 'leftover women' is created through the interaction of party ideologies, popular opinion and social changes. The characterisation of non-conformist women is a form of social policing that relies upon political fear surrounding evolving gender relations, social order and power structures. The disconnection between stereotypes and reality and how this is reflected in the discourse of 'leftover women' shows the influence of Chinese media in transforming social perceptions and how behaviour is policed.

It is noted in the Beijing Declaration (1995) that:

> The continued projection of negative and degrading images of women in media communications - electronic, print, visual and audio - must be changed. Print and electronic media in most countries do not provide a balanced picture of women's diverse lives and contributions to society in a changing world […] Programming that reinforces women's traditional roles can be equally limiting (Article 236).

This problematic representation of unmarried women is evident in the creation and perpetuation of the 'leftover women' discourse. Even though the Platform for Action specifically addresses what governments, media organisations and NGOs should do to increase the participation of women to promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in media, the Chinese government, the ACWF and mainstream media have not followed these guidelines and the refusal to take action is telling. These organisations have successfully shifted the focus from unmarried men to unmarried women to avoid social unrest. China's population policy was designed not only to control the country's quantity of people, but also to improve the quality of its citizens.

The term 'quality' took on particular significance within the initiatives of the CCP, government and the ACWF to improve women's education and development (Judd, 2002). The government and the CCP encourage Chinese women who are well-educated and professional to have children, as their children will ostensibly be born with 'superior genes' (Greenhalgh, 2010). The 'leftover women' campaign conducted by the government, the CCP, the ACWF and Chinese media can therefore be seen as a

politically-driven measure intended to resolve the imbalance of sex-ratio, maintain societal stability and enhance the quality of population through promoting marriage.

In summary, the phenomenon of ‘leftover women’ has two layers: the inner layer is the social reality itself that a growing number of women decided to stay single; the outer layer is labelling the single women as ‘leftover women’ - the official definition and media proliferation of the term and meaning, which implies that the women are incapable of finding a husband. Instead of reflecting the reality of the marriage market in China, the discourse of ‘leftover women’ communicates sexist rhetoric as a response to women’s empowerment. Although traditional social practices, such as early marriage, remain largely popular in China, the propagation of ‘leftover women’ as a construction reflects government anxiety towards new forms of imagining femininity in China.

In response to shifting power dynamics, ‘leftover women’ has become a term that reinforces stereotypical and restrictive gender norms. Moreover, the constructed term of ‘leftover women’ conveys a desire to deflect attention away from the outnumbered unmarried men compared to unmarried women, asking women to solve the skewed sex-ratio, maintain societal stability and improve population quality. This chapter explored the outer layer of ‘leftover women’ phenomenon. The research chapters five, six, seven, eight will explore the inner layer – the experiences of the dramatically increasing number of single women in China. But first, in the next chapter, I will set up a conceptual foundation for this investigation.

Chapter 3 Literature review: identity and studies of single women

This chapter discusses theories on identity and examines studies on issues relevant to the identities of single Chinese women. It aims to approach the phenomenon of the increasing number of single women by exploring the questions of identity composition, its negotiation and maintenance. This research adopts the communication theory of identity (CTI) (Hecht et al., 2003) as a theoretical framework. It emphasises communicative and relational aspects of identity and views it as a manifold concept, where individuals and communities help to construct holistic identity (Hecht et al., 2005). Using CTI in the analysis of single women's experiences relating to adult development, choice, autonomy and the single stigma in other cultures can provide insight for this research. At the end of this chapter, sub-questions relating to the inner tier of 'what constitutes the phenomenon of the increasing number of single women' are presented.

3.1 Theoretical Framework – communication theory of identity (CTI)

Identity is generally seen as a complex concept. However, no standard definition has provided a comprehensive picture of the dynamics that form the conception of identity. Identity construction was first understood as multiple tiers in relation to an environment (Hogg & Abrams, 1988) and, more recently, as a continually developing procedure (Kellner, 1992). From "a concept in which personal, social and institutional dimensions intertwine" (Hogg, 1993, p. 89), identity is now understood to be formed through verbal and non-verbal performance and in negotiation with one's interactions on personal and social levels (Winn & Rubin, 2001).

Social identity theory has set the agenda for many identity theories. It sees identity construction as a product of social categorisation and asserts that individuals form their identities based on various social categories, such as ethnicity, gender and class (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). The individual internalises these social categories by aligning themselves to ideas within categories that reflect their values, attitudes and behaviours (Hogg, 2007). Placement in a particular social group can be voluntary or involuntary. For example, while individuals choose their own political affiliation, society assigns other

group memberships, such as ethnicity. While social identity theory provides a methodical exploration of the social aspects of identity construction, the theory does not consider micro-level attributes, such as individual and social roles.

Conversely, identity theory is built on the perception that people possess and express multiple roles across different social contexts. Although it has often been referred to as identity theory, it is more accurately described as identity role theory because it is mainly based on an individual's relationship to society. Individuals maintain a hierarchy of selves, where the various levels are each associated with different roles. A role is seen as "the functions or parts a person performs when occupying a particular position within a particular social context" (Schlenker, 1985, p. 18). Different roles vary and one can become more prominent than others based on the situation and the importance of the role to the individual. These roles are internalised and comprise a person's sense of self.

Scholars (e.g., Hecht et al., 2005; Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000) argue that research focusing upon roles in social interactions and interpersonal relationships, rather than on social categories, ignores the communal aspect of identities. Even though identity research on social roles sees identity as formed by social interactions, it neglects the role of communication in identity formation, how role and identity are communicated and how identity is formed through communication (Faulkner et al., 2002). Communication is only seen as a way to express identity, but not as identity itself. However, identity is inherently a communicative process; an individual's sense of self is formed and shared through communication (Collier & Thomas, 1998).

Rooted in social identity theory and identity role theory, the CTI regards the individual, society and communication as having significant roles in identity construction. It takes a unique mechanism – "social relations and roles are internalised by individuals as identities through communication. Individuals' identities, in turn, are acted out as social behaviour through communication" (Jung & Hecht, 2004, p. 266). The CTI advances the understanding of the relationship between communication and identity by conceptualising identity as an intrinsically communicative process instead of regarding it as the mere product of interaction (Hecht et al., 1993). Hecht et al. (2003) contend that identity is "a transaction in which messages and values are exchanged" (p. 230). Jackson (2008) further notes that:

> It would be nice to think that as we speak, we are simply exchanging information, but even in casual contact with others, we are constantly exchanging codes of personhood, worldview, indeed our identities (p. 359).

Hecht and his colleagues centred the development of the CTI on the assumption that communication and culture are inextricably interwoven – the former exists because it is constantly enacted and becomes meaningful only in cultural contexts (Baldwin et al., 2006). They admit that culture also plays a role and that cultures are generated and perpetuated through the expression of self (Hecht et al., 2003). The CTI incorporates the classical views of self with modern and postmodern approaches, resulting in a multi-layered concept of identity (Hecht et al., 2005). These researchers conceptualised identity as an interpenetration of holism and sudicism from African culture, harmony and collectivism from Asian Confucian philosophy and individualism from the Greeks (Hecht et al., 2005). Such a complex view of identity is indicative of its inherent complexity, its simultaneously enduring and situational nature and its individual and social components (Hecht et al., 2003). Unlike other theories on identity, the CTI also draws on classical understanding of the self from East Asian cultures, making it particularly suitable for this research.

Identity and self have been studied across multiple disciplines and the understating of these varies in different areas of studies. Some scholars differentiate identity and the self (e.g., Burke, 1980; Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012), although others seem to use them interchangeably (e.g., Baumeister, 1997; Carbaugh, 2006). The complex nature of these terms has made it difficult to define them clearly. While the self is often discussed in terms of one's consciousness using notions of 'I' and 'me' or of the 'known' and the 'knower' (e.g., Gecas & Burke, 2005; James, 1968), identity tends to be used to refer to a certain aspect of the individual, such as role identity and ethnic identity (e.g., Rumbaut, 1994; Tajfel, 1978).

In this study, identity and the self are believed to overlap. I refer to the self as a totality of one entity (e.g., an individual) and identity as an aspect of the self. The self comprises various identities (e.g., gender identity, national identity, social identity, self-identity), self-esteem (e.g., emotion, value, spirit), and individual traits. Each identity cannot be examined independently. Yet, examination of the self differs from the study of identity,

as the former deals with the totality of an individual while the latter focuses on specific social roles or the social status of the individual. This study examines the identities of 'leftover women' by exploring commonalities and distinctiveness among these women based on their socio-cultural positions in contemporary China.

3.1.1 Theoretical perspective

The CTI suggests that society can be understood in a multitude of ways, such as through cognition, physiology, behaviour, emotion and spirituality (Hecht & Baldwin, 1998). It puts forward that reality is an experience influenced by social rules (Baldwin et al., 2006). This multi-layered perspective adopts a dialectical view, suggesting that there are different polarities and contradictions in all aspects of social life (Hecht, 1993). Instead of examining only the virtues of social life, the layered perspective welcomes contrasting or different theoretical stances. When taken together, they provide a deeper understanding of a phenomenon. Proposed by Hecht et al. (2003), CTI not only integrates psychological, sociological and anthropological approaches, but also emphasises the communicative and relational aspects of identity.

The CTI takes interpretive and dialectical approaches. The interpretive approach centres on investigating "the member's taken-for-granted, in and out-group assumptions about culture and communication" (Hecht et al., 1993, p. 15). In this research, such assumptions emerge through the experiences of Chinese 'leftover women' and others' opinions of 'leftover women'. This approach is useful as these women's voices have been ignored in the discussion about Chinese culture and communication.

The dialectical approach focuses on understanding the complexity of identity. It can include paradox and contradiction, and it is important to pay careful attention to dialectical tensions existing in one's identity. For example, Hecht et al. (2005) suggest that the dialectical tension between individual and social elements of self-concept is more significant than other distinct elements because this tension creates and recreates identity. Similarly, Deaux and Stewart (2001) point out that gender is inherent in other identities, such as ethnic identity, and called for an examination of "a set of intersecting, overlapping gendered identities" (p. 88). Therefore, this research concentrates on the identity of Chinese 'leftover women', but keeping in mind that their singlehood cannot

be understood in isolation. The fact that these women have education, occupations, relationships and live in a modern society needs to be taken into consideration.

3.1.1.1 Identity is enduring and changing

The CTI assumes that identities are both enduring and constantly evolving, which is grounded in culture and history. From a psychological perspective, identity is concerned with personal and group identifications and the perceptions that individuals hold about themselves; these self-definitions affect people's interactions with others (Cheek & Hogan, 2003). Psychologists tend to conceptualise identity as a core of who a person is and identity may become less stable across contexts (Hecht et al., 2003). In fact, as Jung and Hecht (2004) argue, this perspective describes shifts in identity as indicative of a person's psychological imbalance.

Some scholars discuss the process-oriented nature of identity. For example, Guidano (1997) views identity as an evolving, dialectically-interactive process built through "a progressive differentiation between self and non-self" (p. 29). James (1968) explains how identity is understood to have both stable and shifting qualities in a discussion about 'me':

> As a concrete 'me', I am somewhat different from what I was: the hungry, now full.... yet in other ways, I am the same (the essential ways)… My name and profession and relations to the world are identical now and then. Moreover, the 'me' of now and the 'me' of then are continuous: the alterations were gradual and never affected the whole of me at once (p. 47).

> It is a conclusion grounded either on the resemblance in essential respects, or on the continuity of the phenomena compared the past and present selves compared are the same just so far as they are the same, and no farther. They are the same kind. But this generic sameness coexists with generic differences just as real; and if from the one point of view I am one self, from another I am quite as truly many (p. 48).

Communication researchers have recognised that identities cannot be viewed as fixed products; instead, they are dynamic, created and recreated in the process of interaction (Collier & Thomas, 1998). People develop their identities through everyday communication with others within their social group (Ting-Toomey, 2017). As such, Ting-Toomey (2017) argues, identity is a "reflective self-conception or self-image that we

each derive from our family, gender, cultural, ethnic, and individual socialisation process" (p. 212). This notion of identity builds on Mead (1934) idea that people incorporate the attitudes and responses of others into their self-understanding.

Critical scholars, such as Hall (1996), theorise that identity is ideologically constructed through social categories such as race, class and gender, which define individuals as different from one another. Identities, according to Hall (1996), are "never unified … [but] increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiple constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions" (p. 4). Hall further argues that identity needs to be considered within a larger historical and socio-economic context, which takes power relations into account. He maintains that identities of minority groups are defined by the dominant discourse, including media representations of non-dominant identities. Hall's view allows for the development of identity not through assimilative practices, but rather through the celebration of difference (Mendoza, Halualani, & Drzewiecka, 2002).

Whether or not identity is discussed in realtion to its stability or fluid state depends on one's perspective. On the one hand, with rapid development, identities could be strongly influenced or even reconstructed by social, political, financial and contextual factors, such as ideological trends, globalisation and technologies. On the other hand, identity also changes with a sense of continuity in relation to core values, beliefs, or ideologies which have extended over time. Therefore, in order to understand the multi-faceted identities of Chinese 'leftover women', both enduring and changing aspects of their identities should be discussed. When examining the shift between past and present identity, it is useful to view change along a continuum (Flanagan, 2006).

3.1.1.2 Identities are cognitive, affective, behavioural and spiritual

Identity has been commonly studied from a perspective of people's cognitive understanding of themselves or others. However, many researchers conceptualise identity as more than just thoughts: some aspects of identity are important to the understanding of identity and its relationship to the issue of power. Kegan (1982) claims that both cognition and effect are inseparable from the self. Eisenberg (2001) includes emotion in his construction model of identity and states that the way people understand their emotions influences their perceived sense of power and future possibilities.

James (1968) explains the relationship between emotions and power using the example of the second-best fighter in the world and a weak man. Even though the fighter is strong, he feels ashamed that he cannot beat one person. On the contrary, a weak man is not ashamed of himself. Apart from objective facts of these men's physical strengths, their perceptions of their strengths construct their feelings and self-empowerment. Therefore, James (1968) states, "our self-feeling is in our power" (p. 45). So, if being a 'leftover woman' is perceived as a life of solitude, it is necessary to explore whether a 'leftover woman' feels alone or feels free. It is important to understand her feelings about being regarded as a 'leftover woman' as it is related to the issues of power and control on personal and social levels.

Some researchers also conceptualise identity as behavioural. Carbaugh (2006) views identity as 'a set of communicative practices' and suggests that 'who one is' depends not only on one's actual conceptions but also on one's "conduct of identity in real social scenes" (pp. 25-26). In any situation, people perform "some arrangement of selves over all possible others" (Carbaugh, 2006, p. 26). It is through this performance that people express their identities. For instance, a doctor's identity is explained by what a doctor does. People's identities are expressed by their action/inaction in everyday life.

Lastly, identities are thought to have a spiritual aspect. James (1968) divides the 'me' or 'the known self' into the material, the social and the spiritual sides of an individual. He defines a person's 'me' as "the sum of all that he can call his" and the 'spiritual me' as "the entire collection of one's states of consciousness" (p. 41). This claim suggests that anything one is aware of, including knowledge, values and relationships, relates to one's identity. Drawing from ancient Eastern philosophy, Capra (2010) views reality as "an awareness of the oneness of all life, interdependence of its multiple manifestations, and its cycles of change and transformation" (p. 326) and contends such awareness as a spiritual awareness. This view suggests that one's sense of self includes transpersonal levels of identity, identity which goes beyond traditional ego boundaries and unites with everything in the universe (Cox & Lyddon, 2007).

While conceptualisations of the self differ between James and those in the transcendent self paradigm, they are all concerned with one's awareness. Their conception of spirituality relates to the belief that everything is spiritual (Pokora, 2011). Spirituality

pervades our lives and is inseparable from our beings (Pokora, 2011). Based on this belief, anything people are conscious of — their senses, beliefs and values — has some effect on their sense of self.

When exploring the cognitive, behavioural and spiritual aspects of the identities of 'leftover women', other influences must be considered: what these women are aware of regarding singlehood, motherhood and womanhood and how they are treated culturally. For instance, their awareness of the historical value of marriage, femininity, their religious beliefs and the perception of 'leftover women' has influenced the way that they construe their own identity.

3.1.1.3 Identities attend both subjective and ascribed meanings

Identity can be viewed as internally defined and externally imposed. This subject/object notion of identity is similar to James' (1968) concept of 'I' and 'me' or 'the knower' and 'known' of the self or Guidano's (1997) notion of self-perception and world perception of experience. Guidano (1997) explains the relationship between the two as follows:

> Any information about the outside world inevitably corresponds to information about the self and, conversely, self-knowledge development parallels the process by which the individual comes to understand external reality. (p. 30)

Objective notions of identity develop through socialisation, which begins from the time people are born. Rubin, Provenzano, and Luria (1994) find that parents describe their newborns using stereotypical attributes of the babies' biological sex (e.g., baby girls as more beautiful than baby boys) although there is no big difference between the physical appearance of male and female babies. Such objective gender identification further influences interaction dynamics. For instance, Smith and Lloyd (1998) observe interactions between women and six-month old infants and found that infants were given toys consistent with their presented gender.

When infants demonstrated gross motor activity, the women reacted with encouragement to an infant presented as a boy, but tried to calm the child who was presented as a girl. The above developmental studies describe processes through which children come to learn the socially constructed meaning of their sexes. At the same time, however, subjective notions of identity exist. Duveen (2001) argues that children

reconstruct “particular identity positions” (p. 262) in relation to social representations of their identity.

The subjectively defined and objectively ascribed meanings inevitably cause some tension. Identities in high tension may develop greater complexities, leading to a fragile sense of identity, while those low in tension may have stability reinforced or be underdeveloped. For example, those who accept the culturally accepted notion of a woman’s role will find it difficult to not perceive singlehood as a status that exclusively means unmarried, while someone who resists society’s views may struggle with her womanhood or come to understand the complexity of her identity in relation to the social world.

3.1.2 Four frames

The properties of identity discussed so far are essential in understanding the complex nature of identity proposed by the CTI. The CTI states that identity can be explored via four frames, or layers: personal, enacted, relational and communal (Hecht et al., 2005). These four layers define the location of identity and can be seen as ways to interpret reality (Hecht et al., 2005). Framing allows identity to be conceptualised at multiple levels, reflecting the complex realm of the social world. These frames are interconnected rather than mutually exclusive and “create dialectical tension requiring identity negotiation” (Hecht et al., 2005, p. 257). Although it is significant to understand the viewpoint that each frame provides, it is also crucial to keep other perspectives in mind.

3.1.2.1 Personal frame

The personal frame offers an understanding of how individuals internally define themselves. Many social psychologists (e.g., Adams & Marshall, 1996; Burke, 1980) consider identity as a self-image. Every individual has various identities, such as those related to being Chinese, a woman, or a daughter. These different identities coexist in an individual and each contribute to constructing a unique person. These identities can be explored by “interactions with others in situations which those others respond to the person as a performer in a particular role” (Burke & Reitzes, 1981, p. 89). Even though this process includes elements of enacted and relational frames of identity, the personal frame is the way a person understands their identity in relation to others, or as a result of others. In the personal frame, identities are organised hierarchically (Hecht et al.,

2005). The more general identities are on the top while more specifically situated identities are at the bottom and are less permanent (Wadsworth, Hecht, & Jung, 2008). The identities on the top are utilised to organise and influence the lower ones (Tajfel, 2010). The dialectical tension among identities can be viewed as "the completing pressures of maintaining self-consistency and comforting to social norms and situational nuances" (Hecht et al., 1993, p. 37).

This frame allows exploration of the understanding of 'leftover women' and the meaning of their singleness. It is suspected that there are shared meanings of singlehood among Chinese 'leftover women' and single/unmarried women in the Western world. There are also unique meanings due to subjective and ascribed aspects of identity. Additionally, the way how the single identities of 'leftover women' relate to their other identities needs to be explored. As different contexts evoke identities in different ways, these effects need to be taken into account in order to productively study the changing nature of the identity of Chinese 'leftover women'.

3.1.2.2 Enactment frame

The enactment frame focuses on identity expressed through social interactions. This frame regards identity as created through/by identity enactment (Hecht et al., 2003). Hecht et al. (2003) assume that interaction is interpreted through identity. Definition of oneself influences interaction and is simultaneously influenced by interaction via enactment. Therefore, understanding the mutual influence of identity and social interaction is crucial to this frame. In this research, childhood wedding fantasies of 'leftover women', their experiences relating to their single status, the way they talk about their singlehood and their perceptions of marriage and having children is explored to understand how the identity of 'leftover women' is enacted.

An indidivual's identity can be reinforced, challenged, or denied during interactions by various messages. Gecas and Burke (2005) argue that when someone is committed to a particular identity, the identity is more prominent and influences one's behavioural choices. Identity is not only constructed in communication around social roles or interpersonal relationships, but also present as societal behaviours via communication (Jung & Hecht, 2004). For instance, a woman might concentrate more on her family after marriage, especially after having children, by shifting her focus from work to her

husband and children. This is similar to the 'doing gender theory' (West & Zimmerman, 1987) that argues that gender identity is represented via communicating interactions. Frequency/infrequency of enactment of a specific identity in daily life may indicate dominance of a particular identity over other identities within an individual. The enactment frame particularly helps to observe the way identity is expressed in daily communication.

3.1.2.3 Relational frame

In this frame, identity can be viewed as a "property of the relationship" (Hecht et al., 2005, p. 39), and the relationship itself may become an identity. Since identity emerges out of interaction with others, it cannot be discussed in isolation. There are three levels in the relational frame (Hecht et al., 2005).

The first level is referred as 'ascribed relational identity' as it is externally imposed by other people (Hecht et al., 2005). Individuals are aware of how other people view them and do not want to be associated with a group whose identities are viewed with negativity. People try to build, retain and even rebuild a positive identity. It might be necessary to balance positive identity with an imposed identity that might be negative and trigger social stigmas (Woodward & Fergusson, 2000). As for 'leftover women', their behaviour of remaining unmarried deviates from the normative idea of femininity emphasised by Chinese culture and the traditional values of marriage and motherhood.

Secondly, identity is defined in terms of one's relationships with others (Hecht et al., 2005). Relationships influence an individual's attitudes and behaviours. For instance, studies (e.g., Acock & Bengtson, 2007; Glass, Bengtson, & Dunham, 1996) found a strong connection between mothers and their children to their attitudes toward marriage and gender roles. Retherford, Ogawa, and Matsukura (2001) find that women who live with their parents and whose parents have an unhappy marriage are more likely to marry. On the other hand, some women expressed disinterest in getting married due to their parents' unhappy marriage (Acock & Bengtson, 2007). Such reports reveal a complex impact of interpersonal relationships on women's ideas regarding marriage/singlehood. Therefore, the identity of 'leftover women' must be seen in relation to their interpersonal relationships with parents and intimate partners and friends.

Finally, relationships form identities and have some impact on individuals' identities, or their sense of self (Hecht et al., 2005). Two or more people coming together creates a family identity. Marriage for Chinese women traditionally means marrying into their husbands' families while staying single means remaining in one's biological family. Remaining single precludes the identity of being married or being a mother. When examining the identity of 'leftover women', the meanings associated with having relational identities (e.g., biological family) and not having others (e.g., as a married couple) need to be taken into consideration.

3.1.2.4 Communal frame

Identity can be examined communally. This frame focuses on how a group of people "shares or constructs an identity" (Faulkner et al., 2002, p. 862) and can also be understood as a social identity. Tajfel (1978), who develops social identity theory, defines social identity as "part of an individual's self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (p. 63). As 'leftover woman' is a socially constructed category, it is a complicated shared identity. These women all belong to the same social category, which indicates their position in society (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and even though they do not perceive themselves as 'leftover women', society's views of them influences their self-understanding.

In understanding identity, the communal refers to the general characteristics of the group or community members. However, when such characteristics are imposed on individual members, it becomes stereotyping (Hecht et al., 2003). Negative stereotypes are harmful in human relationships because they create outgroup bias (Tajfel, 1978). Augoustinos (2001) argues that categorisation perpetuates this problem: while stereotyping is viewed as problematic, categories are often seen as "real and valid group entities" (p. 203). In Witteborn's (2004) study of terrorism in which participants linked the identity of terrorists to their ethnicity, he contends that social stigma is the consequence of communal discourses. Through everyday use, the category of single women becomes "objectified symbolic meaning systems" (Augoustinos, 2001, p. 207). In order to understand communal aspects of Chinese 'leftover women' identity, it is necessary to know who objectifies Chinese single women and in what ways.

3.1.3 Identity gaps

An extensive line of CTI research involves the interpenetration and the presence of the four layers of identity (Hecht et al., 2000). These four frames of identity are interconnected. Therefore, it is crucial to understand identity as a dynamic process with four frames overlapping.

However, these frames can be inconsistent, which results in 'identity gaps', as each frame has respective standards to follow and requirements to meet (Jung, Hecht, & Wadsworth, 2007). The gaps are an unavoidable consequence of communication and relationships. Jung and Hecht (2004) argue that although there may be contradictions between each frame, their coexistence constitutes identities. The overlapping of frames is conceptualised as identity negotiations (Jung & Hecht, 2004). Identity helps define the interaction as "the dialectical tension between contradiction and coexistence of identity frames can be a source of dynamic and fluid nature of identity" (Jung & Hecht, 2004, p. 268).

In studies on identity gaps, Jung and Hecht (2004) find that the personal-enactment identity gap can trigger feelings of being misunderstood and the personal-relational identity gap can influence communication satisfaction. Jung et al. (2007) and Jung and Hecht (2008) point out that among Korean immigrants, the personal-enactment gap is more likely to increase the likelihood for depression compared to the personal-relational gap. The former gap occurs as a reaction to a conversation, while the latter is a postponed consequence of communication which involves interpreting the meaning of others' communicative behaviours (Jung & Hecht, 2008; Jung et al., 2007). Their interpretation is supported by Wadsworth et al.'s (2008) research on international students in the United States. They (Wadsworth et al., 2008) argue that the personal-enactment gap is likely to have a much stronger impact on discrimination or educational satisfaction than the personal-relational gap.

Kam and Hecht (2009) explore the personal-enactment, personal-relational and relational-enactment identity gaps and their impact on the grandparent-grandchild relationship when avoiding conversation, communication satisfaction and relationship satisfaction. They find that individuals who experience the personal-enactment identity gap are more likely to avoid discussion, are less likely to be satisfied with their

communication and relationship. Identity gaps involving the relational frame are not clear on any of the three outcomes, as relational related gaps involve relational expectations (Kam & Hecht, 2009). Maeda and Hecht (2012) argue that identity gaps are crucial for people who have a non-traditional identity. As the non-traditional identity may be silent and can be seen as deviating from the social norms, expectations and normative communal identity (Maeda & Hecht, 2012).

The concept of identity gaps is relevant for the examination of 'leftover women' phenomenon. Identity based on single/unmarried status can be viewed from a personal frame of the person involved, but also from provisional relational frame by other people. The label 'leftover women' and homophonic term 'victorious women' labelled by single/unmarried Chinese women presents a discrepancy between the positive personal frame and the negative connotations associated with the term 'leftover women'. The negotiation of the identity of 'leftover women' could be another context where the interpenetration of multiple identity dimensions can be explored.

In summary, the CTI explains that identities can be studied in terms of personal, enactment, relationship and communal frames and the identity gaps between each frame. Although they are presented here in a linear manner, these frames are correlative, interdependent and inconsistent (Jung & Hecht, 2004), allowing the investigation of identity from multiple perspectives. The CTI can deepen our knowledge about how Chinese 'leftover women' come to understand who they are through their daily communications as indicators of what constitutes the phenomenon of the increasing number of single women. When exploring the identity of 'leftover women' through their experiences, it is important to capture their identities contextually by considering these women's personal, relational and social positions and their behaviours stemming from such positions and any inconsistencies created by these factors.

3.2 Review of literature on single/unmarried women

To analyse the Chinese 'leftover women', limited studies have been conducted on this newly emerged phenomenon. I therefore rely upon studies on unmarried/single women from the Western World with robust outcomes, conducted in the 1990s. Single

women are generally studied in comparison to married women, where the application of conventional female models are used to scrutinise single women's maturation process. The choice for women to be single, their lifestyles and their identities have to be constantly explained. Their work to achieve self-satisfaction and social acceptance in a gendered, stigmatised and marginal setting forms the construction of their identity.

In societies prioritising marriage and motherhood, unmarried women are seen as problematic. The narrow definition of womanhood as heterosexual, married and mother is exclusive. Ideologies of familism have historically valued single women for their domestic role, as is the case of Chinese daughters under the one-child policy. Researching the identity of 'leftover women' of the one-child generation, when traditional ideologies have come under increasing pressure from the economic and social forces of modernity, reveals the complexity of relationships between the individual and society. The elements relating to the construction of their identities require understanding which is open-minded to single women's choices, values and relationships.

The examination of single women's experiences in Western culture can provide insights into the research on single Chinese women. In this chapter, four main themes in this research have been extracted from studies on single/unmarried women: the adult development process, treatment of choice, autonomy, single stigma and stigma management.

3.2.1 Adult development process

Early studies are mainly concerned with the adult development process of unmarried women (e.g., Bonds-White, 1997; Dougherty, 1990; Lange, 1995). Their research shows that single women can be regarded as mature adults, despite the fact that they have never married nor have children. The initial basis of the studies was looking at marriage and motherhood as the foundation for women's identities and, for those who wish to marry, failure to do so has repercussions on personal identity. Scholars report that frustration and disappointment lead to greater self-awareness, self-sufficiency and creation of alternative sources of gratification through interpersonal relationships, meaningful work, pleasurable activities and solving adaptive tasks

(Bonds-White, 1997). The adaptive tasks include working through feelings of loss, developing a positive perspective on singleness, dealing with issues of stigmatisation and caring for oneself emotionally and financially.

Not marrying can be an opportunity for single women to strengthen their identity. Research looking at the impact of social status on the sense of self – or the connection between the subjective experience of being unmarried and objective reality – focuses on the individual's psychic, ego-based response. It does not pay enough critical attention to features which are assumed to be fixed.

Marriage and reproduction are accepted as fundamental to the female identity. The individual is regarded as reactive to their external environment, rather than as a person with power and capacity to act. A drawback of such studies is the lack of attention paid to the concept of self and identity. Though the research population is female, a gendered analysis of identity categorisation is not applied and the categories – feminine and masculine – are treated as absolute. Despite this, the concern with caring for the self, the focus on individual responsibility for one's life and the attitudes to self-development is of interest to this study.

The adult development of unmarried women has been examined by Bonds-White (1997), who explores the issue of gendered female identities. Her study established the significant marker events and age-related transitions in the lives of unmarried, child-free women. The study found that the transition to adulthood for unmarried women is more complex than the path that men follow, as suggested by Levinson (1987). The exception is women in their early twenties who choose not to marry. Bonds-White is critical of models of adult development based either on career ambitions of men, marriage or maternal aspirations of women, which unmarried women are compared to. It is correct to contest the view that women's adult development is organically linked to marital and parenting relationships.

In her research, Bonds-White (1997) presents two patterns of adulthood development for single women. One pattern is based on a view of life as a series of crises related to 'phases and transitions' where the perception of self is altered. The second pattern is described as a 'flow'. Women who wish to marry or have children see their lives as a series of crisis-related phases precipitated by awareness of ageing, failure to find a

marriage partner or the biological limitations on childbearing. The resolution of the crisis leads to an altered sense of identity and a higher level of self-acceptance. Women who choose between marriage and an education/career most commonly described their lives as a 'flow', with a transition at the age of 30, where career ambitions are re-evaluated and adjusted in favour of higher personal satisfaction. On the generation of Japanese women that she interviewed for her study, Maeda (2006) regards the crisis among 30 year olds as difficult, as they had no role models of unmarried women whom they could emulate.

For both groups, the experience of adulthood was comparable, marked by similar events, such as work or education opportunities, separation from biological family and the beginning and ending of relationships. Importantly, Bonds-White (1997) presents the single woman's adult identity as not dependent on motherhood and wifehood. Though she refers to a female sense of identity in her overview, she does not present any interpretation of the identity as a female in the discussion. Women who value independence and freedom and who address crises that result from not pursuing traditional routes to female adulthood demonstrate that other options, lifestyles and strategies are available.

Self-knowledge and prioritising self-development are intrinsic to the maturation process. Bonds-White (1997) provides valuable evidence that the focus on identity may be evidence of a female identity that is not-relational. This has some significance for the meaning, composition and organisation of femininity that are not discussed by Bonds-White. Other themes that she identifes that are relevant to my research are: the emphasis on choice; the attempt to produce a gendered analysis of female identity; the critique of gendered adult developmental models premised either on marriage/motherhood; and the focus on women's own persepctive of their adult development.

Burnley (1999) conducts an exploratory study of identities, careers and relationships of unmarried, childless women. She examines their lifestyle, examining identity turning points, career entry and social support networks. As with Bonds-White (1997), Burnley (1999) rejects developmental models of the path to adulthood, preferring to use the concept of personal career to examine shifts in personal identity over time.

Developmental models, she argues, are not sensitive enough to represent the individual's capacity to construct their own life and to neglect cultural and social differences between groups and individuals. A symbolistic interactionist perspective brings together subjective features of adult lives: the meaning assigned to events and actions are understood to shape the subjective understanding of self and the social world.

Burnley (1999) demonstrates that for signifying shifts in understanding of one's self and identity transformation, the personal career framework is more suited to examining the lives of single women than it is for adult development models (which assume marriage and parenthood). However, she does not examine the specific effects of gender on a personal career. Though her work is concerned with social identity, she neglects to make any reference to the composition of single female identity other than to suggest that identity transformation occurs at the age of 30. Burnley did not draw conclusions about the role of supportive relationships of single women compared to spousal relationships when exploring views of self-understanding.

Gordon's (1994) starting point is that structure and cultures do not determine people's lives, but form a framework in which lives are played out. While acknowledging that the 'individual' is a masculine construction in which women are the 'other', she argues that it is impossible to keep women outside individuality. She states that studies on single women show women's struggle for autonomy as female. In constructing autonomy and individuality in their daily lives, single women continue to redefine these constructs. She asserts that the struggle for autonomy and individuality is not a conscious form of resistance, but is evident in unmarried women's constant push against the boundaries of what it is to be a woman.

In my research, I follow Gordon's emphasis on resistance as renegotiating the meaning of womanhood. The question of how being in a couple and being a mother continues to define womanhood is tested by the extent by which Chinese 'leftover women' can identify themselves as single to both themselves and others.

For women who have resisted convention and remained single into middle-age in Japan and Korea, the transition into adulthood is ambiguous. It has been argued that their

identities and lifestyles challenged the post-war concept of maturity for women, which involves patience and self-sacrifice achieved through marriage and motherhood, a conception that was part of the formula for economic growth (Rosenberger, 2001).

Although independence and responsibility are the key elements of adulthood, these concepts take on particular manifestations for Japanese and Korean women and make transitioning into adulthood difficult for long-term singles. Resisting their place as housewives in the new economic order and opting instead for self-actualisation through full-time work and enjoyment, single women delay or forgo marriage (Rosenberger, 2007). Unmarried women emphasise the importance of developing the self as an identity outside the family. Unmarried women face challenges attaining adulthood in the eyes of elders and peers because their maturity hinges on self-sacrifice to the family unit.

There are two channels to avoid being perceived as immature – economic success, or caring for aging parents. Such options were supported by Ryn's (2008) study on the domestic lives of single women in which she described singlehood as a survival strategy. Ryn's (2008) research views singlehood as a valued identity within familism because of the importance of single women's caring activities for parents and helping siblings. She argued in favour of an emphasis on careers and deems transition as part of the course of life rather than a stage. Her study is concerned with family, friendship, health, residential and occupational careers of unmarried and widowed working-class women. Ryn (2008) argues that an approach that only observes marriage and motherhood not only suggests that single women are deviant, but obfuscates their adult development and their relationships to family. Even though the stereotype of the old maid persists, unmarried women disassociate themselves from this negative term. One point made in my research is that adulthood for Asian women should be studied historically with attention to groups whose identities are under debate as society changes.

3.2.2 Treatment of choice

In most studies of singleness, the concept of choice has been understood in a restricted sense – 'push' (constraints) and 'pull' (attractions) are generally regarded as important in explaining the structural and personal elements in the decision to remain single (Bunk & van Driel, 1989). A concept of choice premised on push/pull factors

alone, or as a weighing up of benefits, may not be suitable to explain personal life paths or the composition of identity. In recognising this, scholars have either appropriated the concept to fit their concerns, or have side-stepped it by introducing alternatives, such as the 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' categories.

As noted by Gordon (1994), singleness was rarely explained in terms of individual motivation, needs or values. Indeed, she argues that intrinsic attraction to the single lifestyle is less important in explaining the choice of being unmarried than structural constraints. Choice should not be only considered as an outcome of push (constraints)/pull (attraction) factors and that choice is connected to identity formation. What is of value to the person informs the identity, informs choices and relationships, giving shape to the living structure. Knowing what one values also provides crucial support for maintaining identities in interactions with others.

Interestingly, Maeda's (2006) research on singlehood among urban, upper and middle class professionals in Japan is based on a concept of choice as a process that is rational and ideological. For example, Maeda (2006) states that "yesterday's choice could be today's stage in transition to tomorrow's new choice…those who choose to be single do so after evaluating the relative costs and rewards of other life-style which are realistic options" (p. 39). She argues that social and ideological support for the idea of singleness as a choice has come from the women's liberation movement. Medea broadened the concept of choice in order to use it as an explanatory framework for singlehood.

Gordon (2000) regards the concept of voluntariness as more precise than choice in the analysis of singlehood. She argues that choice is filled with ambivalence, as there are both positive and negative sides of being single. Small decisions may have led to singlehood, but could not in themselves be regarded as responsible for choosing the single life. Voluntariness, on the other hand, refers to women who are retrospectively aware how their singleness came about. I agree with Gordon that in studying singleness, it cannot be understood as simply an outcome of choice, nor as an examination of specific types of women who predictably become single.

As a researcher, I wish to understand singleness as an identity, part of which is the process of becoming single and women's own interpretation of that process. The

concept of voluntariness described by Gordon captures the process of becoming single from the viewpoint of the researcher and the retrospective viewpoint of the researched. Choice is also an analytical tool helpful for focusing on how small decisions are made. For example, the priorities involved in forming and maintaining a single lifestyle and the values and relationships important for single women's identity. I argue for conceptualisation of choice which includes values, plans, priorities and relationships which compose single women's identities.

The challenge is to work with the concept of choice as opposed to leaving it to one side. Importantly, 'leftover women' themselves use the language of choice to explain their singlehood to themselves and others. While the terms voluntary and involuntary are wider than choice and are helpful in identifying typologies of singlehood, there are some difficulties. Despite the addition of 'temporary' or 'stable' to the categories, they are representative of a position at a fixed moment in time and make movement between categories ambiguous. For instance, women can move from being involuntary single to voluntarily single. The categories also obscure any link between ideologies concerning dominant social identities and their consequence on personal identity.

In arguing for a focus on choice in relation to identity, the social context in which choices are made and the values attached to particular choices are exposed. A broader concept of choice also links lifestyle and identity. Choice, I argue, is inherently bound with an understanding of oneself. It also alerts the researcher to individual capacity for composing their own personal identity. A definition of choice put forward for this research is evident in the decisions 'leftover women' made in relationships, in prioritising educational and occupational achievement and in devising life plans and decisions which serve what women value in contemporary China.

Duggan (2003) argues that there is a permitted female identity relating to family and reproduction. Her observation is based on a view of personal identity as a product of social identity, an outcome of conditioning and socialisation. She does not examine the components of identity, as this is beyond the scope of her work, but the research clearly signals the difficulties involved for women in building a personal and social identity that is not based on marriage and motherhood. She argues that it is very

difficult for single women to overcome the hetero-patriarchal socialisation that defines a woman as a wife and mother.

In the absence of a supportive community, it is difficult for single women to overcome negative stereotyping. Even women who have a source of political and personal support find it difficult to be self-identified single women, an identity Duggan (2003) describes as “at odds with those structures which shape our choices and definitions about ourselves” (p. 61). She does not deny that individual agency is possible, but that it is confined by the “hetero-patriarchal definition of the identity of women” (p. 44).

For Duggan, it is evident that agency is discussed in the attempt for women to make meaningful choices relevant to single identity. She does not refer to an explicit theoretical model in her work, but it is apparent that choice and constraint are not viewed as oppositional. Choices operate within a framework of structural constraints. Even within structures that oppose choice, reminiscent of Giddens (1991), the capacity to choose remains. Through socially ascribed identity constraints, personal identity is a matter of choice. Duggan (2003) also suggests that it is necessary to explore females’ resistance to culture and ideology and “retain an optimistic attitude concerning choices, independence, and freedom” (p. 66).

3.2.3 Autonomy

When reading about single women’s lives, the significance of independence stands out. Cherishing independence and being responsible for one's own decisions and actions all place a value on autonomy. Christman (1995) defines personal autonomy as “the psychological, social, and cognitive ability to be independent and self-governing” (p. 30). Classical concepts of autonomy have been criticised for being overly individualised, premised on the separation from others, leading some feminists to argue that drive for autonomy is undesirable (see Friedman, 1997 for an overview of the debate). Autonomy is also more commonly associated with male identity. However, the importance of autonomy to single women is signalled by the constant reference to freedom and the advantages of the single lifestyle. The concept of independence is under-theorised in social research, considered more as a value, with less emphasis on the practice and consequences of independent living and the

subsequent implications on self-identity or autonomy, particularly in relation to women.

Gordon, Holland, Lahelma, and Thomson (2005) observe that there are a number of facets in the composition of independence: positive ones where independence is beneficial; negative ones in which independence is over-emphasised; other facets include independence as a necessary response to coping with loneliness; independence as alternating with dependence on others; and finally independence as an aspect of interdependence – maintaining a single lifestyle while taking others into account. Independence for the women included financial autonomy, living by oneself, the ability to care for the self, to be in control of one's life, being emotionally self-reliant and having a strong sense of self (Gordon et al., 2005). Throughout empirical studies on single women, the tension between achieving and working for independence while creating and sustaining meaningful relationships is crucial.

Identity formation is a social construction, it suggests that autonomy, as an aspect of identity, cannot be regarded as separate from social relationships. While arguing that autonomy is social, Friedman (2003) considers the tension between autonomy and sociality, suggesting that while some relationships are inimical to autonomy, there are others that are constitutive of autonomy. She calls for an account that explores how social relationships promote and hinder the realisation of autonomy. Commenting on feminist discussions of autonomy/relationality (which include debates about whether autonomy and relationality can co-exist or whether autonomy is relational), Friedman (2003) notes:

> One of the ideas underlying the feminist call for a relational conception of autonomy is the now familiar social conception of self… on this view, even the most independent, self-reliant, emotionally self-contained among us are nevertheless social beings who are connected to and dependent on a great many others for material and emotional support, for the development of our capacities, for the sources of meaning in our lives, and for our very identities, this perspective on the self leads easily to the view that autonomy should also be conceptualised relationally. (p. 55)

Freidman goes on to discuss the severing of relational ties. She suggests that autonomy requires the exercise of choice in actively detaching from certain relationships. Here is an opportunity to reconstruct the relational, feminine, social-

autonomous, masculine, individual dichotomies. I argue that such dichotomies obfuscate the realisation of female autonomy, which is partly constitutive of women's lives, but not recognised. It is visible in the accounts provided by 'leftover women' about their identities.

Feminist theoretical work has revealed the existence of autonomous thought and implications for caring practices that are part of women's conventional roles as wives and mothers. Thinking of female identity as relational only disregards a form of autonomy which could be imagined as relational-autonomy. Friedman notes that the new agenda for feminist theory concerns the social basis of autonomy, or the interaction between autonomy and relationality. This will help to understand the composition, negotiation and maintenance of the identities of 'leftover women'.

Evidence from studies concerning single women or unmarried women show that social networks and friendships are a meaningful element in the management of the single lifestyle (e.g., DePaulo, 2007; Lewis & Moon, 1997; Maeda & Hecht, 2012; Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003). Rindfuss, Bumpass, Choe, and Tsuya (2004) examine relationships between social networks and attitudes toward non-traditional family behaviours in Japan and found that individuals who have personal relationships with those who engage untraditional family behaviours have positive attitudes toward such behaviours. They further argued that nonstandard behaviour can eventually become novel and then normative. Although Rindfuss et al.'s (2004) study is focused on Japanese culture, their findings are consistent with contact hypothesis, which states that when members of different groups interact within certain optimal conditions, intergroup prejudice decreases.

A family network was one important aspect of single and/or unmarried women's lives, but friendships were also perceived as a significant factor in their life experiences (Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003). Macvarish (2006) finds that the life satisfaction of single women is moderately related to their friendships. Rubinstein, Alexander, Goodman, and Luborsky (2001) also identify family-like relationships as another important type of relationship for Japanese single and childless women. They argue that these relationships developed because of the flexible nature of singleness.

3.2.4 Single stigma and stigma management

Recent studies on single women concentrate on the single stigma (e.g., Byrne & Carr, 2005; Morris, Sinclair, & DePaulo, 2007; Sharp & Ganong, 2011; Strijbosch, 2015). Despite the profound changes in cultural norms relating to traditional life norms, the heterosexual married couple (with children) is still deemed the correct life path for adults and the ideal pattern constituted society (Koropeckyj-Cox & Pendell, 2007; Rothrauff & Cooney, 2008). Therefore, stigmas continues to exist against women's unmarried status. Singlehood is stereotyped as it is still perceived as a violation to the social and cultural norms and ideology of coupledom and parenthood.

Goffman (1963) points out two classifications of stigma: discreditable and discredited stigma. The former refers to a stigma when others cannot distinguish the difference between the virtual identity and the actual identity. The latter refers to stigma when others can recognise the difference between the virtual identity and the actual identity. The key to manage the discreditable stigma is to conceal the messages about oneself, while the key to manage the discredited stigma is to cope with the contradictions raised by others.

In the case of single women, scholars have found that they not only attempt to conceal their single status, but also deal with the ambivalence and contrary perceptions of others concerning their singlehood (Byrne, 2000; Koropeckyj-Cox & Pendell, 2007). Goffman's theory of stigma management demonstrates some strategies to cope with stigmatised identities. For instance, stigmatised people could avoid stigmatised social identities. He suggests stigmatised people limit exposure to discrimination, such as concealing their identity, or looking for another acceptable social identity.

However, there are some problems of Goffman's theory of stigma management. Firstly, Goffman's theory is rooted in the Western culture and would not fit with research conducted in Eastern culture. The basic cultural and social assumptions of Goffman's (1963) theory that "self-determining, autonomous individuals with choices and a society that allows for privacy" (p. 113) is different to the situation of single childless women in Japan (Maeda, 2008) and single mothers in Malaysia (Ibrahim & Hassan, 2009). Riessman (2002) suggests that stigma management should be understood in a social

structural context. My research understood the stigma management of 'leftover women' in the social structural context of contemporary China.

Secondly, Goffman's theory is not providing any stigma management strategies for destigmatising individuals. It does not offer resistance to devaluation, such as redefining stigmas as diversity. Goffman considers stigmatised individuals as having the same perspectives on themselves as others and the key of Goffman's stigma management is concealing information. Yet, it can be seen in research where stigmatised single women reject the stigmas held by the general public. Correspondingly, researchers formulate a more proactive view than Goffman's theory, coming up with two types of strategies of stigma management for the self-protection of single women: defensive strategies and resistant strategies (Riessman, 2002; Sharp & Ganong, 2011).

Reacting with defensive strategies, single women try to limit exposure to the stigmatised single identity. While engaging with resistant strategies, single women attempt to confront and challenge the negative perspectives. Such strategies include talking about their future marriage intentions, describing singleness as more desirable than marriage and socialising with other singles to reduce guilt and self-doubt on their choices. A single woman can either correct the abnormal trait (marry), she can act outside her expected role (have an extraordinary career), or she can adopt a new and radical identity (choose her single status) as positive marginality. Such strategies could also be understood not only as stigma management strategies, but also as forms of resistance to dominant identities, which is a trend my research followed.

Third, feminist scholars have revised Goffman's theory of stigma management through their research on how women manage stigmas in their daily lives (e.g., Blackstone & Stewart, 2012 (stigma of childfree women); Clark, Lindner, Armistead, & Austin, 2004 (stigma of women's ethnicities); Collins, 2000 (women's resistance to subordinated status); Meyer, 2003 (stigma of lesbian); Riessman, 2002 (stigma of involuntary childless women); Taub, McLorg, & Fanflik, 2004 (stigma of women with physical disabilities); Zajicek & Koski, 2010 (stigma of single women)). They suggest that the resistance to stigma does not have to be confronting or combat dominant perceptions. Applying a strategical attack may have a better effect on rebutting the opinions of others and can redefine their stigmatised identity. Collins (2000) and Riessman (2002) both notice that

the element of social structure is absent from Goffman's theory of stigma management and argue how individuals resist their stigmas is rooted in their social structural contexts, such as their social status, gender, age, family background, race, etc.

Social stigma refers to the intolerance of some features that distinguish an individual from cultural and social norms (Goffman, 1963). The singlehood of China's 'leftover women' is considered anomalous, as they deviate from the normative femininity emphasised by Chinese culture and the traditional values of marriage and motherhood. Although China has signed the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), stereotypes of women and the stigmatisation of 'leftover women' persist to enforce gender inequality and the Chinese government has not taken effective action to combat this. Stigmatisation of 'leftover women' and their single status highlights persistent gender inequality in China (Fincher, 2016). Information on stigma and stigma management are useful to strengthen existing policies on gender equality. Thus, there is a need for policy intervention against this type of gender-based stigma.

The examination of single women's experience in terms of the adult development process, treatment of choice, autonomy, and single stigma management in other culture provide insights and some guidance for the research on the phenomenon of the increasing number of Chinese unmarried women. Taking these into consideration, three sub-research questions are proposed in the next section.

3.3 Research questions

In this section, I explain how the different contents and paths concerning the reviewed literature of studies on single women above can fall within the guidance of the theoretical framework of CTI: personal, enactment, relational and communal identity frame. Three sub-research questions (sub-RQs) investigate the complexity of the identity formation of 'leftover women' from personal, enacted and relational identities, respectively. The three sub-questions act in all to explore the constitution of the inner layer of 'leftover women' phenomenon from individuals' perspectives which is associated with the communal frame.

Recent studies of singlehood explore the meaning of single status relating to single stigma and stigma management in the United States (e.g., DePaulo & Morris, 2006; Sharp & Ganong, 2011), Europe (e.g., Byrne, 2008b; Greitemeyer, 2009; Macvarish, 2006), Singapore (Jones, Zhang, & Zhi, 2012), Japan (Maeda, 2008), Malaysia (Ibrahim & Hassan, 2009) and Korea (Song, 2010). This study on Chinese single women extends this knowledge through the experience of single stigma and stigma management in Chinese society and may provide a revised version of Goffman's theory through **Sub Research Question #1**: 'what does being single mean for a Chinese 'leftover woman'?' guided by personal identity frame.

Single studies have shown that adult development models premised on social and biological stages are neither relevant nor applicable to the lives of single women or to the study of single women's identities. This is because they had no role models who were single women and had conventional expectations of marriage and motherhood. Female adulthood characterised by marriage and motherhood does not reflect the experience of single, childfree women. Needless to say, the 'leftover women' phenomenon happened at a specific time and as a consequence of specific political policies. In rejecting developmental or stage models of adulthood, Taylor (2011) advises that

> To view individuals, such as the never-marrieds, who choose alternative paths of adult life, not as deviants but as conscious actors who occupy new roles in one or more areas of life. (p. 16)

To identify unmarried women as conscious actors who choose to build their own lives demonstrates that their identities can be composed beyond marriage and parenthood, even in the context of stigma. Singlehood was seen as an advantage to achieving alternative adult lifestyles and being vital to the making of a developed personality. Surveying the studies on single and/or unmarried women above, however, the impression is that scholars strive to show that it is possible to be satisfied with the single lifestyle (Bonds-White, 1997; Byrne, 2003; Byrne & Carr, 2005; Duggan, 2003). Gordon (1994) notes that single women are unlikely to take their lifestyle for granted, that most reflect on their single status and that marriage continues to cast "a long shadow" (p. 195). A number of studies claim that the age of 30 is a turning point for single women (e.g., Byrne, 2008a; Maeda, 2006).

It is evident from this review that female adulthood characterised by marriage and motherhood does not reflect the experience of single, child free women. Therefore, the research conducted on Chinese 'leftover women' would expand the knowledge on adulthood development via **Sub Research Question #2**: 'how does a Chinese 'leftover woman' seek completeness?' guided by enactment identity frame.

Single women not in relationships pay more attention to self-development and self-identity, which supports the observation that absence of some familial relationships (spousal and child) may be necessary for the expression of autonomy in women, assisted by the presence of other relationships that affirm counter-values. A women's identity can no longer be viewed as purely relational based on familial relationships. Relationships with others are important, but significant relationships are not limited to couple-oriented relations, or adult-child parent relationships.

In this research, the presence, or absence, of traditional patterns and the alternative sequence of new and old roles will be explored by through relationships (relationality) and independence (autonomy) in the lives of 'leftover women'. I also focus on attachment to the single identity while negotiating women's identity. Crucially, I argue for the inclusion of a broader role of choice in understanding the identity of 'leftover women' – a concept that includes values, plans, priorities and relationships, which informs their identities. Understanding unmarried women's identity as autonomous-relational broadens the knowledge of adult womanhood and the dominant social identity for 'leftover women' in Chinese society. Therefore, **Sub Research Question #3** asks: 'in what ways do the relationships of a Chinese 'leftover woman' with others contribute to her choice?' guided by relational identity frame.

Some studies (e.g., Bonds-White, 1997; Rosenberger, 2007) suggest that single women develop a strong sense of self. The process of forming identities provides a more general conceptualisation of adulthood and womanhood rather than age or socio-biological developmental stages. How 'leftover women' view themselves and their relationships with others provides a better understanding of their identities in terms of personal, relational, enacted and communal realms.

My aim is to invite 'leftover women' to talk about their own experiences, perceptions and interpretations of dealing with pressures to conform to dominant social identities

for women. For single women, it may also be the case that singleness itself represents the attainment of different expressions of womanhood. It is argued in this research that confronting and negotiating the single identity through formulating a coherent personal, enacted and relational identity and the transformative shift of dominant social identities for ‘leftover women’ has begun. ‘Leftover women’ find power in their singlehood.

Chapter 4 Methodology: phenomenological take on single life

This chapter details the methodological choices and processes of the study, establishing how the sub research questions below are answered through phenomenological inquiry and via face-to-face, in-depth semi-structured interviews. In order to answer the main research question (RQ): 'what constitutes the phenomenon of 'leftover women'?', I examine the external forces by looking at the representation of the 'leftover women' campaign in politics and media in chapter two. The main research question is then unwrapped into three sub research questions focusing on the inner layer – the phenomenon of the increasing number of single women in China – and these are explored in the following research chapters.

Sub RQ1: What does being single mean for a Chinese 'leftover woman'?
Sub RQ2: How does a Chinese 'leftover woman' seek completeness?
Sub RQ3: In what ways do the relationships of a Chinese 'leftover woman' with others contribute to her choice?

My inquiry is phenomenological. Phenomenological inquiry allows cultural perceptions to be observed in narratives and increases the understanding of complex communication processes (Hecht et al., 2000). The face-to-face, in-depth semi-structured interview process helps us to understand how individual experiences interact with social and organisational forces; these influences affect the context in which individuals exist, so the interview can reveal the interconnections among people who live and work in a shared society.

This chapter first introduces the phenomenological inquiry process and explains the key assumptions of phenomenology. It illustrates how the inquiry was applied to this research in a synergistic three-stage process. It emphasises the significance of interview as the method and specifies how it was conducted and how thematic analysis was then undertaken. It demonstrates the reliability of the study through an examination of its credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability.

4.1 Phenomenological inquiry

Phenomenological inquiry served as the methodology for this research, which allowed for an inductive exploration of the complex experience of Chinese 'leftover women'. As a qualitative approach, this methodology provided insight into the similarities and differences of the identity negotiations of 'leftover women'. Phenomenology is the "theory of the unique" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 6) and clarifies the heterogeneity and distinctiveness of a minority's existence by allowing them to voice their own lived experiences in an unrestrained manner (Nelson, 1989). Phenomenology allows for capturing the meaning of the everyday experience of an individual as it is lived by those individuals (Omeri & Atkins, 2002). Phenomenological inquiry is an effective approach to capture the perspectives of 'leftover women' to "allow the cultural perceptions to emerge from their own words," and to increase understanding of complex communication processes (Hecht et al., 2000, p. 35). By increasing awareness of "the consequential in the inconsequential, the significance in the taken-for-granted" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 8), such an inductive methodology revealed the subtleties of relationships and the nuances of identity enactments (Viruell-Fuentes, 2006). It is important to note that phenomenologists do not attempt to make claims about the universality of an experience. Instead, they attempt to capture its richness and uniqueness, and may seek generality within a specific context (Wertz, 2005). As long as researchers explicate both the commonalities and distinctiveness of the human experience, phenomenology allows for the recognition of differences by providing opportunities to learn from others, searching for similarities and eschewing polarisation (Craig, 1999). The phenomenological inquiry is particularly suited to articulating the diverse experiences of 'leftover women' while observing commonalities at the same time.

4.1.1 Phenomenology

Phenomenology is simultaneously a philosophy of conscious experience and a qualitative methodology that serves to rigorously describe, thematise and interpret the meanings of the what is taken for granted in the world (Nelson, 1989). Phenomenology, the study of lived experience or phenomena (Van Manen, 1990), was originally developed by Husserl (1962) and influenced the works of Heidegger (1988), Jaspers

(1968), Sartre (1992) and Merleau-Ponty (2013). Wertz (2005) argues that phenomenology originated as a reaction to the dehumanisation prevalent among researchers in psychology. He further states that this methodology not only values people's viewpoints and provides a discursive space for recognising diverse lived experiences, but also provides an opportunity to capture insights into the first-person experience and the distinctiveness of human behaviour. In the field of communication, scholars like Deetz (1981), Nelson (1989), Lanigan (1979), and Orbe (2000) have used phenomenology to gain a deeper understanding of their participants' experiences and to honour the range of perspectives found within the world.

Van Manen (1990) describes phenomenology as the study of the world as it is experienced pre-reflectively, before we categorise and conceptualise information. Phenomenologists strive to explore "prescientific life-world' as it presents itself in our consciousness and as it is 'encountered in everyday affairs" (Wertz, 2005, p. 168). Van Manen (1990) notes this approach to research allows for an intimate understanding of what phenomena mean and how they are experienced. The fundamental question that phenomenologists attempt to answer is "what is this or that kind of experience like?" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 9). In this regard, phenomenological research is the study of the essence of a shared experience (Husserl, 1962). It allows for an understanding of a phenomenon as it is seen through the eyes of the people who have lived it (Patton, 2001).

4.1.1.1 Key assumptions of phenomenology

Van Manen (1990) delineates several key assumptions on which phenomenological research is based. First, phenomenology does not accept a possibility of an objective researcher (Giorgi, 1994). Qualitative researchers inevitably bring their personal assumptions, beliefs and opinions to their research (Lanigan, 1979). However, they must be free of value judgements to fully focus on the meaning of participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenologists need to acknowledge their position by disregarding it (Wertz, 2005). Husserl (1962) argues that scholars must set aside their scientific assumptions to understand phenomena as they are lived and exist prior to scientific knowledge. According to the phenomenological approach to research, presuppositions are omitted and this offers the best opportunity to reform policy-making and practice (Hammersley, 2000). While analysing the narratives of others,

researchers distinguish their subjective experiences when reflecting on those of others in order to capture the meaning of participants' lived world (Wertz, 2005). The quality of phenomenological research relies on the researchers' ability to "set aside predilections, prejudice, predispositions, and allowing things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness, and to look and see them again, as if for the first time"(Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). In the instance of 'leftover women', it helps when considering the emerging phenomenon of the increasing number of single Chinese women.

The second assumption on which phenomenological inquiry is based is that research does not begin with preconceived notions and expectations of what needs to be revealed (Lanigan, 1979). In this sense, phenomenology is "discovery oriented; it wants to find out what a certain phenomenon means and how it is experienced" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 29). As such, it is an inductive approach, where a researcher strives to comprehend the situation without making predictions about it (Patton, 2001).

The third assumption of phenomenological inquiry conveys the idea that researchers need to gather "descriptive lived experiences to which the person gives consciousness" (Patton, 2002, p. 607) and study them in an open and unconstrained manner (Orbe, 2000). An important characteristic of phenomenology is that ambiguity is not to be avoided; on the contrary, it is considered valuable and necessary in the process of inquiry (Lanigan, 1979).

The fourth assumption on which phenomenology is centred refers to our inherent need for desiring to know more about the world and the way we experience it (Van Manen, 1990). Van Manen (1990) argues that researchers need to remain attentive to every detail, no matter how seemingly inconsequential. In phenomenology, the research needs to read between the lines to obtain a deeper understanding of participants' lived experiences, cultural practices and how they work in a larger context (Wertz, 2005). Though this approach, the microcosm within larger social and political relationships at a specific time in history can be reflected from participants' lived experiences (Orbe, 2000). For my research, the specific place is the generation of the only child under the one-child policy and open-up policy in Chinese history. Phenomenology also embraces the world in its entirety as opposed to only what can be easily observed (Merleau-Ponty,

2013). That which individuals do not even pick up on in their daily lives has to be accessed through detailed description and described by a phenomenologist (Nelson, 1989). This assumption is effective for "minority group members to articulate their experiences in their own voices, without the prevalence of pre-existing structures to distort them" (Orbe, 2000, p. 607) and it enables women to be seen without stereotypes or preconceived ideas.

The fifth assumption of phenomenology refers to the fact that this approach is not concerned with studying subjects or individuals. Instead, it is the study of persons – such choice of vocabulary emphasises the distinctive social positioning of each one (Van Manen, 1990). According to Van Manen (1990), persons are conscious and act purposefully. Similarly, those who participate in research are not referred as mere respondents, but rather as participants who partake in discovering knowledge (Moustakas, 1994) via creation, implementation and interpretation (Orbe, 2000). Such a conceptualisation expresses the importance of their active participation throughout the process. It also allows for appreciating the individuality of others and it centres on participants' roles during the research process (Orbe, 2000). Therefore "persons can be viewed as multi-dimensional and complex and from a particular social, cultural, and historical life circumstance", which is a crucial account for the exploration of traditionally marginalised groups (Orbe, 2000, p. 607). This premise conveys one of the fundamental ideas of phenomenology: it is not only the context and experience that is central to knowing, but also "the knower is a large part of what is known" (Struthers & Peden-McAlpine, 2005, p. 1265). Phenomenology, unlike traditional empiricism, allows the researcher to make disclosures to participants, as such an approach frequently elicits richer descriptions (Nelson, 1989).

Lastly, phenomenologists do not work with data, which is collected from others and analysed with a pre-determined agenda in mind (Lanigan, 1979). Instead, phenomenological research involves capta, or conscious experiences, which is viewed as something that is "taken from experience and allows people to assign meaning to themselves" (Orbe, 2000, p. 608). There is a clear distinction between the phenomenologist's search for capta and the collection of data. Data, Lanigan (1994) maintains, is the information given as evidence to the researcher, "it is the methodology of invention" (p. 5). Capta, however, is what is taken as evidence, "it is the methodology

of discovery" (Lanigan, 1994, p. 5). The difference is how the researcher connects the relationship between consciousness and experience.

The collection of data infers that there is an external world that can be universally known and described through language or symbols. Phenomenology, however, is based on the belief that the external world is understood as a shared social construct. The collection of capta acknowledges the researchers' qualitative judgment in the collection of information. As such, phenomenology allows participants to speak in their own voice without the researcher modifying their experiences (Van Manen, 1990).

4.1.1.2 Three stages of phenomenological inquiry

Phenomenology involves a synergistic three-stage process: collecting descriptions of lived experiences (description), reviewing descriptions to reveal essential themes (reduction of capta) and discovering how the essential themes collectively reflect the quintessence of the phenomenon (interpretation) (Nelson, 1989). These three phases, Nelson suggests, are interdependent, not only summative, and the researcher's account of the phenomena is never composed in a linear way. She further argues that no two phenomenological studies will proceed in the same fashion. Instead, procedures are uniquely determined by the phenomenon under study.

Phenomenological descriptions must begin with researchers acknowledging their subjectivity toward the phenomenon under study because this allows them to remain open to their participants' experience (Wertz, 2005). A researcher engaging in a phenomenological inquiry needs to articulate, and then overcome, his or her biases, assumptions and prior knowledge of the phenomenon (Husserl, 1962). In order to focus on the phenomenon "as it reveals itself to the experiencing subject in all its concreteness and particularly" (Merleau-Ponty, 2013, p. 10), descriptions of experiential meanings must be taken directly from participants as they disclose the essence of phenomena (Struthers & Peden-McAlpine, 2005).

The goal of the second stage of phenomenology is to determine the essential parts of the capta (Lanigan, 1979). It is where the researcher starts to organise the text into preliminary themes (Moustakas, 1994). This step begins with participants' descriptions being reduced to a written transcript (Nelson, 1989). It allows the researcher to relive the interview and observe not only meanings as expressed through words, but also the

intensity (Anderson & Jack, 1999). During the process of phenomenological reduction, transcripts are read openly without the research topic in mind (Giorgi, 1994). Such a review allows for capturing participants' meanings in a broader context (Wertz, 2005) and observing a phenomenon as something that has its own textures and meanings (Moustakas, 1994).

Having reacquainted his or herself with details, the researcher rereads each transcript individually while underlining "words, phrases, and recollections that emerge as essential in the lived experiences of the participants" (Orbe, 2000, p. 615). The preliminary themes that emerge during the initial reading of the transcripts need to be reviewed to eliminate repetitiveness, overlap and redundancy (Moustakas, 1994). A straightforward interpretation is taken to reveal essential themes of experiences and to determine specific features that are essential for the existence of the phenomenon (Van Manen, 1990). It involves imagining the existence of the phenomenon without a particular context, which allows for the elimination of all the themes that are incidental or redundant. It makes it possible for a pattern to emerge by contextualising a variety of characteristics of lived experiences as a whole (Nelson, 1989). Such a process further reduces paradigmatic themes and ultimately leads to the emergence of essential themes that unite the experience of participants while recognising the uniqueness of these experiences (Wertz, 2005). Although the ultimate goal of phenomenology is to grasp the essence of the phenomenon, a complete reduction of the lived experience is impossible (Merleau-Ponty, 2013).

The third phase of phenomenology – interpretation – "attempts to understand the meaning which links the phenomenon under investigation with consciousness" (Nelson, 1989, p. 236). Its goal is to discover the meanings that were not immediately evident during the description and reduction stages – 'the meaning as the person lived it' (Lanigan, 1979, p. 40). The researcher disposes of themes that are not relevant to arrive at the core of the experience (Van Manen, 1990). The ultimate object of phenomenological interpretation is the emergence of a revelatory phrase – a central idea that interconnects essential themes and captures the essence of lived experience (Nelson, 1989). This "seemingly unimportant utterance can be the preconscious, pre-reflective meaning used by the respondent" (Nelson, 1989, p. 236). The revelatory phrase emerges as a result of hyper-reflection, which involves reinterpreting themes to

discover the meanings connected to groups that participants explicitly stated (Merleau-Ponty, 2013).

It is important to note that phenomenologists do not attempt to make claims about the universality of an experience. Instead, they attempt to capture its richness and uniqueness and may seek generality within a specific context (Wertz, 2005). Thematisation allows us to capture the differentiation within a participant's account and among participants (Nelson, 1989). Researchers must therefore explicate both the commonalities and the distinctiveness of human experience (Orbe, 2000). Phenomenology is therefore suitable to describe the experiences of Chinese 'leftover women' while observing commonalities at the same time.

The objective of the three phases of description, reduction and interpretation is to grasp the essential meaning of a phenomenon (Van Manen, 1990). In this research, phenomenological inquiry serves as a tool to reveal the essence of the lived experiences of Chinese 'leftover women' and their identity. In order to achieve this objective, the experiential descriptions of participants were examined to understand compositions and identity negotiations of 'leftover women'. The interpretation offered here is merely one possibility, as a single interpretation of a phenomenon never exists (Van Manen, 1990). What follows is a detailed method description of how the phenomenological description, reduction and interpretation processes were accomplished.

4.2 Method

This research used face-to-face, in-depth semi-structured interviews, a method frequently used by phenomenologists to collect descriptions of participants' lived experiences (Patton, 2002). A thematic analysis was used to complete the phases of reduction and interpretation as themes are needed for the process.

4.2.1 In-depth semi-structure interview

The most commonly used approach to collect capta in phenomenological inquiries is through face-to-face, in-depth semi-structured interviews as it constitutes the empirical backbone of qualitative research (Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, & Pedersen, 2013; Orbe, 2000). With the presence of both interviewer and interviewee, it provides synchronous

communication in time and place, which is associated with the advantages of social cues. Social cues, such as voice, intonation, and body language of the interviewee, can give the researcher extra information that can be added to or even transfer the meaning of a verbal answer (Patton, 2002). Another benefit of synchronous communication is that the response of the interviewee is more spontaneous, without an extended reflection. Especially when a semi-structured and in-depth interview is used, the interviewer has to formulate questions as a result of the interactive nature of communication to better suit the flow of conversation (Opdenakker, 2006). It also offers higher possibility of creating a good interview ambience (Bryman, 2010), which makes it easier for participants to approach the questions and sharing their experiences.

It can be useful when data collection is aimed at gaining rich capta about specific life experiences (Hesse-Biber, 2007), stories (Chase, 2011) and narratives (Glover, 2003). As Seidman (2013) states, in-depth interviews can help to understand the details of people's experience. It can also identify how their individual experience interacts with social and organisational forces in which they live and work. This can help to discover the interconnections among people in a shared context. An in-depth interview is therefore an effective method for collection of phenomenological descriptions for the research concerning Chinese 'leftover women', especially since it can facilitate thinking about their identity as a special group.

To get an even more personal account, the in-depth approach is combined with semi-structured interviews, which not only provides access to the personal experiences of participants, but also offers a possibility of exploring the meanings of expressed ambivalence, contradiction and nuances (Longhurst, 2003). Semi-structured interviews apply open-ended, neutral, sensitive and clear questions within a flexible framework reminiscent of the flow of natural conversations (Patton, 2002). However, some approaches to in-depth interviewing are more structured and formal and have more of a neutral role in the interview process (Hesse-Biber, 2007), but as stated by Lofland (1995), semi-structured interviews is a guided conversation. The set of questions regard behaviour, opinion and feelings to gain a holistic understanding of the identities of 'leftover women'. The wording of the interview guide affects the quality of responses greatly (Patton, 2001). I organised the interview guide into a funnel sequence by asking very general questions at the beginning, then moving to more specific ones to follow.

This approach is less threatening to interviewees and eases them into the topic (Patton, 2001). The questions should be rearranged to adjust the conversational flow.

Rather than playing a neutral research role, I wanted to focus on speaking with others with an engaged and interactive interview style. I see the potential for interviews to create an inviting space where information is shared. I wanted to take an approach to interviewing that was more conversational to build rapport between the interviewer and the interviewee to overcome the fact that the researcher did not know most of the interviewers personally. In this research, the participants and I shared some similarities in marital status, age, education and even class background. The interviewees felt comfortable disclosing their experiences as a 'leftover woman' to a future 'leftover woman'. Similarly, I shared the same cultural experiences with the interviewees, which allowed me to understand their background and experiences. However, this cultural likeness might have biased findings. My knowledge about 'leftover women' might have prevented me from being an impartial observer. Such conditions might not be a limitation for phenomenology inquiry, as it rejects the possibility of an objective researcher (Giorgi, 2009), but it is important to keep this in mind as these facts might influence the findings of the study.

In-depth semi-structured interviews position the researcher and participants as co-creators of knowledge, which can break down issues of power and authority traditionally embedded in the researcher's role. In doing so, power is redistributed between all parties involved in the interview process (Hesse-Biber, 2007). To accomplish this, I used face-to-face, in-depth semi-structured interviews, referred to as a reflexive, dyadic interview (Ellis, 2004). With this type of interview, the focus remains on the participant and pursues the same basic inquiries with each interviewee while leaving some conversational freedom (Patton, 2001). Moreover, it is based on conversations between the researcher and the participants where the participant plays an active role sharing thoughts, feelings and emotions (Ellis, 2004). In this research, I shared some thoughts of 'leftover women' with some other 'leftover women.' In this way, reflexive, dyadic interviews have similarities with both conversational interviews and active interviews. All three of these types of interviews involve less structure and are a bit more conversational.

Conversational interviews rely on the notion of going with the flow and give the respondent full control to decide where the interview goes (Patton, 2002). In other words, the researcher is not an active participant in the interview process. However, in comparison, reflexive, dyadic interviews and active interviews require that both the researcher and participant actively share their experiences and stories throughout the interview process and are therefore collaborators (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Furthermore, reflexive, dyadic interviews add an additional layer to the active interview process. Researchers are encouraged to not only share their own reflections and emotional responses, but also to share their reasons for the research to provide additional context in the interview space for participants. Although the researcher shares his/her reflections and experiences, with reflexive, dyadic interviews the researcher's reflections do not take centre stage (Ellis, 2004). With reflexive, dyadic interviews, the focus remains on the participant's experiences and knowledge, whereas the researcher's experiences are used to provide deeper insight about the topic, fuelling conversation and engagement as the interview unfolds, deepening understandings and bringing out additional layers of the stories being shared by participants (Ellis, 2004).

4.2.2 Sampling procedure and recruitment process

The respondents were selected through purposeful sampling, as opposed to random sampling, in order to allow "inquiry into and understanding of a phenomenon in depth" (Patton, 2002, p. 46). Purposeful sampling selects information-rich cases to learn a great deal about the key issues and to promote greater insights to a particular phenomenon (Patton, 2002, p. 230). I used a hybrid form of purposeful sampling that included a combination of criteria based on sampling and snowball sampling because I wanted to focus on the experiences of a particular group of single/unmarried women to ensure that all participants met the "predetermined criterion of importance" (Patton, 2002, p. 238) in this research.

The defined characteristics of 'leftover women' are: women over 27 years old, who are 'single/unmarried,' well-paid and highly educated (Fincher, 2016). Therefore, Chinese single/unmarried women between 27 and 36 years old will fall under this umbrella term. The age of 27 years is within the range of 'leftover women' as defined by the Chinese government and the ACWF. 'Leftover women' who were 27 years old in 2007 were 36

years old in 2016. The women were recruited from the large cities (including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Tianjin, Nanjing, Wuhan, Hangzhou, Shenyang and Xi'an) in China. They needed to have at least two bachelor degrees and have higher income than the average income of where they live. The above criteria yielded a homogeneous sample of Chinese 'leftover women' who were never married, 27-36 years old, had at least a bachelor degree and earned more than the average income of the large city that they live in.

Meanwhile, Chinese 'leftover women' vary in their personal and social backgrounds. To capture such diversity, the study purposefully included women of different age, occupation, education, overseas experience, ethnicity, geographical location, living conditions, and customs in order to maximise heterogeneity among 'leftover women.' Including variation in a specific group may reveal uniqueness emerging from a specific site as well as common patterns among 'leftover women' which captures "the core experiences and central, shared dimensions" (Patton, 2002, p. 235) of women being single or/and unmarried in China.

Participants' recruitment was conducted using the network sampling technique (Schensul & LeCompte, 1999). I first advertised my research in public, via Weibo and Wechat, and friends circulated information to their peers who might be interested. Snowball sampling was used to expand the number of potential participants (Patton, 2002). This recruitment approach of accessing potential participants through their peers, those with no hierarchical relationships, also helps to preserve voluntary participation and eliminate possible power relationships in the process (Seidman, 2013). I contacted women who expressed their interest to discuss details of the study and arranged for an interview.

The number of participants was determined based on theoretical saturation: the point when properties of a theme are fully developed and no new properties emerge from additional data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This point cannot be determined in advance, but can be identified by the redundancy of the information obtained (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While theoretical saturation is the ultimate goal, this study anticipated a minimum of 20 respondents, as the sample size of 20 guarantees that "the experience of most qualitative researchers is that in interview studies little that is 'new' comes out

of transcripts after you have interviewed 20 or so people" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 120). In the end, 26 interviews were conducted for this research. In general, most interviews lasted about two to two and a half hours.

Demographic characteristics of participants can be seen in the table 3 below.

Table 3. Demographic characteristics of participants

Name	Age	Occupation	Education	Salary Range (RMB)	City (origin-present)	Living arrangement
Liyan	36	Engineer	Master of Engineering	500-550K	Baoding - Tianjin	With parents
Shuyu	35	Insurance industry	Master of science in Business	350-400K	Shijiazhuang -Tianjin	With parents
Lijia	28	Accountant	Master of accounting and finance	150-200K	Xi'an	On her own
Lee	33	High school teacher	Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies & Bachelor of Education	150-200K	Wuhan	On her own
Liling	27	Restaurant owner	Master of Business Administration	Above 600K	Shantou -Guangzhou	On her own
Jiwen	34	Politician	PhD in social work	250-300K	Jinhua - Ningbo	With parents
Liao	27	Psychologist	Master of psychology	150-200K	Hangzhou	With parents
Wei	28	Beauty industry	Bachelor of Arts & Bachelor of Science in Nutrition	150-200K	Shanghai	On her own
Xiaochen	31	Producer	Master of Fine Arts	250-300K	Fuzhou - Beijing	With parents
Wangxi	30	Lawyer	Master of Law	250-300K	Taiyuan - Xi'an	On her own
Xiong	29	Athlete	Master of Physical	150-200K	Suzhou - Nanjing	On her own
Yili	35	Coach	PhD of Physical	150-200K	Jinan - Wuhan	On her own
Luoji	35	Real estate	Master of Resource Management	400-450K	Shanghai	On her own
Yiqiao	28	Real estate	Master of Landscape Architecture	250-300K	Hangzhou	On her own
Malin	30	IT industry	Bachelor of computer science & Bachelor of Administration	150-200K	Shenyang	With parents

Yaqin	31	Director	Master of Arts in film studies	200-250K	Beijing	On her own
Fangfei	33	University lecturer	PhD in resources management	200-250K	Shanghai	With parents
Liu	34	Doctor	PhD in Medicine	350-400K	Tianjin - Guangzhou	On her own
Laila	31	Marketing executive	Master of Science in Business Administration	200-250K	Shenzhen	On her own
Zhou	36	HR manager	Bachelor of arts in social work	250-300K	Wuhan - Beijing	On her own
Weiqian	30	Actor	Bachelor of Arts in Performance & in film studies	200-250K	Nanjing	With parents
Bingfang	35	Journalist	MA in journalism	300-350K	Shanghai	On her own
Marui	30	Engineer	PhD in Engineering	200-250K	Guangzhou	On her own
Ting	27	Service industry	Bachelor of Arts in Administration & Music	150-200K	Shenyang	On her own
Xiaozhu	29	Accountant	Master of accounting and finance	150-200K	Wuhan	With parents
Liuqian	30	Lawyer	Master of law	150-200K	Baoji - Xi’an	On her own

4.2.3 Thematic analysis

It is necessary to use all the capta for analysis for yielding holistic, reasonable and sensible results. The audio-recording of interviews of 26 women was transcribed in Chinese and relevant extracts were translated into English. Some nonverbal communication or body language were noted in the transcription. All the field notes (such as popped-up potential themes, ideas, questions, concerns, and other related thoughts) were dated and filed based on the type of notes. All participants were given anonymity.

Thematic analysis identifies, analyses and reports patterns within capta, rather than narrative analysis, discourse analysis and grounded theory, which are thematic in essence (Braun & Clarke, 2013). It is a useful method for exploring the lived experience and identities of 'leftover women' as it is particularly effective in investigating an under-researched area or "with participants whose views on the topic are not known" (Patton, 2002, p. 83). With such guidelines to make it more suitable under a phenomenological inquiry, I followed the process of thematic analysis through three phases: generation, integration and adjustment. The process of the analysis did not follow phases in a linear and mechanical way, but in a more recursive process, moving back and forth (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

The first phase was a generation of themes. I read the transcripts and notes of interviews and made some comments in the margins about what I can do with the different parts of data (Patton, 2002). This reading was the groundwork for developing a code. The code refers to the most basic element of "the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon" (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 63). On the second reading, I started to code the transcripts by conducting open coding of "the data in every way possible" (Glaser, 1978, p. 56) to organise capta into meaningful groups (Tuckett, 2005). Focus was given to provide themes to all parts of the capta and to create a comment for each open code with brief details of the coding and explaining it based on words and phrases the interviewee or participants used. I also quoted any sentence that caught my attention (Seidman, 2013). As capta collection progressed, separate incidents that were coded under the same theme were compared (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Through this process, which was often known as a constant comparison, various types or the range of a theme emerged. This lead to the theoretical properties of the themes. In this research, the codes and themes were mainly data-driven but also theory-driven (Braun & Clarke, 2013). To some extent, they reflected the four identity frames in CTI: personal, relational, enactment and communal frames and the identity gaps between or among these frames were kept in mind during the research.

During the second phase, I focused on the integration of themes and their properties. After generating all possible themes, I looked for recurring patterns for possible integration and to develop their properties. For example, as for the qualities sheng nv want their ideal partners to have, I selected the top five recurring responses among participants. Patton (2001) claims that themes should have internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. Internal homogeneity means that the capta that belong in a certain theme exist together in a meaningful way. The external heterogeneity suggests clear differences among different themes. Therefore, I paid attention to the possibility for the existence of sub-themes and the relationship between codes, themes and different levels of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2013). For example, I located initial themes with external heterogeneity such as independence, freedom, mobility, and responsibility under a sub-theme 'singleness as life style' with an internal homogeneity shared between all these themes.

To be more specific, I scanned through extracts for each theme to check whether it constructed a coherent pattern and thought about the accuracy of each theme to its related capta to check whether the themes precisely reflect "the meanings evident in the data set as a whole" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 91).

The third phase dealt with adjustment. Glaser and Strauss (1967) call this phase 'delimiting,' and Guba (1981) explains this process as 'fleshing out.' In essence, this phase attempted to refine the themes aiming for 'parsimony' (Patton, 2002) and define the scope of the final theme set. This was conducted by deleting irrelevant properties, extending properties, elaborating interrelated themes or their properties, or proposing new themes or properties. When conducting such adjustment processes, it is important to pay attention to the whole picture of the researched phenomenon in order to

organise themes “into a coherent and internally consistent account, with accompanying narratives” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 92).

4.3 Trustworthiness of the study

Trustworthiness of the study can be established by examining credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability (Bryman, 2012). They are equivalent to internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity in conventional quantitative research, respectively (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

4.3.1 Credibility

Credibility relates to “confidence in the ‘truth’ of the findings” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290), which is the extent to which credible findings and interpretations are produced. In order to secure the truth of the findings, original capta should be reliable and fairly analysed. Apart from following a set of systematic procedures of data collection and data analysis, several techniques were used during and after the data collection process to ensure the credibility of my research findings as described earlier as methodological steps in this chapter. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest techniques to ensure the credibility of research findings, such as prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer-debriefing, negative case analysis, referential adequacy and member checks.

Prolonged engagement refers to “the investment of sufficient time to achieve certain purposes: learning the culture, testing for misinformation introduced by distortions either of the self or the respondents and building trust” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 301). It is believed that prolonged engagement will help minimise distortions and ensure the credibility of the capta collected. In this research, I attempted to achieve this through casual contact with each respondent. Through this contact, a long-term relationship with the respondents was developed. Preliminary contact provided me with valuable first-hand information and helped in reducing possible distortions in my interpretations of the capta collected. Moreover, my engagement with respondents was not confined to conducting the interview. I maintained contact with the respondents after the interview through casual correspondence. Continued correspondence provided me with additional information by which I could judge the credibility of the data collected. For

example, I asked them to check whether my interpretation based on their quotes is what they wanted to express. I also showed them the feature of different categorisation and asked whether they agreed with being located in the category of acceptor, resister or rebel. I and my participants listened to each other's reasons for the typology. 'The categorization of sheng nv' showed in the table 8 is the result of the agreement reached with each participants. In addition, at their suggestion, I decided to replace voluntary/involuntary by temporary/stable for the expression on the status of their singleness. Participants' inputs helped evaluate the findings and shaped the final analysis, which match phenomenology's commitment to active participation throughout the research process.

While the purpose of prolonged engagement is to render the inquirer open to the multiple influences in the research context, the purpose of persistent observation is to pinpoint the qualities that are most pertinent to the issue at hand, then looking at them closely (Bryman, 2012). If prolonged engagement provides the scope, then persistent observation provides depth. In my study, I enhanced the depth of my observation and sharpened my continued process of analysis through the use of a variety of techniques. These included the use of a reflective diary as a method for auto-ethnography (my position as a potential 'leftover woman'). However, after a certain point I decided not to use auto-ethnography. As it was too difficult to find a balance between the participants' experiences and my own thoughts. Phenomenological inquiry requires researchers to be free of value judgements in order to fully focus on the meaning of participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994) and to acknowledge their position by disregarding it (Wertz, 2005). Therefore, I mainly used the reflective diary to keep reminding myself of setting aside predilections, prejudices and predispositions . I analysed and categorised the capta by means of rigorous procedures. This helped to enhance the credibility of the findings and to ensure that the conceptualisations were true reflections of reality.

By measuring the angle at which each of the antennas receives the most powerful signal, a triangle can be erected and, using simple geometry, the source at the vertex of the triangle opposite the baseline pinpointed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Bryman (2012) suggests different modes of triangulation, such as the use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators and theories. In this research, in order to expand the

variety of the sample, I interviewed women from 10 large cities in China, from an age range of 27 to 36 years old with different careers. In conjunction to the 'leftover women' themselves, I also discussed politics, media behaviours and official statistics to get additional perspectives on the prevalence in the population of single women and public attitudes toward a growing group. The information collected and perspectives expressed provided me with additional information to verify the credibility of the capta collected from the interviews.

Peer debriefing is "a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session and to explore aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer's mind" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 306). Such a process helps to keep the inquirer honest by exposing him or her to criticisms of an experienced protagonist doing his or her best to play the devil's advocate. The inquirer's biases are probed, meanings explored, the basis for interpretations clarified. In this research, peer debriefing was conducted during the process of capta collection and analysis. I discussed my findings with supervisors and received their feedback. I asked their opinions about some contradicting capta. This process helped to assist my analysis, especially in controlling the influence of my biases in interpretation of the capta. Some necessary adjustment was made based on their feedback.

4.3.2 Transferability

Transferability concerns the issue of how interpretive research can be generalised in other contexts. In order to provide transferable knowledge, a qualitative researcher needs to present descriptive capta so the audience can decide if and how the findings can be transferred to other groups or settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This was achieved by presenting a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973, cited in Bryman, 2012), referring to the rich consideration of cultural details and through the use of an adequate number of quotations in the report of the findings. The thick description refers to a detailed and concrete description (Denzin, 2005). The goal is to show how the researcher comes to certain findings from the original capta and to help the audience decide the meaning and significance of the study (Patton, 2002).

4.3.3 Dependability

Dependability is about figuring out if the research process and the findings are reliable, consistent and stable. According to Faidley and Leitner (1993), the dependability of qualitative capta relies on an account of the procedures used to collect and handle capta. These include a detailed description of the context of capta collection, the rapport between the researcher and the researched, the researcher's position, goals and expectations and the guidelines for the transcription of interviews and so on. Since dependability is a precondition for validity, the validity checks described above can be sufficient in establishing dependability (Guba, 1981).

To reiterate, trust-building provides dependable capta as interviewees and participants feel comfortable sharing their own stories and ideas. For example, before conducting the interviews, I made brief contact with each respondent, built up a rapport and clarified the purpose of this study to them. During the process of transcribing and translating the capta from written Chinese to English, AUT postgraduate workshops randomly reviewed several pieces of transcribed capta. If some differences in meanings were found, I referred back to the records and made modifications of the meanings that were close to what the respondents said. Various groups of people (e.g., participants and supervisors) investigated my categorisation and interpretation in different phases of the analysis. Such examination improved the authenticity of findings. Another method to demonstrate dependability is conformability to the check illustrated below.

4.3.4 Conformability

Comfortability refers to the ability to authenticate, corroborate and substantiate the findings. It concerns the emergent nature of findings and is assessed by investigating the possibility of the researcher’s imposition. To confirm the study, all documents related to the study, including original capta, theme information and field notes, were maintained systematically. This system is called the audit trail and informs how the study is carried out (Bryman, 2012). The audit trail not only helps researchers to produce reliable findings through systematic capta management, but also allows others to access the study information if they wish to trace the source of the findings (Bryman, 2012). In this study, my supervisors helped me to ensure my interpretations were grounded in capta.

In summary, with the rigorous use of the above-mentioned techniques, the reliability of the research findings and the research process is therefore assured. The techniques included careful planning of the interview procedure, detailed record of the analysis process and evaluation of findings by participants and supervisors. While I do not claim that my research findings cannot be challenged in any way, I can say with confidence that adequate measures were built into the research process to ensure its credibility as far as possible. The research process, as well as the research findings, are therefore, to the best of my knowledge, authentic and trustworthy and are able to provide us with significant knowledge of and insights into the experience of Chinese 'leftover women'. From the next chapter, I start presenting the interview data from participants to answer the sub research questions: what does being single mean for a Chinese 'leftover women'? (Chapter five); how does a Chinese 'leftover woman' seek completeness? (Chapter six); and in what ways do the relationships of a Chinese 'leftover woman' with others contribute to her choice? (Chapter seven).

Chapter 5 Meaning of singlehood

> *Will I accept the label of such a ridiculous 'leftover women'? Absolutely no! None of us are 'leftover', we are living the life we want. If you have to say 'sheng nv', then it's 'sheng' for 'victorious' rather than 'leftover'. (Marui)*

> *If you see it as 'leftover', then there's only one way for women – the married women, but if you see it as 'successful', same pronunciation but opposite meanings, then you can find heaps of alternatives. (Fangfei)*

In the interviews, the term 'leftover women' is understood as a homophonic term 'victorious women'. Instead of referring to my participants as 'leftover women', which has obvious negative connotations, I refer to them as sheng nv which contains the meaning of 'victorious/successful women'. The participants themselves use this term with its clear positive connotations; they are therefore presented as 'sheng nv', the original phonetic transcription which still comprises the qualities given by the official definition – 'those who are over the general social thought of marriageable age but still unmarried. Generally, it refers to those single women who are over 27, highly educated, well-paid, and independent'.

This chapter provides an answer to the sub-RQ1: 'how does a Chinese sheng nv describe meanings of singlehood?' It is based on the reflections of sheng nv on the meaning of singlehood and factors that are significant to their personal identity. They discuss self-knowledge and the rationale behind their life choices. I observe that sheng nv regularly reflect upon and manage their personal identity and their relationships with others. They question their own values and compare these to what is valued by others. Individuals who are treated as outsiders are forced to constantly reinterpret their own identity.

From this chapter onwards, I focus on sheng nv's experiences and the meaning of being single. I examine women's views of themselves based on their own values. I begin the chapter with their own definition of what is meant by being single. Independence emerges as a core value relating to the identity of sheng nv, which also highlights the role of autonomy. After elaborating on the benefits of being single, the challenges and

strategies for managing the vulnerabilities attributed to a single lifestyle are also discussed.

Listening to the personal narratives on being single, I became aware that a story of identity was unfolding. A sense of associating single status to a way of life was clearly communicated to me. In observing women's attachment to their single lifestyle, I observed that singleness is consequential to the personal identity of sheng nv.

5.1 Singleness as a lifestyle

It is evident in the interviews that sheng nv value specific aspects of being single, namely: independence, freedom, mobility and absence of responsibility for others. When I asked Jiwen what being single means to her, she said:

> *Being single is being responsible for myself and not necessarily for others. It has given me much more freedom, much more independence. Flying from Beijing to Manchester is just a decision. Nobody questions where you are going, who you are going out with, what time you have to be home by.*

Being single offers freedom and independence: the option to act autonomously is treasured by single women. The personal, emotional and financial independence enjoyed by single women allows them to relish the act of making their own decisions. Not having to rely on others is the most celebrated advantage of being single. While self-reliance means occasionally being self-interested, it also means that women are less likely to ask for help from others. Liyan said that she has become more self-reliant with time:

> *I think of myself as being on my own. The person I feel that I can rely on the most is me and should be me. In a way, I find it's difficult to ask for help. I suppose I have become very independent…I feel very much on my own and have learned to rely on myself. But relying on oneself doesn't mean being isolated from friends, relatives or other people.*

Women have learned the importance of being self-sufficient. The absence of certain types of relationships, particularly intimate relationships or child-parent relationships, clearly facilitate independence (Byrne, 2008a). Instead, relationships can be formed with a broader network of friends and the choice to be in an intimate partnership. Sheng nv

feel that they have easier lives than married women. My interviewees spoke about the predictability of being single, an aspect of their life that they would hate to lose. Xiaozhu recognises her satisfaction with her life and the appeal of the single lifestyle:

> *Being married is like being tied to all sorts of family issues, a husband, children and parents in law. Pulled from different directions, it would be hard to follow any opportunity to the destination you want to get to. Once you knew the feeling of being in a relationship and you've experienced singlehood, you know which one is better for you and you know which one is your choice.*

The benefits of being without responsibilities or connections to others are strongly emphasised by many interviewees. Her choices are not governed by the needs of family and she represents herself as a woman that values freedom and is satisfied with her single life. Sheng nv realised that remaining single afforded opportunities for self-discovery, self-development and self-fulfilment. However, Luoji added a different perspective when I asked about her ideas on freedom:

> *After all, society is still dominated by traditional values. Despite the increase of choices, it is still difficult to survive in this society as single women. We are outsiders of what is expected from us. What they consider important is not what we consider as important and vice-versa. Anyway, we grabbed opportunities no matter what others thought.*

The understanding of choice disregards society's fixation on marriage and family. In China, financial, political or individual freedom can only be achieved by transferral of power from the state to individuals (Wang, 2005). Therefore, the amount of freedom enjoyed by women is correlated to the tension between state paternalism/collectivism and individualism.

China has experienced four decades of industrialisation, where the clash between new social perspectives and traditional values must be negotiated. This struggle reveals the tension between the constitution of personal and social identities. Personal identity is one person's understanding of her own uniqueness while social identity concerns the ascribed social categorisations upon an individual (Jung et al., 2007). How a sheng nv copes with or rejects social identity is based on the ideologies associated with these categories and the existence of alternative perspectives.

Resistance to dominant social categories is possible through discursive strategies and behaviours. The call for recognition expressed by participants gives individuals control over their experiences and identities (Zajicek & Koski, 2010). As Byrne (2003) argues, studying individual identities lends insight into how social transformation is possible by individuals claiming a once unacceptable identity for themselves. These identities facilitate the human capacity for agency and action, which creates the possibility for social change.

5.1.1 Valuing single independence

When listening to women express the challenges and benefits of being single, what they value about singlehood also becomes apparent. Participants share the belief that independence is the most significant aspect of their single life. Independence has many internal and external factors and involves a variety of strategies and choices in its structure and maintenance. Independence may be a single aspect of one's life, such as being economically self-sufficient, but one may also be dependent on emotional companionship.

Gordon (2000) suggests a definition of the components of independence and on what is involved in establishing independence. Aspects of independence include being financially independent, being able to care for oneself, exerting control over one's life, emotional and mental independence. For her participants, establishing independence was difficult; they learned to cope through relationships with other people. The importance of relationships in supporting single identity is the primary interest of this research and is investigated below and in the following chapters.

In the opening stages of the interview, participants used 'independence' to describe all the sheng nv they knew. Independence, singleness and the desire for autonomy are intertwined in their self-reflection. When asked whether there were any negatives to being single, Wei expressed:

> *I don't have a problem with being single, but there are an awful lot of advantages to it. It supports my want for independence. The time to invest in yourself and do your own thing. I think you would need to be strong because, I mean, I feel that in lots of women there is a huge sense of dependency. Being single, in charge of yourself - you are free to choose whatever you like.*

Attachment to independence partially explains the practicality of the single identity and lifestyle. It is commonly believed that the benefits of not being in a relationship allow women to be free to make their own decisions and become a self-governing individual. Luoji described independence as a feeling of wholeness, a very different to the common perception that singleness is inherently incomplete:

> *To be independent, it means being able to stand on your own, not feeling that you are lacking in anything. That you are complete and able to stand on your own, even through strengths and weaknesses and ups and downs…I attach some kind of importance to being on my own and able to stand up and able to manage and get things done, on my own. You know what, after I ended that trial of married cohabitation, I felt more complete.*

Zhou described her attachment to being single, her sense of personal achievement over her self-reliance and independence. She is reluctant to consider any alterations to her lifestyle on the grounds that it would not be an improvement:

> *I suppose because I have done it all my life. It's great sense of freedom and I feel myself that I have achieved a lot myself. I could do like lots of women do and brood over it and feel sorry for myself, but I couldn't do that. It would not do me any good and it would drive me crazy.*

Zhou has learned to be single: other lifestyle would involve losing her independence. Her commitment is demonstrative of how much independence is valued by sheng nv. Emphasis was put on being financially secure. For example, when discussing her single life, Bingfang stated:

> *Single life is built on financial independence. We all know how important it is. As the only child, we received everything best from parents. The best high school in our province and one of the best universities. All this background gave me a good outcome with the position I have now.*

Independence is a concept that women born in 1980s value highly. This is one of the reasons why many women choose to be single. This appears in Bingfang's further explanation.

> *I also think that this generation, we were born in 1980, this only child generation, did reject a lot of the models of marriage that we saw in our parents' marriage and particularly of our mothers because they saw how much they were losing. Also there was more choice because*

> *there has been more money and opportunities in the last three decades to help us keep independence with us.*

At the time of interviewing, almost two thirds of the women lived alone and their financial independence allowed for this. However, living alone is linked to being self-sufficient. For Liu, living by herself is enjoyable:

> *I didn't know how good it was until I lived alone, an unexpected pleasure. I can lay on a couch, drink a can of Pepsi with ice and most importantly, hiccup as long as and as much as I want. Even though I can do it in front of my parents, I know it's not a good idea.*

Participants divulged in how important to them it is that they live alone and enjoy their own space. In a study based in mainland China, Yuan et al. (2010) find individuals who are single, divorced or widowed feel more isolated than those who are married. However, a sub-group of single and divorced individuals living by themselves reported fewer feelings of loneliness and these creative singles talked less about intimate relationships. They (Yuan et al., 2010) offer no explanation for why creative single people cope with living alone, apart from conjecturing about whether people can actively choose to live alone and still be emotionally, and financially independent. I suggest that a focus on independent values and practices provides the explanation: while women living alone in this study felt lonely occasionally, very few would give it up, even when an additional income would ease the burden of mortgage repayments. Living alone means acknowledging that one is lacking relationships with others in the domestic space. Choosing to live alone is a statement about one's personal preferences and is part of composing an autonomous personal identity.

This study demonstrates that participants value their independence and that it plays an important role in their every day lives. Women who enjoy independence emphasise that their autonomy is crucial to organising their lives and forming their connections to other people. The role of independence is significant for gender identity, as women are redefining what it means to be a woman. Gilligan and Attanucci (2000) argue that women have different morals from men in relation to emotions and relationships and this "sets its own distinctive developmental path" (Friedman, 2003, p. 43). However, achieving a female identity that is based on single values is difficult for women. Gilligan and Attanucci (2000) state that for women, the yearning for autonomy is "the illusory

and dangerous quest" (p. 48). Participants who live by themselves are claiming an autonomous existence in relation to their personal and gendered identities as Chinese women. Sheng nv have to struggle with balancing autonomy and relationships. In valuing independence, however, they are seeking autonomy and have opted for the more challenging route.

5.2 Vulnerability in single independence

For the single women interviewed, independence is the most valued aspect of being single, while having to manage loneliness and the absence of intimate relationships are the drawbacks. I present women's insights into the limitations of being single revealing that independence comes at a price. I also explore how stigma around singleness is handled. In this section, I discuss how participants in this study view independence as fundamental to their identity; being an independent sheng nv is how they present themselves to the world. However, this comes with its own difficulties. Single women are challenging dominant social identities by cherishing an identity based on self-determination and sheng nv recognise the lack of social support that they receive. Most women do not want to be ostracised. In listening to accounts of the vulnerabilities caused by independence, the scope of the challenge to compose an identity based on autonomous values becomes apparent.

5.2.1 Managing loneliness

In previous studies (e.g., Burnley, 1999; Duggan, 2003), the main challenges of being single are linked to concerns about capacity to care and being self-sufficient. In interviewing sheng nv, issues such as managing the domestic household, coping with sudden illness alone or worrying about personal safety rarely emerge; these fears have been transformed into self-reliance. Unlike participants in similar studies who talk about loneliness in terms of not being in an intimate relationship, sheng nv in this research expressed that loneliness occurred when they moved away from their parents. It therefore seems that loneliness stems from lack of company from parents, especially when women are an only child.

Some participants felt lonely because their lifestyle differs from the lifestyles of their peers. When friends get married and then have a family, participants felt the loss of their

friends and sense of belonging. For example, when asked about the first time she was aware of her unmarried status, Jiwen said:

> *Classmates' reunions or gatherings of relatives. They bring their husband and kids. For me, I have no one to bring.*

Marriage and family are viewed as the standard way of life and appear to provide women with a sense of personal and social belonging. This illustrates the dialectic nature of identity. When Jiwen was asked whether she feels lonely because she is single, she said:

> *I guess I feel lonely but I'm not a lonely person. If I need something like a warm feeling, I can get it from my parents or my friends. Seriously, I feel a lot less lonely than many married ladies I know. You may be lonely in one hand, but you get the freedom, independence, autonomy on the other hand.*

By appropriating socially recognised values such as freedom, independence and autonomy and associating these with being single, Jiwen confers legitimacy of her personal identity as a single woman. The contradiction this connection causes is evident in the understanding of singlehood of sheng nv. Baxter (2000) states,

> Autonomy can be conceptualised only in terms of separation from others. But too much autonomy paradoxically destroys the individual's identity, because connections with others are necessary to identity formation and maintenance. (p. 70)

While sheng nv enjoy their autonomy as a result of being single, they simultaneously long for connections, particularly family relationships, and this is reflected in their loneliness. Most participants manage their loneliness by connecting with others through work, leisure activities, or living with other people. Yet when participants talk about their vulnerabilities, their emphasis on independence, autonomy and strategies for managing loneliness were discussed. Three strategies of managing loneliness included: seeking for companionship of parents, focusing on their job and building meaningful friendships.

Public assume women who are single enjoy an active sex life. I want to focus on what women say about what they miss most in relation to intimacy:

> *Physically, someone to cuddle with. I really notice that as I get a bit older. I didn't miss that when I was younger, but since turning 35, I*

> *think I miss someone that you can cuddle, put their arms around you. So something physical, not sex as much, but warmth, physical warmth. (Bingfang)*

> *There is something special between a couple – two individuals combined into a harmonious whole to create a sweet atmosphere. When I am in love, it can be easily recognised by people round me as I look different – from their words, I'm 'lighting up'. I would say, what I miss, probably is not the relationship itself, but my status of being in a relationship with love, even carrying a torch. (Shuyu)*

> *Sometimes I'm afraid of being in a lifelong single woman. I mean even though one-night stands or friends with benefits are fine, 'having sex' is not the same as 'making love', if you know what I mean. I wish to have a permanent partner for this sake. (Lijia)*

Many women spoke at length about sexual desire and behaviour, some remarking that they regularly reflect on their sexuality. Others were interested in hearing how other sheng nv explore their feelings about their sexuality. When asked, women stated that they missed the physical presence of another person.

Participants also enjoyed living double lives: as a professional woman and a daughter unburdened with any household affairs. Weiqian described it as paradise:

> *I'm a homebody. I first worked in Shanghai but when I got a chance for job transfer, I went back to my home city without a hesitation. I don't need to worry about what to have for dinner. My mum is super good at cooking. I would be satisfied to continue the current lifestyle if none of us did age. You know, I mean the feeling of being a 'half disabled'.*

Participants who do not live nearby describe the relaxing feeling of being back at home with parents as the paradise of feeling 'half-disabled'. Even though participants are physically, spiritually and financially independent, they are emotionally reliant on their parents. In terms of the one-child policy generation, the relationship between daughter and parents is very strong because parents are the only lineal relative by blood they have in a culture where familial ties are valued. The sense of dependency in Chinese culture is constructed on consanguinity, which has a long history. It is valued and the parent-child relationship for the only child can be expressed by attachment theory. Infants, because of their prolonged dependent state, form powerful attachments to their caregivers (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002). It is argued that this attachment is carried across their lifespan. Attachment theory argues that in adulthood, individuals shift their

attachment from their parents to other forms of relationships (Schachner & Shaver, 2004). Doherty and Feeney (2004) find that many married participants had “full-blown attachments” (p. 470) (i.e., relationships that met the criteria for a secure foundation, a safe haven, a desire for consistent proximity, and angst upon separation) with their married partners. However, in this case where they choose a single lifestyle, they have these full-blown attachments to others in place of partners. Listening to these accounts, it is evident that sheng nv have personal strategies to cope with loneliness so that they can continue to enjoy their single lifestyle.

5.2.2 Managing stigma

The single identity is intrinsically opposed to the norm of marriage in Chinese culture. It is difficult to create meaning of singleness without separating it from not being married, which reflects compliance with the normative construction of women in Chinese society. As Grossberg (2006) states, “any identity depends upon its difference from, its negation of some other term, even as the identity of the latter term depends upon its difference from, its negation of, the former” (p. 58). The crux of the problem is when the dominant identity becomes superior and the existence of sheng nv becomes what Goffman describes as a stigma – the gap between what a person ought to be and what they actually are (Ritzer, 2006). In the case of sheng nv, stigma works to support the dominant perspective and discredit those who choose ‘to do otherwise’. For example, Liling thought there are only two identities for women:

> *People suppose that you are either single or you’re married…so if you are not single, what are you? You’re married. The only difference is that it’s great if you are married and it’s not that ok if you are single – that is because singlehood is defined as opposite to marriage.*

Sheng nv are often asked why they are single; Adams (2000) uses Goffman’s concept of stigma to explain why it is deemed acceptable to ask such personal questions:

> When an individual manifests a personal characteristic or is in a social situation that carries social stigma and devaluation, he or she forfeits the right to the normal taboos safeguarding privacy. (p. 61)

While married women are not scrutinised about why they chose to get married, single women are often forced to constantly explain their unmarried status. This interrogation is a form of social control, attempting to pressure sheng nv to conform to the normative

course of life. Bingfang told me that getting married cannot put an end to the questions, however:

> *Once you are married, someone is waiting at the first corner asking you about your first baby.*

Is this imposing social norms on women, or does it represent the discomfort that members of society have with someone who deviates? This persisting questioning endured by sheng nv demonstrates the practice of identifying single women as outsiders. The power of such discourse can be illustrated by the instillation of these values to children. For example, Liao was asked by her 10-year-old nephew:

> *'I have heard that you are not married, but do you have a boyfriend?' I replied 'nope'. He kept asking 'But you do not feel lonely? You don't need someone to sort you out?' Then he mentioned couple of things that he thought only a man can do. After heard 'Yes I can, yes I can, yes I can…', he looked confused and looked like he just learned something so strange.*

Not being on the expected life track made some sheng nv feel vulnerable when deemed problematic by other people. They were offered unsolicited advice to solve the problem of being 'leftover'. This stemmed from the social construction of singleness being a life stage that naturally came before marriage and motherhood. Women have to negotiate gender-specific ideas of what being a woman means and this plays a role between intimate relationships and their decisions about having children or remaining child-free.

Apart from the stigma relating to the single and childless, participants also experienced stigma about their sexuality – they are often dismissed as lesbians. Elders and peers will assume a single woman is a lesbian and this is a way to humiliate 'leftover women'. Wangxi and Liao shared their experience:

> *There was one morning, my mom kept looking at me with a wondering and secret face. I asked her 'what's up?' She said 'well…well…your dad and me just wondering whether you are a lesbian…you know it's okay for us to know'. I said 'no, I'm not. What made you to think like that?' 'Oh thank goodness. You are not. Just we never know if you have a boyfriend or dating somewhere.' (Wangxi)*

> *A stranger I met two or three times told me he has falling love with me. I thanked him and refused. Then he suggested that he and I should introduce [other potential partners] for each other. He told me he knew*

> *a PhD who has an Audi. I refused again. He said 'I'm wondering whether you are a lesbian or not?'. What the hell? (Liao)*

They both noticed that homophobia stigmatises singlehood. The hostile attitude towards lesbians is linked with cultural ideologies about homosexuality that justify the subjugation of minorities, both single women and lesbians. This stereotype places these women into outsider groups, where they are seen as threatening and inferior to members of the dominant groups (Herek, 2000).

Data presented in other studies on single women presented more defensive strategies (e.g., Byrne, 2000; DePaulo, 2007; Zajicek & Koski, 2010) like limiting exposure to discrimination. However, in my research, sheng nv are more likely to confront negative perceptions. Strategies are "intentional, agentic responses to possible harm" that challenge the negative attitudes of others (Thoits, 2011, p. 11). By challenging the dominant social identity, marginalised groups cope with not only the stigma, but also negative cultural opinions.

Participants demonstrated their intentional singlehood as a response to such inquiries, overthrowing understandings of what is interpreted by others as deficiencies. They hit back against the stigma through redefinition of their identities with a focus on the positive. Unlike reacting defensively, resistance strategies concentrate on the advantages of their single lives in comparison to their married peers. The first resistance strategy that emerged from the interviews was upsetting the dominant views of 'leftover women'. For example, Liuqian and Bingfang said:

> *A new emergence of the new women is depicted as nit-picky, arrogant, a women-man, or macho-woman. They would definitely give us a bad name because they don't want us to be like this victorious. They make us look pathetic because we don't fit into the round circle of 'femininity' but who want to fit into that 'femininity' they circle for women? (Liuqian)*

> *As 'leftover women', they accuse us of not being able to get married after 27 years old, but I would say that all of the victorious ladies can find a husband on street if they really want to get married. But most of us don't see the reason to get married. We are luckier when compared to the last generation who were born 10 years earlier. They didn't really have an option, but we have the chance to choose. Therefore, there is a reason why we born 10 years later – to make a difference. (Bingfang)*

Participants addressed the potential challenges that they face by remaining single and child-free by deconstructing dominant social perspectives. Similar to Zajicek and Koski's (2010) research on white middle-class singles, interviewees in my research also demonstrated that single life is busy and fulfilling. Participants discussed their individual experiences to highlight their life satisfaction. For example, Laila and Liu stated:

> *Since I went back to being single, my salary doubled. I'm in a good shape, energetic and read hundreds of books. I increasingly know how to get along with myself, complete within myself and follow my heart. This provides me with necessities and sufficient confidence to be a winner at the workplace. When I'm sitting by myself, I feel fulfilled. All these is not possible one year ago when I was in the relationship. (Laila)*

> *I aspired at one time in my life to being single and I think that's the time when I really became mature. I wanted to be, as somebody joked, a 'person's own person' as opposed to being a 'person's person'. (Liu)*

Laila and Liu are fulfilled with her singlehood. In their narratives, this is a clearly resistant conception of self that is in opposition to the dominant view of single women as incomplete, immature, isolated and a person lacking something. They made the conscious decision to remain single so that their existences were not defined in relation to another person.

Liu believes that she is responsible for her own happiness. She is in charge of her own life, which can be organised according to what she values most. Her capacity for being herself is quite distinctive. She is actively involved in volunteering and community activities to overcome feelings of being excluded from society and to actively create meaningful connections with others.

> *You certainly have more time to be involved with something that you keen on, not for your own family but for the bigger community or society. That's why I don't feel excluded - to further the things I reckon is more significant and worth doing.*

Liu regards her extensive involvement in the community not as a remedy for her singleness, but as complementary to her life. She points out that her work should not be mistaken for altruism, as she is also motivated by self-interest.

> *My involvement is very important because of the kind of life I live. I have no responsibilities other than myself. Absolutely none. No*

> *children, no husband, my parents need nothing…I'm not thinking of myself when I'm thinking of other people, because I have plenty of space, energy and time and everything else and ability to take on other things and they are not all terribly altruistic. I joined the NGO and I see all the things I've done, I'm currently doing, and I will do in the future are all an extension of myself to benefit some other people.*

Participants deconstructed the social message that it is better to be married or in a relationship. A meaningful life is an important priority for the Chinese (Chen, 2011), which is represented as something that unmarried women cannot achieve. Participants declaim that marriage or relationship are not synonyms for happiness. They challenge society's schedule, where singlehood is just the warm up before a relationship, to show that singleness is a key element consolidated their life choices and opportunity for happiness, freedom, meaningful living and fulfilment. These life experiences are not happening while they wait for marriage, or instead of marriage, they instead have their own scope and meaning. In contrast to taking up subject position of single women as having deficit identities defined by their lack of partner (e.g., Morris et al., 2007; Reynolds & Taylor, 2005), the subject position facilitated the construction of asset identities for these women outside of the scope of marriage and motherhood – not secondary to marriage and motherhood.

Zhou believes that in challenging stigma and dominant identities for women and in attempting to compose new identities, one has to remain as an outsider, which requires strength. She is actively committed to making singleness a more acceptable social identity. She feels that single women who do not live in large, urban, cosmopolitan areas are only beginning to see that singleness can be a viable alternative social identity for women.

> *I went back to my hometown during the Chinese New Year. I think they kind of apologise for themselves. They are discovering they can have fun and there is a freedom to it. But still that freedom can has a price because you are outside and you have to be strong enough to be outside. It's even harder for them to do that. My parents built better foundation for me. I went to university and got a job, can afford fancy cloths, vacations abroad. But for them, getting married is a guarantee for life.*

Zhou is keenly aware that the single lifestyle is only available to women of a certain background. She acknowledges that her class has provided her with benefits and

opportunities that allowed her to be financially independent, self-sufficient and to remain single. Life is markedly different to the life of less wealthy women, for whom financial and social security is found in marriage.

Singlehood was described as an asset to their identity constitute of independence and choice. Participants occasionally responded to inquiries about being single by considering the meaning of life in the company of others. Xiaoche shared her thoughts when asked if she has encountered such questions:

> *When people asked if I am married, I ask back 'should I be?' I quote Yang's statement: 'some people's life is to have children to carry on the family blood, some are to enjoy, to experience, while I am the observer of the life, my coming to this world is to see how a tree grows up, how the river flows, how clouds float, and how dew coagulates.'My life at this point concerns what needs to be accomplished. Not in an aggressive manner to challenge, but it's okay not to be married. Marriage is not the only choice or the meaning of our life. They ask me when will I be married and I respond not for the next decade.*

She refuted the stereotypes and stigmas of 'leftover women' by approaching the stereotypes of single women by changing the questions and demonstrating that alternative viewpoints might also have tensions. The real issue is with the inquirer's perception of the superiority of marriage and motherhood, which is instilled by the negative representation of single women in society. Sharp and Ganong (2011) argue that the lack of positive portrayal of singles is the primary reason for the "contradictions and tensions experienced by single people" (p. 394). In China, the lack of positive representation of sheng nv amplifies the stereotypes and stigmas, causing further resistance from society to accept their lifestyle choice.

The stigma theory argues that social representations of single people tend to have negative connotations (Zajicek & Koski, 2010). Even though participants do not consider being single a shortcoming, they still worry about others' perspectives. When I asked Yaqin about the disadvantages of being single, after expressing she did not see any issues about remaining single or unmarried, she paused for a while and went on:

> *We care about how people evaluate us - the influence of an unmarried status has on the overall impression. I have 'pluses' in many aspects of my life but because of that, I have been seen as not perfect…. Marriage is like the '1' of life scores, without it, no matter how many '0's you*

> *earn, to them it still means nothing. Once you make a mistake at work or hurt someone unintentionally, you are afraid that they may ascribe the mistake to your single status - those characters or behaviours that prevent you from getting married and all of that impacts on the overall evaluation of you. Especially as we know the whole environment is gendered. I have to double or triple my efforts to make it dissipate. I can manage myself, but I cannot manipulate how other people think. I need to hide my singleness first, pay more attention to what I say and make people know my personality quicker and better.*

Yaqin's response includes an observation about inequality at the workplace, which is evident from official statistics – the employment rate of women aged 20-59 is 15.1% lower than men and the workplace remains highly gendered (NBS, 2010). There is a gap between how sheng nv view themselves and how they think others perceive them. Jung and Hecht (2004) examine identity gaps and find that such gaps relate to negative communication patterns (e.g., feeling understood, communication satisfaction). Women's voices in response to others' views not only had an effect on their communication, but also on their personal identities. It is clear that the single stigma led to a disconnection between Yaqin's personal frame and communal frame. Tension is created when personal identity and social identity are disconnected and individuals are asked to manage the consequences of the conflict.

In order to eliminate or at least reduce the identity gap, Yaqin attempts to manipulate at least one of the four identity frames. In doing so, she influences either (or both) of the two frames creating the disconnection. Alternatively, people can also alter their identity to confront the source of the disconnection. For example, relying upon one of their identity frames to combat stigma, thereby eliminating the identity gap. In Figure 1 below, I present a theoretical model.

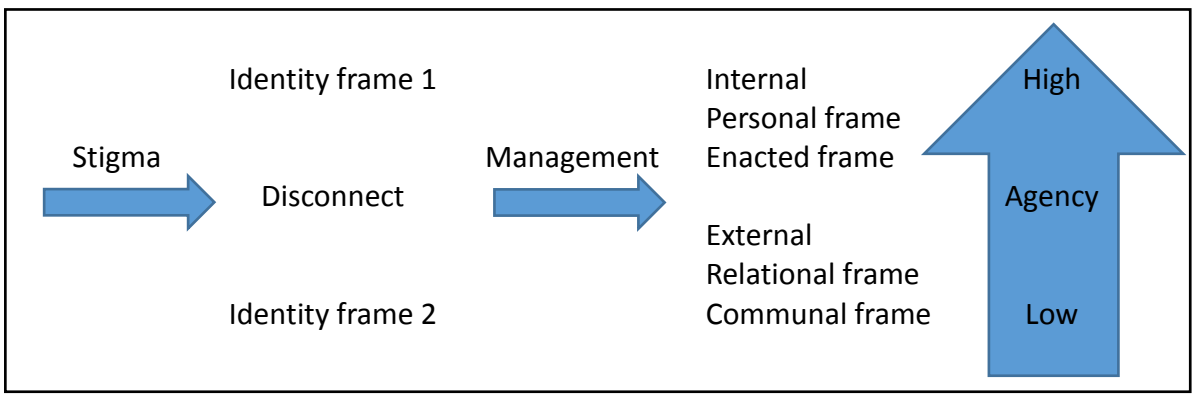

Figure 1. Theoretical model of managing identity gaps

I argue that the personal and enacted frames are internal, as people determine for themselves who they are and how they communicate their identities to other people. On the other hand, the relational and communal frames are external, as both are determined by others. The relational frame depends on the connection to others whereas the communal identity is also known as social identity.

The internal and external natures of identity frames give individuals varying levels of agency; this allows sheng nv to control their own lives and results in individuals possessing different levels of agency over the various frames. Agency allows people the freedom to have influence over their lives (Bandura, 2001). Bandura (2001) argues that sociocultural factors, such as social contexts, directly affect how much agency that an individual possesses. I suggest that the amount of agency an individual possesses and holds in each of the identity frames is on a continuum. The most agency is held over the personal frame because there is less restriction as it is self-defined. Lesser amount of agency is held over the enacted frame compared to personal frame because it related to the way an individual communicates their identity to others. Individuals have even less agency over their relational identity because it relies upon people around the individual. This is also true of the communal frame, as this is the identity allocated by society. However, through social interaction with other people, an individual exerts an impact on the agency concerning relational frame through indirect control.

As previously discussed, an example of communal identity is a stereotype. Witteborn (2004) argues that stigmas are the result of communal discourse. In other words, stigmas arise from societal feelings toward and communication regarding a particular attribute. The change of stereotypes occurs slowly and through a joint efforts of agencies (Link & Phelan, 2001). With the trend of the steadily increasing number of single women and the popularised stigmatisation of ‘leftover women’, unmarried women are caught in a cultural and normative lag. This refers to the delay that culture must take to catch up with societal changes (Woodard, 1934). Although the social shifts brought by the open-up policy and one-child Policy resulted in the increasing number of single women content with their lives, the social and cultural perceptions have not caught up. They are still perpetuating the ideology of marriage and motherhood. The cultural and societal lag produced by social changes offers an arena to contest the stereotypes, stigma, prejudices and discrimination of Chinese single women and to

manage the gaps contradicting the construction of single identity. Identity frames are the unified construction of elements of individuals' identity. Disconnection appears when two identity frames are in conflict with each other. In order to manage this in harmony, the consequences are decided by the amount of agency an individual exert upon frames.

5.3 Summary

This chapter addressed the findings of sub-RQ1 (how does a Chinese sheng nv describe meanings of singlehood?). Singlehood was expressed as a multitude of experiences and illustrated through the advantages, disadvantages, perceived and ascribed aspects to single women. Throughout the narratives, the attachment to independence as the most valued characteristic of being single is marked. The meaning of singlehood and the significance of independence are intertwined. Singlehood is mostly constructed as a positive statement of a fulfilling lifestyle with physical, psychological, economic and domestic freedom. It grants individuals with independence, but also causes loneliness due to the social stigma surrounding sheng nv. There are 13 aspects of the meaning of singlehood taken from the transcripts, which can be seen in the table 4 below.

Table 4. Meaning of singlehood

Singlehood as	Meaning
Lifestyle	♦ Freedom from responsibility of a relationship/ constraints of marriage and children ♦ Autonomy to make one's own decisions ♦ Financial and emotional independence ♦ Free spare time ♦ Lack of relational ties
Comfortable lives	♦ No obstacles ♦ Easy life ♦ Life satisfaction
Self-reliance	♦ Take care of themselves, financially, physically and emotionally ♦ Look for happiness and satisfaction in life
Choice	♦ Deliberate choice, just like those who choose marriage; marriage is not the only choice or the meaning of life
Loneliness	♦ Lack of one-on-one physical and emotional intimacy ♦ Lack of stable sexual behaviour ♦ Absence of children ♦ Lack of social support ♦ Lack of company from parents and friends Coping strategies ♦ Busy with work ♦ Social activities ♦ Seeking companionship from friends/parents ♦ Building kin-like relationships
Transition	♦ Moved from a place of anxiety to a place more accepting of singlehood
Opportunity	♦ Opportunities for self-discovery, self-development and self-fulfilment ♦ Know their 'true' selves better, outside of the role as wife and/or mother.
Double life	♦ Professional and responsible women at work ♦ 'Half disabled' lovely daughter at home
Social exclusion	♦ Due to cultural mores, societal norms, social expectations on womanhood
Openness	♦ Open to all the possibilities of the future
Self-acceptance	♦ Expressed satisfaction and/or acceptance of who they were
Ascribed self-deficiency and unfinished adulthood	♦ Marriage is considered as a marker for adulthood ♦ Worried about being constructed as pitiable, pathetic and problematic women ♦ Personality as the reason why they remain single ♦ Emotional dependence on parents
Cultural depreciation	♦ Single stigma ♦ Childless stigma ♦ Sexuality stigma – lesbian/homophobia Coping strategies ♦ Expressed intentional single status ♦ Redefine/replace stigma with positive aspects of single life ♦ Swaying and upsetting the dominant view ♦ Highlighting the fulfilment of their lives ♦ Use own experience to deconstruct stigma

While these were common themes represented in the meaning of singlehood for Chinese sheng nv, but other ideas were expressed. For example, while many women viewed their lifestyles as free, several did not agree with this. While some were concerned about the future of singles, some did not think marriage was the solution. This implies that while there may be a general tendency among Chinese sheng nv, differing opinions exist. These variations reflect the complexity of identity construction and culture.

It is evident that the nature and quality of one's relationship with others significantly modifies their perspective on autonomy as a desirable trait for organising one's life and informing one's identity. Relationships can be both destructive and instrumental to autonomy, which will be further investigated in chapter seven. What is remarkable, however, is that throughout the narratives, in speaking about personal identity, sheng nv emphasise the significance of independence to them. Independence is one of the elements necessary for achieving autonomy.

Single identity is routinely created and sustained (Giddens, 1991) in two ways: in the constant re-examination and reflection on the values which underpin singleness and through choices made. From the evidence presented in this chapter, personal identity is based on distinct values which celebrate independence. In the expressions of sheng nv of what they value about being single, the view of autonomy as a principle for organising one's life is prominent. These women challenge the normative practices and ideologies of marriage and motherhood by their very presence and by valuing independence. This is only part of the story of identity construction. The identity is composed by relationships, some of which are encouraged, other of which are suppressed, in order to realise a concept of womanhood that is based on autonomy.

In the following chapter, the identity of sheng nv is explored in terms of the enacted layer that relates to how women construct gender and their own perceptions on marriage and having children.

Chapter 6 Striving for completeness

When constructing their identity, sheng nv have contradictory thoughts, feelings and experiences about their singleness. It is important to understand how sheng nv manage these contradictions and reconcile ambivalence. They overcome the traditional meaning of womanhood through enacting their identities in social interactions in relation to the ideas of marriage and having children. In this chapter, I attempt to offer a respond to the sub-RQ2: 'how does a Chinese sheng nv seek completeness?' First, I explore how childhood fantasies about their wedding day haunt sheng nv and how they come to accept the difference between the dream and reality. For women who do not have these dreams, acceptance of their singleness appears to be an easier process. Along with childhood fantasies, the messages that sheng nv receive about marriage and motherhood and how these might influence their identity construction as adults is analysed. I also discuss issues of socialisation and gender construction and how sheng nv have challenged both. I then explore the enacted identity of sheng nv in relation to their choice concerning marriage and having children.

6.1 Befriending ambivalence

Scholars (e.g., Castells, 2011; Halberstam & Halberstam, 2002; Lakoff & Lakoff, 2004) have challenged the idea that gender is biologically determined, suggesting that there is a social construction of gender. Social constructionism theories point to cultural and historical factors that form gender (Seidman, Fischer, & Meeks, 2016). Despite the proliferation of work in gender studies, the ideologies of relationships and motherhood are perpetuated in Chinese society with a limited understanding of gender and an insistence on gender binaries (Li, 2005). Theories of socialisation suggest that gendered identity begins in infancy for women, when girls are clothed in pink and given dolls as toys (Hupp, Smith, Coleman, & Brunell, 2010). Early socialisation into appropriate gender roles begins in the family and is continued by social institutions such as kindergarten, school and work. These practices foster a natural attitude toward two genders, with complementary roles stemming from their biological differences (Jackson, 2008).

The binary concept of gender is connected to the experience of sheng nv concerning singlehood in their identity construction. While participants attempt to create full lives for themselves, the notion that they can be complete without a partner challenges old ideas from their childhood. Single women's ambivalence towards these ideas challenges the concept of socialisation as a one-way approach to gender (Connell, 2014). Socialisation is instead a two-way street where young girls can resist the belief that they become a woman only when they marry and have children. Liu has defied these gendered messages from an early age:

> *I got a sense when I was a little girl. I think I got that from my grandparents, as I was with them before I was 6 years old. You're not a real woman unless you're with a man. I know historically, women married into men's families and were given her husband's family name. I saw this as problematic... I felt that women had to have a sense of wholeness and that was important.*

In Liu's childhood, gendered messages quantified women as the 'other', or the second sex, implying that single women are therefore incomplete others. Her childhood understanding of culture included notions of binary gender socialisation. She rebelled and developed her own understanding of gender which focuses on women being complete within themselves. Liu resisted the messages that she received from her family. She did not have childhood dreams of marriage, but dreams of becoming a successful career woman. Liu's story contrasts with Shuyu's experience, who shared the strength of the message in Mongolian culture:

> *I dreamed about getting married since I was a little girl and I was always the mother when playing grown ups. You would think that marriage was the thing to do. It was a big part of the life course, getting married and having children. I mean, that's what women should do. As an ethnic minority, after we married, our identity disappeared in this union. That would determine what will make you okay and acceptable.*

Shuyu's childhood construction of gender hinged on getting married to be accepted by society because it the natural path for women. In her childhood memories , the 'natural attitude' toward binary gender construction took root. Shuyu's earlier experience exposes the depth of social construction of gender and how it is deeply connected to her self-identity (Fivush & Haden, 2003). Although she can now analyse the cultural creation of gender construction, it was difficult for her to resist cultural pressure.

Therefore, being single is still problematic for her. Walker (2004) suggests that single women understand gender differences as socially made, that they believe that social causes shape their personalities in such a way that change is difficult. The gender binary concept is deeply rooted in unmarried women who were not happy with themselves at an early age (Jackson, 2008).

During the interview process, I recalled the impact that childhood wedding fantasies had on me. I never dreamed of working towards a PhD when I was a little girl, but I always dreamt in great detail of my wedding day. When I interviewed the one of the women for this research and she told me that she never had childhood dreams of weddings or marriage, I was surprised. My first thought was to understand it as a potential class or age issue. However, as I went on to interview other women, I discovered almost an equal number of women did not have any fantasies about their wedding in childhood than those who had. There was no class and age distinction evident between these groups. Participants who did not have these dreams may be seen as challenging 'emphasised femininity' (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) and creating an alternative idea of femininity. This wedding dream also connects the self-identity of any woman to a gendered identity of a married woman. Young girls are introduced to "the regulatory practices that generate coherent identities through the matrix of coherent gender norms" (Butler, 2002, p. 17). These reinforce the sex/gender/desire continuum that Butler presents. Liao described her wedding dream:

> *I think we all have the fantasy of becoming a bride, the most beautiful princess in a white dress holding hands with handsome Prince Charming and living happily ever after. After growing up a bit, I thought about my big day in more detail, like the venue, decorations, what I'm going to wear…But since starting primary school, it's gone or been supressed by academic pressure. When you could not finish your homework until 10 pm, how can you dream about your wedding? No weddings, but homework and exams.*

Experiencing feelings of the desire does not necessarily result in marriage, but childhood wedding fantasies that create a desire for young girls to marry is a critical turning point, guiding them towards domesticity and motherhood (Uggen, 2000). The self-identity of women becomes engaged in this gendered identity. Literature suggests that society creates a culture where adulthood culminates in marriage and family and the early years are preparation for becoming wives and mothers (Baxter, Hewitt, & Haynes, 2008).

However, in China, dodging perceptions and behaviours of intimate relationships results in an unusual situation where women undergo a process of anticipating socialisation. Women learn to perform a particular role where there is the only expectation of growing up to be a good student and a professional (Zheng, 2016). The experiences of sheng nv demonstrate that messages are often contradictory and adulthood can be achieved in other ways than tradition may dictate. This challenges the gender socialisation framework that assumes "gender roles become internalised in stable personality traits as a result of gender differences in socialisation during youth and childhood" (Baila, 2001, p. 93).

6.1.1 Abandoning childhood fantasies

The construction of gender in China involves the ideology of 'true' women as married women who choose to have children, which remains the central characteristic of 'emphasised femininity'. The childhood wedding dream stems from Chinese cultural gendering. Early studies have shown that family and domesticity dominate Chinese teenage girls' lives (e.g. Wang & Ye, 2000; Yue, 2002). So how do sheng nv reconcile their reality against their long-held dreams? Lijia explained:

> *I thought marriage would be there, at least before I was 30 years old. I not only received the reminder messages from relatives, but also got it from my childhood dreams. It haunted me since I was five years old, like a ghost. Seriously, there was a time, the sound of every step I took on the street was telling me 'where is your husband; where is your husband…' Of course, now I feel marriage is not that important anymore. It is fine to live without it.*

Women who are single, but dreamed of getting married, developed an identity that lacks a partner as a central component. It is not just the 'haunting' sensation (Gordon, 1994) of the childhood wedding fantasy, but also the absent spouse. It seems that in adolescence, gender identity is wrapped up in time and energy spent on finding this missing husband. Wei's story was filled with attempts to reconcile her childhood wedding dreams and the reality of her single life:

> *I think everybody does have a wedding dream. I always thought that I would at least get married, at least for a while. I don't think I'm going to, I don't know, unless something radical happens. This is it, you know. But I still haven't given up hope, I still date and stuff and try to get into a relationship, but well, I don't know. It's great to live like this as I enjoy*

> *it, but on several quiet nights, I've asked myself 'will a companied life be better?' I have no idea.*

Wei's story represents the wrestling of identities. Her sense of a self began while she waited for a suitable partner. When these women began to imagine their lives without a husband, they acknowledge the benefits of single life. Yet some find it difficult to let go of a dream because there is always a possibility lurking in their imagination (Smelser, 1998). The 'enormous repercussion' on personal identity (Bonds-White, 1997) can be seen in the gap between what Wei wishes for herself and her opportunity to redefine her identity; there is an identity gap that many of the dreamers attempt to narrow down, the space between accepting reality versus the desire. These women believe that if they resign themselves as single, they are excluding themselves from ever finding a partner. Whereas if they focus too much on the desire to find a husband, they create an incomplete single existence for themselves. Living in the middle ground produces an ambiguous sense of self.

Even the acceptance of being single means that women continue to experience social discrimination, as their lifestyle choice differs from married women who take on a coupled identity complying with social expectations. For them, ambivalence becomes inevitable as unmarried women's acceptance of their identity is always haunted by an uncertainty fuelled by social disapproval (Simpson, 2016). This was exemplified in conversation with Wei, when asked how she feels about being single. The wrestling within identity construction continues:

> *Would I rather be married? No. Here's the thing, I think what has actually happened over the years is there was a period of time when I really wanted to be married and I'd say that was in late 20s. Now that I'm in my 30s, it's kind of like, well I'm over it and I don't see it as something that I have to do any more. And so it's taken on less importance than it did. But I'd still like to be married. Even if it wasn't forever, I'd like to experience that lifestyle, for a while maybe? If it's not better, I'd just go back to the single lifestyle.*

Although Wei may feel content with her status as a single woman, or at least more relaxed about it than in her late 20s, the certainty that she would still like to marry echoes the certainty she felt when she spoke of her childhood dreams of marriage. Although being married is less important to her now, her fantasies of a wedding remain.

As a result, Wei struggles to accept her identity as a single woman, giving testimony to the power of gendered socialisation.

The reconciliation between desire and reality is present in Wei's description of when she began to see herself as an adult. She states 'I haven't started viewing myself as an adult until the past couple of years.' When asked 'what does it feel like to be an adult?' her answer reflects a connection that acceptance of her singleness is crucial to adulthood:

> *Well actually, my 30s have been good to me. I'm more at peace in 30s than I ever was. I just feel like I have a different perspective on life as I don't let the small stuff bother me as much as I used to. I think that's part of the reason why getting married isn't as important to me as it had been maybe when I was younger, because when you're more your own person, it's not as important. I mean, yes, sharing your life is important and all the rest of it, but you don't view yourself as an extension of another person. All the way through life until now has been based on my own choices.*

The ability to see herself as a whole person without marriage brings peace into her life. Wei moves more towards Liu's understanding of a gendered identity as being complete within oneself. Although contradiction is evident throughout her interview, Wei confronts it and makes peace with her single identity. While the dissolution of the childhood dream brought her sadness, it also brought a greater sense of independence. This was discussed by Xiaoche, who began to take life much more seriously at the age of 26 when she began to embrace her singleness.

> *I think part of it is relief and it was something that I know needed to be done. I was pretty frustrated at that moment. But then it turned into a new start…it actually giving myself more control of my life, rather than in a marriage or having a man to give me that life. I became an adult and I should be responsible for my life and not someone else's. And now I am single and fulfilled.*

The transition to singlehood acts as a turning point for Xiaoche. Her frustration of being single led to greater self-awareness, self-sufficiency and alternative sources of gratification through interpersonal relationships, meaningful work and other pleasurable activities (Bonds-White, 1997). When lives diverge from cultural expectations, individuals experience a shift on how they perceive marriage (Davies, 2003). This new adulthood for single women uncovers meaningful ways to define an

adult status when marriage does not occur. It is critical to the emotional health of single people and their families (Schwartzberg, Berliner, & Jacob, 2001).

The transition to singlehood is a change in social identity that may be associated with aging and must be negotiated within a marriage-oriented cultural context. Rather than relying on socially constructed desires, Xiaoche constructed her own and forged her own path to adulthood. The key to adult identity seems to be responsible for oneself. This challenges the traditional notion within Chinese society that marriage and having children is the natural way for continuing family lineage and culture heritage (Zhou, 2011) and indicators that parents have successfully finished their mission through raising up their offspring.

When I asked Lee why she decided to abandon her wedding dream, she said:

> *It is pretty straightforward. When I was a kid or even a teenager, I had the wedding dream and thought it should be like this and it would happen in the future that I would be married in 20s, probably just after graduation. When you start to live your own life, what you've learned or what you've practised are not the same as the old fantasy and also what you want to be and what life you want could be quite different to that as well.*

This experience is echoed in others' narratives. It reflects the three stages of identity formation: life by scripts, identity crisis and self-definition. Those who dreamed of their weddings follow the 'life script' written by traditions and social expectations. The identity crisis stems from the conflict when reality does not meet childhood expectations. The ideology of familism forces women to decide whether they should compromise and comply with the accepted idea of the emphasised femininity. Self and gendered self are intrinsically bound together, so the gendering of self can cause a crisis of identity for most women (Addie & Brownlow, 2014). The resolution of the crisis leads to an altered sense of identity and a higher level of self-acceptance. By the stage of self-definition, participants have developed a distinct consciousness of adulthood and singleness. Increased self-esteem enables them to possess a positive concept of self and life satisfaction.

6.1.2 Constructing dreams against the trend

Compared to dreamers, those who did not dream of their weddings in childhood have a more satisfying experience of being single and experience less inner conflict about their identity. This may point to the significance of the dream and its impact on women's endeavours to construct a positive image of herself as single. Women have career ambitions that take priority, so they challenged emphasised femininity from an early age. For example, Laila discussed how her dreams were fixed on career:

> *I had that, those dreams of being a superwoman, you know, going and getting the education and the career and doing something like being a doctor to save lives. You need to have the ambition, which is very important. I had career goals and the issue of marriage didn't play into it. Marriage could be a by-product of what I was doing after I finished education and built my career, then my part of the 'perfect women' expected from and emphasised by the public might be complete, but I didn't see marriage and having kids as necessary to fulfil me. I enjoy my independence.*

It is interesting how Laila separates her own dream from the traditional image of Chinese women, which embodies the role as good wife and mother (Li, 2005). She gave an astute analysis of the socially constructed desire for marriage. Although social construction of gender is that for a woman to be complete, she must marry and have children, Laila's own understanding of gender is that she is complete within herself. She is more interested in living her own life and developing her career and other interests. By rejecting the enacted image of women, she is turning away from emphasised femininity and creating an alternative version. Her construction of the single identity is a positive one.

Several of the non-dreamers attributed their lack of childhood wedding fantasies to a childhood where feminine qualities were not emphasised. This disrupts the sex/gender/desire continuum. For example, Wangxi said:

> *Well, I tried to think about this and I don't think I had. It doesn't seem clear. I mean, I did have a Barbie. I didn't play with her that much more because there were other things that seemed more fun. I can clearly remember my favourite toy was a soldier from a cartoon called Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers. So I wasn't one of those people who had a wedding dream, no.*

Although Wangxi was given the correct toys in which she could begin to construct her gendered self, she rejected Barbie for other toys. This gave her the ability to construct a gendered identity that challenged the accepted ideas of the 'emphasised femininity'. When Xiong was asked about her identity as a single woman, she replied:

> *I feel pretty good. I appreciate things like not having to consult somebody else about what I'm doing. Things like buying this condo, it's like really totally me doing it. You know, I've made all of the decisions, I did all the looking, and I've had to get the resources to get some people to help me with it, but I like that freedom of being in charge of my life without really having to clear it with another person.*

Although she would consider marriage, it is not something that she pines for. She is more interested in living her own life and developing her own interests. Independence is the most important aspect of single life and she does not see herself as incomplete or waiting. Similarly, Wangxi is comfortable being single and when asked if she had childhood dreams of a wedding, she stated:

> *Not really… I was really a tomboy. My cousin and I were both tomboys; we always preferred a neutral appearance as it's cosy and easy to wear. Now we have fancy dresses for certain occasions. People said 'those little boys are so cool'. We didn't do the mother play or auntie play. We weren't like girly-frilly either, so wedding dreams were not our style.*

Although tomboys are tolerated during prepubescent years, with puberty bringing the "full force of gender conformity descending on the girl" (Halberstam & Halberstam, 2002, p. 6), this phase allows some girls, like Wangxi, some space to dream of things other than a wedding. For Wangxi, it was becoming a great novelist. In the book, Female Masculinity Halberstam and Halberstam (2002) write:

> When gender-ambiguous children are constantly challenged about their gender identity, the chain of misrecognitions can actually produce a new recognition: in other words, to be constantly mistaken for a boy, for many tomboys, can contribute to the production of a masculine identity (p. 8).

Although Wangxi does not see herself as having a masculine identity, part of what Halberstam and Halberstam (2002) claim seems to relate to her. Whether the challenge to emphasised femininity was triggered by her choice to be a tomboy or not, single

women are creating alternative femininities. Part of their independence forces them to adopt traits that are more traditionally deemed masculine.

> *I often think, it would be better if I had a traditional type wife, a 'wife-like' person, someone can do the housework. (Zhou)*

> *No matter how hard it was, I went for it. I need to be strong, to treat myself like a man. (Luoji)*

Zhou and Luoji's comments suggest an ambiguous gender zone, as being successful in the workplace has traditionally been a male virtue in Chinese culture (Gao, 2014). Their statements present an example of 'female masculinity' (Halberstam & Halberstam, 2002), breaking down traditional binary understanding of gender. They are challenging emphasised femininity at home and in the workplace by not behaving in accordance with social norms. Unmarried women also cross traditional gender lines in adulthood. Yili told a funny story,

> *Two years ago, I entrusted my mom to buy a new house. The staff reminded my mum to bring my divorce certificate. My mum said 'she has not even gotten married!' Come on, it's no longer the time that just men and divorced women can afford a house. They believe you should be either married or divorced at this age.*

Despite the increasing number of single women in China, marriage remains a rite of passage to adulthood for many women, followed by having children. "While marriage and parenthood provide automatic structures and rituals to locate one's life along a fairly predictable life course, singlehood has very few signposts to mark the trail" (Schwartzberg et al., 2001, p. 9). In Chinese culture, buying a house signifies settling down for men. Typical homebuyers are still men preparing for upcoming marriage and married couples who purchase it as their first home or when children arrive. However, an increasing number of single women have started to buy their own houses, the number tripling in four years (SSB, 2016), to prove their independence from the family of origin. The ability to support oneself financially without the support of parents is the ultimate standard of adulthood discussed by participants. Adulthood shifts from entering a marriage relationship to being responsible for one's own decisions and household bills.

The majority of those who did not dream of their weddings believe that they are single by choice. This is the factor that distinguishes them the most from the dreamers. Many of the non-dreamers approached the question of choice from the perspective that if they really wanted to marry, they could. Since they are not in a serious relationship, they do not pursue marriage for its own sake. They would rather be unmarried and single than in a broken relationship or bad marriage. Regardless of this, there was often doubt expressed over the reason why they are single. Jiwen is a good example:

> *I think on some level, it is a choice. But I haven't always wanted that choice. I don't think that these things just happen. Because I think people who really, really want to be married are married, or at least in some point in their life are married. You can find a way to make that happen for the most part. So clearly on some level it is a choice because of other choices I have made about how I've wanted to live my life and who I need to be for myself. On another level, I think that part of me has definitely felt conflicted that if I do make these choices about who I want to be and how I want to live, I think that I might not end up with a someone, you know, this kind of thing. There's definitely some conflict there, because I don't think it was my intention to not get married initially.*

Jiwen highlights the fact that choices are often made that halt marriage and the result of the choice is remaining single. Regardless of the reasons for choosing a path, they are in control of their own lives. Non-dreamers are more active constructors of their single identities and more of them feel that they chose to be single.

6.2 Perceptions of marriage and motherhood

Data released by the Ministry of Civil Affairs shows that fewer Chinese people are getting married and more couples are divorcing. Since 2014, the number of newly registered marriages has dropped for three years in a row, with only 11.3 million people choosing to marry in 2016, a 9.1 percent reduction from 2015 (Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China (MCA), 2017, 2016). Meanwhile, China's divorce rate increased from 1.3 million in 2007 to 4.8 million in 2016, among which couples born in the 1980s were in the majority (MCA, 2017, 2008). When asked why fewer people are getting married and more people are getting divorced, Yiqiao explained:

> *I may explain it from a woman's perspective. In the old days, marriage is more on how to run a life with joint force to raise children. Now,*

> *people have more expectations on a spiritual level. Women could make bread and butter, which used to be the basis of marital life, but now they wish for some mutual and common things beyond daily necessities. They work to support themselves. If the expectations cannot be met, then there is no need to keep that relationship.*

Marriage was once a safeguard for women. However, nowadays, women's economic sufficiency can be seen as the basis for the increasing number of single women, lower marriage rates and increasing divorce rates (Gong et al., 2017). The relationship between singleness and economic sufficiency can be explained by the economic independence theory (Sayer & Bianchi, 2000). It assumes that traditional gendered roles were constructed in a breadwinner/ caregiver balance. Marriage and family were the only means that women had to fulfil their gender identity. However, when women can financially support themselves, they abandon the idea of looking for security through marriage. In addition to economic independence, work also enables women to achieve new dimensions of self-confidence and a sense of pride in their ability to support themselves or contribute to the support of a family, as another source of gratification (Byrne, 2008a). They are now breadwinners instead of marrying breadwinners. Economic structure and gender roles change as social resources for men and women change, allowing women to construct single identity.

6.2.1 To marry or not?

Participants were critical of the place of marriage as a dominant institution in Chinese society. Social support for the institution of marriage and marital relationships is a reminder to participants that they are the others. Sheng nv are aware of the societal pressure to marry, the pressure to stay married, and the normative status of marriage and motherhood. Weiqian described the support for marriage as an obsession:

> *I think the government would much prefer if everybody got married and it all worked all of the time, but the obsession of holding onto marriage doesn't work. There is pressure to get into it, to stay in it and there is this feeling that the whole society revolves around marriage… It was suggested to me to at least get married once and then divorce, as divorce is not necessarily my fault, but being unmarried is my fault.*

Portraying marriage as a faulty, inflexible institution, one that does not work, which does not recognise the vulnerability of people in relationships, devalues it as an

organisational, bureaucratic structure. If the institution can be devalued, then the normative values attached to it are also diminished. The devaluation of marriage can be a strategy for combating social stigma. Participants commented on the pressure to marry and observed that some people married because of societal expectations. Zhou said:

> *Quite a lot of people end up being married just to get married and then they find it's not quite right. That's why the divorce rate is pretty high. Many people end up being married that just shouldn't and the only reason they are married is because of the pressure. You can see the examples of flash marriages and flash divorces around you and you feel rather lucky to be single. And now that there's no late marriage leave – who wants to get married if we don't even have time for a honeymoon?*

In 2016, the Chinese government cancelled the late marriage and late maternity leave that allowed China's older couples to take a 30-day paid leave when getting married and a 60-day paid leave after having a baby. The legal marriage age in China is 20 for women and 22 for men, while the late marriage age is 23 for women and 25 for men and the late maternity age is one year after the late marriage age. With the policy now scrapped, newlyweds cannot take more than a three-day wedding leave and 98 days maternity leave. This shows a redirection of the Birth Control Policy, which advocates 'late marriages, late childbirth and fewer and better births' in favour of people getting married and having children as early as possible because the average age for marriage in China is now 25 (Bao, 2010).

In these accounts, participants dismiss marriage as an institution pushed by the government and present themselves as resistant to the normative, societal and family pressure to marry. Women have also intentionally avoided unstable, unsatisfactory relationships. Participants are keen observers of friends' marriages. They observed the differences between themselves and married women who don't want to be single again at any cost. For example, when asked what she thought of married friends, Xiong said:

> *Some of my friends might have bad marriages that contain violence and instability, and we would say 'I would kick him out. What is she doing holding on to him?' You would see the difference there. To us single women, there appears to be a great difference. For women who are traditionally married…they don't want to be unmarried. No matter what's happening, they still try to cling on. 'Can't she wake up?' we*

> *often say things like that. I think they have been dragged down by their married life. They have encumbered by married lives. Ah, there is no good reason to get married. I feel rather superior.*

Bingfang's statement is very telling, emphasising the perceived differences in the worldview of the importance of being married between married and single women. There is little about marriage that participants find attractive. Marriage is equated with dependency, gender roles, power struggles and unequal relationships between women and men. For example, Liao and Xiong talked about how witnessing gender roles in marriage is a reason to not marry:

> *There might be social changes that liberate certain roles for women, the expectation of 'inside roles' still remains the same, mainly as a caregiver. The different expressions of marriage are 'take in a daughter-in-law' for the groom's family and 'marry off a daughter' for bride's family. Women give up a lot, more so than men, in marriages. Like my mom, she sacrificed the best chance for promotion to accompany me for two-years before my national university entrance exam. My mum is also excellent at taking care of my grandparents. She's a great woman. I respect her so much. But I definitely won't follow or repeat her path. (Liao)*

> *In the family, my aunt has been spoken highly of being a woman with traditional virtues. She used to take care of my two cousins even after they became adults, now looking after their grandkids. I don't know whether she enjoyed it or not. But for me, women should not feel obliged to do such things, should live their own life, not for her sons or grandkids. (Xiong)*

The theme of women losing out in marital relationships comes up in many critiques of marriage. Marriage is regarded as an unequal institution from which women do not benefit. Gendered and sexual relations in marriage favour males (Gong, 2012). Social changes altered women's outlooks and changed their gender roles, while men did not shift their expectations. Weiqian saw it as the roles blurring:

> *Social changes have brought complicated things, like roles merging without a clear boundary concerning what women and men are supposed to do. Apart from taking men's old characters and virtues, women also took men's roles in old times, work, responsibility, family… Women are very decisive about what they want. This is what we want, what our lives should be like. We work and we need an equal share. I think men got confused about their role.*

Weiqian's idea can be seen as a continuity of Liao and Luoji's comments concerning ambiguous genders and this flows from gender-based characteristics applied to roles in marriage. Due to the change of women's behaviours, the traditional gender roles in a marriage cannot be maintained. Most men have no idea what the male role should be (Wang et al., 2015). Weiqian discussed how issues of power and control were central to what she saw as gender roles. Her instincts told her that she would rather be alone. Anderson, Stewart, and Dimidjian (2000) discuss this phenomenon in Western world as 'gender lag'. They state:

> Having adapted to the enormous cultural changes that have occurred in the short space of their own lifetime, modern women find that they are out of sync with most of the men they meet. They encounter 'gender lag', a kind of cultural lag of the sexes, in which standing on the edge of the cultural change often means standing without men. (p. 193)

However, it is more of a gender gap than a gender lag. Lag implies that men will adapt to the shifts in gender roles; but what seems to be happening is that women are often expected to revert to traditional gender roles to relate to men in relationships. This is evident in the mainstream media, proliferating the message that 'women need to make themselves more feminine and receptive though revising their aggressive feminist-inspired characteristics to attract men who will marry them for keeps' (Xinhua Net, 20121102).

When asked about her ideas on marriage, Marui mentioned the family registration system in China:

> *I don't like the government frames. The sister of my best friend got married and her 'hukou' was deleted as the family of origin and added to her new family. I feel the same - the self really disappears from the family of origin. I don't like that, in particular as the only child, and find it is unacceptable. This is just another reason why marriage is not that good.*

In China, individuals are identified through a family registration document. This system makes marriage legally significant: through marriage, one enters the other's family and their name is deleted from their biological family's registration document. Marui objected to the institutionalised marriage system and is particularly troubled by the mandatory elimination of identity from one's biological family and the promotion of

female dependence on a husband. Consequently, some women prefer to avoid legal marriage because the current marriage system does not provide them with security. Ting told a story about her divorced friend and its influence on her.

> *Her ex-husband's parent paid a down payment on a house before they got married and she couldn't get anything, even though she paid almost all of the mortgage. It neglects the wife's contribution to the family. Then why should we contribute to a family as it is not acknowledged by the Marriage Law? If she's not married, the money for the mortgage is still all hers. Now, I have even more things to consider about marriage.*

Ting targeted the new amendment to Marriage Law, in which property is no longer regarded as jointly owned and divided equally in a divorce. Instead, the house belongs to the person who paid the initial or full payment. According to Chinese marriage traditions, the husband's side should offer a house as part of the dowry. The new ruling is an attempt to bolster the crumbling institution of marriage by making divorce less attractive (Yang, 2011). Even though the general idea of the new amendment is to protect the property owner and curtail the increasing numbers of divorce, the equality of the outcome has not been taken into consideration. A divorced man is left holding the valuable house, while a divorced woman has no compensation. It is not hard to see how the 2011 Amendment could detrimentally influence the financial situation of Chinese women when considering how ingrained male ownership of houses is traditional in Chinese culture (Chen, 2013).

The objection to marriage allows participants to seek alternative solutions to replace it. More than half of participants mentioned a 'Boston Marriage', where two women live together, and an 'Auntie House', where unmarried or single women buy a house together in a little village. Moreover, participants spoke of a new form of marriage conceived for a modern family. Yiqiao said:

> *Marriage is perceived as providing intimacy, companionship and care in an older age and necessary to rearing children. If China allows gay marriage, I guess all women would prefer to build a family with women. As a straight woman, I prefer to be with a woman as well. As a woman, you know what a woman needs. You would be financially joined, share the work and get on very well.*

The deconstruction of the institution that depicts unmarried women as deviant is a way of protecting themselves from stigma. Respondents referred to injustices related to gender and marital relationships that encourage their thinking about their choices; they point to the oppression, domination, inequality and unfairness of treatment that stems from marriage. Most of the women interviewed, however, do not expect to marry and as they have learned to be single and value their independence, they would be reluctant to change their status. A significant portion of women in this study view marriage as confinement, as diminishing potential and as detrimental to personal autonomy.

6.2.2 To have children or not?

The roles of women and feminine identity are historically and traditionally constructed around motherhood in Chinese culture. Raising a child is seen as an aspiration for women and becoming a mother as their primary social role and life course, which constitute Chinese women's femininity (Li, 2005). Women have been biologically built for reproduction, so the failure of fulfilling the task is viewed as not achieving the female identity. Motherhood is synonymous with womanhood. Just as being single is becoming more common around the world, so is childlessness (Cherlin, 2009). The traditional and hegemonic assumptions of womanhood are increasingly being challenged and slowly broken down. China's birth-rate dropped from 1.43 to 1.04 from 2001 to 2011 (Ye & Wu, 2011). However, childlessness may not be understood as a choice for unmarried women in China, as expressed by Marui when I asked her opinion on the two-child policy:

> *In China, it is not a choice because you are given no choice. Yeah. They speak highly of the new two–child policy – for those who want more children can now have two children. But that is not our case. Regardless of whether you want a child or not, the problem is in China, if you are unmarried you cannot have a child. The two-child policy does not change our situation at all.*

Even though it is not illegal for unmarried women to have children, registering for a family planning service certificate (formerly the procreation permission certificate) requires a marriage certificate. A family planning service certificate is necessary for newborns to be registered for national identification purposes and for permanent residency. Non-marital birth is effectively illegal because it does not meet the prerequisites of the Family Planning Policy. The reason for these limitations imposed on fertility given by the policy officials is:

> The current child policy in which a couple generally can have no more than two children: if the singles can give birth legally, some couples may choose not to go through with marriage or divorce procedures in order to give birth to the second children or more, so it will be difficult to show the fairness of the policy and will also lead to social instability (Hun yin fa gui, 2015).

In other words, the Family Planning Policy is a basic national policy that affects law-making and supporting policies. Even though the population policy now allows for a second child, the family planning system grants rights to procreation that are linked to marriage. As a consequence, unmarried women's reproduction rights are being violated. The Beijing Platform for Action and CEDAW both clearly affirm that women's human rights include reproductive rights. As a signatory of CEDAW, China has obligations to respect, protect and fulfil these rights. Even the constitution (Article 17) stipulates that all citizens have the right and the obligations of family planning. From a constitutional point of view, unmarried women's fertility rights should be guaranteed. The constitution and family planning laws do not treat unmarried women and married women differently in terms of fertility rights. The policy of family planning has been amended based on changes in national conditions; however, the problem with the one-child policy is not the number of children permitted by the government. The new two-child policy is not a guarantee or return of women's reproduction rights as it is against CEDAW (Article 16), which grants women equal rights in deciding 'freely and responsibly on the number and spacing of their children'.

In addition to the limitations set by the registration of identification and right of permanent residence placed on the children of unmarried mothers, participants also criticise the restrictions on women's reproduction rights. When Malin was asked whether marriage is necessary before having children, she said:

> *No. Frozen eggs and sperm banks are two main ways me and my friends thought about if we want kids. You can choose the genes for your own kids. You can have a preference and find a best choice. I fancy blue eyes. However, there is no sperm bank in China yet and frozen eggs are banned in China. That's the system China has. You are discriminated against by different sorts of laws, rules and regulations for being unmarried. Immigration is what I am considering currently.*

The National Health and Family Planning Commission stated that, according to the current laws, unmarried women are prohibited to have their eggs frozen. In 2002, the

Jilin province enacted the Population and Family Planning Regulation, which included an article stating that “the woman who has reached the legal age of marriage and decided not to marry and does not have any children, can take legal medically assisted reproductive technology means to have a child” (Standing Committee of Jinlin Provincial Congress, 2004, p. 3). This is the first time in China’s local legislation where procreation rights were extended to single women. However, in 2013, the Ministry of Health announced the newly revised Human Assisted Reproductive Technology Specification, which clearly stipulated that ‘it is prohibited to give single women human assisted reproductive technology (Ministry of National Health, 2001)’ and overturned the local legislation.

Under the revised Human Assisted Reproductive Technology Specification, there is no regulation preventing single women purchasing sperm from a sperm bank, but the technique of artificial insemination and use of frozen eggs are defined as human assisted reproductive technology. Only infertile couples with three certificates (marriage certificate, identity card and family planning service certificate) can have treatment with assisted reproductive technology. Therefore in China, again, having children is linked to marriage. That is to say, a woman can only have her own child when she is married to a man.

There is also limited cultural and maternal support for single women to have children. Inspection fees, operation fees, hospitalisation expenses, delivery fees and medical costs should be covered by maternity insurance; however, the application for paid maternity leave also needs a family planning service certificate. Maternity insurance was originally a system where the government guaranteed a women’s right to procreation by providing medical care and maternity benefits. In practice, this policy is linked to the Family Planning Policy. Having children out of wedlock violates the Family Planning Policy, so an unmarried single mother cannot apply for maternity insurance. In addition, although the Marriage Law stipulates that children born in and out of marriage have the same rights, in practice it is impossible for illegitimate children to access social warfare, social security and insurance. This is again because they do not have the family planning service certificate to register for permanent residency.

Most of the participants have decided not to have children and, generally, these child-free women are clear about the reasons for their choice. However, similar to the defensive coping strategy of singles, they shift the emphasis to concerns about potential injustices and the welfare of children of single mothers. What emerged is that participants do not want the responsibility of having a child as a single parent: this would interrupt their independent lifestyle and would be unfair to the child.

A number of factors influence Xiaozhu's position on single motherhood: she would need a loving relationship, a father would have to be actively involved in rearing the child and parenthood would deter her from fulfilling her career ambitions. For her, having a child would involve a fundamental change to her lifestyle:

> *I think it's complicated. I mean I wouldn't have wanted to have a child with anyone that I was not totally in love with and I would want the father to be around if I had a child. And as well I think the demands of my job are very strong and that probably has an effect too. I certainly cannot see myself doing all the things I am doing now if I was working as a single mother. I need to focus on my career. I don't think I can do both perfectly at the same time.*

A number of women consider the child's welfare rather than their own desire to be a mother. Liling regards single parenthood as being unfair to the child:

> *It's fine to be a single mother as I am capable of doing it. But the thing is whether the whole of society accepts it. It wouldn't be fair to the kid. It's unfair for the kid to bear something else than other kids. I won't let kids to come into a world where they need to tolerate things they shouldn't need to. Needless to say, they can't be registered.*

Other reasons for not having children include not wanting to be a parent and not wanting the responsibility of having to rear children in an unsafe environment. When asked whether they want children or not, a range of reasons were provided:

> *I am happy without children. People can live how they want. Having a womb doesn't mean you have to give birth to a baby, just like 'We all have a soundtrack but not all of us are singers' (Yaqin)*

> *I 100% don't want to have children. I don't think I will be a good mum, I can be a good aunt, but I don't want to spend the time required to be a good mother. I don't have the time and energy to raise a child. Raising a kid takes so much energy. Taking care of them, repeating the*

> *same routine every day. Anyway, there are many kids on the earth and many people on the earth. (Liu)*
>
> *To be honest, I think I have the talent to be a good parent. But having a kid, there is no turning back. If you don't like your job, quit it and get a new one. If you buy a faulty, get refund of it. But for your own kids you can't... The thing is that we don't know the life they are going to face is good or bad in this unsafe environment. It may be even harder for me to avoid the feeling that I caused it all: as originally, I brought them into the world. I can't hold the responsibility. (Yili)*
>
> *I don't want kids or to settle down. I like kids, but I can't be with them for a long time. They are lovely, sweet, but then my head begins to ache. (Zhou)*

The sheng nv who have decided to be child-free speak of the attractions of childlessness, including freedom and independence, reinforced autonomy, an improved economic situation and more opportunities. Participants not only reject traditional ideologies of parenthood, but also the perceptions concerning the benefits of motherhood. They rebuff the view that motherhood is natural, desirable or a fulfilment of womanhood. Instead, participants describe what they would lose as mothers. Motherhood is portrayed as a sacrifice, a burden and a loss of identity, which they are not prepared to handle. For example:

> *I think in part as a mother, you have to give up the idea of yourself as an individual person to look after and take care of kids. Money, time and energy… your choice about what you want to do, who you are, or what you need will be lost. Like what my mum had sacrificed for our family. That is not the sort of lifestyle that I would take. I'm ready to get away. (Laila)*
>
> *Rules and regulations for what you can't do. Your life is more likely to revolve around someone else, but it would be a commitment that I won't take. There might be a lot of satisfaction to those who want to be a mother, but to me, it's just burden. (Xiaoche)*
>
> *My cousin has 8-year-old twin boys. Whenever I am around her, all she talks about is kids. They are the centre of her life. She doesn't seem to be a woman for her own sake. She is a wife to Mr Pan, or a mother to this kids. When I left her house, I thought I would never swap my life with her. Losing my freedom, losing my independence, losing my identity, no way. (Lee)*

Wangxi and Liao distinguish womanhood from motherhood:

> *We hear it all the time… 'you're not a real woman until you have a child'. 'There's a bond there between mother and children', 'being a mother makes a woman woman'. The sense of mission to continue blood, life and happiness. It's about blood inheritance of a family and the continuity of family name… The thing is I am not a mother and I don't feel any less feminine. Motherhood is not something to achieve. It's the same as singlehood. It's just a choice, different lifestyle. I saw a woman on a street. I saw her as a woman. Is she a mother or not? I don't care. I see a woman, not a mother. (Wangxi)*

> *People say when a woman becomes a mother, her life will be totally different. She attaches importance to something; thus she has to give something up correspondingly. So, which one is the true you, before or after? The most sarcastically is that this is an irreversible choice and I choose to be childfree to be a better woman. (Liao)*

Wangxi and Liao rejected the idea that motherhood is the ultimate aspiration for a woman and the crux of feminine identity. In this research, participants have instead experienced a sense of female gender identity separate from motherhood, a child-free femininity. It is possible that some respondents rejected motherhood because they have never experienced a maternal desire. Participants developed alternative femininity on the basis of independence; this is a radical denunciation of motherhood as a normative female gender marker. Indeed, an increasing number of women resist cultural imperatives of femininity that conflate woman with mother, highlighting the emergence of a positive feminine identity separate from motherhood. The experiences of singlehood may motivate participants to have a more comprehensive understanding of femininity and identity of women to correspond with the single identity.

6.3 Summary

This chapter explored the findings relating to the question: how does a Chinese sheng nv seek completeness (sub RQ2)? For sheng nv, completeness is pursued by putting childhood wedding fantasies aside and relying on personal experiences to decide whether or not to get married and have children. Details of how their completeness is achieved and their perceptions on marriage and having children can be seen in the table 5 below.

Table 5. Striving for completeness

Completeness as	Meaning
Adulthood	♦ Acceptance of singlehood ♦ Reconciling ambivalence (desire for independence and desire for intimate relationship) ♦ Complete within themselves ♦ Living one's life in a responsible manner ♦ Finding meaningful ways to define oneself ♦ Letting go of childhood wedding dream ♦ Take responsibility for their own decisions ♦ Educational and professional success ♦ Supporting themselves financially/ economic independence ♦ Purchasing own house ♦ Ability to take care of themselves ♦ In charge of their own life ♦ Content with current status ♦ Ignoring social disapproval ♦ Self-reliance, self-awareness, self-sufficiency and alternative source of gratification ♦ Alternative femininity
Perceptions on Marriage and Having Children	
Marriage	♦ Not a necessary ♦ Highly overrated, faulty and inflexible institution ♦ Unattractive – witness of poor marriages ♦ Blurred gender roles ♦ Restrictions brought by the Marriage Law and family registration system ♦ Alternative companionship style: Boston Marriage and Auntie House ♦ Oppression, domination, inequality and unfairness ♦ Lack of interest in conforming to the social obligation
Having children	♦ Career and/or educational commitment ♦ Personal advancement ♦ Lack of desire to become mother ♦ Marriage as a pre-requisite for having children ♦ Child should have two parents ♦ Anxiety for the welfare of a child ♦ Questioning own capability to care for a child ♦ Difficulties of rearing a child in a difficult environment ♦ Responsibility not prepared to handle ♦ A sacrifice of privacy and personal space ♦ A loss of time, energy and self ♦ Childbearing and childrearing are burdens ♦ Childfree femininity ♦ Dislike the irrevocable state of parenthood

Recognising themselves as complete without a partner is a very important step for sheng nv. This is often difficult for women who hold on to a childhood dream of their weddings which supposes that a woman will never be complete within herself. A critical point of

identity transformation occurs when women who harboured or abandoned these dreams let them go.

Observations made of other relationships shape the experiences of sheng nv and understanding of marriage and singleness. Violence, instability and the inequality of marriage were highlighted by the participants. This creates a sense of both reality and uncertainty; although society states that marriage is the preferred state, they do not see much evidence of this in their lives.

Participants who do not have wedding dreams resisted gender socialisation from an early age. One of the most interesting findings is that nearly half of the participants did not have these fantasies. From early on, these women demonstrate a keen ability to debunk the dominant discourse of 'happily ever after'. This lends credence to the academic critique of socialisation and demonstrates that many of the single women did not comply with dominant discourse. Participants who did not dream of marriages spent their childhoods dreaming of what they wanted to be when they grew up, which challenges the ideology of marriage.

Although past experiences may shape their enacted identity, sheng nv are constructing new paths to adulthood for women that consist of responsibilities and decisions rather than marriage and having children. They are paving the way for social change to allow for other single women to have role models. This is also represented in their perceptions of marital relationships and their parent-child relationships. Participants will not consider an unequal, intimate or marital relationship with another.

They are aware that their enacted identity and the dominant social identity for women are in conflict. Womanhood as defined by marriage and domesticity involves caring for one's husband, parents-in-law and children. These women are moving out of the private, domestic sphere and putting the gendered social identities for women aside, instead they build a conception of self on work for tertiary education and professional work. They side-stepped the potential conflict between social identity and enacted identity by choosing to invest their energy into their career and resist marital and parental ties. Their enacted identity is validated by their successful careers and by maintaining financial independence.

These participants have reinterpreted the dominant social identity by taking it and making it their own, preserving a definition of themselves as independent while maintaining meaningful relationships with others. In the next chapter, single women's relational identity is explored through how they speak about their intimate relationships, relationship with parents and friendship.

Chapter 7 Negotiating relationships and choices

The previous two chapters were concerned with examining the attachment of sheng nv to independence and completeness within themselves. This is indicative of a shift towards autonomy in relation to personal identity and enacted identity; while some believe that sheng nv are confident and do not yearn for connections with other people, this assumption is based on the misconception that female gender identity is determined by their dependent role as a wife, mother and daughter. However, taken together, some may argue that this leads to a conception of self-defined as largely separate from others. I argue this is a mistaken conception. Isolation from others is both a consequence of being single and also a necessity to maintain an independent lifestyle. Single women still desire connections with other people, however.

In this chapter, I provide an answer to the sub-RQ3: 'in what ways do the relationships of a Chinese sheng nv with others contribute to her choice?' Sheng nv discuss the contradiction between being independent and yearning for meaningful relationships. The relational identity is seen as reflective, developmental and self as actively making choices has been considered. It is created through specific relationships with familiar others. In trying to understand the choices people make in relationships and the consequences on their identity, understanding their concerns about care and justice is helpful (Brown, Debold, Tappan, & Gilligan, 2001). Care concerns relate to loving and being loved, listening and being listened to and responding and being responded to. Justice concerns are linked a vision of equality, reciprocity and fairness between individuals. Apprehensions about care and justice reveal "actual or potential experiences of vulnerability in relationship" (Brown et al., 2001, p. 34) . These experiences are an important aspect of understanding the choices sheng nv make, which reflect what they value.

I explore how participants seek meaningful connections while not compromising the values that underpin their identity. In the accounts of their lives, the important role of relationships with lovers, parents and friends becomes clear. I observe that managing and carefully reflecting upon these relationships are important to achieving an autonomous identity. Autonomy is relational and influenced by gender. The choices that women make on meaningful connections and when choosing to be single under the

influence of the relationships that they choose with parents, friends and lovers are important to the evolving composition of single identity and the maintenance of the single lifestyle. How sheng nv speak about their relationships provides an idea of the context in which these choices are formed.

7.1 Identity and intimate relationships

All participants spoke confidently about their relationships, observing how they acted in a relationship, how they judged the potential of the relationship and they considered their own identity within the context of that relationship. When asked if any of her relationships were heading towards marriage, Liao answered:

> *I could feel the pressure from him. When I decided whether or not I should accept his proposal, my cousin asked me how I think of him. 'He's a nice guy, treats me well by cooking, cleaning, taking care of me'. My cousin said a nanny can do the same and I shouldn't make the decision under pressure. I particularly didn't want to be married at that time. I thought he was right, but I felt the relationship confined and pressured me too much.*

In listening to women's accounts of identity, it is clear that sheng nv like Liao consciously avoided relationships that would restrict their sense of self. Liu had difficulty being identified as somebody's girlfriend, for instance:

> *I was a non-identity. I want to be a person in my own right. I hate when people introduce me, instead of saying what my name is, what I do for a living, or if there is a similarity I share with the people who are around, they say I'm someone's girlfriend. Then the focus is not me, but I need to be attached to someone to express my identity. So I feel more of myself when I'm single.*

The relational identity of being someone's girlfriend triggered contradictory feelings for Liu. There is a sense that remaining single allows Liu to maintain a more complete sense of self. The increasing number of single women seems to contradict the strong connection of self-identity to a gendered identity that is associated with a relationship. Sheng nv struggles with a construction of gender that allows for both independence and to relate to another as part of her self.

> *It's hard to have your identity not buried in a relationship. I think one of the reasons why I'm not married is I want to be who I am. It's something that I wanted and for some reason I don't have.*

Yiqiao expressed the sense of contradiction that surfaces when attempting to reconcile the desire for relationships and independence. Worry about losing her inner-self might cause sheng nv to make choices that keep them away from relationships. However, to face the fear of losing a sense of self, sheng nv take different acts when pursuing relationships. For example:

> *I want to give it go as I want to figure out the way of keeping the sense of myself in a relationship and I believe there is a way of doing that. Any time that I'm free, I attend social activities, keeping my eyes open to potentials. Last week, I joined a group called 'All my Friends are in Couple and I'm Single'. (Liling)*

> *We don't actively seek potential partners anymore. As we have enough experiences of having part of 'lost self' in a relationship. It takes too much energy and I'm getting used to [being single] already. For someone in their mid-thirties, the number of available men are limited. And those who I might have feelings for are married and have children already. (Lee)*

Also, the anxiety felt by a new couple is the reverse of when couples separate, when individuals must recreate a single identity and redefine themselves as a separate person. In China, females are expected to marry into their husband's life. Being in a relationship causes the anxiety of losing one's identity to adapt to their new status. Recently, Yili began a relationship that has made her think:

> *I'm starting to consider giving up singlehood, but we're not at that place yet. But just noticing what it's like to be husband and wife and where that's comfortable and where it's not comfortable. His expectation of a wife and my expectation of a husband are totally different and we have to compromise. You know in China, marriage is not just about two people; it concerns two families. You need to get this right as well.*

Yili alluded to the fact of being in a couple brings wonderful and challenging experiences. It is even harder to maintain a sense of self in marital relationships – the desire for independence is conflicted with the desire for an intimate relationship which, as a social norm, complies with traditional gender roles. While women's emancipation and social changes have helped women to have more independence, the cultural obligations of a

wife in China seems to limit both intimacy and autonomy in relationships. Participants reveal that many men that they have dated embrace hegemonic masculinity, which expects a corresponding emphasised femininity from women. When sheng nv are deemed too independent, this is a turn off for many men.

The fear that single women have of losing themselves in a relationship was found in other research (e.g., Adams, 2000; Addie & Brownlow, 2014; Budgeon, 2016; Byrne, 2008a; Davies, 2003; Gordon, 1994). Public opinion is that autonomy is not necessary for women, or that any well-adjusted woman should experience enough independence within the structure of marriage (Morris et al., 2007). For the women they (Addie & Brownlow, 2014; Budgeon, 2016; Davies, 2003; Gordon, 1994) interviewed, marriage felt incompatible with the independence and freedom they valued. Scholars debunk what is believed to be a win-win situation for women in relationships in the dominant discourse, but is experienced quite differently by the women themselves. This difficulty in maintaining their autonomy in relationships causes a deep contradiction.

There were many configurations of relationships discussed among the women, but the vast majority said, even when they are involved in relationships, they still maintain their single lifestyle. For example, Zhangxin said:

> *From inside, I don't think I'm in a relationship and I guess that's why I consider myself single. I've been in relationships and that's interesting, because I never thought about it, but I guess I would still see myself as single. Maybe in others' eyes, they might think we are boyfriend and girlfriend. But from my side, we're not.*

Zhangxin discovers that she maintains her single identity when she is asked to define what it means to be single. Her experience comes from a strong sense of self and autonomy that is common for many participants. Even though some participants long for a relationship, they want one that allows them to maintain the sense of self and not compromise their valued independence.

7.1.1 'Too selective' or 'not settling for less'?

One of the stereotypes applied to 'leftover women' is that they have unrealistic expectations, in particular that they are too picky. However, sheng nv express their

standards as 'not settling for less'. Luoji tried living with someone, but the relationship ended after five months:

> *I guess that's what it is, it's settling. I know somebody said to me recently, 'you're too picky.' I thought, is the implication then that I should settle for something just to not be alone, should settle for less just to not be single, for marriage, or a stable life? Because I've gotten over the hump of being alone. Because I'm independent, so I don't have any hesitation when I end it. It doesn't influence my life. I won't accept any relationship just because I want to be in a relationship. You know, there's a lot of things to do and see or what have you.*

Luoji discussed how others might see her as being too choosy, but putting her desires first is not settling for less. The independence that Luoji enjoys makes it easier for her to end unsatisfying relationships. This statement is also prevalent in Byrne's (2008b) study of Irish single women and Macvarish's (2006) research on British single women, Cherlin's (2009) study of American single women, and Maeda and Hecht's (2012) research on Japanese single women, where they all pointed out that single women know what they want from relationships; therefore, they refuse to settle for less. When I asked her about the unrealistic expectations of sheng nv, Luoji said,

> *People believe that there have to be men and women available that we could partner with if we were just more realistic. But just because we are being realistic, with a strong feeling on what kind of life we want, what kind of people we want to achieve it with and what we want to be. We improve ourselves, so why shouldn't we increase our expectations? You see life from the higher view and don't want to see it from the lower view again. Yes, we lift our expectations compared to what our mother's generation expected. Social reality has also changed.*

These increased expectations of sheng nv may be linked to the development of self that occurs as they live their own lives. Lee supported this idea and identified that divorced women also desire singleness as they transition from being married to single.

> *I think more women are satisfied being single. There are a lot of married women going back to being single now. Many are very happy with the fact that they are single now, and with more divorces, there will be a lot more, whereas I think men would prefer to be married and be with somebody.*

As Gordon et al. (2005) explain, single women who have self-confidence and self-worth have undergone a learning process, but they are still open to relationships based on their expectations for the kind of partnership that they would accept. The ideal relationship is the only one that women would even consider investing time, energy and resources in.

What qualities do sheng nv look for in ideal partners? The list ranges from fun-loving and spontaneous, responsible and communicative to having political and spiritual compatibility. The top five responses among participants were men who are: emotionally supportive (23), financially independent (21), respect mutual independency (20), have a pleasant personality (18) and are intellectually compatible (17). It was evident that intimate relationships were frequently thought about. Concerns about injustice are reflected in these narratives, with equality, reciprocity and fairness between people also required. For the most part, care concerns also feature as women talk about 'loving and being loved, listening and being listened to, and responding and being responded to' (Brown et al., 2001).

For the most part, sheng nv express the need for emotional support. Participants believe this is what true equality starts with: mutual respect and constructive communication. For example, when asked to define what she meant by equality, Xiaozhu said:

> *It is hard to define the equality in relationships. There would be some basic qualities, like being mutually respective, but the equality between each couple is based on their situation, not on some ready-made belief systems, which always need to be figured out during the adjustment period via constructive conversations, not only at the outcome, but also during the process. They need to be emotionally supportive to each other.*

This quotation shows Xiaozhu's understanding of substantive equality, which is an actual equality rather than formal equality, and her concerns about equality of dignity and equality of outcome to achieve real social justice (Fredman & Goldblatt, 2015). Most participants who listed emotional support as a desirable attribute were vague in their descriptions: they wanted partners who were emotionally supportive, emotionally considerate, or emotionally present. When asked about Xiaozhu's bottom-line for a relationship, she replied:

> *I can make the bread and butter, so I need something I don't have. The one thing I won't compromise on is the emotional support and the ability to process and negotiate. Communication in a relationship feels incredibly important to me. I like to talk about what's going on. I really like to talk about feelings. That seems incredibly difficult for men to do and I find that very discouraging.*

Because women are financially independent, they want partners to be emotionally supportive, which goes against traditional gender roles. The dynamic of relationships is no longer one where women carry the emotional burden while the men are responsible for finances. Culturally, feelings are not out in the open and women are told to bury their emotions to maintain relationships (Li, 2011). Not only do they want to be upfront with their emotions, but they also want their husbands to be able to support them and share their own emotional selves.

While unmarried women have become economically independent, most women do not want to financially support a partner in a relationship. Jiwen stated:

> *He doesn't have to be rich, but needs to support himself. When I was a girl, I thought men should take care of women financially. I wouldn't want him to financially depend on me, break my security and lower my living standards. If any relationship leaves me with less than what I have, I don't want to be in it.*

Jiwen describes how she does not want to be with someone who is going to be a drain on her financially. Other participants also echoed her sentiment that a partner does not have to be wealthy but a respectable job is necessary.

Mutual independence is also an important trait as independence is such a vital aspect of their lives. For participants, mutual independence is about feeling equal and allows them to pursue their own interests. Not only it is important for them to be independent in their own lives, but they want a husband who also has a life outside of the relationship. This important characteristic allows them to maintain a certain level of independence within the relationship. This point was developed by several of participants. For example, Bingfang said:

> *I need to find someone who is independent and strong and someone who has a strong enough sense of their own interests and work and feel that my sense of self is not a problem or threat to them. My ex-boyfriend was too clingy and needy.*

Bingfang suggests that if her partner is not strong enough, it may be difficult for her to maintain her sense of self, since that might be seen as a threat. This implies that if some women lose their identity in relationships, it may be partially due to a weakness in men. This was expressed by Shuyu:

> *It's hard for me to maintain my sense of self while being in a relationship. I think it's easier for me to do it in a long distance relationship than from day to day. Because I have my own life, I can't be always there. I think that's why I don't picture myself moving in with a partner. Because it's really easy for me to lose my sense of self and they become all-important, you know. And I have to cook what they like to eat instead of what I like to eat and can't stand watching myself do that. It drives me nuts. So, in some ways, I really prefer being single because I know I'm taking care of me.*

The ideal partnership for Shuyu involves distance. This type of relationship is described as 'encapsulated intimacy' (Anderson, et al., 2000). The advantages of these encapsulated intimacies is that they allow women to experience love, sexuality and companionship in a way that does not threaten their autonomy, integrity, or self-direction (Anderson, et al., 2000). Shuyu has discovered a way of having a relationship that will allow her to maintain her own identity. Her desire is felt by other women who long for their independence while they also yearn for a relationship. The traditional way that relationships are structured have made it difficult for women to keep their sense of selves.

Participants that listed personality traits as important described their desire to have partners who were loyal, responsible, kind, thoughtful and respectful of their parents. Liling talked about a specific character she values when asked about ideal partner:

> *What I really want is someone who's a really decent person. I have been amazed at how bad a lot of guys I've been involved with were. I mean, I just, I don't know, maybe it's just me, but, you know, my female friends are just great. I don't find any of them mean or cruel or uncaring. I mean, some of these guys and the way they treat people is appalling to me.*

Though only an individual response, Liling raises an interesting point of how characteristics that you would assume to be fairly universal in decent human beings are culturally influenced. Intellectual compatibility was fifth place in the listed characteristics. Although several participants defined it as 'well-educated', the majority

did not mention degrees. Zhou confessed that a formal education was never a criterion for her, but this has changed recently:

> *I want somebody who can discuss interesting things with me and who has some depth. A guy that I went out with last fall, it's not like I looked down on him, but I need someone who I can talk to who I don't have to pretend that I'm less intelligent than I am.*

They also acknowledge the difficulties that women can have when they lower their standards. Zhou highlights the importance of intellectual compatibility, as she has previously hidden her intelligence because it was threatening to a partner. Although she does not need to be with a well-educated man, she does want someone who she can have interesting discussions with. This was the sentiment of the majority of the women who listed this trait.

Participants desire support, companionship, compatibility and to feel completely unthreatened in a relationship. On the one hand, some sheng nv want to love and be loved, to give and receive emotional support, indicating the desire for attachment. However, the grave concern about whether or not they will be treated equality, with fairness and reciprocally places conditions on what is desired in relationships. These conditions are required for maintaining an independent personal identity, enacted identity and relational identity simultaneously. However, opportunities for equal relationships are limited and lack of availability of male partners are constraints. Sheng nv's concerns over care and justice suggest that they value their independence. Their observations of the shortfalls of other relationships and their own conditional standards for a fulfilling relationship also influences their choices.

7.2 Messages from parents: supporting singleness?

I asked sheng nv to talk about the messages they receive from parents about marriage and singlehood. Mothers – and on rare occasions fathers too – spoke about an alternative path to self-sufficiency and independence for their daughters, encouraging them to postpone marriage. Educational opportunities, the importance of establishing a career and gaining financial independence were prioritised over marriage.

Jiwen can remember advice given to her on how to be self-sufficient, particularly in achieving economic independence, but was also warned of the loneliness of the single life. She reminisced how her mother stressed the importance of financial independence for women:

> *There are two things she said to me. Firstly, if you only have one thing in life and that is to be independent, in particular economic independence and that definitely needs to be achieved from your education and professional work [and secondly] if you want to spend the life on your own, she said, it could be lonely but I should not be afraid of that.*

This is opposite to the conventional view of parents as highly normative and encouraging daughters to marry and have children. In particular, it is against the idea Wei (2011) argues that mothers have conservative beliefs about socialising daughters into patriarchal roles, beliefs and behaviours. The majority of participants were born in the 1980s and their parents came of age under the Cultural Revolution of 1966–1976, during the Maoist socialist era where they lacked educational opportunities. It is therefore understandable that they gave their daughters the best education that they could afford, by putting them through university and postgraduate studies, or even overseas studies at great expense. In the reform era, many middle-aged mothers were forced to undergo early retirement from state firms and could not find decent jobs in foreign or joint firms under the new meritocratic system because of their lack of education and skills (Liu & Zuo, 2011).

Participants told me that their mothers realised that only strong academic credentials could ensure the success of their children and it is important to prepare daughters for a more independent and self-sufficient lifestyle, more so than marriage and motherhood can guarantee. The mothers of sheng nv were keenly aware of the constraints of marriage. Wei shared her mother's perspectives:

> *My mum told me that marriage at her time is no choice, everybody went for it and all warfare was linked with marriage. Come back home from work, cook a meal from the family day by day, clean the dishes, do the housework, have sex when he wanted. She doesn't want the same thing happen to me. It's not mainly about marriage – it's about what the two people do in a marriage. She doesn't want that to happen to me. But when we talk about single life, there was not much useful suggestion I can get from my mum.*

A sheng nv does not usually have the practical assistance on how to enter and live a single life. Where marriage is a ritualised institution with a certain cultural values predetermined before the social changes brought on by the open-up policy and one-child policy, being single does not have similar rituals or road maps. Although sheng nv had their predecessors who paved the way in education or work experience, they do not have the same models as women entering marriage. Sheng nv lack what Strauss (2017) calls the coaching experience. Sheng nv enter uncharted grounds without such guidance and explanation, but construct their life from their own experiences and other role models. For example, when asked what kind of influence Marui's mother had on her, she explained:

> *My mum and my grandma are my role models. They built all these positive characteristics and the strong mind I have. But they still sometimes joke about my status, but it's full of positive energy. Yesterday, we went to a supermarket. I remembered to buy a new eye protecting lamp. When I put one in the trolley, mum said loudly 'Good, it helps you to turn your eyes up and open for a good son-in-law […] But first, you need to have enough money to buy the lamp you fancy and that may help to find a new direction, or whatever you like.'*

Economic independence and career opportunities presented an alternative to marriage and motherhood or, at the very least, perceived by parents as an option in the interim. In addition to the typical feminine characteristics, parents also encourage features traditionally associated with men, including ambitiousness, independence and adventure.

By motivating daughters to achieve financial independence, the old view of marriage as a form of social organisation that provides economic protection for their daughters becomes blurred. For example, Wangxi quoted her mother's question:

> *'What if you don't have anyone to take care of you when you get old? When you are ill, unlike what your dad did to me, you don't even have someone to send you to the hospital.' Well I know she said that because she worries about me, but my mother was treated so poorly by my grandparents that I was wondering why she still thinks that way. I would say that is one of the reasons I remain single.*

Marriage is considered as a means of transferring obligations of caregiving from parents to husbands (Wu, 2004). This is far from the reality, however. Fifty-eight percent of older

women take care of their husbands when they are ill, followed by their daughter-in-law's, sons and daughters. When older women need looking after, daughters-in-law account for 46 percent, followed by sons, daughters and then husbands (State Statistical Bureau (SSB), 2014). Instead of being the care-recipients, women in marriage mainly act as care-givers.

With successes including educational achievement and economic independence, parents are also picky. Liyan said that her mother would like to see her settle down, but none of her boyfriends met her mother's standards. Her mother had a big influence on her life, pushing her to start her own business. Her parents' marriage was unhappy and her mother supported her decision to break off her engagement because:

> *My mom knew what it's like to have a bad marriage and didn't want me to experience the same thing because she believes that I deserve better. She would never want me to be married when things are not 100% right.*

Participants also thanked their parents for showing their support of their single lifestyle. When asked whether her parents felt any pressure brought by her unmarried status, Yaqin described her parents as supporting her choice:

> *My parents were stressed out at first, but they said they learned to not care about it. I remember my mum said to me that I don't have to do it for them, they're only concerned about my future happiness. They want me to live the life I like. She told me 'give it careful and deliberate consideration and you should not be afraid of being single.' I think she uses that to both support and protect me from my status. I don't need to feel guilty if I'm not married. It is the same case for other single friends. With the support from parents, it is easier being single now.*

The pressure on parents is consistent with Wu's (2004) and Meada's (2008) research on Taiwanese and Japanese unmarried/single women. It also happens in Korea, where if a woman is not married, it is because her parents have failed to find their daughter a husband, which is seen as their obligation (Yang & Rosenblant, 2001). Yaqin's mother may be influenced by the success of her own marriage, which Yaqin recalls as being distant. Xiaoche does not see her singleness as an issue in her large family:

> *In my generation, nobody is married before twenty-seven. There's only one grandchild out of four cousins...I think everybody sort of wanted to have adventures and do things on their own before settling down.*

For Xiaoche, making memories and having the freedom to do so was more important than looking for a partner to settle down with. Her family allows for single members to still have a role at family functions, which leads to a more positive construction of herself as a single woman. Such examples illustrate the importance of permission givers, someone close to a single woman who encourages her to do what makes her happy. This permission comes into two forms: overt and covert. Overt permission is usually verbalised and is direct and clear, telling women that singleness is acceptable. Covert permission is communicated indirectly and sheng nv need to read between the lines; even though it is sometimes not conveyed frankly, the message is clear.

Although participants did not extensively discuss concerns about their family members, the most noteworthy finding is the lack of discussion about their fathers' involvement. Most sheng nv described their mothers' engagement exclusively. Unlike mothers, who played a pivotal role in participants' acceptance of their own singlehood, fathers are notably absent. When asked whether her father agreed with or supported her singleness, Liao said:

> *No, my dad never intentionally talks about my unmarried status or persuades me into marriage, even though I always needed my dad's thoughts on big decisions like which university to study at, which company I should apply for, what major should I choose. But I never asked him about this nor did he talk about this. I think he trusts me as always. Well, sometimes he speaks on behalf of my mum, but he always adds one more sentence at the end of his arguments: 'that's what your mum asks me to say, not me'.*

Her father's inability to express his feelings about his daughter's singlehood is either covert permission, or a consequence of the traditional and cultural parenting role divisions of a strict father and understanding mother. Chinese fatherhood, rooted in Confucianism (Ho, 1994), assumes a strict and disciplinarian role. Fathers are culturally conditioned to not show affection and emotion openly so that the educational goals of children were not affected (Ishii-Kuntz, 2015). A study conducted by Retherford et al. (2001) find that a group of women whose fathers engaged in housework and raising children had a higher likelihood of getting married in their twenties. It indicates that single women whose fathers were not involved in their relationship choices may have a detrimental influence on their view of marriage.

However, the absence of fathers' concerns on their daughter's singleness may also be seen as a representation of the decline of patriarchal authority and power in Chinese society. It shows progress regarding the deeply entrenched Confuscian family values in which "men play a more authoritative role in the inter-generational relationships" (Zheng, 2016, p. 105) has been subverted. The silence of fathers is regarded as implicit support. The role of single women in contemporary Chinese families after the implementation of the one-child policy in 1978 has shifted (Fong, 2004). The transitional model of fatherhood between old and modern times also demonstrates a shift where fathers are troubled by the contradiction between the 'authoritarian model' of fatherhood and the "emergent desire within them for closeness and intimacy with their children" (Kwok-bun, 2012, p. 308). Such observations also point to a reversal of power in marital relationships, where the mother often has the upper hand in decision making.

7.2.1 Negotiating the parental relationship

In this study, parental relationships are observed from the viewpoint of the daughters. There were three types of responses to questions about the relationship with their biological parents. These were: sheng nv continue to nurture their bond with their parents, expressing feelings of love and comfort when talking about them; sheng nv maintain contact and provide emotional and practical assistance to parents in need, speaking in terms of obligation and responsibility; or sheng nv live out their lives largely separate from their parents. Some parents offer support for the maintenance of their daughter's single lifestyle and consequentially her identity, while others ignore it. Here I provide examples of sheng nv's negotiated responses to these relationships.

Most women talked about their parents in loving and close terms. Continued attachment to one's biological family can be regarded as a sign of delayed development or immaturity, particularly if one has failed to set up a family home of one's own. Some studies (e.g., Gordon et al., 2005; Reynolds, 2008; Rosenberger, 2007) have identified leaving the parental home and/or the emotional separation from parents as key developmental tasks that single women must reconcile in order to prove to others that they have attained adulthood. Alternative framework for adult development questions the assumption that separation from parents is equivalent to arriving at maturity and individual autonomy (Cohen, Kasen, Chen, Hartmark, & Gordon, 2003). In listening to

participants speak about their good relationships with parents, it is evident that women receive comfort, support, attention, security, protection and respect for their lifestyle choices. In return, sheng nv look after and care about their parents. For example, Malin lives with her parents and described their relationship as follows:

> *I love them so much. It's not just somewhere to live, but my home. My parents support all my decisions. They are wonderful and very important to me. They are my only blood relations as the only child. It's a very loving environment, very easy going, you feel relaxed. They don't intervene, but you know they're concerned about you all of the time. Dad always cooks my favourite dishes. I am so spoilt. Similarly, I'm their 'small cotton padded jacket'. I think that's important to them too.*

All the women that live in the parental home provide care for their parents. Others not living with their parents also speak about their strong attachment, specifically as a source of emotional support. In this context, when parents make demands on participants' time, women see it as unalterable principle. I found no evidence that women who spoke with love and affection about their parents, those who continued to live in their parents' home, or who willingly provided care (not out of a sense of obligation) were any less independent. Participants spoke about these relationships in reciprocal terms and the importance of preserving a loving bond with them. Yili considered her mother as her best friend:

> *It's not just about respect or devotion. It's not a top-down relationship between us. Maybe it was when I was young it was because I needed to learn. But when I grew up, it was more of a mutual relationship. I often regard my mum as my best friend.*

Although Giorgio (2002) usefully distinguishes the variations in the meaning of the term 'very close' when applied to mother/daughter relationships, I suggest that sheng nv's continued mutual attachment to parents is a resolution for the desire for a relationship that does not compromise single identity. Parents and daughters who nurture each other extend a form of familism into adulthood that indirectly supports the single lifestyle and women's relational identity as single. It is also a preference for retired parents to stay with their only child. In this case, a close relationship to the biological family is an important element in maintaining single identity It is hardly surprising that women continue to support these relationships as the relationship sheng nv have with their parents is few of the relationships that they are not perceived as 'others'.

Friedman (2003) argues that some social relationships are supportive of autonomy and should therefore be nurtured, while others are destructive and should be abandoned. Deferring to her rationale for a moment, it makes sense that the parent-child relationship by sheng nv serves to maintain their autonomous identity. Likewise, maintaining parental relationships that do not restrict daughters' choices, which create opportunities for independent living while providing meaningful human connection, is an example of choosing a social relationship that promotes the realisation of autonomy. In her study, Gordon (1994), refers to the construction of a safety net of important people who single women need to maintain their independence. She suggests that the concept of interdependence captures women's attempt to move beyond dichotomies of independence/dependence. For her, "interdependence means taking others into account: not being an other" (Gordon, 1994, p. 176). In this study, sheng nv exercise interdependence in choosing relationships that sustain single identity.

The second response is linked to the parental relationship in terms of responsibility and obligation. Zhou gave up her fulltime job and income to care for her father in her own home. When asked why she did that, her explanation was succinct:

> *I had a one-year gap, quit my job to take care of my dad during an operation and rehabilitation. He had a serious fracture and I brought him to Beijing to receive the treatment from the best specialised hospital. I believe that anybody has a duty to their parents. During this time, I definitely should be and must be with him, for sure.*

The old saying is to 'bring up sons to support parents in old age', but due to the one-child policy, daughters must fill in this role. Over 64% of the Chinese prefer to live with their children (SSB, 2010). It is difficult for the Chinese to accept the idea of living in nursing homes for both the parents and their children. Putting parents in a nursing home is effectively turning one's back on their family. Nursing homes are a Western idea, which is built on the spirit of contract, commitment and standardising a legal system which Chinese distrust (Wang, 2006). Clan, consanguinity and human relationships are the foundations of Chinese culture and society, so putting parents in a nursing home is abandoning these fundamental values.

The pension security system in China is deficient, as there are contradictions between local laws and the regulations of one place to another (Wang, 2006). Under the current

endowment insurance system, the insurance expenses of personnel working in government are covered by national finance at an average rate of more than 80%. In contrast, others not only need to pay their own pension, but have an insurance rate of less than 50% on average. The different system arrangements are not only unfair, but cannot adapt to societal changes due to globalisation and marketisation. Older adults may lose trust in the Chinese pension system and their single daughter is the only security for them to rely upon.

Caring obligations can be regarded as oppositional to autonomy. However, Ruddick (2014) has outlined the possibilities for retaining female autonomy within caring relationships, arguing for greater visibility of maternal practices which "insist that the dominant values are unacceptable and need not be accepted" (p. 595). Some women may give up their lifestyle to engage in a caring relationship on the basis that duty and obligation are important values and practices in relational identity. Caring is not necessarily only an outcome of female socialisation, convention or coercion, but can facilitate single identity.

The third response concerns women who have reduced familial relationships to a routine. Participants maintained an ongoing commitment to their parents, even when the relationship was based on poor communication, little revelation about their private lives and ritualised contact. This commitment involved a reassessment of the bond with parents, some participants seeking more open, more honest relationships with parents. When Liuqian was asked about her relationship with her parents, she told me she wants to tell them that she neither wants to be married nor have children, but fears their disappointment.

> *The family perceive me as a successful independent woman, doing well in my career and also helping other cousins, sitting up there on a pedestal. I don't want to disappoint them. Being held in high regard has stopped me from doing some things that I would have liked to have done for years. I believe I would come down in their estimation.*

Now, however, she said that she wants to be herself and challenges the institution of marriage and the concept of motherhood:

> *I think about going back home and telling them. That is one of my stumbling blocks, even at the moment. I believe when the time is right*

> *I will do it. Talking to people about no marriage with no children, this is the one aspect of me that I would like to tell them about. I would like to tell them the number of reasons why I don't want marriage or children.*

Wanting to be acknowledged and supported in one's lifestyle choices by parents is expressed throughout many of the interviews. Yiqiao is more open about the small details of her life with her parents. Previously, she said, she offered a sanitised version of her life to them, revealing less information about herself or presenting an image of herself as a care-free, with lots of friends and a man somewhere in the background. Now she has begun to give them a full version of her life where she is self-determining and not intentionally seeking a relationship with a man. Yiqiao prefers to travel alone, but she could not tell her parents, or even her friends, as they would perceive her as a lonely, single woman:

> *I just couldn't say it to my parents as they would have been very worried about me and people at work would say 'pitiful.' This year, I was actually stronger about saying that I went off to Switzerland on my own and people did accept this.*

In their relationships with their parents, sheng nv are continually negotiating their attachment with others and their own identity. This attachment is mediated by the extent to which single identity can be expressed and maintained. Two aspects of familism impact on their relational identity: 'kin-keeping' familism, or caring for relatives, largely complements single identity. However, some women sought to redefine themselves to others in the context of heterosexual familism, rejecting representations of themselves as a lonely 'leftover woman'.

7.3 The importance of friends

Many single studies have focused on the vital importance of friends and friendship networks in supporting the single lifestyle (e.g., Cherlin, 2009; Gordon et al., 2005). Bleske-Rechek and Lighthall (2010) have argued that women's friendships influence their identities and transformative potential, offering "an alternative definition of identity – or at least one which enables women to critique the dominant definition of themselves as 'the Other" (p. 117). Friends meet personal needs, offer one-to-one companionship. Friends bring sheng nv into the company of a wider network of others.

Friends can also provide ideological support for an alternative value system, sustaining the choice to be unmarried.

> *I've established a really good network. Not just knowing a vast number of people, but some solid people that I can count on. I have sort of a good network through my job and other communities. For me, it's key for someone who's single to have. (Weiqian)*

> *You've got some friends and you may not have contacted each other for a long time, but you know, when you need them, just a call and they will be right there for you. I would do the same for them for sure. (Bingfang)*

> *I used to think at certain age, it would be pretty hard to find new friends. But I was wrong. It's not hard at all if you two have same interests or appreciate each other's personality. Last week, when I applied for a UK Visa, I met a stranger in the lobby and just had a random chat. Then we spent the rest of the day together and planned to combine our trip to UK together. Amazing, huh? (Yiqiao)*

Participants underlined the significance of their friendships and were clear about their expectations of friends and what they are prepared to offer in a friendship. Reciprocity in friendships was a topic or concern. Friends commonly included other singles, married women and occasionally married men. I was surprised by the frequency that sheng nv nominated siblings and relatives as close or 'best friends', a pattern observed in ascriptive societies according to Marcus (2009). When Laila was asked about being the only child, she said:

> *Even though I don't have any siblings, my cousins to me are siblings. Even though we don't live in the same city, we are so close. They are my best friends. Better than best friends, as you can count them when it might a bit embarrassing to ask for a friend's help.*

However, when talking about the kind of friend that they themselves were, sheng nv's expectations of friendship and family ties were not spoken about. In general, friendships and family ties were valued differently: more idealistic and emotional expectations were invested in familial relationships and fewer practical or emotional demands were made of friends.

Marcus (2009) notes that despite extensive research on theorising friendship and studies on single women's friendships in particular, little has been revealed about the

experience of singleness itself, or whether the deviant status of being single has an impact on friendship patterns. Interestingly, in this study, most participants rarely discussed their singleness with each other and almost never with married female friends. Though they listened to married women's stories concerning husbands, children and extended family, this was not reciprocated with stories told of the impact of the absence of these relationships in single women's lives. When asked why Shuyu does not talk to her married friends about her singleness, she said:

> *I never really feel confused about my singlehood. So I don't think I need this type of help. Because it's not an issue, it's my life and I just share what's happened recently to me. Sometimes it might seem as showing off to them. We listen to their stories, I can provide useful solutions as an outsider, that's why they need our opinions.*

Participants said that this interview was one of the few occasions where they spoke at length about being a single woman in a society which defined womanhood in terms of social and institutionalised relationships with others. Wei said that she does not speak about being single with friends. Though she has two good friends who she trusts, she does not speak about this aspect of her life:

> *I want to be really low key. There is no need to share my personal life with others, it may become gossip material for some. People don't know the real me. I am not one of those people who would go out and yell my life story to all.*

If one understands friendship as a social and cultural construction which validates identities, which is based on similarity, intimacy and maintaining the status quo (Marcus, 2009), the difficulty of speaking about being different becomes apparent. Perhaps the transformative potential of female friendships is the key to breaking such silence. Despite the reservations observed among friends about being single, it is evident that friendships were significant and meaningful to sheng nv as it provides intimacy and social opportunities. They were prepared to invest a lot of time in maintaining their friendships, recognising that these were valued relationships which could not be easily replaced. Luoji gives an analogy to forming friendships:

> *It's like a commute on a bus, people hop on and off on the same bus you take and you also hop on and hop off different buses. The time that both of you are on the same bus is friendship. You may be headed in*

> *different directions, but you share the distance between the two bus stops. It's about similarity we have.*

Participants know friendships may change as interests diverge, such as when other women marry and have less time or resources for friendship. In discussing the importance of having similar experiences, Marcus (2009) notes:

> Implicit in the notion of such similarity as an important element in friendship lies the idea that friendships are likely to be differentially available to women who are in someway 'out of synch' with the normal lifestyle and/or with the wider social context. (p. 127)

In this study, commitment to friendship was felt to be vital, but friends cannot fulfil all expectations, needs and desires; the satisfaction with one's life must come from themselves. Compared to the expectations of ideal, intimate/sexual or familial relationships, actual friendships are more limited. Participants preferred single friends as they have more spare time and flexibility. There are certain times that they do not contact their married friends – usually on weekends. When asked about her married friends, Bingfang discussed the differences that she sees in her friendships:

> *Early on Sunday morning, I called a friend who's single because I guessed she should be free. But I wouldn't call any of my married friends early on a weekend morning as I know that they're probably busy or with their partner doing something. But I know that single friends like to have somebody be in contact with them and I do too.*

This is a fascinating discussion of the construction of time with single women as opposed to married women. Connecting with her friends through their singleness is an important act of solidarity for Bingfang. Weiqian noticed the difference in the relationship she has with single friends compared to married ones:

> *Single female friends have more time. They're more aware of the weight and importance that friendships carry because they aren't falling back on a marriage. We have more in common. There's just a qualitative shift that people do when they're in a marriage or having a family, where it takes the priority.*

Apart from the availability of single friends, it seems that either because friends have similar characteristics which encourage them to remain single, or their similar single lifestyles, this provides mutual understanding. It points to one of the areas where a

single identity draws women together in solidarity, leading to a common identity. When friends of single women get married, their friendships are tested. Commonality is one of the important factors for friendship (Güroğlu, Van Lieshout, Haselager, & Scholte, 2007). Availability or approachability is argued to be vital to satisfaction with a best friend among other essential qualities, such as open-mindedness and good communication skills (Linden-Andersen, Markiewicz, & Doyle, 2009).

Some participants said that it is always uncomfortable being with their married friends, as their marriage is also a constant reminder of an opposite identity and the social norm. When asked about the difference between her friends, Malin explained:

> *Singleness sometimes becomes a topic and we are not interested in that. Of course we have some friends who raise it to support us. But surprisingly, we have some friends who judge it. I went to Hangzhou last month to have a dinner with an old friend. She told me I'm all good in all aspects apart from being single, I need to be fast as I'm getting older and I need a man to help me out. What can I say?*

Participants found it surprising that some married friends judged them, especially as they perceived their friends to be progressive in other aspects of social life. This reaffirms the ways singlism, as defined by DePaulo (2007), continues to be a form of marginalisation that goes unnoticed within society, particularly by people who are living a conventional and privileged lifestyle. In some research (e.g., Sharp & Ganong, 2011; Simpson, 2016), single women felt discounted by their married friends. However, my participants did not report being left out; instead, they were the ones who actively isolated themselves from some married friends.

Though most participants invested time and energy in friendships, they suggested that friends should not be relied upon entirely as a source of support, advice, or even companionship. How women talked about this issue was interesting. It was not that friends themselves were unreliable, but that women's self-reliance was occasionally put under pressure throughout the friendship. Participants talked about the necessity of not being too dependent on these relationships.

7.4 Summary

This chapter investigated the findings relating to the sub RQ3, in what ways do the relationships of a Chinese sheng nv with others contribute to her choice? I have detailed how participants spoke about their relationships with their intimate partners, parents and friends in terms of the impact of these relationships on their relational identity and how single women respond to these relationships. Participants' negotiation tactics and choices relating to intimate relationships, parental relationships and friendships can be seen in the table 6 below:

Table 6. Negotiating relationships

Relationships	Negotiation & choices
Identity & intimate relationships	♦ Avoiding relationships constraints that confine independence
Realistic expectations	♦ Remaining single maintains solid sense of self ♦ Not settling for less ♦ Ideal partner: a. Emotionally supportive (mutual respect & constructive communication) b. Financially independent c. Share mutual independence d. Pleasant personality e. Intellectually compatible
Message from mothers	♦ Support singleness – postpone marriage ♦ Alternatives (self-sufficiency & independence) via education and career development ♦ Marriage provides economic protection & care ♦ Picky – settle for 'good enough' ♦ Affirming singleness: overt/covert permission ♦ Lack of fathers' presence
Connection to parents	♦ Nurture parental relationship via love and comfort ♦ Responsibility/obligation: maintain contact and provide emotional/practical assistance ♦ Live largely separate from parents, routine form of contact – become more open
Importance of friends	♦ Personal needs & companionship ♦ Wider social network ♦ Ideological support ♦ Rarely discuss singleness with friends ♦ Preferred single friends: a. Availability b. Flexibility c. Similarity d. Approachability

The analysis of the themes of care and justice reveals the difficulties women have in their relationships with others and the solutions they have for meaningful connections.

I conceptualised care concerns in terms of attachment/separation, while justice concerns are reflected in the equality/inequality dimensions of relationships. Women seek meaningful connection with others and have to work to achieve these while not compromising the values that underpin their single identity. When considering how sheng nv speak about their relationships on their sense of themselves as single women, a number of points were made. Participants reported that their parents spoke about alternative options to marriage and motherhood for their daughters, stressing the importance of education and career to achieve financial independence. This sent the clear message that marriage was no longer necessary for economic survival and that women do not have to be economically dependent within a marriage.

Even though single women grow up surrounded by conventional opinions of marriage and motherhood, as the first and only generation of the one-child policy, they consider alternative lifestyles and relational identity based on valuing their independence. This independence is based on economic self-sufficiency, self-reliance, competency to live as a single person and in choosing relationships that facilitate, rather than obstruct, the single lifestyle. The international women's movement, legal changes and educational and professional opportunities have helped to shape the possibility of negotiation and to make their own choices.

Participants have made personal choices to ensure that their independence would not be compromised. These included:

- Maintaining a view of single identity that is not related to either the presence or absence of intimate relationships;
- Choosing intimate relationships that provided greater contentment with single identity
- Choosing intimate relationships that did not compromise independence & sense of self
- Nurturing parental relationships that recognised, supported and validated singleness
- Moving away from those who were critical and hostile to singleness
- Committing to being more open about their single lifestyles
- Seeking to make singleness more visible
- Looking after much needed friendships, not overburdening them

In tandem with women's rejection of mother/child and marital relationships as discussed in the previous chapter, this indicates that choice of relationships is a crucial

aspect in composing and maintaining single identity. It is evident from this study that relational identity can be composed in other spheres and not only in intimate, dyadic relationships. This is observable in the way that sheng nv negotiate between their desire for attachment and their desire for independence. The relationship choices that sheng nv make about significant others, family and friends reveal this process of negotiation more than the presence and absence of certain kinds of relationships.

For sheng nv in this study, their understanding includes relational autonomy as responding to the needs of others, as reflexivity, as the ability to act upon one's own beliefs and as control over life plans. Their choice of lifestyle is indicative of the capacity of being autonomous. The choices fit with what sheng nv value and with their idea of themselves as competent, self-reliant individuals trying various methods to exert control over their lives. Identity is therefore realised and made more secure through the practice of making these autonomous choices. The act of confronting conventional ideas about womanhood and remaking them is discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 8 Conceptualising 'single' identity

This chapter argues that sheng nv are actively engaged in composing identities that move beyond the realm of marriage and motherhood and are instead based on the experience of being single. In doing so, single women are actively challenging and transcending patriarchal constructions of Chinese womanhood. Identity for these women is not defined by their relationship to others as a wife, mother or daughter, but rather by themselves and their chosen relationships with others. This is a composition of self that represents a paradigmatic shift in the role of Chinese women from being a passive and dependent individual with limited control over the direction of their lives to an active agent who is autonomous and connected to others (not just romantically). In this chapter, I demonstrate that by virtue of their unconventional position in a familistic society, new forms of womanhood are created in the single identity that sheng nv have formed.

The communal identity frame is evident in the individual's concept of the self, in self-awareness, self-behaviour and self-knowledge, in the individual's interactions, their capacity to discuss experiences and in the exercise of reflexivity. Most aspects of these elements have been discussed in the previous chapters in terms of personal, enactment and relational frames. Sheng nv's understanding of the meaning of singlehood, valuing singleness as a way of life and their experience of confronting and responding to stigma are detailed in chapter five. In chapter six, gender construction and ambivalence towards singlehood, marriage and motherhood reveal the complexities of composing and maintaining an identity as the 'other'. In addition to this, the conflict between emphasised femininity, women's own experiences and the resolutions women make as they learned how to be a sheng nv within the context of familism relating to enactment identity are discussed. In chapter seven, the relational identity is investigated through intimate relationships, parental relationships and friendships as women seek to transcend relationships established by the traditional family unit. The conflict between the personal and relational identity is explored as are the resolutions that women make in the context of caring for families, all while attempting to preserve their independence and maintaining meaningful human connections with others. The communal identity acts as a reconciliation of these conflicts and gaps. It concentrates on how a group of

individuals shares or constructs an identity. Compared to the three previous research chapters, this chapter moves from how a sheng nv defines her singlehood, seeks her completeness, and negotiates her relationship with partners, parents, and friends to sheng nv as a joint force that create new forms of womanhood based on the single identity that they have formed.

The main focus of this chapter is to examine and conceptualise individual identity as a locus of changing social identity. I present a categorical analysis of sheng nv's engagement with the dominant social identity for women, which is based on marriage and motherhood. The analysis shows that there is resistance from single women who seek to make singleness an acceptable social identity. In doing so, single women challenge dominant social identities for all Chinese women.

8.1 The potential for identity transformation

A Chinese sheng nv has to deal with two common views: the patriarchal conception of womanhood as defined through marriage and motherhood and the conception of singleness as going against the patriarchal order. Gender relations are fundamentally challenged by single women's valuation on independence. Single women are confronted with the challenge of composing their identity, negotiating the ambivalence between independence and traditional roles.

In a discussion of the concepts of dominant womanhood in China, Li (2005) is interested in establishing whether new forms of womanhood exist, combining an analysis based on macro-level socio-economic changes and the effects of self-awareness on Chinese women's identities at a communal, local and individual level. She (Li, 2005) rejects a concept of womanhood based on individual autonomy in isolation, suggesting that new forms of womanhood may be discovered by using "a concept of personhood which leaves open the possibility that the self may be defined in and through relationships with others…"(p. 103). The framework of Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) based on the personal, enactment, relational and communal frames of identity composition, was used in this research and highlights the importance of relationships in interaction with others. It is argued that the experiences or consequences of those relationships promote

reflexivity and allow for greater self-awareness, self-knowledge and changes in self-conception.

One of the ideas consistent throughout the research is that because single women negotiate stigma on a daily basis, and because of their marginal position, they are interested in their single identity and in women's social identities generally. I argue that sheng nv autonomously choose their relationships, seeking a meaningful connection with others that does not comply with the dominant ideology of Chinese social relations around marriage and motherhood. In choosing relationships with others, unmarried women define themselves, an act which constitutes a new form of womanhood. Valued connections with family and friends and intimate connection with lovers are achieved without marriage and motherhood. At the same time, independence is preserved. Sheng nv work to achieve a form of autonomy which is highly relational, but also allows for self-determination as opposed to being defined by others.

Li (2005) names three newly emerged aspects of womanhood in contemporary Chinese society: the domestic feminists, the degendered workers and the acceptance of difference. She describes them as follows:

> Implicit in the idea of the domestic feminists is a definition of womanhood in terms of empowerment and connection in a context where women's ideas of themselves include, but transcend, the familial. The concept of the degendered workers implies that men and women are all the same in terms of work. The acceptance of 'difference' implies that women can and will vary in their needs and desires and that this diversity is an enriching manifestation of the reality of womanhood. It accepts that women's agency is legitimate, even when it is not controlled by individual men, whether husbands or employers or by patriarchal forces within the area of paid employment or the state. (p. 103)

The latter concept of womanhood is subversive. There are strong echoes of these definitions in the interviewed women's concept of themselves, who express their identity as one that preserves familial relationships, who seek to achieve success and self-satisfaction through work and have a desire for tolerance and diversity. However, they are also aware of the limitations placed on change. This is evident not only in family and social expectations that women marry and have children, but also in women's observations that, despite working hard and having successful careers, the workplace

remains highly gendered and is not advantageous to women. Women commented that assuming otherwise is self-deception.

As observed from participants' accounts, sheng nv are also conscious of the conventional social identities for women, influencing the idea of what it means to be a woman. Participants struggle with these constraints, but in recognising what they value, single women have developed a new form of womanhood that transcends the familial and hegemonic masculinity/emphasised femininity relationship. This new sense of womanhood desires connections and independence, equality and diversity, and is centred on being single, but stems from being the 'other'.

I present a categorical analysis of sheng nv's engagement with the dominant social identity for women and their relationship with the communal identity related to single identity. This analysis demonstrates that not only is there continuous and increasing resistance among sheng nv, but that this has transformative potential, presenting singleness as a different – but entirely acceptable – social identity for women.

8.2 Locating unmarried women – a categorical view

Following Stein's (1981) category of the single status, I develop a three-dimension typology to identify links between unmarried women's identities, their conceptions of womanhood and to locate their resistance. Initial sociological attempts at understanding the single life revolved around the development of categories and typologies. Stein (1981) develops a fourfold typology of the single status (see the table 7 below) based on the concept of voluntariness and the degree of permenancy. This typology is often cited as it reports the heterogeneity of the single population (e.g., Levy Simon, 1987; Gordon, 1994; Taylor, 2011). It is assumed that the four categories identify the extent to which single people choose to be single and whether their perception of their status is temporary or permanent.

Table 7. Stein's (1981) typology of single status

	Voluntary	Involuntary
Temporary	Those open to but not looking for marriage	Those actively seeking mates Those who were not interested but are now looking
Permanent	Those choosing to be single Those who oppose marriage Members of religious orders	Those wanted to re/marry, but have not found a mate, and have accepted singleness as probable life status Persons with physical or psychological impairment

In Stein's (1981) sample of 60 people, which included women and men, single parents, windowers, divorcees, separated and unmarried individuals, only three were unmarried women. As such, this research aims to provide a more detailed and insightful typology for Chinese unmarried women. In order to distinguish these women's placement vis-à-vis new forms of womanhood, I developed a typology based on three dimensions: their perception of the approved, dominant social identity; the extent to which singleness has informed their identity; and whether singleness is temporary or stable.

In the construction of the typology, the dominant identity for Chinese women, being an ideological construction, belongs mainly to the realm of social identities. Attachment to the single life, despite the social stigma, I assigned to the realm of personal, enactment, relational and communal identity. This categorical analysis enabled me to identify links between unmarried women's identities, their conceptions of womanhood and to locate their resistance.

Table 8. Categorization of sheng nv

Category	Characteristics	Sample
Acceptor	♦ Singleness is an acceptable location. ♦ Aware of singles as the 'other' ♦ Explaining singleness as fate/destiny ♦ Ambivalent about single identity ♦ Support of the institution of marriage ♦ Critical of married women ♦ Desire to be a mother	Temporary: Lijia, Liling Stable: Liyan, Shuyu, Lee
Resistor	♦ Critical of gender roles ♦ Aware that singleness is an unconventional role ♦ Acknowledge single stigma ♦ Considering being a single mother ♦ Singleness is a viable alternative ♦ Content to be single (comfortable) ♦ Resolve negative aspects of singleness ♦ Identity informed by being single ♦ Independence is valued ♦ Thought about remaining unmarried permanently ♦ Desire to make singleness more visible ♦ Emphasis on economic independence ♦ Seek equality in relationships ♦ Knowledge of self is sought and valued	Temporary: Xiaoche, Jiwen, Liao, Wangxi, Luoji, Wei, Yiqiao, Stable: Xiong, Yili, Fangfei, Malin, Xiaozhu, Yaqin
Rebel	♦ Content with the single life ♦ Do not want to marry. ♦ Reject all categorisations of women ♦ Composing the self is emphasised. ♦ Desire to establish other ways of being a woman ♦ Contest constructions of femininity ♦ Challenge the hierarchy of relationships ♦ Require equality in relationships ♦ Women are understood as individuals ♦ Desire to achieve single autonomy as a lifestyle ♦ Importance of self-reliance ♦ Tolerant of other lifestyle choices	Temporary: Laila, Weiqian Stable: Liu, Zhou, Bingfang, Marui, Ting, Liuqian

Least Evidence of Resistance

Most Evidence of Resistance

The women are assigned to a category based on whether they accept or reject the stereotype of marriage and motherhood as the dominant social identity or reject their single identity. The prevalence of a stereotype of a particular social identity for women is important to assess: stereotypes occur in public and private spaces, forcing unmarried women to consider the dominant viewpoint and their position, image and distance from/proximity to this. The second dimension relates to the attachment to the single identity. Following Stein (with slight revisions), I placed a classification on attachment to single identity by characterising it as either temporary or stable. This is based on whether the women are looking for an intimate relationship, on their standards of what is acceptable in a relationship and the existence of opportunities to meet a partner.

From the two main dimensions which represent identity, I identified three possible categories: acceptor, resistor and rebel.

Based on statements made in the interviews concerning dominant social identity of women and single identity (communal identity) relating to the realm of personal, enactment and relational identity, the set of general characteristics for each category were compiled. It is important to note that the categories are not separate and some characteristics are shared between categories. The intention of using the categories is not only to emphasise both the commonalities and unique qualities of the women, but to uncover evidence of resistance to dominant social identities of Chinese women. The categories, therefore, represent a continuum of resistance to dominant social identities and emphasised womanhood, with acceptors showing the least resistance and rebels showing most.

8.2.1 Characteristics of the acceptor category

There are five of 26 participants who belong to the acceptor category, listed below in the table 9:

Table 9. Acceptor category with demographic information

Name	Age	Ocupt.	Edu.	Salary Range	City (origin-present)	Living arrangement	Temp/ Stable
Liyan	36	Engineer	Master	500-550K	Tianjin	With parents	S
Shuyu	35	Insurance	Master	350-400K	Shijiazhuang -Tianjin	With parents	S
Lee	33	Teacher	Bachelor	150-200K	Wuhan	By herself	S
Lijia	28	Accountant	Master	150-200K	Xi'an	By herself	T
Liling	27	Restaurant owner	Master	Above 600K	Shantou - Guangzhou	By herself	T

The women in this category agree that the stereotype of marriage and motherhood continue to be the main feature of the dominant social identity for women, but their personal relevance is missing from this viewpoint. However, they accept singleness as a basis for personal identity. The acceptance of marriage and motherhood as the dominant social identity for women is an indication that gendered constructions of femininity and womanhood remain constant and have moral, social, economic and collective support. It also signifies the effectiveness of stigma in prompting support from the stigmatised indidivuals in relation to dominant ideological beliefs. There is a notable

age difference in the temporary/stable dimension, with younger women (under 30 years old), such as Liling (see quote p. 135), actively seeking the possibility of intimate relationships in the future. The older women, such as Lee (see quote p. 135) are around their mid-thirties and regard singleness as a stable status. The main characteristics of women in this category are:

- Women in this category consider singleness an acceptable position.
- They are aware that other people view singleness as abnormal and that expectations for women is to marry and have children.
- If they are younger, they accept singleness while investing time in education and/or career and seeking partners. Older women are resigned to being single now, as they have been single for a number of years and it would be difficult to change.
- Talk about the role of fate/destiny in explaining singleness – singleness just happens or the right partner did not come along.
- Most of the older women expressed that they are content being single and that looking back on their lives and the choices that they made, it could be said that they chose to be single.
- Women remain ambivalent about single identity. A typical response would be that being single is okay, though life might be better if one was married.
- Generally support the institution of marriage for others, remaining quite ambivalent about marriage for themselves.
- Critical of married women. Married women's treatment of them is characterised as insulting, excluding and demeaning.
- Have had a desire to be mother in the past and expressed regret that they have not had children.

Women speak about their ambition and achievements in their careers, showing competency and self-reliance. They also recognise many of the benefits of independent living, particularly freedom and being responsible for oneself. However, although these benefits are important, they might have less significance in the composition of self-identity than an intimate relationship with another. A relationship that is both publicly and personally meaningful is important for women in this category. They have also adapted to being single and value many aspects of independent living; however, for those women whose singleness is stable, they can still experience some uncertainty about their womanhood, as in their view, it should be based on marriage and motherhood.

8.2.2 Characteristics of the resistor category

This is the most populated category (13/26) as can be seen in the table 10 below.

Table 10. Resistor category with demographic information

Name	Age	Ocupt.	Edu.	Salary Range	City (origin-present)	Living arrangement	Temp/ Stable
Jiwen	33	Politician	PhD	200-250K	Jinhua - Ningbo	With parents	T
Liao	27	Psychologist	Master	150-200K	Hangzhou	With parents	T
Wei	28	Beauty industry	Bachelor	150-200K	Shanghai	By herself	T
Xiaoche	31	Producer	Master	250-300K	Fuzhou - Beijing	With parents	T
Wangxi	30	Lawyer	Master	250-300K	Taiyuan - Xi'an	By herself	S
Xiong	32	Athlete	Master	150-200K	Suzhou - Nanjing	By herself	S
Yili	35	Coach	PhD	150-200K	Jinan - Wuhan	By herself	S
Luoji	33	Real estate	Master	400-450K	Shanghai	By herself	T
Yiqiao	28	Real estate	Master	250-300K	Hangzhou	By herself	T
Malin	30	IT industry	Bachelor	150-200K	Shenyang	With parents	S
Yaqin	31	Director	Master	200-250K	Beijing	By herself	S
Fangfei	33	Lecturer	PhD	200-250K	Shanghai	With parents	S

Women in this category both acknowledge and resist the prevalence of the stereotype of marriage and motherhood as the only social identity for women in China. They feel that alternative choices now exist, even though resistors are less valued by society. This category represents those who support changing gender roles and gender relations in China and are committed to a view of the future where the choice to be single is treated with equal merit to the choice to marry or become a mother.

Women in this category speak about the significant economic, legal and attitude changes that have facilitated career and educational opportunities for women, have provided improved access to higher levels of earnings and have enabled independence. Women in this category are content with their single identity. They express support for increased tolerance of all lifestyle choices.

Women in this category identify themselves as single women and are very satisfied being single. The view of the single identity as a positive identity is strongest among these women. The main general characteristics of women in this category are:

- Women who are critical of patriarchal, traditional marriage based on distinct gender roles.
- Acknowledge that being single is unconventional as long as marriage and motherhood is the main source of identity for women.
- They also acknowledge that some single stigma remains and that married women have higher social status than unmarried women.
- May consider having a child as a single parent.
- Believe that single women have the opportunity to have satisfying, independent lives and singleness is a viable alternative for women in contemporary China.
- Women are content to be single and it is a comfortable position.
- Have worked at resolving aspects of singleness which have distressed them and are in no doubt that their identity is informed by being single.
- Independence is valued, marriage is at least postponed and they think about remaining single for the rest of their lives.
- Significantly, women strongly express the aspiration that singleness for women will be valued someday and express the desire to make singleness more visible.
- Aware of their educational and career achievements and take pride in their evident competency to be economically self-sufficient. Many aspects of being single are valued, but an emphasis is placed on the importance of economic independence and autonomy as necessity for all women, unmarried or married.
- Women seek and require equality in relationships with others.
- Knowledge of self is valued. Women are clear about their goals and priorities and what they want for themselves.

Most of women in this category have no intention of marrying, expressing a deep satisfaction with the single lifestyle. Being single is a crucial aspect of identity with regards to their personal, enactment, or relational identity. The participants are critical of the social approval for marriage and having children at the cost of excluding others. The inherent inequality in the dominant social identity for women is offensive to them because womanhood is defined by a subservient relationship with a husband, parents-in-law and children. This is a conception that they actively resist. They question definitions of women based on their attachment to, and dependency on, men.

These women seek a definition for all women, starting with living their own lives and choosing to be single. Sometimes this choice is conscious, for others the realisation that they have chosen to be single triggers a reflexive analysis of one's life path to date. In general, singleness is in opposition to marriage, but for these women, it is an alternative choice, a parallel to marriage. The acceptance and promotion of diversity rather than being constrained by difference informs women's self-conceptions and their concepts

of womanhood. Diversity, equality and tolerance of all lifestyle choices epitomise these women's vision of the future.

8.2.3 Characteristics of the rebel category

As can be seen in the table 11 below, seven participants of 26 are located in the rebel category:

Table 11. Rebel category with demographic information

Name	Age	Ocupt.	Edu.	Salary Range	City (origin-present)	Living arrangement	Temp/ Stable
Liu	34	Doctor	PhD	350-400K	Tianjin - Guangzhou	By herself	S
Laila	31	Marketing executive	Master	200-250K	Shenzhen	By herself	T
Zhou	36	HR manager	Bachelor	250-300K	Wuhan - Beijing	By herself	S
Weiqian	30	Actor	Bachelor	200-250K	Nanjing	With parents	T
Bingfang	35	Journalist	Master	300-350K	Shanghai	By herself	S
Marui	30	Engineer	PhD	200-250K	Guangzhou	By herself	S
Ting	27	Service industry	Bachelor	150-200K	Shenyang	By herself	S
Xiaozhu	29	Accountant	Master	150-200K	Wuhan	With parents	S
Liuqian	30	Lawyer	Master	150-200K	Baoji - Xi'an	By herself	S

Rebels want to fundamentally alter and challenge the fact that a woman's identity is defined by society and seek change this on a political level; this is one of the most distinctive characteristics of women in this category. For these women, identity should not be based on one characteristic or attribute of a person and neither singleness nor marriage should be used as a basis for an identity. Rebels also share many characteristics with those in the resistor category, particularly their belief that they are solely responsible for who they want to be and their live directions in the future. Rebels believe that it is possible for the social identity to come from their own values.

Expanding our knowledge on and experience of a range of sexualities, long-term non-cohabiting partnerships, single parenthood and non-traditional intimate relationship choices are acceptable options for women in the rebel category. Women are interested in self-development and are willing to commit time, energy, resources and work into gaining more knowledge about themselves. Independence from others and living an autonomous life is the basis of identity for women in this category. Single identity is not

measured by reference to familistic ideology and dominant social identity for women based on marriage and reproduction.

Single identity is composed of individually relevant values that support single autonomy. Women in this category are more aware than others of the social basis of identity and are more aware of the consequences of constructed identities. They refute naturalistic or essentialist definitions of womanhood. There is a suggestion that gender will not matter in the future: that concepts of identity will be gender-free. Similar to resisters, women in this category are risk-takers, are prepared to move beyond established boundaries and expectations in their relationships with others. Usually women in the rebel category are prepared to take the initiative in relationship with others.

The main characteristics of women in this category are:

- Women express happiness with the single life and state that they do not want to marry.
- Reject all categorisations of women, including singleness as an identifying, constructed category. Composing the self is emphasised.
- Women express the desire that they want to establish other ways of being a woman and question what is it to be a woman. New forms of womanhood and femininity are discussed and thought about. Traditional constructions of femininity are contested and these women are anti-patriarchy, pro-feminist.
- Challenge the hierarchy of relationships which celebrate traditional relationships over other relationships. Women seek equality in relationships with others and reject male dominance, particularly in the public sphere.
- Women are understood to be individuals, i.e. not subservient to men, nor defined in relation to men.
- Education, career plans, business development, personal development, self-knowledge and ambition are placed before the desire to marry, to have children and to form families.
- The desire to achieve single autonomy as a lifestyle goal is clearly expressed and supported.
- Strong sense of the importance of self-reliance is expressed in the interviews as is the desire to be in control of one's life. Women want to control over their careers, relationships and do not want to be driven by the expectations/actions of others.
- Women in this category are more likely to give time and commitment to improving the political, social, economic, legal and personal situation of all women.
- Women in this category are content with their chosen lifestyle. Women ask that

they are accepted as they present themselves to the world. They are tolerant of other lifestyle choices and seek equality in all relationships.

Being single has led to greater self-awareness for women in this category. These women were distinctive from all others because they spoke clearly about themselves, knowing what they want and what their needs, values and priorities are. None of the women in this category are currently in a sexual relationship and are not interested in forming these attachments in the future.

Identity for these women can be altered, achieved and is based on a set of values which hold significance for the woman concerned. These women identified feminist consciousness as crucial support for challenging dominant social identities publicly and legitimising alternatives for identity composition. In general terms, similar to the resistor category, a commitment to engaging others in the acceptance of diversity in identities is what characterises these women most.

8.3 Uniqueness and diversity: the implications for identity

This study reveals that sheng nv in this study are aware of social factors that imposed on their relationships with others and influenced how they thought of themselves as women. Single women view singleness as an alternative that can co-exist with and even replace the dominant discourse. Nevertheless, these women know that by being single, they are considered as the 'other' and are stigmatized in social interactions. They are perceived like outsiders who are excluded and perceive themselves as unconventional. These feelings indicate the level of social inequality and social exclusion that impacts single women's lives.

It would be a mistake to assume that women regard themselves as falling short of the required standard of womanhood. This is not the case, and despite the difficulties, they choose to be single and are willing to accept their singleness openly. These women have devised numerous ways of making singleness less problematic to counter the effects of stigma. By accepting the constraints imposed by the dominant ideology, some women challenge the patriarchal rule by prioritising relationships that they value, in paying attention to the needs of the self and in rejecting single stigma in social interactions.

Even among women who approve of the ideological messages concerning womanhood, this does not mean a restricted sense of self-identity. Each woman's individual experience of living a single life, her relationship choices and valuing of her independence allowes her to establish a personal identity that is robust enough to negotiate the everyday world. This can be on a short-term or a long-term basis. Participants who are least resistant can move into the categories showing more resistance.

Although the dominant social identities for women continue to prevail, resisters and rebels reject this conception of womanhood, believing this idea is shifting in Chinese society when they compare their mothers' lives to their own. The future for younger women presents a range of possibilities of how women in China can exist. Participants confidently describe themselves as sheng nv and hope that singleness will be an acceptable social identity for Chinese women in the future. They are satisfied with the single identity and lifestyle, but hope that singleness will offer a different way to be accepted as a woman.

Rebels and resistors also have an emancipatory mission. There are women who are strongly committed to living as independent, autonomous women. They view singleness as an alternative to marriage and as a preferred choice for all women. Seeking equality and tolerance in all relationships, embracing uniqueness and diversity in identities, rejecting heterosexuality as the only expression of sexuality, taking risks in the pursuit of self-development and living one's life in reference to these principles is characteristic of those who reject the ideological messages of familism, particularly in relation to womanhood. These women have a strong sense of themselves as individuals and cherish their own values; they are committed to questioning oppression and inequality. Sheng nv have built their lifestyles, made choices, fostered relationships which enable and nourish identities which are distinctive. They offer perspectives of the phenomenon of the increasing number of unmarried women in China, where the dominant perspectives can be criticised. This is an attempt to remake an identity that was previously considered to be marginal and place it alongside other identities for women.

The contrast between difference and diversity is important here: considering the self as different to other people leads to a conception of the self as isolated from others, while

perceiving the self as diverse embraces individualization (Habermas, 2002). Individualization holds many possibilities for claiming new identities: isolation is merely evidence of the dominance of strong social identities. Emphasising difference is an outcome of being positioned as the 'other'. Accentuating diversity comes from composing the self and refusing to be alienated.

Participants think of themselves as single women and this is a basis for defining the self. Most women agree that marriage, partnership, motherhood and singleness ought to be considered as a range of available lifestyle options for all women and for all to be treated with equal merit. Until this happens, they support independence for all women and enjoy being single themselves. Importantly, singleness as a deviant identity is no longer as an accurate representation for independent women.

This research demonstrates that the women are experiencing new forms of womanhood. This is evident in their single identity, in their emphasis on relational autonomy as a goal and their aspiration to increase the acceptability of singleness as a social identity. Sheng nv's progression towards self-reliance and their commitment to self-awareness in the context of the stigmatisation of singleness is, however, the key to understanding sheng nv's determination to compose their own definition of identity and to reconstruct social identity. In the capacity to autonomously compose the self, new forms of womanhood emerge.

8.4 New social identities for Chinese women

The feminist theoretical argument on patriarchy and womanhood has shifted between an essentialist/universalist standpoint to post-structuralism arguments that suggest that the effect of discursive practices on identity is more useful (Huntingdon, 2005). Much of this conceptualising, as I have suggested, is an effort to deal with women's agency. Agency as it contributes to emancipatory action, such as challenging patriarchy, is of crucial concern to feminist theorists and researchers. In this study, I have argued for an emphasis on the composition of identity to pinpoint the means for change within the individual (who is socially and culturally constituted). I explore what factors allow a person to welcome change and defy patriarchal constraints.

Feminist wisdom and practice have highlighted the consequences of increasing women's self-awareness. Both put forward that private and personal experiences have roots in society and that women's identities are patriarchal constructions. Women therefore have to struggle against the patriachy for personal and collective liberation. This echoes Taft's (1993) argument that personal liberation is achieved through the development of self-consciousness. It is also possible that increasing awareness might leave the individual overwhelmed and immobilised by the knowledge of the pervasiveness of patriarchal power. The development of competencies are said to assist identity transformation, as argued by Meyers (2018) in her work on autonomy. Socialisation is also required for autonomy; this was identified as essential to individual agency on personal fulfilment. Thus, socialisation, increasing awareness, development of competency and familiarity with alternative ideology are crucial in theorising about identity transformation of individuals.

This is an opportunity to construct new identities rather than binding women to dominant social identities. The availability of resources and the expansion of legal rights are prerequisites to gaining individual autonomy (Meyers, 2018). This is apparent in cases where barriers, like marriage and having children in China, limit women's employment opportunities and their economic independence. Inequality concerning class, gender ethnicity also influences individuals' identities. Such structural restrictions and opportunities should not be neglected, but rather should be viewed in tandem with an individual's capability to alter.

I have argued that a theoretical and empirical focus on identities through various frames – via the interaction of personal, enactment and relational identity – interplays with the communal identity. They provide a mediating force between the potential for individual agency and the power of social structure. This force helps us to understand the possibility for individual and social transformation through a communal identity within a group compared to the dominant social identity.

This research was motivated by a desire to understand how single women navigate a social and cultural environment that is saturated with the ideologies of marriage and motherhood. How do single women construct an identity, despite their stigmatisation? The process of composing identity for single women requires a focus on values and

choices made in relationships while facing the dominant social identities for women. In observing this process, the acceptable ways of being a sheng nv are developed. Huntingdon (2005) argues that feminist theories can help:

> The activity whereby we assume responsibility for who we become and for cultivating critical consciousness, even as our desires and intentions remain socially influenced and even though we liberate ourselves via the range of critical discourses already available. (p. 43)

Huntingdon is searching for a developed theory of autonomy that adequately explains why some women's resist – and others invest in – patriarchy. For her, the definition of self-determination includes self-construction and the limitations of social construction (Huntingdon, 2005). This theory of identity transformation and liberation points to the motivation for change, an idea that is supported in this work. Self-awareness increases the ability to make self-critical choices, which are important in relationships. This helps to 'produce new habits and capacities' and engender autonomy (Huntingdon, 2005, p. 50). The ability to be oneself leads to the ability to compose one's own identity.

For all of the participants, their singleness is an aspect of their identity with which they are constantly engaged. What is most striking from listening to women's accounts is that a large number of them compose their own definition of self, one that does not depend upon patriarchal notions of a dependent female as a wife and mother. In doing so, participants are challenging those ideologies which do not support a meaning of womanhood as independent and self defined. Single women have resorted to composing a conception of self because others view them as unrepresentative of femininity and this makes it difficult to have a coherent identity. In the active transformation of their identities, in reflecting upon their own values, in making relationship choices on meaningful relationships with others, in resisting patriarchal formations of womanhood in interactions with others, sheng nv demonstrate the potential for change.

Marginalisation enables the oppressor to stabilise dominant identities by positioning those who threaten or challenge approved identities as the 'other'. This is the point of Connell's (2005) theorisation of hegemonic masculinity/emphasised femininity as a dominant/oppressed dynamic, neither of which can exist without the other. Connell argues that restricted femininity is more likely to exist than a restricted form of

dominant masculinity. In the context of debating dialogic (communicative interaction) versus exclusionary bases for identity formation and responding to post-modern criticism, Joas (2002) argues for a revision of the concept of identity formation to include a stronger theorisation of the degree to which power and exclusion serve to stabilise identities. He argues for including both dialogue and exclusion as contributing factors to identity formation: this is precisely the stance taken in the present work. He writes:

> For the recognition that dialogue and exclusion are interwoven saves the notion of identity formation in the face of an approach that claims all identity formation is based solely on power and arbitrary definition. After all, only thus are we sensitised empirically to the elementary conditions of identity formation. Only thus are we confronted with the task of finding ways of individual and collective identity formation in which the excluded is not merely the excluded, but can be tolerated as 'Other' (p. 16)

Single women whose social identities are stigmatised have not met the socially approved ethical standard of womanhood. The effects of stigmatising interactions with others accelerated the awareness that the identity of a 'leftover woman' is not understood or accepted, something that women observe in their interactions with others. This knowledge compels women to actively reconstruct another interpretation of the situation. As argued in the previous chapter, in early stages, some women do this by reinterpreting the dominant social identity for women and finding acceptable ways to exist as a single woman. The rest reject being stigmatised as the 'other' and created an alternative identity in a community of others who offer validation, allowing the development of an alternative identity and develop the capacity to resist patriarchal conceptions of womanhood. Resistance is possible when exclusionary practices are found to be objectionable and when self-consciousness and self-determination are in harmony, supported by chosen relationships with others who will endorse these reforming, innovatory sheng nv. Single women make efforts to attain a non-stigmatised self-identity and to make single identity as a social identity acceptable.

8.5 Singlehood as a new form of womanhood

Sheng nv are pioneers of enabling the politics of diversity, the right not to be stigmatised or marginalised, the right to be represented and the right to be seen. The identity transformed from society's viewpoint of 'leftover women' as incomplete and selfish to

seeing themselves as sheng nv, connected to others, independent and autonomous individuals. This transition is representative of the difficulty in being oneself, the difficulty of defining one's own identity and the difficulty of negotiating layers of identity in the context of dominant social identities. Transformative self-identities are achieved through autonomous choices in relationships with others and in chosen activities based on own values by coming up with non-conformist resolutions to achieving relational connectedness and independence. These decisions help compose a meaningful single identity, which offers protection from single stigma. However, it is single women's attention to, and awareness of, the importance of their own responsibility for self-development and self-realisation that establishes the single identity. It allows for the possibility that singleness can eventually be an acceptable social identity for Chinese women.

In this study, I have suggested that singleness is a problematic identity for the patriarchy, a reality that is familiar to many single women who refer to their singleness in positive terms. As I argued in previous chapters, sheng nv have created distance between the stigmatised social identity of singleness and their own communal identity based on the construction and negotiation of personal, enactment and relational identities. They have accomplished this by developing a single lifestyle based on valuing independence, self-reliance and autonomy, underpinned by choices made in relationships, activities and experiences that support this status. Once this is achieved, it is possible to compose an identity based on a reinterpretation of singleness as an acceptable – even desirable – lifestyle. I have argued that sheng nv have reinterpreted aspects of the dominant social identities for women, finding their own ways of being single women. In this resistant behaviour, the potential for transforming the social identity of single women is found.

The statement of 'I am a single woman, a victorious woman' was reiterated throughout interviews as women spoke of their awareness of being single, what they like and dislike about being single, the benefits of the single lifestyle and the skills that they have gained along the way. Women also spoke about the difficulty of claiming that singleness is chosen lifestyle in a society that celebrates the marital family. Women also spoke about the viability of singleness as an alternative lifestyle in China. What can be concluded from their accounts is that not only is the attachment to being single fundamental to developing an alternative identity for women. Sheng nv actively think of themselves as

single and consider singlehood as a feasible alternative identity for the Chinese females, especially as they are already engaging in the construction of new forms of womanhood. The identity moves from how a sheng nv defines her singleness, seeks her completeness, and negotiates her relationship and choices with partners, parents, and friends to sheng nv as a joint force that create new forms of womanhood based on the single identity that they have formed. This communal single identity can become a new social identity for Chinese women.

Once singleness is used as a basis for self-definition, there is potential to transform Chinese women's social identity. Transformative single identity is realised through the capacity for being one's self, enabled by reference to own values which allows a fundamental re-working of others' familial, marital and economic negative constructions of single women. The central role of wifehood and motherhood are challenged by empowering the single identity and shifting singleness from an outsider position to one of a number of diverse identity options for women in contemporary China. The constraints of marriage and motherhood are transcended as women attempt to hold on to the aspects of womanhood defined by familism while simultaneously deposing the need to base their female identity on them as they become financially independent.

The women's relationship to intimacy is also transformed in that identity is not regarded as equivalent to forms of intimacy as represented by emphasised femininity. Women also seek sexual intimacy on their own terms, looking for an egalitarian and reciprocal relationship. Women's views on heterosexual relations are transcended as women explore the possibility of living without a sexual relationship with men. These are the domains in which transformative identities work. Making autonomous choices and living as a single woman are acts of political and ideological resistance. In this research, the experiences of sheng nv evidently highlight the significance of having an autonomous identity to resist and challenge the dominant societal identity. It also helps pave the way for the singlehood to become an acceptable alternative societal identity for women and a new form of womanhood in China.

The women in this study who are categorised as acceptors have a pragmatic or realistic view of the world. While they enjoy the single lifestyle and their single identity, they

believe that the dominant social identity of women continues to prevail. As single stigma continues to have resonance on the lives of single women, resolving tensions relating to identity is complex. Most acceptors agree that singleness can be a viable alternative for women even though it is rarely chosen. Liling said that she is content with being single and developing her career has been more important. For her, there are only two identities for women: being married, which is accepted, and being single, which is only tolerated (see quote p. 99). Lee believed that more women are satisfied being single, however. She identified divorced women as also desiring singleness, as they transition being back into singlehood (see quote p. 177).

Sheng nv categorised as resistors are in the most populated category. Fangfei is very content with being single and view singlehood as an alternative identity available to Chinese women (see quote p. 90). However, just because it is possible to have an autonomous single self-identity does not mean this is indicative that singleness is now accepted by others as a social identity. It is disingenuous to assert that the identity is accepted by others, as the changes must be agreed upon by the larger community. In Xiong and Liao's accounts, the possibility of singleness as a social identity has yet to be attained as they have learned women's social identity from observing their mother's and aunt's roles in family (see quotes p. 123)

The single social identity represents womanhood as autonomous and as exercising the capacity to choose and to determine one's own life path. In living as single women, the viability of single self-identity is evident. For Yaqin, by continuing to be single, singleness as a social identity becomes more acceptable to others (see quote p. 146). The relation between achieving autonomy at the level of self-identity and having the capacity to change the status of a social identity is complex.

The women categorised as rebels advocate change at the collective level and were among the most successful at neutralising single stigma through valuing the single lifestyle and rejecting the dominant social identities for women. Liu and Laila, categorised as rebels, are fulfilled with their single identity; this is a resistant conception of self that is in opposition to the dominant view of single women as incomplete, immature, isolated and a person lacking something (see quotes, p. 102-103). Bingfang also perceives the single identity as a station from where to challenge dominant

identities. She says that sheng nv are at the frontier to fight for singleness being recognised as a viable alternative to marriage for women. While Bingfang is deeply aware that the single stigma continues to exist, she believes that there are greater opportunities for women born in the 1980s (see quote p. 94). Rebels recognise that singleness is not represented in politics and in society. This is a situation that they want to change. Liuqian rejects the social identities for women that are based on emphasised femininity or on male models (see quotes p. 101).

Zhou believes that in challenging dominant identities for women and in attempting to compose new identities, one has to remain as an outsider, which requires strength (see quote p. 103). Rebels are also aware that the single lifestyle is only available to women of a certain background. They acknowledges that their class has provided her with benefits and opportunities for financial independence and self-sufficiency to remain single. Life is markedly different to the life of less wealthy women, for whom financial and social security is found in marriage.

A concentration on the identity of sheng nv discloses that resistance to patriarchy is occurring. It is a defiance based on composing a single identity which has transformative capacity. The single identity embraces diversity, is critical about the dominance of ideology of familism and the approved identities built on patriarchal relations. Transformative identities are achieved by making autonomous choices in relationships with others, in undertaking activities based on an individual's own values and in forming some innovative and non-conformist solutions for combining relational connections with independence. These choices help to create a meaningful single lifestyle, which in turn offers protection from the single stigma that remains prevalent in Chinese culture and society. However, it is single women's self-awareness, self-development and self-realization that reinforce the single identity, allowing for the possibility that the communal identity of singleness may become an acceptable social identity for Chinese women.

8.6 Summary

I have argued in this chapter that interactions with others link personal, enactment, relational and communal identity frames. The impact of these connections on personal

experiences, along with self-awareness and reflexivity, give rise to the agency and the capacity of transforming social identity. Identity is evident in reflexive activities, in one's experiences of interactions, in care and practices of the self, in the concept of womanhood held by the self and in accounts demonstrating self-awareness and self-knowledge. In particular, I have argued that relationship choices are significant for the composition of identity.

The evidence presented in this research demonstrates that sheng nv perceive themselves as independent, competent, complete, self-reliant, self-determining, valuing egalitarianism and tolerance, willing to take risks and as connected in the relationships they choose to have with others. In achieving an autonomous identity, women can successfully transcend social identity conceptions of womanhood based on dependence, – being married or a mother – despite the strong ideological support for these notions with denigration of singleness in the ascribed social identity for women. In achieving their own identity, in actively living as and naming themselves as sheng nv, the communal identity of singleness as an acceptable social identity can become acceptable. The gendered social identities of all women in China are consequently challenged and open to transformation.

I began this thesis with an idea of the powerful effects of traditional ideologies of marriage and motherhood on the composition of single women's identities in China. This research, based on collaborative inquiry with 26 participants, has shown that sheng nv are capable of providing for themselves in emotional and material terms. Their request to be treated as adults is not in doubt. A substantial cultural shift is required to challenge ideologies that value marriage and motherhood as dominant social identities for Chinese women; this has implications on how we perceived all people. The increasing number of single women in China, their demand to be seen and to not be marginalised or stigmatised, is evident in the development of their transformative identities and is a harbinger of such change.

Chapter 9 Conclusion – where we are going?

This study addressed the main research question of what constitutes the phenomenon of 'leftover women' in China. The analysis concentrated on two tiers of the 'leftover women' phenomenon: external forces (outer layer) and the women themselves (inner layer). After contextualising the phenomenon with statistics, governmental policy aims and media representation, I argued that instead of a reflection of social reality, the discourse of 'leftover women' reflects the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) ideologies. The dialogue is a process of mythmaking to preserve the patriarchal gender construction. It is also a form of social policing that relies on fear around evolving gender relations, social order and power structures that is put forward by the CCP and Chinese government and implemented by the ACWF and mainstream media.

The outer layer related to proliferation of the term 'leftover women' as a political campaign that deflects attention from unmarried men by emphasising on the increasing number of Chinese single women. This campaign aims to resolve the skewed sex ratio in China, to maintain social stability and improve population quality. The sexist rhetoric targets unmarried women and propagates the term 'leftover women', reflecting public anxieties about new ideas of femininity and the meaning of womanhood in contemporary China.

After peeling away the outer layers of the 'leftover women', the core of the phenomenon, the increasing number of single women, becomes clear. It should be noted that rather than internalising the negative meaning of 'leftover', these single women refer to 'victorious women' – the same phonetic transcription of 'leftover women' but with a positive meaning. The term 'leftover women' and 'victorious women' are homophones with the same pronunciation of 'sheng nv'. The opposite double meaning of 'sheng nv' illustrates the complexity of their identity formation and negotiation. This positive interpretation of 'sheng nv' has also contributed towards the increasing number of women who choose to be single.

The focus has shifted to the core of this issue – the sheng nv themselves. This study explored women's identity through their own voices. Under the guidance of the communication theory of identity (CTI), the main research question was unwrapped into

three sub-research questions concerning personal, enacted and relational identities to investigate the complexity of the identity formation of sheng nv:

Sub RQ1: what does being single mean for a Chinese sheng nv?
Sub RQ2: how does a Chinese sheng nv seek completeness?
Sub RQ3: in what ways do the relationships of a Chinese sheng nv with others contribute to her choice?

In order to understand the perspectives of Chinese sheng nv and respond to these questions, through the guide of phenomenological inquiry, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 26 women who met the definition of 'leftover women' – unmarried, over 27 years old, highly educated, well paid and independent. The sub research questions are used to examine the constitution of the 'leftover women' phenomenon from individuals' perspectives. Sheng nv address a variety of topics and their unique views are presented as their own opinions in chapters five, six and seven. The main research question, which is refined into three sub research questions, is discussed in chapter eight from the communal frame. This chapter begins with a reflection on the limitations of this research to provide direction for future research. I then discuss the political and theoretical implications of the study. This chapter finishes with a recap of the significance of this research.

9.1 Limitations and future directions

This study explores the identities of sheng nv in contemporary China. A reiteration of the limitations of this study will help to pinpoint the directions for future research. Firstly, this study encountered challenges due to language barriers: the participants and the main researcher are native Chinese speakers and the non-English capta lead to the PhD thesis being written in English. All care was take to translate as closely as possible, as the interpretation of meaning is the core of the qualitative research. Qualitative research is valued by minimising the gap between the meaning expressed by participants and the meaning interpreted by the researcher (Polkinghorne, 2005).

In this case, the gap might be unavoidable due to the richness of subjective experiences. Participants prefer to use cultural (Chinese) specific narratives, proverbs, idiomatic expressions and metaphors, all of which are difficult to literally translate into English and

liberal translation cannot guarantee that the original meaning is not changed. In addition to this, as a researcher whose first language is not English, I am concerned about the distance between translated meaning, my interpretation and the reader's understanding. Therefore, I asked a qualified native English speaking proofreader to help me edit this thesis. However, editing is also an interpretative action and fluency and clear meaning may be altered in this process. Therefore, even though the proofreader and I attempt to preserve the true meaning in translation, interpretation and editing, language barriers may still create some challenges and could lead to the ambiguity of the meaning.

Secondly, as discussed in chapter four, the sample size is relatively small. Participants were recruited via Weibo and Wechat, which requires access to these applications. Due to time constraints and the desire to cover a large geographical area, participants were recruited exclusively by this method. Limitations affecting the generalisation and validity of the study include self-reporting by participants of their experiences. When compiling these they might unknowingly censor thoughts or feelings to present themselves in a particular light. It is also important to note that they are not representative of all unmarried women.

The women who participated in the study have higher education and socioeconomic status. It could be argued that these demographic characteristics tend to influence the way that these women see their single status. Sheng nv may not view being single as negative because they have the means to support themselves financially and are not reliant on a male partner to provide for them. Additionally, living in a large urban area can also contribute to their positive perspectives on being single as they have the opportunity to create a large social network without a partner. They also could have access to more activities where having a partner is not expected.

Guided by phenomenological inquiry, this study does not make claims about the universality of experiences. That is, it does not argue about how the experiences of the sampled interviewees may represent the general situation of single women in China. However, future research may focus on the issue of class, social background, and economic status to allow the readers to perceive the differences between single women who face different social and economic situations, such as single women in rural areas.

Research conducted with this direction may help people to understand the general situation of Chinese unmarried women from particular perspectives.

A further limitation of this study is that it was conducted only with heterosexual women, even though I did not intentionally omit homosexual women in the recruitment progress. The experiences of a single lesbian or bisexual women may be different, as they may experience different social stigmas. Women who are lesbian or bisexual, for example, may feel as though they are excluded from institutions such as marriage and religion, so they may feel these are more pronounced stigmas than being single. In future studies, it would be important to include women who are lesbian and bisexual so that the scope of experience is extended.

In order to investigate gender identity and patriarchy more deeply, single men warrant research focus, especially ‘leftover men’ and/or ‘diamond bachelors’. Lifestyles, experiences and coping strategies might differ between single men and single women. For instance, women may be more likely than men to establish systems of support for themselves and may be more likely to experience higher levels of life satisfaction than men. There may be similarities and differences between men and women in relation to their singlehood and in being a single adult. People's acceptance of the single lifestyle may also vary between single men and women. Therefore, studies to clarify the differences between single women with diverse backgrounds and different sexual orientations and between single women and single men should also be fruitful and rewarding.

On a final note, the age range of this sample is unique – 27 (official definition) to 36 (the age of who were 27 in 2007, who were the first group of ‘leftover women’ in 2016). As the only generation of single children and the first generation of ‘leftover women’, the views of these women change over time and their view of being unmarried, of being single at a later point in life might be different during their life course. In addition to this, as these women are still relatively young, it is possible that they may find, and commit to, partners in the future.

There may be a difference in the views of women who have a partner later in life versus those that do not. It would be beneficial to follow these women in a long-term study to determine how the meaning of being single changes over time and in what ways. It

would be important to understand if having a future relationship changes their views retrospectively of their singlehood. It would also be interesting to understand what factors cause individuals to redefine what it means to be single. Future studies across a longer term would be useful to understand these aspects.

9.2 Political implication

In the interviews, participants felt their hands are tied when stereotypes and discrimination are supported by laws and regulations. The accounts of women in this study reveal various issues concerning political restrictions on their rights, such as marriage laws relating to property, the family registration system and having children outside of marriage. It is necessary to summarize and gather these political constraints here.

As argued in Chapter two, the government is concerned about promoting children through marriage although the increasing number of singles might be linked to the reduction of birth rates. If the government's goal is to maintain the birth rate and proliferate better genes, which was indicated in the amended one-child policy permitting second children, then they should accept alternative lifestyles and family structures, such as single parent families, by implementing relevant supporting policies and systems.

First of all, it is clear that the official definition of 'leftover women' given by the Department of Education and the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) clashes with the meaning of discrimination as defined by The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) - irrespective of their marital status, any exclusion made on the basis of sex which has the effect and purpose of impairing the recognition, enjoyment and exercise by women (CEDAW Article 1). The CEDAW committee expressed concern over the persistence of deep-rooted stereotypes relating to the roles and responsibilities of women and men in the family. It also expressed concern about societies that continue to devalue women and violate their human rights (CEDAW, 2014). The CEDAW committee requested that the Chinese government takes all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in all matters

relating to marriage and family relations. In particular, CEDAW have asked the government to ensure the promotion of equality between men and women.

However, on reflection of the stereotypes mentioned by the CEDAW committee and in shadow reports, only the preference of sons is condemned, which can lead to illegal sex-selective abortions and high adverse sex-ratio. Marital status, marital choice, or stereotypes and stigmatisation of 'leftover women' are not included. The discrimination attached to women based on their marital status leads to the distinction, exclusion and restriction of their social life and impedes gender equality and women's human rights in social, cultural and civil fields.

A comprehensive definition of discrimination against women is needed in the Chinese legal system in line with Article 1 of the CEDAW Convention with a view to ensure that Chinese women are protected against both direct and indirect discrimination in all areas of life. Appropriate enforcement mechanisms and sanctions to ensure the prohibition of sex and/or gender-based discrimination is also required. It is helpful to measure and to supervise whether the existing official documents, legislation and laws accord with the basic requirements of the definition of discrimination. This would be one of the most effective ways to cut the political support for the campaign of 'leftover women' as the State party will then be made aware of the importance of such a definition. Only then can the application of the full scope of the Convention's definition of discrimination be issued.

Secondly, in relation to the marriage rights, the new laws on property rights and family registration documents is a key topic raised by sheng nv. Under the new amendment to the Marriage Law, housing is no longer regarded as joint property and is not divided equally in a divorce. Instead, the house belongs to who paid the initial payment, regardless of who pays for the mortgage and decoration. Even though the general idea of the new Amendment is to protect the property owner and to stop the rising rate of divorce, according to tradition, it is the husband's side who offers a house as part of the dowry. Therefore, the equality of outcome has not been taken into consideration as such legal text would grant a divorced man the valuable house asset, while a divorced woman has no compensation despite her contibutions to the mortgage.

Due to certain traditions and practices in rural areas, women are still unable to hold or register land in their names and risk losing land ownership upon divorce. Therefore, for legislation, it is necessary to emphasise the outcome of equality. Certain traditions and practices need to be taken into account to prevent divorce or inheritance titles reverting back to the original investor.

In China, individuals are identified through a family registration document - a system that legally makes marriage matter. Through marriage, the woman is taken in by the man's family and is deleted from her biological family's registration document, which is viewed as a loss of identity by sheng nv. Registration should be a choice made between married individuals. The family registration system should respect a woman's desire to remain registered to her biological family, to be registered on the document of her husband's family, or to create a new family document.

Not only do single mothers endure a strong stigma, unmarried women are not allowed to have children. Even though single women are not legally forbidden to have children, a Family Planning Service Certification is required for a new-born to register for national identification and permanent residence, but the certificate is only granted to married people. Therefore, an unmarried woman can give birth to a child, but that child would not be recognised by the government. Birth out of wedlock is constructively an illegal birth because it does not meet the requirements of the Family Planning Policy.

Unmarried single mothers are not supported by policies and are deprived of some of their rights. The application and implementation of maternity insurance, medical care, maternity benefits and paid maternity leave all need a Family Planning Service Certification. Unmarried single mothers, therefore, cannot enjoy these benefits.

A single women's reproductive autonomy rights are also restricted. The Human Assisted Reproductive Technology Specification has clearly stipulated that it is prohibited 'to give unmarried women human assisted reproductive technology (NHC, 2010).' Even though there is no regulation to expressly prevent single women from buying sperm from sperm banks, the technique of artificial insemination and freezing eggs both belong to the realm of human assisted reproductive technology, for which a family planning service certificate is required. Therefore, having children is intrinsically linked to marriage in China.

It seems that the political restrictions on unmarried women having children all hinge on the family planning service certificate. The current policy is that the certificate is exclusively issued to married couples in the guise of maintaining social stability. As a result, unmarried women's reproductive rights has been violated. The Beijing Platform for Action and CEDAW both clearly affirm that women's human rights contain the right to reproduction. As a signatory of CEDAW, China has obligations to respect, protect and fulfil rights related to women's reproduction. Even the constitution (Article 17) stipulates that all citizens have the right of reproduction and the obligations of family planning. From a constitutional point of view, single women's fertility rights should be guaranteed. The constitution and family planning laws do not treated single women and married women differently in terms of fertility rights.

The policy of family planning has been amended based on changes in the national conditions. However, the problem with the one-child policy is not the number of children 'permitted by the government'. The new two-child policy is not a guarantee or a return of women's reproduction rights as it is against CEDAW (Article 16), which grants women equal rights in deciding 'freely and responsibly on the number and spacing of their children'.

Although the Marriage Law (2011 Amendment) also stipulates that children born in and out of marriage share the same rights, in practice it is impossible for illegitimate children to access social warfare, social security and insurance. This is because they do not have the family planning service certificate to register for permanent residency and hukou. Therefore, with the increasing numbers of women remaining unmarried, it is crucial to acknowledge the birth rights of unmarried women and to guarantee that their children can enjoy the same rights as children born in wedlock. I would recommend that the government and the ACWF's legislative and administrative offices remove or modify the unreasonable documentation required for having children, such as the family planning service certificate, to ensure that the implementation of regulations can be in line with the constitution, family planning laws and the marriage laws.

9.3 Theoretical implication

As the theoretical framework of this study, the Communication theory of identity (CTI) posits that identity is inherently communicative and proposes four frameworks to explore the complexity of identity construction: personal, enacted, relational, and communal identity frame. Chinese sheng nv's accounts can be interpreted as representing four frames of their identities. In this thesis, the four identity frames guide research questions and structures the analysis of research data. Specifically, the personal frame, which provides an understanding how individuals internally define themselves, guides the exploration of what being single means for sheng nv through viewing it as a lifestyle built on single independence and managing loneliness and stigma. This is dealt with in chapter five. The enactment frame focuses on identity expressed through social interactions, leading to examination in chapter six of how sheng nv seek completeness through confronting childhood wedding fantasies and having clear perspectives on marriage and having children. The relational frame, which invests one's relationship to other people, is explored in chapter seven in relation to the presentation of the ways sheng nv's relationship with partners, parents and friends contribute to their choices. The communal frame, which concentrate on how a group of individuals shares or constructs an identity, leads the discussion on the composition of single identity in chapter eight. The thesis argument moves from how a 'leftover woman' defines her singlehood, seeks her completeness, and negotiates her relationship with partners, parents, and friends to 'leftover women' as a joint force that create new forms of womanhood based on the single identity that they have formed.

In addition to the adoption of CTI in guiding this research, this study also advanced the knowledge and application of CTI. The proposed extension of CTI in this research mainly concentrates on four aspects: transverse and longitudinal tenets, new levels of relational frame, identity gaps within frames and an identity gap management model.

9.3.1 Transverse and longitudinal tenets

While CTI was useful in unpacking the complexity of the identities of Chinese 'leftover women', I propose to include the tenet that communication is continuous. This belief highlights that communication is a vehicle for identities, relationships and society that travels across time and people. Previous identities and relationships influence the

current ones and current experiences have an impact on the future. My research shows how childhood wedding fantasies haunt sheng nv and influence their understanding of the choice of single status and how they overcome the dream. Yet half of participants did not have such fantasies. From early on, these women debunked the dominant discourse of 'living happily ever after'. This lends credence to the academic critique of socialisation and demonstrates that many of the women did not comply with dominant discourse. My data also suggests that some women are affected by a relationship or a group that has an indirect relationship to them.

The CTI focuses on identity negotiation from the individual perspective - seeking to represent the relational partner's view of the situation. However, given the nature of the relational and communal frames, where the individual's self-concept is influenced by relations to others, it is imperative to take into account the responses of the others in the relational frame or community members in the communal frame. Through the accounts, it is obvious that participants' parents, partners and friends are also engaged in negotiating their identity at the same time.

When examining the only child policy generation, it is necessary to look beyond the parent-daughter relationship to the extended family and/or network of relationships. In some cases, understanding a mother's relationship with her in-laws is a key to fully understanding the parental relationship and, in turn, their choice of remaining single. Other cases, such as Malin's relationship with her mother and grandmother, both of whom are role models, suggest a continuity of life. A story of sheng nv is also a story about her mother. The ratio of singles has increased drastically in recent years. However, this does not mean that adults of this generation have suddenly changed their attitude about marriage or family, but rather that such changes have been going on gradually over generations. This perspective is parallel to lifespan perspective, which states that one's lifespan does not merely change and it is both experienced by and enacted by people (Cramer & Jones, 2007).

Furthermore, Jetten and Wohl (2012) argue that historians should examine continuity, asserting historical continuity requires more attention than change. Although disciplines differ, because communication is an ongoing process, identity needs to be seen within

the continuity of communication to understand its changes. Specifically, I propose that CTI expands its attention to a number of relationships in the relational frame.

9.3.2 New levels of relational frame

Relational identity has four levels (Hecht et al., 2005) which are detailed in the literature review. First, individuals constitute their identity by internalising others' perspectives, which is referred as ascribed relational identity, as it is externally imposed by other people (Jung & Hecht, 2004). Secondly, individuals define themselves by their relationships with others (Jung & Hecht, 2004). An individual can be someone's daughter, someone's cousin, someone's husband, or someone's teacher. Third, identity exists in relationship to one's other identities as individuals have multiple identities (Jung & Hecht, 2004). One can be both defendant and accuser, teacher and student and parent and child. Societal roles are crucial in developing this level of identity (Hecht et al., 2005). The fourth level of the relational frame is the relationship itself. "A relationship, itself, can be a unit of identity" (Hecht et al., 2005, p. 263). Two or more people form relationships, such as that of a couple or family. Their coming together creates unique dyadic and family identities.

A new level of the relational frame emerged in my research: counter-identities. Participants speak of their singlehood in contrast to married women, presenting a single identity as a counter identity to that of a married woman. Some participants present themselves in opposition to married women and single men. Even widowers or divorcees with children are considered to have counter identities. By applying the counter identities' notion, Chinese single women's identities can be illustrated in comparison to the identities of married women, a 'diamond bachelor' and 'leftover man'. Therefore, in addition to the four levels of the relational frame, there is a fifth level, where people identify themselves in relation to their counterparts.

In conjunction with social, cultural, or status similarities and differences with others, individuals identify themselves in certain ways. Roles of others become a way of comparison and are implicated in the creation of counter identities (Grieshaber & Cannella, 2001). For instance, female identity can be examined in contrast to male identity by investigating how femininity is distinct from masculinity. While some identities, such as female identity, have clear counter identities, others are less clear.

Participants who view singleness as opposite to marriage demonstrate a more radical sense of defiance than those who perceive singlehood as an alternative.

Relevant to the first level of relational identity is ascribed relational identity, which is externally imposed by others (Jung & Hecht, 2004). Perceived ascribed identities emerged from the interviews' transcripts. Some participants define themselves by how they perceive what others ascribe to them. The identity gaps between perceived ascribed identity and other identities create ambivalence for some participants. For example, Yaqin is an ambitious career woman (personal identity, enactment identity) She thought others, such as married colleagues (counter-identity), would have a negative view of her (perceived ascribed identity) if she failed to do something because she thought others would link her mistake to her unmarried status (perceived ascribed identity), which is due to social stereotypes and stigmas (ascribed identity, communal identity).

Individuals learn about themselves through their relationships with other people via social interaction. Medea (2008) proves that people's understanding of themselves differs from how other people view them. The way that individuals think of how others view them influences how they define themselves and constitute their identity. Therefore, it is important to include perceived ascribed identity in the relational frame, as individuals partly define themselves by how they think others view them.

9.3.3 Identity gaps within frames

Unlike Hecht and his colleagues (1993; 2004; 2005) whose findings on the identity gaps that occur mainly between or among the four frames, in Yaqin's example, identity gaps are evident inside the relational frame, between perceived ascribed identity and ascribed identity. In addition to inter-frame gaps, there are also identity gaps within frames. I will list examples discovered in my research to prove that identity gaps emerged within each of the four frames.

In the personal and enactment frame, the identity gap emerges within some women's ambivalence. For example, when Xiaozhu turned 30, she was torn between her enjoyment of her single life and her desire for an approved identity through marriage and motherhood. As for the relational frame, the participants have two opposite

relational identities: one stems from the general public majority, while the other comes from the side of 'leftover women', or the minority. The conflicting views of society, who view singlehood as a deficiency, and sheng nv, who view their lives as fulfilled, created the identity gaps in the communal frame. In the relational frame, apart from the gap between ascribed identity and perceived ascribed identity, might be seen as inter-gaps between or among levels rather than intra-gaps.

At the fourth level of the relational frame, identity gaps emerge within multiple identities, where identity exists relevant to other identities. For example, Shuyu has an identity as a single woman, as a career woman and as a daughter. She feels that she lives selfishly and has trouble justifying her status. As a career woman and a single woman, she is doing what she really wants, but as a daughter, she feels guilty because she cannot give parents a grandchild. Similar to the identity gaps across personal, enactment, relational and communal frames, which might be inconsistent with each other, these frames can still coexist and cooperate with each other to constitute identities. Interpenetration can exist with dialectical tensions not only between and among, but also within, the four frames. Uncertainty and reconciliation within the frames can be viewed as a source of the dynamic and fluid nature of identity.

9.3.4 Identity gaps management model

Jung and Hecht (2005) examine identity gaps and found that such gaps relate to negative consequences of communication (e.g., feeling understood and communication satisfaction). Single women's perspectives in response to others' views not only indicate the effect on their communication outcomes, but also on their identities. It is clear that single stigma leads to a disconnection between their personal frame, relational frame and communal frame. The tension is generated while their internal identities and social identity are in conflict, forcing them to develop coping mechanisms. In order to reduce and eliminate the identity gap, sheng nv learn to manage the identity frames which are not in harmony with others. They can also alter the identity to resist the discourse giving rise to such disconnection.

I argue that the personal and enacted identity frames are internal, while the communal and relational frames are external. The former two frames are at the individual level of analysis, as individuals forge their own identity, while the latter two frames relate to

relationships and collectivises. The internal and external natures of identity frames give individuals varying levels of agency which allows single women to control their own lives. Social factors influence the power of one's agency. I argue that the amount of agency that an individual possesses and holds in each of the identity frames is on a spectrum with the most agency is held over the personal frame because it is self-defined. A lesser amount of agency is held over the enactment frame compared to the personal frame because it is related to the way that individuals communicate their identity with others. Individuals have little agency over their relational identity because it relies upon people around the individual. This is also true of the communal frame, as this is the identity allocated by society. However, compared to communal identity, relational identity has more agency as it can be influenced by interactions with other people. The change of communal identity occurs slowly and through a joint efforts of agencies.

9.4 Significance of this study

This research began with an interest in the 'leftover women' phenomenon – it is particularly concerned with the lives of unmarried women in a society where marriage and motherhood define what it means to be a woman. Outside of this definition, all other conceptions of womanhood are deemed socially unacceptable. I am concerned by the conception of 'leftover women' as unnatural, a concept proliferated in modern political discourse and popular culture in China. I sought to reveal this conceptualisation as indicative of the power of patriarchy and the strength of the ideology of marriage and motherhood, which deliberately forms and constrains identity composition for single women.

For women, resistance to dominant social identities has become a feminism issue, but we have a lot to learn about the forms and basis of this opposition in China. The case of Chinese 'leftover women' can provide some insight into the struggle against dominant social identities in favour of alternatives or a new identity. I argued that a focus on the management, organisation and negotiation of a stigmatised identity is useful in understanding resistance to the dominant, patriarchal order; but I also suggest an examination of the process of identity composition from the viewpoint of the individual who is marginalised. My interest is not only in how unmarried, child-free women compose a coherent identity and strive for an acceptable social identity in a familistic

society, but to search in collaboration with this group of women, for evidence of transformative identities that can lead to changing dominant social identity. In other words, composing an identity that refutes marital status and inequality as a basis for womanhood but also embraces independence and relational connections. This presents a fundamental challenge to dominant social identities of Chinese women.

New forms of womanhood are evident everywhere, facilitated by material change (e.g. greater economic and educational opportunities and availability of fertility control), structural change (e.g. the dissolution of private and public spheres of activity, the movement of the power from the family to the globally interdependent state) and ideological change (e.g. precipitated by women's movements, advanced social structure, the spread of democratic ideals and gender equality), and a number of points need to be observed. Little empirical attention is paid to the dynamic relationship between the self and the social, between constituting new communal identities and dominant social identities.

Transforming social identities ultimately involves change at the level of personal, enactment and relational identities. This is evident in the formation of new communal identities in contemporary China. An explanation of how this process occurs is offered by paying attention to values and to individual choices made in nurturing or severing relationships with others, as identified by feminist theories (Friedman, 2003). Many practices valued by women have the potential to displace and transform what society values now. Arguably, the collective revaluing of what is important becomes more compelling as the identity of unmarried women in China changes and provides a basis for challenging dominant social identities.

I have supported the idea that the privileging of marriage and motherhood is problematic in the composition of gender identities and emphasised femininity. Such ideologies continue to inform social-political, economic and legal structures. Critically, it shapes the understanding of womanhood. The persistence of single stigma is indicative that these ideologies reinforce the patriarchy in Chinese society. China, I argue, is a difficult place to be a single woman. Achieving womanhood for those who do not wholly conform to the dominant social identities is a significant challenge. Female identity and single identity are uncertain and in conflict. A focus on ideology and identity reveals the

negotiation – where single women reinterpret and redefine the dominant societal identity of women and seek alternatives for being unmarried.

I have argued for a reconceptualisation of autonomy that includes a relational element and a reassessment of women's attachments on the basis of their capacity to make choices. I have also argued for a broader interpretation of the concept of choice in the study of identity. This understanding is informed by the values, plans, priorities and relationships with others which support a lifestyle and are also involved in identity composition. I have been drawn to this interpretation in listening to the disparities in how participants discuss choice. When talking about whether they choose to be single when singleness is a stigmatised identity, women use 'choice' in the colloquial sense of 'freedom to choose'. However, in talking about reviewing their lives as single women, 'choice' is connected to a valuation, a preference of some sort, drawn from values, plans, priorities and relationships.

This research shows that sheng nv are actively engaged in constructing an identity that is not formed by marriage and motherhood, but on the daily experience of being single in China. This is an important personal achievement for Chinese women, but is also on the influence of ideologies in actively challenging and transcending dominant social identities for women and creating alternatives for womanhood. Identity of sheng nv is not a matter of being labelled by their relationship to others (as wife, as mother, as daughter), but rather by oneself in chosen connections with others. This is a composition of self that represents a paradigmatic shift in the view of woman from a passive, dependent object with little control over the direction of her life to womanhood as an active agent, as autonomous but connected to others in accordance with what she values. This shift, I argue, is the essence of the 'leftover women' phenomenon – an increasing number of women are choosing not to get married. It represents a fluctuation in women's identities, which began in the 1980s through awareness and collective work associated with the humanism movement. This was facilitated by legislative, political and economic reform and through online contact with a broader social and economic world.

While I detailed the insidiousness and persistence of the single stigma, I devoted large sections of the work to the variety of meanings that single women attach to singlehood.

All of the women interviewed value their independence, their single lifestyle and most are attached to their single identity. Women's chosen activities and relationships reveal their valued connections with others, a connection which facilitates single identity. Yet, sheng nv's refusal of relationships and activities that are opposed to singleness are also as important in forming and facilitating the single identity. Women demonstrate that a coherent identity can be composed through a variety of relationships with others and not only in the context of dyadic, heterosexual relations. In constructing a coherent identity not based on marriage and motherhood, the self is at the heart of change as single women challenge dominant social identities and emphasised femininity in their daily lives. Challenges are also evident in the range of individual, innovative, non-conformist relationships and arrangements sheng nv have devised to reflect their single identity. However, based on the evidence revealed in women's accounts, even though it is becoming easier to be single in China, the stigmatisation of singleness continues to prevail. It is believed that under the current system and leadership there is very limited space left for other forms of feminism movement other than the top-down version of state feminism China (Angeloff & Lieber, 2012; Wang, 2005). The increasing number of single women can be seen as a discernible movement who actively choose to stay single and seek greater acceptance of singleness as a social identity; this might trigger a new wave of grassroots feminism. The evidence from this study also strongly suggests that being an outsider looking in can be a powerful standpoint to initiate the change of self in the personal level, enacted level, and relational level, allowing transformation of dominant social identity of women and new forms of womanhood to announce themselves.

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Appendix A: Interview guide

1. How do you think society in general views 'leftover women'? 你觉得社会上一般是怎么看“剩女”的？

   Probe: via TV, magazine, social media. 电视，杂志，社交媒体

   What do you think about it? 你怎么看剩女？

   How do you feel about it? 你对于社会一般对“剩女”的看法有什么想法？

   Are there any articles or news items that you think have demonstrated the best treatment of the 'leftover women' phenomenon? 你有没有看到过你觉得是正面的关于“剩女”的新闻？

   Are there any articles or news items that you remember showing the worst treatment of the 'leftover women' phenomenon? 你有没有看到过你觉得是负面的关于“剩女”的新闻？

   Do you regard yourself as a 'leftover women'? 你认为你自己是“剩女”吗？

   Why? 为什么？

   Do you think their views affect you? 你觉得别人的看法会影响你吗？

   In what way? 怎么影响？

2. Is there any difference between (saying) young unmarried women/single women and 'leftover women'? 你觉得青年未婚女性这种称谓和“剩女”有区别吗？

   What are those differences? 什么区别？

   Do you think young unmarried women is really 'left'? (Show statistics— Why does it happen?) 你觉得青年未婚女性真的是“剩下”的吗？（展示性别比—为什么会这样？）

   According to the official definition of 'leftover women', you are one of them, no matter you agree or not. Is there any difference between the image of you and the image of 'leftover women' described in the mass media? What are they? 根据官方对“剩女”的定义，你是“剩女”，不管你同不同意。你觉得你和媒体中的“剩女”有差别么？什么差别？

   The definition of 'leftover women' was given by the department of education, and the Women Federation seems not stand on your side (Show news title on Women's Federation website). What do you think about it? “剩女”的定义是由教育部下的，而且妇联貌似也没有站在你一侧（展示妇联官网的文章），你怎么看？

3. Are there any circumstances with a relatively high possibility of conversation regarding your single relation or unmarried states? (Family gathering? Friend gathering?) 有没有某种情况下，有很高的可能性会提到你的单身和未婚状态？（家庭聚会？朋友聚会？）

   Do your family members (parents, relatives) refer to your 'leftover women' status? 你的家人（父母，亲戚）有没有提及你的“剩女”状况？

How often? 大概多久一次？

What does she/he think of you remaining unmarried being 'leftover'? 他们怎么看你不结婚“剩”的状态？

Do you think so (what behaviors or comments make you think so?) 你同意么？（他们的什么行为或者言论让你觉得是对的？）

No, why? 不同意，是为什么？

Do their views of you being 'leftover' affect you? 他们对于你“剩”的看法影响你么？

In what way? (Compare to the media, who affect more?) 怎么影响（和媒体相比的话，哪个影响的厉害？）

4. What do your close friends think about your 'leftover women' status? 你的朋友怎么看你的“剩女”状况？

   Their unmarried/marital status? 他们是已婚还是未婚？

   (Unmarried: Do they face the problem of being a 'leftover women') （未婚：他们是不是也面临着成为“剩女”？）

   Did you talk about your unmarried 'leftover' status? 你们会不会说到你的“剩女”状况？

   What about your friends? Will you guys discuss the confusion of 'leftover' status together? 你的“剩女”朋友呢？你们在一起的时候会不会谈及“剩女”，怎么谈？

   Do their views of you remaining unmarried being 'leftover' affect you? In what way? 他们对于你“剩”的看法影响你么？怎么影响？

5. Are there any other people (neighbors, colleagues, bosses) in your daily life who influence your idea of who you are or your single 'leftover' status? In what way? 有没有在你生活中的其他人（邻居，同事，领导）他们提及你“剩”的状况？他们对你单身的态度？他们对于你“剩”的看法影响你么？怎么影响？

6. Tell me about yourself. 说说你自己吧，你自己怎么看自己

   Probe: How would your friend (family) describe you? 你的朋友，家人一般怎么描述你？

   Have you ever done a blind date? How often? Under what circumstances? (Dislike? Why agree to attend?) 你有相过亲么？多久一次？是个什么状况？（反感？为什么同意去？）

   If someone is dating you for the first time, what do you want them to know? What do you want to know about them? What do you don't want them to know? What do you don't want to know about them? 如果有人第一次跟你约会的话，你会希望他们知道什么？你希望知道他们什么？你不希望他们知道什么？你不希望知道他们什么？

7. Are there times when you become aware of being married being 'leftover'? 你有没有曾经（突然）意识到/在意自己单身/未婚-被“剩”？

Please describe such incidences. 讲讲？

Probe: When? How often does it happen? Who were you with? 什么时候？多久一次？当你和谁一起的时候？

How did you feel about it? 你当时什么感觉？

When you look back, what do you think of the incidence? 现在你回头想想，你又怎么看呢？

If there was any change over time in the way you thought about your singlehood? When? Why? 你对你自己的关于单身这方面的想法、行为有没有因为时间的推移而改变过? 什么时候产生的变化？为什么会有变化呢？

8. You are unmarried now, did you choose to live in this way (what influence you)? 你现在未婚，为什么选择单身/未婚（主观）？（是有什么影响你么？）

What are pros and cons of remaining single in daily life? 你觉得单身/未婚有设么好处和坏处？

In what occasion? (When? With whom?) 在什么情况下？（什么时候？和谁？）

How do they affect/ relate to you (characters, what you do)? 这些好处和坏处是怎么与你相关或者影响你的？（特点，你做了什么？）

Do you think you will lose/gain such aspects once you are married? 你觉得当你结婚的时候，这些会变么？

Is there any incident that related to your remaining unmarried/single？有没有什么事件跟你单身未婚有关的？

9. What are your reasons for staying single being 'leftover'? 你单身/未婚的原因是什么（客观）？

Probe: Are there any factors that prevent you from marriage? Examples: busy with work, do not like men, against marriage system, marriage law? 有没有什么你不结婚/阻止你结婚的因素？比如太忙？同性恋？反对现有婚宴制度？婚姻法？

Are you currently in a relationship? 你现在是在一段感情里么/谈恋爱？

Yes - Is marriage possible? 是 - 你会和他结婚么？

Have you you talked about it? How? 你们谈过结婚么？怎么谈的？

How do you feel about it? 你怎么看？

No - Are there any reasons? 没 – 为什么？

Do you want to have a steady partner and relationship, why? 你希不希望有一个稳定的另一半，稳定的感情，为什么？

What's your expectation on your partner? 你对你的另一半有什么要求？

10. Do you want to get married in the future? 你将来想结婚吗？

When? Why? 大概什么时候？为什么？

How do you feel about having a child? 你怎么看生个小孩儿？

How do you acquire these ideas? 你为什么会有这样的想法呢？

Do you think these ideas relate to your decision to remain single/desire to get married? 你觉得生小孩儿这种事儿和你（选择）未婚/单身或结婚有关系么?

Have you ever talked about marriage and having a baby with your parents? 你有和你的爸妈讨论过生孩子的问题么？

11. What do you think of unmarried men under the same condition as you as 'leftover women' called 'diamond bachelor' (Compared to 'leftover women', same condition but different gender, totally different treatment) 你怎么看那些和“剩女”一样三高条件下，被称为“钻石王老五” 的单身男？（只是因为性别不同，待遇就完全不同）

Have you ever experience the same sort of thing before? (gender inequality: childhood, adolescent, adult, school, family, occupation) 你之前有没有经历过这种不平等？（性别不平等：儿童、青少年、成人、学校、家里、职业上）

12. What do you think is the womanhood in contemporary China? 你怎么看待当代中国的女人？

Describe (typical) Chinese woman in your generation. 形容一下你这代（典型的）中国女人。

How do you feel about that? 你怎么看？

As for you, what do you think is the most important thing for a woman? 你觉得对于你而言，作为女人最重要的是什么？

What do you think if the most important thing Chinese society counts on Chinese women? 你觉得中国社会最看重女人或者最在意女人的是什么？

13. Are there anything you want to add about your ideas and experiences of being unmarried being 'leftover women' or being treated differently because of gender? 对于你之前的想法和经历有没有什么需要补充的， 对于单身/未婚 -“剩女”或者被区别对待只是因为性别？

Appendix B: Participants' information

Name	Age	Occupation	Education	Salary Range (RMB)	City (origin-present)	Living arrangement
Liyan	36	Engineer	Master of Engineering	500-550K	Baoding - Tianjin	With parents
Shuyu	35	Insurance industry	Master of science in Business	350-400K	Shijiazhuang -Tianjin	With parents
Lijia	28	Accountant	Master of accounting and finance	150-200K	Xi'an	On her own
Lee	33	High school teacher	Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies & Bachelor of Education	150-200K	Wuhan	On her own
Liling	27	Restaurant owner	Master of Business Administration	Above 600K	Shantou -Guangzhou	On her own
Jiwen	34	Politician	PhD in social work	250-300K	Jinhua - Ningbo	With parents
Liao	27	Psychologist	Master of psychology	150-200K	Hangzhou	With parents
Wei	28	Beauty industry	Bachelor of Arts & Bachelor of Science in Nutrition	150-200K	Shanghai	On her own
Xiaochen	31	Producer	Master of Fine Arts	250-300K	Fuzhou - Beijing	With parents
Wangxi	30	Lawyer	Master of Law	250-300K	Taiyuan - Xi'an	On her own
Xiong	29	Athlete	Master of Physical	150-200K	Suzhou - Nanjing	On her own
Yili	35	Coach	PhD of Physical	150-200K	Jinan - Wuhan	On her own
Luoji	35	Real estate	Master of Resource Management	400-450K	Shanghai	On her own
Yiqiao	28	Real estate	Master of Landscape Architecture	250-300K	Hangzhou	On her own
Malin	30	IT industry	Bachelor of computer science & Bachelor of Administration	150-200K	Shenyang	With parents
Yaqin	31	Director	Master of Arts in film studies	200-250K	Beijing	On her own
Fangfei	33	University lecturer	PhD in resources management	200-250K	Shanghai	With parents
Liu	34	Doctor	PhD in Medicine	350-400K	Tianjin - Guangzhou	On her own
Laila	31	Marketing executive	Master of Science in Business Administration	200-250K	Shenzhen	On her own
Zhou	36	HR manager	Bachelor of arts in social work	250-300K	Wuhan - Beijing	On her own

Weiqian	30	Actor	Bachelor of Arts in Performance & in film studies	200-250K	Nanjing	With parents
Bingfang	35	Journalist	MA in journalism	300-350K	Shanghai	On her own
Marui	30	Engineer	PhD in Engineering	200-250K	Guangzhou	On her own
Ting	27	Service industry	Bachelor of Arts in Administration & Music	150-200K	Shenyang	On her own
Xiaozhu	29	Accountant	Master of accounting and finance	150-200K	Wuhan	With parents
Liuqian	30	Lawyer	Master of law	150-200K	Baoji - Xi'an	On her own

Appendix C: Ethic approval

28 March 2018

Verica Rupar
Faculty of Design and Creative Technologies

Dear Verica

Ethics Application: **16/442 Where is home: Exploring the identities of newly immigrated Chinese in New Zealand**

On 15 December 2016 you were advised that your ethics application was approved.

I would like to remind you, that it was a condition of this approval that you submit to AUTEC the following:

- A brief annual progress report using the EA2 Research Progress Report / Amendment Form, available at http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics/forms, or
- A brief Completion Report about the project using the EA3 from, which is available online through http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics/forms. This report is to be submitted either when the approval expires on 15 December 2019 or when the project is completed;

It is also a condition of approval that AUTEC is notified if the research did not proceed or any adverse events occurring during the research. If there has been any alteration to the research, (including changes to any documents provided to participants) then AUTEC approval must be sought using the EA2 form.

To enable us to provide you with efficient service, please use the application number and study title in all correspondence with us. If you have any enquiries about this application, or anything else, please contact us at ethics@aut.ac.nz.

Yours sincerely

Kate O'Connor
Executive Secretary
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: juehongzhang@gmail.com

Appendix D: Demographic information survey

1. Age 年龄 _____

2. Highest Level of Education 最高学历 (please add details 请填写细节)
    1) Bachelor degree 本科学位: _____
    2) Master degree 硕士学位: _____
    3) Doctoral degree 博士学位: _____

3. Where are you from? Where were you born?
    _____

4. Work experience 工作经历
    a) Do you work now 现在有一份工作么？ YES 有工作 or NO 没工作
    If YES, do you work full time or part-time 现有工作是全职还是兼职?
    Full-time 全职 or Part-time 兼职
    _____hrs小时/week周
    Occupation 职业:_____
    How long have you been in this business 这份工作做了多久了?
    _____
    If NO, have you worked before 现在没在工作，之前工作过么?
    YES 之前有工作过 or NO之前没工作过
    If YES, did you work full time or part-time 之前是全职还是兼职?
    Full-time 全职 or Part-time 兼职
    _____hrs小时/week周
    Occupation 职业:_____

    b) When you are unable to describe your work experience based on the above questions, please explain 如果您没有办法根据以上两个问题来描述您的工作经历的话，麻烦您给出解释.
    _____
    _____
    _____

    c) What is your current annual salary (RMB)? (please circle one)
    您现在的年收入是多少(人民币)（请在相关数值打勾）

1) Under 低于 50,000	2) 50,000 – 100,000
3) 100,000 – 150,000	4) 150,000 – 200,000
5) 200,000 – 250,000	6) 250,000 – 300,000
7) 300,000 – 350,000	8) 350,000 – 400,000
9) 400,000 – 450,000	10) 450,000 – 500,000
11) 500,000 – 550,000	12) 550,000 – 600,000
13) 600,000 – 650,000	14) Above 超过 650,000

5. Relationship 情感关系
    a. Are you 您是: 1) heterosexual 异性恋 2) homosexual 同性恋
    3) bisexual 双性恋 4) other 其他 (please explain 请解释)

    _____

    b. Are you currently in a relationship 您现在有在一段感情里么?
    YES 在 or NO 不在
    If YES, how long have you been in this relationship?
    是的话，这段恋爱谈了多久了?

    _____

    If No, have you ever been in a relationship and how long have you been single since last relationship?
    不是的话，您有谈过恋爱吗，以及从上一段感情结束算起您单身多久了？

    _____

6. Living arrangement 居住情况 (Please tick one 请选择一个)
    I. By myself 自己住
    II. Cohabitation 与他人同住
    parents 爸妈 mother 妈妈 father 爸爸
    boyfriend 男朋友 partner 伴侣 friends 朋友
    roommate 室友 others 其他 (please explain请解释)

Thank you very much for participating in the research. 谢谢您的配合

Appendix E: Research information sheet

Project Title 项目名称：

Gender, media and politics: exploring identities of 'leftover women' in contemporary China 性别，媒体，政治：当代中国“剩女”身份探究

An Invitation 邀请：

My name is Chao ZHANG (Christina), and I am undertaking a Ph.D. in Communication Studies at AUT. My study aims at better understanding the interplay between media, gender and politics. I am conducting a series of in-depth, face to face interviews with young unmarried women in China, and I am also using structured observation (shadowing) in this research project. If you are interested in participating in this project and/or need more details about it, please get in touch.

我是张超，现就读博士于奥克兰理工大学传播学院，我的研究致力于通过对中国未婚青年女性进行一系列面对面的深度访谈和组织观察来探究性别、媒体、政治三者之间的相互作用关系。如果您有兴趣参加或者想知道更多的信息，请联系我。

What is the purpose of this research 研究的目的是什么？

This research will explore Chinese 'leftover women's identities in order to understand the phenomenon of 'leftover women', a stigmatized label used to describe Chinese young women who have not been married and are older than 27. This study aims to answer the question how Chinese 'leftover women' define and understand themselves, how their identity is constructed, and what these identity formations indicate about culture and society.

本研究将通过中国“剩女”的身份来进一步探究“剩女”现象。“剩女”作为一个污名化的标签施加在中国 27 岁以上未婚青年女性身上。本研究希望解决中国“剩女”是如何定义和定位自己，她们的身份是如何建构的，以及该种身份的形成对于文化和社会有什么意义。

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research? 为什么被邀请参与该研究？

You have seen the advertisement on my research on Weixin or Weibo and expressed your interest in my research. In order to participate in the study, you need to fulfil the following three criteria: 1) you have never been legally married, 2) your age is between 27 and 36, and 3) you have at least a bachelor degree and an average or above average salary in your city.

您有看到我的研究的广告并且您向我表达过您对这个研究的兴趣。参与该项研究您需要满足三个条件：1）您没有合法结婚过；2）您现在 27-36 岁；3）您至少有本科学位和您拥有（或超过）您所在城市的平均收入。

What will happen in this research? 这个研究将会发生什么？

I would like to interview you and talk about your personal experiences. The interview will be conducted in Chinese. Depending on the interview, I might ask you whether you are interested in participating in the shadowing part of the research. It would include following you to the placed or circumstances that you mentioned as possibilities of referring to your unmarried states. I will record the interview and shadowing, transcribe it for you to check and translate it into English. Then I will qualitatively analyse all the data.

我希望对您进行一次关于您个人经历的访谈。这个访谈将会通过中文进行。根据在访谈中的情况，我可能会问您您是否有兴趣参加遮蔽式观察。遮蔽式观察主要是我会紧密跟随着您出入在采访中您提及的最有可能被提到单身和未婚状况的地点和情况来更好的明白您的经历。我将会我会对我们的谈话/遮蔽式观察观察进行录音，抄录，并且翻译成英文。之后我将定性分析我所得到的数据。

What are the discomforts and risks? How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated? 有什么不适与风险，以及如何解决？

As with all research, there is a chance that confidentiality could be compromised. However, I will take precautions to minimize this risk as much as I can. For example, before the start of the initial interview and obtaining informed consent, I will inform the precise progress of the interview/shadowing to the participants and all participants will have opportunities not to answer questions if they do not want to. Participants can withdraw themselves or any information that they have provided for this project at any time prior to completion of data collection, without being disadvantaged in any way. Pseudo names will be used for all participants.

对于任何研究，都有可能对您造成不适.但是，我会尽全力降低对您造成不适的风险。例如，在访谈/遮蔽式观察开始和签署同意书之前，我会告知您具体的进行过程。您可以拒绝回答您不愿意回答的问题。您可以在数据收集完成之前的任何时间收回您为该项目所提供的任何信息。将会为所有的参与者使用化名。

What are the benefits? 参与有什么好处？

There would be no direct benefit through the participation. However, the study provides an opportunity to speak out woman's experiences rather than just be treated as a muted group filled with negative voices from others. It is expected that the research will contribute to expanding the knowledge and understanding of the relationship between media, gender and politics, by exploring the phenomenon of 'leftover women' in China. It is hoped to provide insight into the life of young unmarried women in China and potentially help better understanding of women's issues in China.

您的参与并不会得到直接利益，但是本研究提供了讲述自己经历的机会而不是作为一个失语群体被他人的否定围绕。希望这个研究能通过探究中国的“剩女”现象,为扩展和理解性别、媒体、政治三者之间的相互作用关系做出贡献，并提供洞察中国青年未婚女性生活的机会以及进一步的理解中国的女性问题。

What compensation is available for injury/negligence? 对受伤和疏忽有什么补偿？

It is an unlikely event of a physical injury as a result of your participation in this study. 在本研究的参与中，不太可能会出现受伤和疏忽的问题。

How will my privacy be protected? 如何保护我的隐私？

Pseudo names will be used for all participants. Data will be stored in an external hard drive securely kept for six years and eliminate after that.

将会为所有的参与者使用化名。数据将会被保存在一个另外的硬盘且在 6 年之后销毁。

What are the costs of participating in this research? 参与研究所需时间有多长？

There will be an initial interview of 10-15 minutes to lay the ground rules and familiarize with one another. Then the main interview will usually be set 60-80 minutes. Time for shadowing depends on how long each circumstance takes. You can decide when and where you would like to be interviewed and shadowed. You will be offered the opportunity to review the transcribed notes to check for their veracity and accuracy.

访谈开始会有 10-15 分钟的介绍和彼此熟悉时间，主要的访谈部分会有 60-80 分钟。遮蔽式观察的时间由具体情况决定。您可以决定访谈和被观察的时间和地点。您可以之后检查抄录的笔记来确认精确度和准确度。

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation? 多长时间考虑邀请？

I would appreciate hearing back from you for the interview. 希望您在两周之内回复我对访谈的邀请。

How do I agree to participate in this research? 我如何同意参与该研究？

Please contact me and arrange the time and place of interview and shadowing mutually acceptable. Participants will sign the Consent Form before the interview and shadowing start.

请联系我来安排彼此接受的访谈和遮蔽式观察的具体时间和地点。您会在访谈和遮蔽式观察开始之前签署同意书。

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research? 是否会收到研究结果的反馈？

I will send you a summary of findings unless you indicate otherwise on the consent form, which you will be required to sign before the interview begins.

我将会发给您一份研究成果的总结，除非您在签署同意书时提出了其他的要求。

What do I do if I have concerns about this research? 如果对该研究有问题的话？

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Associate Professor Verica Rupar, verica.rupar@aut.ac.nz, 921 9999, ext 6407

任何关于这个项目本身的问题应该在第一时间通知项目负责人 Associate Professor Verica Rupar，verica.rupar@ut.ac.nz, 921 9999, ext 6407

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEC, Kate O'Connor, ethics@aut.ac.nz , 921 9999 ext 6038.

研究行为的问题应该通知 AUTEC 的执行秘书 Kate O' Connor, ethics@aut.ac.nz , 921 9999, ext 6038.

Appendix F: Consent form

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性别，媒体，政治：当代中国“剩女”身份探究

○ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Research Information Sheet dated _____.
我已阅读并明白该项目信息表中所提供的信息，时间_____。

○ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
我有机会问询问题并得到解释；

○ I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and observation and that they will also be audiotaped, transcribed, and translated.
我清楚在访谈和观察中会有笔记记录，而且会被录音，转录和翻译；

○ I understand that I may withdraw myself or any information that I have provided for this project at any time prior to completion of data collection, without being disadvantaged in any way.
我清楚我可以在数据收集完成之前的任何时间收回我为该项目所提供的任何信息；

○ If I withdraw, I understand that all relevant information including tapes and transcripts, or parts thereof, will be destroyed.
如果我退出，我清楚所有相关的信息，包括磁带、转录都将会被销毁

○ I agree to take part in this research.
我同意参加该项研究；

○ I wish to receive a copy of the report from the research: Yes○ No○
我希望收到一份该研究的报告（请选一项）：是○ 否○

Participant's signature 参与者签名：……

Participant's name 参与者姓名：……

Participant's Contact Détails 参与者联系方式：……

Date 日期: ……