Chinese fathers' and mothers' views of their daughters' marriage and fertility

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ABSTRACT

China is dominated by collectivist culture, which means a person is independent only when building a complete family by getting married and having a baby. However, the phenomenon of late marriage shows a disparity from traditional norms. Chinese parents often serve as defenders of traditional norms and intervene in their children's love and marriage.

The current research adopted a qualitative case study approach to explore how parents of "leftover women" thought of the unmarried daughters' marriage and fertility, what factors affected their ideas, and how their perceptions differed by gender. Through in-depth interviews with 32 parents of unmarried women in their late 20s and 30s, this study examined how tradition entangled with personal marriage experience and social-economic policies in the process of transformation of Chinese society to shape parents' perceptions of daughters' marriage and fertility. This research also provided a gender prism to explicitly address gender differences between mothers' and fathers' attitudes toward the daughters' marriage and fertility.
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1 INTRODUCTION

From the perspective of the traditional Chinese, the happy life is often quantified as some indicators: studying hard at school, obtaining a stable and decent job after graduation, getting married and having a baby before 30, which is called by Confucius: "At thirty, I had planted my feet firm upon the ground (sanshi erli)." In a society dominated by collectivist culture, a person becomes an independent unit only when building a family by getting married and having a baby. However, the late marriage and low marriage rate in the past decade present a large disparity from traditional norms. Many Chinese parents serve as the defenders of traditional norms and greatly intervene in their children's marriage and fertility. A well-known dating website in China, Zhenai.com, conducted an online survey about the views of 140 million members on marriage and reported that 84.78% of single people had an experience of being pushed into marriage by others, and 55% of them said that the age of 26-30 was the peak time for being pushed.¹

Although there are 30 million more single men than women in the existing marriage market (Brandt, Li, Turner & Zou, 2018; Wei & Zhang, 2011), the delayed marriage of women is particularly conspicuous. Chinese mainstream media even developed a stigmatizing phrase "leftover women (shengnv)" to refer to unmarried women over 28 years old. Since women's twenties are the best decade for appearance and childbirth from a biological perspective, parents are more anxious to urge their unmarried daughter to get married (Tian & Davis, 2019).

Prior studies (Amato, 2010; Hu, 2016; Jennings, Axinn & Ghimire, 2012; Wang & Wu, 2013; Wong, 2005) related to parental involvement in child's marriage either used quantitative research methods to examine how parents' identities and backgrounds affected the children's mate selection or adopted qualitative techniques to explore parental attitudes as a whole from the perspective of unmarried women in their late 20s and 30s. Few scholars conducted studies directly interviewing the parents of unmarried women to understand their views on the unmarried status of their daughters. Besides, very little research focused on parental attitudes in the framework of macro-social contexts. Thus, in this research, I filled the gap by focusing on how parents of unmarried daughters thought of the unmarried daughter's marriage and fertility. Also, what factors affected their ideas and how? And were there any gender differences between fathers' and mothers' views of their daughters' marital prospects?

In the study, I adopted a qualitative case study approach to examine parents' perceptions of daughters' marriage and fertility and factors contributing to parents' perceptions. In-depth interviews were conducted with 32 Chinese fathers and mothers who had an unmarried daughter over 28 years old. Six themes were developed, including (1) passive acceptance, (2) urban-rural gap in parents' perceptions, (3) tradition as the background color, (4) personal experience with marriage, (5) family planning policy, (6) socioeconomic transitions caused by the market economy.

In the following sections, I first review the late marriage in China, the changes in Chinese women's status and gender role, the dilemma faced by Chinese women in the marriage market, "leftover women" and parental involvement in daughters' marriage and childbirth. Next, I
introduce my methodology, including the conceptual framework and research method. Finally, I argue that even though the tradition is the background color of each parent facing marriage issue of their unmarried daughter, growing up and living in a society going through drastic social shifts, they are deeply affected by the macro-social contexts. As a result, most of parents resort to "passive acceptance." It also highlights how different gender roles influence parents' attitudes toward unmarried daughters' marriage.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Late Marriage in China

In recent decades, late marriage has become a global trend (Popenoe, 1993; Sassler & Lichter, 2020; Singh, 1974, Smock & Schwartz, 2020; Teachman, Tedrow & Crowder, 2000). China is also experiencing it. Even though the definition of late marriage varies with different cultures, late marriage refers to the unmarried status of young people who have been mature in every aspect of life (Olatundun, 2013). In China, when a man gets married after 25 years old and a woman gets married after 23 years old, it is a late marriage. According to People's Daily, from 2006 to 2012, the age of first marriage concentrated in 20-24 years old; since the beginning of 2013, it has gone up to 25-29 years old. A poll made by the China Youth Daily Social Survey

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2 For more information about "age of late marriage", see 晚婚年龄, https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E6%99%9A%E5%A9%9A%E5%B9%B4%E9%BE%84/7841233.

3 Quoted from Weibo, "中国人婚姻数据" (Zhongguoren hunyin shuju, Chinese marriage data), https://m.weibo.cn/detail/4273544412347331 (accessed on 15 August 2018).
Center on 1764 young people aged 18-35 showed that 26-29 years old was the most common marriage age for the young people interviewed (65.1\%)\textsuperscript{4}.

As China is geographically large, there are many factors, such as economic development and ethnic difference, affecting marriage culture, which develop regional heterogeneity within China (Ji & Yeung, 2014). Since the implementation of the market economy in the 1980s, the unbalanced levels of regional development have caused disparities in modernization. Generally, China is divided into three parts: the East, Central, and West. The East region, including ten provincial-level administrative regions along the eastern coast, has the most developed economy, the highest degree of urbanization, and relatively higher educational level, while the Central and the West are less developed in economy and education. The developed eastern region has also received a large number of immigrants from the Central and West regions (Ji & Yeung, 2014; Liang, 2016). The different levels of economy and education bring about the disparity of culture: people from the East are more open-minded and people from the Central and West are more traditional (Yuan, 2012). Furthermore, the local tradition affected by specific religion and ethnicity also plays a significant role in regional heterogeneity in marriage. For example, Guangxi (the Zhuang ethnic autonomous region) is an underdeveloped western province, but young men there are the latest to get married. Ji and Yeung (2014) conjectured that this may be closely related to the ethnic minority group. In general, people in the wealthy eastern provinces marry late than those

\textsuperscript{4} Quoted from "26-29 岁是受访青年最认可的结婚年龄段"(26-29sui shoufang qingnian zuirenke de jiehun nianlingduan, 26-29 years is the most recognized age group for marriage), http://baby.sina.com.cn/health/mmjk/hzbhy/2019-08-30/doc-ihtctcm4443432.shtml (accessed on 30 August 2019).
in central and western provinces, urbanites marry late, and education delays marriage (Ji & Yeung, 2014).

However, marriage is a gendered issue. Due to the traditional expectations of gender roles and the close relationship between marriage and fertility, the impact of marriage on women is much greater than that on men (Gui, 2016; Ji, 2015). Late marriage among women is particularly notable and late marriage is directly related to postponed childbirth (Gui, 2016). From 1990 to 2017, the average age of Chinese women's first marriage has increased by more than four years, from 21.4 to 25.7, and it has continued to rise; the average age at first birth also increased from 23.4 to 26.8. In Shanghai, the average first marriage ages of men and women were 30.3 and 28.4 in 2015, respectively, an increase of 5.0 and 5.4 years compared to 2005; the age of women bearing the first child was 29. Ye (1995) analyzed the changes in women's marriage age in Hebei Province from 1953 to 1984 and argued that the change in the first marriage age of Chinese women was the result of the transformation of the marriage concept, the implementation of population policies, and the socio-economic development over the past few decades. He found that even rural women who had autonomy in their original families married earlier than urban women, while the marriage time of urban women had nothing to do with traditional marriage values and systems, but with the socio-economic development and the implementation of family planning policy.

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6 Quoted from "女性初婚年龄已超28岁，大数据揭示40年来上海女性的这些变化" (Nvxing chuhun nianling yichao 28sui, dashuju jieshi 40nianlai shanghai nvxing de zhexie bianhua, Women's first marriage is over 28 years old, big data reveals these changes in Shanghai women over 40 years), http://www.spesc.sh.cn/n1939/n1944/n1945/n2300/u1ai179768.html (accessed on 28 November 2018).
Many researchers have explored the factors contributing to Chinese women's late marriage and fertility, including the increase of educational level, wide participation in employment, rapid changes of the social environment and sexual attitudes, far-reaching transformation in values relating to marriage and family life, technological advances and practical pressure (Cai & Feng, 2014; Dai & Lin, 2014; Jones, 2012; Peng, 2017; Qian & Qian, 2014; Retherford, Ogawa & Matsukura, 2001; Sha, 1994; Waite, 1995; Wang, 2010; Wang & Wu, 2013; Yu & Xie, 2013).

The female educated population in China has increased significantly. From 1931 to 1945, women with tertiary education accounted for only 0.46% of the total female population. After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, many women were literate through universal primary and secondary education. In the 1980s, nine-year compulsory education became widespread, and ordinary young people could attend junior high school. Since the 1990s, the rapid development of higher education has promoted an increase in enrollment rates. The proportion of female students in Chinese colleges and universities increased from 23.6% in 1980 to 35.4% in 1995. By 2004, the proportion of female students in undergraduate education had risen to 45.7\%. The proportion of women receiving higher education has also continued to rise. The number of female postgraduates in higher education in 2017 was 1.278 million, accounting for 48.4% of all postgraduates\(^8\). Due to the large opportunity cost of marriage for college students, marriage age is


naturally delayed (Wang, 2010). Sha (1994) investigated women's status by conducting a sample survey of ten provinces and cities in China and found that the average age at first marriage increased by one year for every increase in the education level of women. As the educational level increased, the likelihood of getting married increased among men but decreased among women, especially among those over age 30 (Qian & Qian, 2014; Wang & Wu, 2013).

Better education brings more professional women. By the end of 2017, the proportion of women in the whole employed population in China was 43.5%\textsuperscript{9}. In the past, women depended on their husbands for financial support. As women go outside and participate in the public sphere, they become economically independent and do not rely on marriage for survival (Jones, 2012; Retherford, Ogawa & Matsukura, 2001, Waite, 1995). Well-educated women even have more social capital and earn more money than men (Qian & Qian, 2014).

Meanwhile, the whole society, especially big cities, has become more diverse. Non-marital sex and cohabitation are common and gradually accepted by the general public. (Smock, 2000, Waite, 1995). In the relatively conservative era, marriage meant the beginning of sexual behavior and fertility (Cherlin, 2004). Pre-marital sex or unmarried births would be condemned by the public. As sexual attitude has changed, if the family rights and obligations conferred by law are not considered, non-marriage has no side effect on sexual behavior and fertility (Dai & Lin, 2014; Wang, 2010). Yu and Xie (2017) revealed that premarital cohabitation in China is in the stage of

\footnote{9 Quoted from "统计局: 女性就业占全社会逾四成" (Tongjiju: nuxing jiuye zhan quanshehui yusicheng, Bureau of Statistics: Female employment accounts for more than 40% of society), http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-11/21/content_5342140.htm (accessed on 21 November 2018).}
transition from marginal behavior to prelude to marriage, and the proportion of cohabitation has been gradually increasing.

Besides, compared with their parent's generation, young people today were born during the one-child policy and grew up as the "little emperor" of the family; therefore, they have a "strong independence" and "a sense of entitlement" (Fong, 2004). As the only child influenced by the individualistic culture, they are not looking for a spouse to live a mundane life together (dahuo guorizi), but a soul mate who is physically attractive and emotionally connected (Zheng, 2017). Zheng (2017) interviewed 36 women and found that feeling (ganjue) was the most important criteria for women's mate selection and the elements constituting feeling were affection, physical attractiveness, shared value, and respect for women's need for egalitarianism. When no one could meet these "picky" standards, they preferred to enjoy the present and pursue a comfortable and free lifestyle (Chen, 1993, Cherlin, 2004).

The development of reproductive technology and the progress of the law have also enabled women to better control their reproductive cycle and guarantee their legal rights as single mothers. For one thing, the development of modern contraceptives allows women to choose when to get pregnant and women do not have to rush to get married because of unwanted pregnancy (Gui, 2016). The assisted reproductive technology, such as egg-freezing and artificial insemination, technically assures women's late fertility. For another, even if a woman chooses to raise a child
without a legitimate father, the Marriage Law protects the same right of the non-marital child as the marital child\(^{10}\).

In addition to voluntary reasons for delayed marriage, many late marriages are caused by involuntary factors, such as practical and emotional considerations. From the practical perspective, China's economic reform has eliminated the state planning economy and adopted the market as the main principle of resource allocation since 1978 (Yu & Xie, 2017). The economic development brought by the market economy also put huge pressure on people. For example, the housing reform shifted China's housing system from the distribution of public housing to independent purchase. The process of housing commercialization has caused housing prices to rise steadily (Tian & Davis, 2019). Given the Chinese tradition of having an independent flat when getting married, the high cost of marriage discourages young people from rushing into marriage. Yu and Xie (2017) reported that both males and females in higher-price areas got married late, especially in large cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou.

From an emotional perspective, some women fear marriage because of the high divorce rate. In recent years, the divorce rate in China has continued to rise, from 2.0% in 2010 to 3.4% in 2019\(^ {11}\). According to a survey conducted by the Youth Voice's Marriage and Love Service Committee in 2018, 50% of young men said they were "very secure" about marriage, compared to

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\(^{10}\) For more information about "children born out of wedlock", see 非婚生子女, https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E9%9D%9E%E5%A9%9A%E7%94%9F%E5%AD%90%E5%A5%B3

only 26.56% of young women\textsuperscript{12}. As a female interviewee explained, "now there are a lot of reports of marriage cheating, domestic violence, and high divorce rate. It seems that women should be more independent instead of relying too much on men and marriage." It can be seen that compared with young men, young women have more concerns about the stability of marriage and lack a sense of security about marriage.

2.2 The Changes in Chinese Women's Status and Gender Role

Given that the late marriage of Chinese women is closely related to the changes in women's status and gender roles, it is worth reviewing the history of changes in the status and gender roles of Chinese women.

In the patriarchal feudal society, women had long been in the subordinate roles and were required to comply with the doctrines of "Three Obedience and Four Virtues." Before the marriage, women were the property of the family, parents arranged their marriage and traded them for bride price. After marriage, women were poured-out water (\textit{jiachuqu de nver, pochuqu de shui}) and no longer a member of her natal family (Eklund, 2013). Married daughters should take the family responsibilities of caring for the husband, raising children, and supporting the elderly (Peng, 2017).

At the beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, social and political transformations provided institutional support for the changes in women's roles. In 1911, the Xinhai Revolution overthrew the autocratic monarchy of the Qing Dynasty. In 1919, Chinese scholars and college students

\textsuperscript{12} Quoted from "当代青年群体婚恋观调查报告" (\textit{Dangdai qingnian qunti hunlianguan diaocha baogao}, Survey Report on Contemporary Youth Groups' Outlook on Marriage), http://sns.qnzs.youth.cn/css/docs/qnzsresearch0523.pdf.
initiated the May Fourth Movement to fight against imperialism, criticize traditional culture, and follow the principles of "Democracy" and "Science." These movements not only played the prelude to the political revolution but also radically criticized the feudal marriage system and formed an unprecedented trend of marriage reform. The values of free love, freedom of marriage, equality between husbands and wives, and family democracy were gradually established among intellectuals and young students, including women (Gui, 2016; Zuo, 2005).

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, in order to thoroughly develop social production and demonstrate the superiority of socialism, the state promoted the status and rights of women in the form of Constitution and a series of other laws, laying the most important foundation for the liberation of Chinese women (Cai & Feng, 2014). For example, the "Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China" promulgated in 1950 abolished the arranged marriages and the value of male superiority and legitimized the freedom of marriage, monogamy, and gender equality (Tian & Davis, 2019). At the same time, the state established the work-unit (danwei) system and included urban women in it. Women were encouraged to develop working skills, create social wealth, and remove the backward thought of relying on men. In order to encourage women to work, the state built a large number of nursing rooms, child care centers, and kindergartens to provide convenience for working mothers (Zuo, 2005). The number of female workers in cities across the country surged from 3.286 million in 1957 to 10.87 million in 1960 (Jiang, 2000).

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the authority set off a social campaign "Destroy the Four Olds" to break down "old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits" of
Confucianism. The slogan "women can hold up half the sky" subverted the traditional gender norms that women must be "weak", "gentle" and "docile", which eliminated gender difference and turned men and women into genderless comrades. "Iron Girl" became the highest evaluation of Chinese women at that time (Peng, 2017). Therefore, before the 1980s, the communist party had largely destroyed the traditional mode of "male-breadwinner/female-caregiver" and encouraged women to step into the public sphere by undertaking social reproduction functions and socializing housework, but the traditional gender norm still managed the private sphere (Ji, 2015; Zuo, 2005).

After the Cultural Revolution, the reform and opening up led by Deng Xiaoping transformed China from a highly centralized planned economy to a socialist market economy (Cai & Feng, 2014; Ji, 2015; Peng, 2017). As a large number of 'sent-down' youth returned to the city, women's employment became a serious problem. In the meantime, the guideline of the economic-oriented development stripped the social subsidiary functions of the work-unit, and the authority encouraged family, especially women, to be responsible for family care, which caused the separation of public and private spheres again. Gender inequality that had not been completely eliminated was revived and traditional femininity once again became mainstream. What's worse, women were required to be dutiful wives and loving mothers while working. The escalation of work-family conflicts made women face stronger dilemmas.

In short, compared to feudal society, women's position has improved greatly in law. However, on the practical level, the reforms of the 20th century did not change gender inequity completely and women's gender role has gone back and forth according to the social transitions.
Traditionally, China was known for the family model of "men are breadwinners and women are caregivers," while women's participation in social labor helped to form a dual-earner family model. When the state required women to participate in social production, it formulated policies to reduce women's burden of family care. When economic development became a national priority, the state removed the social subsidiary function of the work-unit and encouraged women to take on the family responsibility which led to intense work-family conflicts faced by women. In any case, the expectation of women's roles as main caregivers and nurturers has never changed.

2.3 The Dilemma Faced by Chinese Women in the Marriage Market

Due to the family planning policy requiring each family to only have one child and the ingrained idea of son preference, sex-selective abortions, female infanticide, abandonment of female infants, and non-registration of female infants have become a serious problem in China. Millions of "missing girls" have brought about the demographic changes in the gender structure and created an extremely skewed sex ratio (Gui, 2016; Ji & Yeung, 2014; Loh & Remick, 2015; South & Trent, 2010; Yeung & Hu, 2013). Since the 1980s, the sex ratio at birth in China had continued to rise. It was 108 in 1982, 111 in 1990, 116 in 2000, and 121 in 2004. Although the sex ratio at birth has declined year by year since 2008, the current sex ratio at birth is still uneven (Loh & Remick, 2015). Nationwide, there are 30 million more young men than young women in the existing marriage market, which is called the "marriage squeeze" (Brandt, Li, Turner & Zou, 2018; Wei & Zhang, 2011). Theoretically, when the pool of potential male partners expands, women
become scarce resources and have more opportunities to find a satisfactory partner (Trent & South, 2011). But the reality is women are not willing to get married. Why?

On the one hand, the double standard of mate-selection makes it less likely for women to obtain an ideal partner. According to Trivers' (1996) Parental Investment Theory, women devote more resources to the next generation and could produce fewer children than men, so they are more sensitive to resource and socioeconomic status, while men have limited access to fertile women, they are more sensitive to characteristics that reflect reproductive capacity. Researches of China's mate selection (Chang, Wang, Shackelford & Buss, 2011; Toro-Morn & Sprecher, 2003; Wang, Yao & Zhou, 2015) have reached similar conclusions. Chang et al. (2011) compared the modern group with a group in the middle-1980s and demonstrated that despite some key changes, women still cared more about social resources and men still cared more about attractive appearance and age. Therefore, women practice hypergamy and men practice hypogamy in mate selection, and more marriages involve better-educated, older men and less educated, younger women (Jones, 2012; Qian & Qian, 2014). In this sense, poorer and less educated men become the most inferior group whether in the marriage market or the arena of life because they are at the bottom of the pyramid. But it is also hard for well-educated women with good financial status to meet a proper spouse because few men are standing higher than them.

Ironically, well-educated unmarried women at the top of the pyramid are stigmatized as "leftover", while as the most disadvantaged group, poorer and less educated men are never defamed as "leftover", the worst description is "bare branch (guanggun)"; instead, a marriageable
but unmarried man, especially educated and successful, is considered as "diamond bachelor (zuanshi wanglangwu)" or "golden bachelor (huangjin danshenhan)". From this narrative, we can glimpse the stigma encountered by women in the Chinese marriage market.

On the other hand, the conflict between the improved women's status caused by social transitions and culturally ingrained gender roles has also contributed to the difficulties of women's mate selection. Hochschild and Machung (1989) developed the concept of "stalled revolution" in The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home. They demonstrated that compared to the speed at which women participated in the public sphere, especially in masculine fields, men joined the family more slowly, which left professional women facing work and family conflicts alone and made them feel relative deprivation and dissatisfaction with their marriage. This concept could also be adapted to China. As mentioned in the previous section, the model of labor division has been restructured due to the participation of women in the public sphere and a dual-earner family model is common. However, in the private sphere, the tradition of "women are caregivers" still persists stubbornly, thus for working mothers, it has shifted from mainly performing domestic work to shouldering the dual responsibilities of family and work without men's help. Yang (2014) reported that from 1990 to 2010, Chinese women's housework hours had always greatly exceeded men's, and more and more men tended to do fewer or none household chores. Even though many sociologists (Frisco & Williams, 2003; Piña & Bengston, 1993; Wang, 2010) have argued that sharing household work is directly proportional to marriage happiness and
the family relying on the wife for housework are more likely to have low-quality marriages, it does not change the reality.

Apart from household work, women have to conform to the expectation of a "good mother." Based on a discourse analysis of related texts in the popular parenting magazine "Parents Must Read (fumu bidu)" since 1980, Tao (2016) found that the media representation of the idealized mother image varied a lot. In the 1980s, magazines advocated father and mother to parent together with grandparents. In the 1990s, titles such as "mother", "mummy" and "female" appeared more frequently, the emphasis was placed on the quality of mothers and fathers disappeared, which meant that parenting increasingly became a mother's primary responsibility. Since the 21st century, the role of mothers in magazines has been diversified. Good mothers should be more rational, follow experts' suggestions, use childcare goods and services, and raise happy children. This finding is consistent with Hays' (1996) concept of "intensive mothering," which is an ideology of making the mother mainly take charge of raising children and the process is "child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive."

Since 2016, the phrases "widowed marriage (sangoushi hunyin)" and "widowed childrearing (sangoushi yuer)" began to appear on the Internet. Despite no consensus on the definition, the key point is that due to the lack of the father's contribution, the mother takes on the main parenting

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responsibility and does most of the domestic work. The intention of these terms is to highlight that although the marriage persists, the father rarely participates in daily family life (Guo, 2019).

In sum, even if the skewed sex ratio is beneficial to women in a marriage market, more and more women forgo marriage if men cannot meet their requirements and do not share the domestic work (Sassler & Lichter, 2020).

2.4 "Leftover Women" and Relevant Studies

The phenomenon of women's late marriage developed a new term "leftover women (sheng nv)," which became one of the 171 new words promulgated by the Chinese Ministry of Education in 2007. "Leftover women" refers to women who are over 28 years old, have already passed what is considered "marriageable" age, but are still unmarried. Chinese society and mainstream media default that no matter how outstanding the women are, those who fail to marry and produce offspring are incomplete women and supposed to be labeled as "leftover". When single women are stigmatized, it indicates the subordinate role of women and anxiety about women's marriage in the patriarchal society (Qian & Qian, 2014).

The phenomenon of "leftover women" inspired some scholars to explore it specifically. To (2013) developed four types of "leftover women" according to different marriage views, expectations for partners' economic values, gender role perceptions, and mate selection strategies. Both "Traditionalist" and "Maximizer" types followed traditional values to look for a breadwinner, but "Maximizers" were more likely to get married because they adopted certain selection strategies.

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such as hiding their accomplishment or meeting Western men. "Satisficers" and "Innovators" didn't care about the partner's social status and were willing to share financial responsibility. Yet, "Satisficers" still attempted to get married, whereas "Innovators" had already accepted nontraditional relationship forms.

Some studies emphasized the strong ambivalence of unmarried women about marriage and their struggle between modern and traditional values (Gaetano, 2014; Gui, 2016; Ji, 2015; Peng, 2017; To, 2013). On the one hand, they were encouraged to study further and work hard, be independent and confident; on the other hand, they insisted on traditional values: a traditional relationship, a breadwinner with higher financial status, bearing a child for filial piety. Some topics were explored only for women (Gui, 2016; Ji, 2015). For example, a double standard of aging in the marriage market. Women felt unfair when selecting a mate because aging was a disadvantage for women even though they were well-educated and competent. Women also went through career-and-family conflicts. Many women tried to balance their roles carefully in the public/private sphere: professional in the workplace and living up to the expectation of the traditional gender roles simultaneously. When two roles conflicted, most women chose to sacrifice their careers and prioritize the family. A few scholars (Gui, 2016; Ji, 2015) reported how women reacted to the pressure from their parents and found that despite the generation gap, most participants were rational and calm about parental pressure on marriage issue: they understood parents' emotions but still stuck to their own philosophy.
Some scholars concentrated on the certain way Chinese mainstream media portrays women, which has strengthened the hegemonic ideology (Feldshuh, 2018; Fincher, 2014; Peng, 2017; Wang & Zang, 2014). Wang and Zang (2014) summarized four types of "leftover women" from three TV series. The first one was the woman who was broken up by a man in late 20s and missed the best time to get married. The second type was the workaholic too busy to establish a relationship. The third type was the perfectionist holding too many illusions about marriage. The fourth type was the materialist looking for a rich husband. All four types presented a deep-rooted stereotype that women's ultimate destination was a happy marriage. Fincher (2014) discussed how women were stigmatized as "leftover women" by state media and contended that the reason why the state advocated the discourse of "leftover women" was to stabilize the society when the sex ratio was imbalanced and to urge well-educated women to marry and have "high-quality" babies. Another study by Feldshuh (2018) analyzed three family ethics dramas and also pointed out that the discourse of "leftover women" was not based in reality but conveyed a desire to deflect attention away from a surplus of young, unmarried men towards educated women in order to maintain the patriarchal society and alleviate the worries caused by changes in gender dynamics and power structure.

2.5 Parental Involvement in Daughter's Marriage and Childbirth

Even though relevant laws have abolished arranged marriages since 1950, the traditional idea of participating in the children's relationship and marriage is still deeply rooted in Chinese
parents' minds. When the expectation of traditional norms is inconsistent with the fact of late marriage, Chinese parents usually serve as the defender of traditional norms.

2.5.1 Family-oriented culture in China

China is a traditional agricultural country with rich natural resources and a long history of farming. Since agricultural society has high requirements for natural climate and political stability, the Chinese developed a model of the self-sufficient small-scale peasant economy and family production to improve the capability of resisting risk. Fei (1985) summarized four reasons why Chinese farmers gather in villages in "From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society." First, every family has a small farming area which is called small-scale peasant economy, so if people live together, the house and farm will not be too far apart. Then, irrigated agriculture needs water to keep vegetables and grains growing, living together makes it easy to cooperate. In addition, in terms of safety, it is easier to defend with more people. Lastly, according to the principle of equal inheritance of land, the sons inherit the legacy of their ancestors separately, which allows the family to accumulate from generation to generation in one place and becomes quite large villages. Thus, the Chinese create a social organization form based on blood and geographic ties, and family becomes the basic unit of social life (Cheng & Chan, 2006; Gui, 2016).

When analyzing the Chinese family relationship, Fei (1985) compared it to Western social structure and put forward the concept of "the differential mode of association (chaxu gefu)." He argued that the Western social structure is like a bundle of firewood in the field, while the Chinese social structure is like ripples when a stone is thrown on the water. The closer the ripples to the
center, the more intimate it is related to the center. From his perspective, the relationship between parents and children is the closest and most entangled one. Besides, patrilineality has been dominant in China for thousands of years, which means the family must pass on the patrilineal surname, have a male heir, and worship the patrilineal ancestor (Eklund, 2013). Because the expansion of family happens only through the patrilineal side, son preference becomes the most conducive strategy. Therefore, the main axis in a family is vertical between father and son, not horizontal, and the marital relationship is secondary (Fei, 1985; Lui, 2019).

Furthermore, the traditional culture represented by Confucianism strengthens the ethical relationship between family members (Tian & Davis, 2019). On the one hand, given the primitive scientific technology and unsound social welfare, the level of productivity depended on the number of male family members, only sons could meet the requirement of family production and social security. Hence, the Chinese believed that the more sons, the more blessings (duozi duofu), and raising sons could guarantee you live comfortably when you are getting old (yanger fanlao). On the other hand, filial piety, or Xiao, was developed to be the core value to maintain Chinese family ties and to ensure parents have absolute authority to direct their children's behaviors and the elderly could be respected and looked after (Cheng & Chan, 2006). As the proverb goes, "filial piety is the most important of all virtues (baishan xiao weixian)." In ancient China, "filial piety" was manifested as obedience to the absolute authority of parents; well-behaved or obedient was considered as extremely high praise for a child, and independence, especially mind independence was considered as rebellious, a threat to parents. Sons should take the responsibility to get married,
have a son to continue his family name, and look after elders to express respect and obedience to the elderly (Cheng & Chan, 2006; Ikels, 2004; Whyte, 1997). Those young people who could not live up to the requirements of filial piety would lose their reputations in the community and be condemned by the locals and neighbors (Ikels, 2004).

Among all the standards of filial piety, producing offspring is the most significant. As an old saying declared: "there are three unfilial acts, having no descendent is the worst (buxiao yousan wuhou weida)." Even though the marital relationship plays a minor role in the family, the family starts from marriage, and the function of producing offspring is greatly valued in Chinese marriage. Chinese maintain that everyone should do the things that are supposed to be done at a particular age, which is reflected in a saying: a man should get married at a certain age and so should a woman (nanda danghun, nvda dangjia). Moreover, traditional Chinese marriages are often completed under the orders of parents and the words of matchmakers (fumu zhiming, meishuo zhiyan). The most important principle of mate selection is the matching door (mendang hudui), which means two families are well-matched in social and economic status (Hu, 2016; Tian & Davis, 2019).

2.5.2 Parental influence and involvement in child's marriage

Parental perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors greatly affect children's behaviors (Jennings, Axinn & Ghimire, 2012). A large number of quantitative studies have investigated the effect of parental background on children's marriage (Amato, 2010; Hu, 2016; Wang & Wu, 2013; Wong, 2005; Yeung & Hu, 2013). Amato (2010) argued that adults from single-parent family had
more problems in their own families. Wang & Wu (2013) found that the higher the educational level of the Chinese parents, the later the age at first marriage of the children, and fathers engaged in technical occupations had a delayed effect on the children's marriage age. Hu (2016) explored to what extent the occupational status and hukou (household registration) of the newlyweds' parents had an influence on the new couples' matching and found that an individual's father and the father-in-law often had the same hukou, both in urban or in rural areas, which reflected a matching marriage to some extent. When focusing on women, Wong (2005) examined the determinants of the age at first marriage among Hong Kong women and found that the educational level of the women's parents was positively associated with women's marriage timing because well-educated parents were more likely to emphasize the importance of education and support their daughters to study further.

Chinese parents also pay much attention to the child's dating and relationship (Hu, 2016; Singh, 1974; Tian & Davis, 2019; Wang & Wu, 2013). Nowadays, you can see a lot of parents in matchmaking malls of the public parks regularly. They print out adult children's personal information and communicate with other parents to match their child up (Gui, 2016; Zheng & Ho, 2016). According to the Marriage View Report conducted by Shiji Jiayuan, 77% of single men and 63% of single women had the experience of going on a blind date arranged by their parents. Parents also borrow traditional ideas to persuade their children. In the analysis of reasons for

15 Quoted from "世纪佳缘发布七夕婚恋观报告，超六成单身曾被父母介绍过相亲对象" (Shiji Jiayuan fabu qixi hunlian baogao, chaoliucheng danshen cengbei fumu jieshaoguo xiangqin daixiang, Shiji Jiayuan released a report on Qixi Marriage View, over 60% of singles have been introduced by their parents), http://finance.ifeng.com/c/7oyCvDDe9i4 (accessed on 8 August 2019).
Chinese-style forced marriage, "it's time to get married" came first and some parents still pressured their children to get married by saying "if you don't get married and have a child, you are not filial\(^{16}\)."

It is not hard to find that in modern China, marriage is still a "family affair, rather than a deinstitutionalized, privatized, or individualized practice"(Hu, 2016). Gui (2016) summarized the reasons why the mate choice was a joint effort for the Chinese family. The first reason was the culture of filial piety and housing shortage. Intergenerational reciprocity enables parents to have a say in the adult child's marriage (Tian & Davis, 2019). Zheng and Ho (2016) argued that it was an active choice, not a passive compromise, for adult daughters to go on a blind date arranged by parents because it was "the result of balancing intergenerational intimacy and pragmatic needs in life choices" and "some daughters also practically benefit from increased downward material resource flows from their parents." As I mentioned earlier, a flat is seen as a necessity for newlyweds in China, but most young people cannot afford it by themselves and need parental support (Zhong, 2014). This situation gives parents some leverage to voice their opinions on their child's marriage. When the child cannot bring back a satisfactory partner, they can express their objection directly (Qian & Qian, 2014; Riley, 1994; Xu & Whyte, 1990).

However, the reform of household registration (hukou) increased social mobility which facilitated more and more young people to leave their hometown to study or work and settle in

\(^{16}\) See“爸妈逼你结婚，都是为了你好啊”(Bama bini jiehun, doushi weile nihao, Parents forced you to marry for your good), http://data.163.com/19/0215/10/E824JI800181IU.html (accessed on 2 February 2019).
other cities or even countries far away from their parents (Liang, 2016). Because of the long physical distance, it became infeasible for parents to control and intervene in their children's lives. Santos and Harrell (2017) stated that even though the old parents could get respected due to filial piety, it did not mean parents were able to control their children's lives. For example, rural young people immigrating to big cities often ignored parental disapproval of their partner due to economic independence and physical distance from parents.

Second, even if love is widely discussed and regarded as one of the most central components in the romantic relationship when looking for a spouse, the Chinese also consider practical factors, such as income, education, and family background (Gui, 2016). Parents often play a role in helping to evaluate whether the potential partner is appropriate (Tian & Davis, 2019). To (2013) pointed out that Chinese parents preferred their daughters to get married, rather than cohabitate or remain single, and hoped their daughters could find a major breadwinner with Chinese descent and higher social-economic status.

Last, the one-child policy shrunk the family size and made singleton the only focus of the parents. The only child attracted the attention of the whole family and was overprotected (Fong, 2004; Ji, 2015). Unlike the older generation who has at least one sibling, singleton children face several risks. For example, Chinese parents always have a worry: if I die, who will take care of my only daughter? Therefore, marriage is not only a critical life event for their daughter but also a task that parents must help to complete. Only by helping the daughter find a perfect partner can they be considered competent parents.
2.5.3 Intergenerational parenting

As some scholars (Tian & Davis, 2019; Zheng & Ho, 2016) have argued, the Chinese often deal with the pressure of daily life and meet their own needs by asking their family members for help. Due to the dual-employee family model and privatization and marketization of childcare, nearly 80% of the Chinese families are involved in intergenerational parenting (Yue, 2018). Grandparents, especially grandmothers, have become the most appropriate candidate to care for the babies. Xiao (2016) argued that the pattern of cimu yanzu was developed in most Chinese families, which meant mothers worked as a manager to be in charge of all family affairs and grandparents served as helpers to assist with daily care, and grandparents spent the same amount of time caring for the preschool child as parents. However, Liu (2013) pointed out that the intergenerational interaction in contemporary Chinese families has become more independent. "Parents devoted to their children unconditionally" is no longer the ideal of being a parent. Contemporary Chinese, including the young generation and their parents' generation, have higher requirements for individual autonomy.

In summary, there is a discrepancy between the reality of women's late marriage and the expectation of traditional norms, and parents attempt to play the role of defenders of traditional norms to narrow down this gap, resulting in the phenomenon of pushing adult children, especially daughters, into marriage.
3 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Based on the literature review, prior studies of parental involvement in the child's marriage either used quantitative research methods to examine how parents' identity and background affected the child's mate selection or adopted qualitative techniques to explore parental attitudes as a whole from the perspective of unmarried women. Few scholars conducted studies directly interviewing the parents to understand their separate views on the unmarried status of their daughters, as well as on how their attitudes are shaped by individual-level factors and macro-social context. Only Jennings and his colleagues (2012) examined mothers' and fathers' divided attitudes on their sons' marriage timing in rural Nepal through a family panel study. Thus, my research filled this gap by focusing on how personal experience with marriage, as well as critical macro-level elements, such as changes in social policies and transformation of the economy, intertwined with the traditional culture to shape parents' views.

A number of scholars who studied "leftover women" have argued that young women were in a state of contradiction between traditional and modern values when facing love and marriage, and they blended different elements of modernity and tradition to make strategic decisions about dating and marriage (Gaetano, 2014; Gui, 2016; Ji, 2015; Peng, 2017; To, 2013). For example, Ji (2017) developed a conceptual framework called the Modern-Traditional Mosaic to examine the motivation of Chinese "leftover women" as well as how they navigated the work-family conflicts. She argued that China is in a transitional period from traditional to modern society, but this is not a linear process that the traditional society would eventually move to modern society; instead, both
traditional and modern parts might coexist for a long time and affect unmarried women's mate selection and views on love and marriage. In this mosaic context, unmarried women kept their independence and compromised to tradition simultaneously.

The same went for the parents when facing their unmarried daughter. These parents born in the 1960s were influenced by Confucian thoughts as every previous generation, but they also witnessed and experienced drastic social-historical and political shifts in Chinese society, such as the Cultural Revolution, the transformation of the economic system, rapid modernization and urbanization, the prosperity and collapse of the work-unit system, and the one-child policy. Those events and changes violently attacked traditional values and had an enormous effect on how these parents regarded the relationship, marriage, and personal life. This current research explored how tradition entangled with personal marriage experience and social-economic policies in the process of transformation of Chinese society to influence parents' perceptions of daughter's marriage and fertility. This research also provided a gender prism to explicitly address gender differences between mothers' and fathers' attitudes toward the daughters' marriage and fertility. In this study, I asked how parents of "leftover women" thought of the unmarried daughters' marriage and fertility; what factors affected their ideas; how their perceptions differed by gender.

4 METHOD & DATA

4.1 Sample

My study included 32 parents of "leftover women" (15 men, 17 women) between age 52 to 67 years, with the majority in their middle 50s (Table 1). Most participants only had one daughter.
I interviewed 12 couples or ex-couples who shared the same daughter; for others, I only got the chance to interview the father or the mother. Their daughters' ages ranged from 28 to 38 at the time of the interview, which happened between May 2020 to January 2021. Three-quarters of the participants were married or remarried, others were divorced or separated, and one was widowed at the time of interview. All of them had a high school or higher level of education, except three females with a middle school diploma. A large proportion of the subjects were employed when interviewed and worked as civil servants, company employees, doctors, professors, NGO employees, freelancers, tailors, and other workers. Geographically, the interview subjects were located in twelve provinces or municipalities in East, Central, and West China; 60% of the participants lived in towns or small cities and the rest were from rural and big cities. In terms of family background, working-class, middle-class, and upper-class families were included. More details about the subject characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of Informants (N = 32)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>n</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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</tr>
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<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
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<td>52-60</td>
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<td>61-67</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's degree and above</td>
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### Urban-rural

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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town</td>
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<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small city</td>
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<td>21.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Big city</td>
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<td>28.1</td>
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### Marital status

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<td>Divorced/separated</td>
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### Class

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### Residence

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<td>Living without daughter</td>
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### Daughter's age

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<td>32-38</td>
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### Daughter's siblings

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<td>Have siblings</td>
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<tr>
<td>No sibling</td>
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<td>90.6</td>
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### Daughter's education

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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Master's degree</td>
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<td>65.6</td>
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### Daughter's location

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<th></th>
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<td>Big city</td>
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<td>46.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>----------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overseas</td>
<td>7</td>
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### 4.2 Data Collection

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I had to cancel all offline recruitments and recruited all my participants transnational online. This situation greatly increased the difficulty of my recruitment because, unlike young people, middle-aged people do not trust strangers online easily. I recruited potential participants mainly in two ways: one was to target middle-aged parents directly. I spread the recruitment information through my social circle and social media, such as WeChat groups, WeChat moments, QQ groups, to target parents meeting the requirement. After I got several initial participants, snowball sampling was adopted to expand the number of participants.

The other way was to target women over 28 years old and ask them to introduce me to their parents. I posted the recruitment information on Douban, which started as a review sharing platform for books, movies, and music, and has developed as a platform to help young people find like-minded people. It has over 600,000 online forums generated by Douban's users. I posted the recruitment information on over 30 bulletin boards related to my topic, such as "Fear of Marriage and Childbearing Group (douban konghun kongyu zu)", "Viva Leftover Women (shengnv wansui)", "Support Group for Forced Marriage (beicuihun huzhuhui)", "Female Singles in Old Age (daling danshen nvqingnian)", "Love, Dating and Seek A Spouse (Beijing lianai jiaoyou zhenghun
liaotian tuodan", "Recruitment of interviewees (fangtan duixiang zhaomu &huzhu)". These bulletin boards included women who desired to get married and women who enjoyed being single.

One weakness of the sample worth noting is that despite the efforts to recruit diverse participants, only unmarried women who were interested in the project chose to spread the recruitment information to their parents, which added a layer of screening. The parents who approved of joining the interview often had a positive relationship with their daughters and their attitudes were relatively flexible or positive when talking about their daughters' unmarried status. Therefore, negative and more traditional views might be underrepresented.

When the potential participants added my WeChat (a popular social networking application in China with approximately 1.1 billion active users) account and expressed their willingness to chat with me, I sent them an introductory message to briefly describe the project content. After obtaining their permission, we made an appointment for the interview. I used an interview guide to organize my interviews. The questions included demographic characteristics, participant's experiences and views regarding the daughter's marriage and fertility. Interviews were semi-structured; thus, each participant were asked the same interview questions, and I could ask different follow-up questions based on their responses. Every interview lasted 30 minutes to 1.5 hours through WeChat.

4.3 Data Analysis

Instructed by qualitative research techniques, the analysis was primarily inductive. After getting a permission, the interviews were audio-recorded. Then the content of individual
interviews was transcribed verbatim in Q&A format in Chinese. I followed the grounded theory approach and coded the data using initial coding and focused coding. Then I sorted and integrated the topics into themes and analyzed them further. A point worth noting here is that my intention was not to quantify how many times a specific factor was mentioned. Instead, each theme was developed according to the participants who described or mentioned a specific factor once or repeatedly, and the goal was to understand how these parents' views were shaped by different factors. For the transcripts quoted here, all names are pseudonyms.

5 RESULTS

This section focused on two main topics: parents' perceptions of daughters' marriage and fertility and factors contributing to parents' perceptions. Six themes were developed, including (1) passive acceptance, (2) urban-rural gap in parents' perceptions, (3) tradition as the background color, (4) personal experience with marriage, (5) family planning policy, (6) socioeconomic transitions caused by the market economy.

5.1 Parents' Perceptions of Daughters' Marriage and Fertility

5.1.1 Passive acceptance

When discussing participants' reactions to daughter's unmarried status, most participants reported that they were anxious. Some inquired about daughter's emotional life and marriage plan, some even actively participated by helping introduce a potential partner, but none of them compelled their daughter to rush into marriage and they were "forced to be enlightened." Among them, four had quarrels with the daughter because of the marriage issue.
According to participants who were anxious about their daughter's unmarried status, most of them were struggling between sense and sensibility. On the one hand, these parents, born after the founding of the People's Republic of China, were more liberal than the previous generation (Zhai, 2017). Some realized that a child was not a private possession but an independent individual who had their own knowledge and ideas, so they tried their best to respect their daughters' ideas. On the other hand, they could not get rid of the shackles of traditional ideas and suffer from inner anxiety and external pressure, so they were presenting a status of "passive acceptance." For instance, Sam, 58 years old, worked in a pharmaceutical-related institution in a northern town. His daughter, 34 years, with a master's degree, was a public servant in the neighboring city. He reported his mixed feelings:

Anxiety does exist, but there is no way to deal with it. Young people have their own ideas and my daughter has a decent educational background… She also has her knowledge and thoughts. We cannot impose our ideas on her. This is unrealistic and she doesn't accept it. We can only respect her. It is not something you can do in a hurry. It is not as simple as buying items in the market….

Sam's wife Fiona, living with him for 35 years, retired as a nurse six years ago. She was a frequent visitor of matchmaking malls and had matched her daughter up several times. She lamented in a helpless tone:

Now this society. . . I feel like it is diversified. Not getting married. . . ok, I agree. Not having a baby …alright… Haha, we hope she could get married, but if she won't, we also respect different opinions.

Taylor was a housewife living in the urban-rural fringe of a small northern town. She reported her ambivalence by saying:
I urge a lot, but I'm in a dilemma: if I force her to marry someone who is not appropriate, she won't be happy; if I don't force her, it's unreasonable not to get married at 38. But the divorce rate is too high, I watched too many unhappy stories on the Internet... I'm just forced to be enlightened.

Harry was a social worker in a municipality. He actively introduced potential partners to his daughter, and four had been introduced in the past five months. He bemoaned:

For us, no matter how many ideas we have, it is useless... Anyway, it's better to get married, but what can I do if it doesn't work? Whether she will succeed in getting married or not, I have done my part and I hope I wouldn't be complained about by her in the end.

Even if some participants said they didn't care about others' gossips and were only concerned about their daughter's happiness, they still asked about their daughter's marriage plan occasionally. The reason why not asking frequently was that the daughter would be mad. For instance, Jessica had a daughter who was living and working in Germany and in a stable relationship with her boyfriend. She emphasized a lot that she respected her daughter since her daughter was a little girl, she supported any choice made by her daughter, and only cared about her happiness. When asked whether she was anxious about her daughter's marriage, she said:

I'm sure to be worried, but I didn't often talk about it because she would be annoyed. When I asked her, she hung up on me, so I don't ask more. Besides, I even didn't urge her, all just joking tone, she didn't accept it. I'm not so worried, but I still hope she will settle down in a few years.

Jill was a working-class Beijing native. Due to the low pension, she could not afford her daily life and went back to work in the original company. She was the only one in her family knowing that her daughter was a lesbian and no matter what decisions her daughter made, she was always on her side. When some family members opposed, she stood up and voiced for her daughter. She said:
I never push my daughter. But I still hope that one day a man would like her and stimulate her girl's power. Now my daughter is boyish. I also imagine that there is an opportunity... or because my daughter is still young and doesn't know what she really needs. I still have this dream, but I dare not tell her (laughs).

These parents, whether or not they expressed their anxiety to the daughter or in public, all showed a kind of helplessness and stayed in the process of attempting to accept the fact that their daughter was unmarried and might never be married. Most of these middle-aged parents struggled between traditional and modern values: they might experience or hear of many arranged marriages when they were young and acquired some modern ideas later, but they were unable to completely free themselves from female gender roles and traditional marriage rules.

Only seven participants expressed that they didn't care whether the daughter would marry or not and they never pushed the daughter, and six out of seven were women. Kate was a retired employee living in a small city in central China. Her daughter worked in a neighboring city. She said:

My daughter is 29 years old, very old with the age standard in the small place. But I don't feel anxious. Logically speaking, I am now retired and I can move to stay with her and urge her every day, but I still give her space to live independently. My husband often asked why you didn't push your daughter to get married. I said that she is in charge of her life. I have no right to interfere, only to make suggestions.

John was a Beijing middle-class native. His daughter was a photographer working in New York. He was the only male never worrying about his daughter's marriage and never urged his daughter. He said:

I never talk to my daughter about it. There are many DINKs (Double Income No Kid) now. Life is very short. It is enough to have a hobby and a goal in life. If she prefers to live alone, we will be relieved and no need to get involved in her life.
5.1.2 Urban-rural gap in parents' perceptions

Based on my participants' responses, their attitudes also presented an urban-rural gap when referring to their daughter's marriage and childbirth. Generally, participants living in metropolitan areas were relatively more open-minded than those living in small cities and towns. At the same time, big city dwellers sensed less external pressure or could sense but didn't care about the pressure; whereas participants in small cities or towns were largely affected by surroundings and feared being subjected to gossip. Compared to small cities and towns, the interpersonal relationships in large cities were more indifferent and citizens in big cities were far away from the traditional "acquaintance society" (Fei, 2015). People in big cities also received modern and creative thoughts first which promoted them to deconstruct the pressure of other individuals on them (Ji & Yeung, 2014). For instance, the couple Jill and John in Beijing mentioned the rural and urban gap.

Jill: This may be a bit of regional discrimination, but I feel that parents in Beijing are open. There are many friends of my generation who do not get married, not to mention my child's generation. Maybe people in small cities care more about others' opinions.

John: My daughter… she is very independent and I am not worried about her independent life…Parents in small cities require more. You see, I have a colleague from Shandong. His child is in the US. He often shows off that my son is good and he dates a lot, as if he takes this as a glory.

Sam and Fiona, a middle-aged couple, lived in a conservative town and their daughter worked in the neighboring city. In their narratives, surrounding environment had a great effect on them:

Sam: I have external pressure. Our generation born in the 1960s holds some old ideas, and there is a certain amount of pressure. . . Everyone is like this. Two to three
out of ten friends have unmarried daughters. Let me count...right. "There are three things to be unfilial, having no descendent is the worst." It seems that this cannot be changed... especially at a county-leveled place. It's not easy to accept the new idea. The surrounding environment, the people around all hold this idea.

Fiona: I work in a county hospital, and some of my colleagues' children are not young and still unmarried, maybe three or four, but they are all in big cities, like Beijing. But my daughter is the only unmarried girl in the local area, so I'm worried...The environment in big cities is different...there are more singles and more DINKs. But in a small place like here, this is not the case with my friends and classmates. The adult children I know are married and have at least one child.

Some participants in small cities or towns were afraid that people might look down on or discriminate against their daughter because of her unmarried status and emphasized that "my daughter is normal" immediately after I asked them why they did not get married. They used the word "normal" because they thought that people at the marriageable age but not married were "abnormal" and mentally unhealthy. A participant said, "her view of marriage is very normal and positive. She will get married, she just... doesn't find the right one." Another participant Grace, was divorced and remarried, and her daughter was the child of her and her ex-husband. She said:

Although my marriage has some impact on her, it has no big impact and has no side effect on her outlook on life. She has a sound mind and a healthy mentality.

However, despite the external pressure, some women from small cities and towns were still liberal and progressive when it came to the daughter's marriage. For example, Kate lived in a small central city and had been retired for three years. She argued that "the pressure only comes from yourself." She said,

If you care about this issue a lot, other's care is an invisible pressure. If you feel that it doesn't matter, others will have no influence on you. In fact, people interacted frequently in small places, they were just being polite to ask when your daughter would get married. You know...we don't have many topics when we meet, it's just a topic. Don't take it to heart.
From the above quotes, we can see that every participant was standing on the spectrum of opposing (tradition) to supporting (modernity) their daughter's unmarried status and most of the participants on the supportive side were women. Besides, although people in big cities were more open-minded than people in small cities and towns, there were exceptions for women in small places. Why did the parental attitudes vary from tradition to modernity? Why were some mothers more open-minded than fathers? What factors and how did these factors affect their attitudes? Next, I elaborated on what factors made them struggle in this issue and how those factors affected their ideas. I listed four elements, including tradition, personal experience with marriage, family planning policy, and socioeconomic transitions caused by the market economy to present how their perceptions were shaped.

5.2 Factors Contributing to Parents' Perspectives

5.2.1 Tradition as the background color

While communicating with these participants, I found that "do what you should do at your age (shenme nianji zuo shenme shi)" was a long-established idea in parents' minds. As Amber said, "A person's life is like the cycle of the four seasons. You should abide by natural rules. Generally speaking, you can't plant seeds in autumn." The Chinese adhere to age-appropriate developmental milestones and when this logic is applied to women, marriage and fertility are a woman's duty before thirty. Most participants used "tradition" to justify their views and reported that "traditionally, women are supposed to get married and have children," "this is the only way that women can go," "it has been the case since ancient times and never changed."
The age hypergamy reminded the participants that women should get married early: because women are supposed to marry up, as women get older, they have less choice. For instance, Taylor had two children, a 38-year-old daughter and a 32-year-old son, both were unmarried. She didn't worry about her son because he was fine at this age but she started to push her daughter since her daughter was 33 years old. When I asked the reason, she said:

Boys and girls are different. Men in their 30s are easy to find a partner, and they can find one younger than them, but it's hard to find a partner for a girl over 30.

Kevin was a conservative middle-aged worker in a small town in central China. When answering why he was worried about his 29-year-old daughter's marriage, he said:

I am very traditional. I hope that my daughter would get married at 27 or 28. In fact, 26 is the best age to get married. In this small place, it's hard to find a partner when you are older than 25. Men older than her have already married.

Harry's daughter was 34 years old. He mentioned age hypergamy as well as a gendered double standard of appearance and socioeconomic status. When telling the story, he felt helpless for the disparity:

Now there are many 30-year-old boys, but where can you find 35-year-old boys? … It's hard to find one anyway, and she doesn't want to marry a remarried man. The son is okay, the boy is okay even at 40, he can find someone younger than him. Men who want to marry can easily do it, but it's hard for a woman. After a certain age, it is difficult to get pregnant…Men also have their ideas. If a man doesn't look good, he would consider finding a way to make up for it. He could make more money. It's easy to find a woman if you have money now.

Harry's narrative threw lights on the ideal couple of "talented man and beautiful woman (nancai nvmao)" in the patriarchal culture. A perfect female partner should be younger and more attractive than a male so that it is easier to produce offspring and a perfect male partner should be older and richer than a female so that he could be mature enough to support the family. He was
aware of the unfair status of men and women that ordinary men can obtain privileges in marriage by working hard to earn money, but we only value women's natural resources, such as appearance and fertile capacity, and he passively accepted this fact.

Like all other participants who worried about the daughter's marriage, Harry also mentioned the female's fertility restriction. Chinese assume that people must have children after they get married. The biological clock, the idea of a decrease of female natural fertility with increasing maternal age, implies that women cannot choose the timing of marriage as freely as men. Even though the "Marriage Law" recognizes that the child born out of wedlock has the same rights as the child born within marriage, unmarried mothers still suffer great discrimination in public, and having a child after getting married is still the mainstream (Ji, 2016). Jessica had a 30-year-old daughter, saying "I hope she could have a good outcome in a few years because it is not good to have a baby too late." Sam had a medical background. He lamented:

We are also worried that she will not be able to give birth when she is old. We are both medical professionals. We know that when she is old, she will be an elderly primipara, so it's better not to exceed a certain line.

In addition, some participants argued that when education conflicted with marriage, the latter had priority. As Fong (2004) argued, the Chinese valued education a lot and parents could sacrifice everything for children's education. Most of my participants attached great importance to the daughter's education and more than half of the daughters got a Master's degree. But some parents attributed their daughter's single status to the high education, saying the daughter was "too demanding" and "too picky" because she knew too much. For instance, Fiona complained about
her daughter who graduated from a top-tier university in China, "she may study too much and look down upon those ordinary men, she has a high requirement for spiritual communication."

I also found that for some parents, the ultimate goal of education for their daughter was to save their faces, increase daughter's bargaining chip in the marriage market and help her get a "good price," instead of promoting her personal development and making her life freer. As Zoe said,

"We are saving face, she helped us to keep our reputation by graduating with a Master's degree. She should be excellent in other aspects, such as marriage…it's okay for girls to study well and work well, but a good marriage and a happy family are more important. . . Marriage is still necessary, she is old enough."

Apart from high education, when a successful career and strong personal capacity became barriers to marriage, they became the disadvantages for an unmarried woman in the marriage market as well. Grace said, "my daughter has strong personal abilities, she has higher requirements for the partner, so it is more difficult to find the one."

In a word, both fathers and mothers, they were deeply affected by traditional culture. The conventional idea that marriage is a woman's lifelong event constituted the background color of every parent's attitude toward the daughter's marriage. Next, I introduced three elements which entangled with tradition to examine how these parents were affected by these factors to form their ambivalent views on the marriage and childbirth of their daughters.

5.2.2 Personal experience with marriage

The personal experience in the conjugal family played a crucial role in reinforcing or undermining parents' traditional views. According to my participants, only those who got benefits
from conjugal marriage supported the conventional marriage form, such as the couples who had a happy marriage and divorced men. The underlying reason was the influence of different gender roles of men and women in marriage.

For couples who were satisfied with their marriage, they expected their daughters to get married. Kalmijn (1999) has examined the association between father involvement and marriage satisfaction and found that the more the father invested in childrearing, the more stable the marriage would be. This effect was attributed to the fact that when the husband shared the childrearing responsibility, the wife's satisfaction with the marriage would be greatly improved. In addition, the more efforts the father put into housework, the more satisfied the father with the marriage. This finding is verified in my interviews. Based on my participants' narratives, when the husband shared housework, the wife was content with the marriage and both of them expected that their daughter could find a kind and considerate partner.

Jason and Donna lived in the countryside of a wealthy eastern province. Jason worked for the state-owned power company and Donna was a tailor. Their family was a traditional extended family with three generations: Jason's parents, Jason and Donna, and their daughter. Jason's younger brother and his family lived next door. This family was the most harmonious family I had interviewed. Donna proudly said:

One of the biggest strengths of my husband is that he is always on call. Everyone in the village says that I have such a considerate husband because I was knocking on the wooden fish in my previous life (shangbeizi qiaomuyu qiulai de zhangfu). I am so lucky and the villagers envy me a lot. A family always needs a division of labor. It's good for my daughter to find a man who is the same as her father.
When I asked Jason about his expectation of his daughter's marriage, he said:

I don't have special requirement, I just want to look for a son-in-law who is kind to my daughter and loves her more than she loves.

Daniel and Taylor were a happy working-class couple living in the urban-rural fringe of a small northern town. Daniel was a worker and Taylor was a housewife because of her health issue. They had a daughter living in Beijing and a son living with them. In their family, even though Taylor was a stay-at-home mother taking on most of the domestic work, she was satisfied with her marriage because her husband shared a lot of housework when he was free. "My husband was involved a lot in the growth of my children. Because my daughter went to school early, he transported her to and from school for 12 years." She said:

I think it is better to get married and have a child, one is to continue life, and the other is to experience the feeling of being a mother. It is better to have one… It's natural to get pregnant when you get married, and you just raise it after you give birth. It's natural to have a child and breastfeed by yourself.

Even if the husband could not share the housework, he was able to provide economic and emotional values to his family and the wife was willing to accept a certain type of gender models, such as the roles of "male-breadwinner and female-caregiver," the wife was also satisfied with marriage and expected her daughter to get married and have children. Christine had been widowed for five years. When her daughter was about two years old, she quit her decent job and became a stay-at-home mother. Her family was a typical male breadwinner model. As she reported, "my husband worked and supported the family. He traveled all the year round. When he was not on business, he hung out with friends. He didn't stay at home for long. I was in charge of the family."
From my perspective, her marriage was a "widowed marriage," but she was satisfied with that division, she said,

I have no problem with my husband's failure to participate in childcare and housework. I think men and women have different roles in the family and we collaborate to live a better life. What's more, my husband was indeed very capable, hard-working, and considerate.

She did not ask her daughter about her emotional life a lot and never arranged blind dates for her daughter, but she believed that she was supposed to get married and have a child:

A family with adults and children is a relatively perfect and happy family. Having a child is a major event in life, and it can also bring you the greatest happiness in life. If there is no child, some people may feel good, but as far as I am concerned, there is a lack of family atmosphere. It is better to marry a guy she loves and have a child.

In addition to happy couples, those men who failed in their marriage also held the belief that their daughter was supposed to get married and have a child. As Connell (2009) argued, in the patriarchal society, males obeying the patriarchal social rules can enjoy the "patriarchal dividend," which includes money, authority, respect, emotional support, and control over one's life. In marriage, doing housework, rearing the child, and looking after the elderly are still devalued and regarded as women's obligations and do not align with the ideal of traditional Chinese masculinity, and social evaluation and reward systems discourage men from wasting time in these areas. Men could push all the domestic labor to their wives and bear no family responsibility without blame. Even if they are divorced, most of their children live with the ex-wife and they could still enjoy the advantages of having children, such as carrying on the family line and being cared for by the child when getting old, without shouldering the hardship of childrearing. Based on my male participants' responses, their marital status never affected how they thought about the meaning of
marriage for their daughter, or they were just unwilling to admit the effect, hence, most of them supported the conventional marriage form to maintain their status.

Harry had been divorced for more than 20 years and his daughter lived with his ex-wife. After the divorce, he rarely contacted his daughter, and only met her once or twice a year. He said, "we don't contact if nothing happens. I just called to ask how she was doing." From the frequency of their contact, it is not hard to find he failed to take on the responsibility of a father and he was not close to his daughter. In his narrative, his marital situation didn't affect his perception of his daughter's marriage. He felt desperate for his daughter's single status and revealed that marriage was a women's destiny:

Girls still need to get married, it should be like this. After all, a girl is not perfect if she doesn't get married. Shouldn't every girl build a family and be a mother? I think every parent thinks so.

Jack was a real estate developer and had four children in three relationships (two of them were born out of wedlock). I had access to him through the 28-year-old daughter of his first marriage, who contacted me saying that her mother June was willing to chat. After interviewing her mother, I asked her if I could interview her biological father. She was hesitant but said she could try to get in touch with her father and her father agreed to be interviewed. When I interviewed Jack, he has migrated to a southern city living with his second wife and young daughter. He deplored the fact that he failed to establish an intimate relationship with his first daughter because they did not live together.
Jack: I owe my daughter a lot. We lived together before she was 7 years old and I didn't take good care of her. After the divorce, I only met her 3 times in more than 10 years. Before this interview, she had blocked me for a while.

Yiwei: Do you know her emotional life and relationship?

Jack: I don't know whether she dated anyone, how she dated, and who she dated. I've no idea.

Yiwei: How do you think about your daughter's unmarried status?

Jack: I still feel like I want her to get married, no matter how old she is to get married. Although I respect her choice, a woman is perfect when she has a child. It doesn't matter if she has a husband. Even if a man much older than her could love her and take care of her, I have no objection. I don't believe marriage could last long. Besides, I think it's a lie for young people in their twenties to say that they won't get married. As they grow older, they will change. Once the opportunity comes, they will get married.

Yiwei: Do you think your love experience affected your attitude towards your daughter's marriage?

Jack: It has nothing to do with my personal experience. It has to do with my understanding of society. I have been in contact with people of all levels and I have analyzed them a lot.

Even though Jack failed to admit that his complicated relationships shaped his perception of his daughter's marriage, it is not hard to find that his expectations of daughter's partner were different from most fathers, such as his daughter could be a single mother, he could accept a son-in-law much older than his daughter, or his daughter's marriage could not last a lifetime. But he still stuck to the traditional view that as a woman, you are complete only if you get married and have a child.

Different from these divorced males, female counterparts who never got benefits from marriage, such as economic values, or those who went through a tough time without the husband's support, were more open-minded when referring to their daughter's marriage. According to my participants, six out of seven who didn't care whether the daughter could marry or not were female,
and most of them were separated, divorced, or unsatisfied with their marriage. As Chamie (2019) noted, single women tended to be happier, less depressed, and enjoyed more freedom than married women largely because they did not need to balance multiple roles at work and home. The reasons that my participants mentioned frequently were "in most families, women are vulnerable and easy to be hurt," and "living alone is very comfortable for a woman." For instance, Patty, divorced for almost 20 years, believed men and women were unequal after marriage and bemoaned:

I am responsible for everything about my daughter. Her father rarely took care of her since she was a baby. After the divorce, I raised my daughter alone. Her father neither paid child support nor cared about her. They don't contact a lot, and only meet every year during the Spring Festival. Before my divorce, I was in charge of everything. I did all domestic labor. Her father played with his friends outside...I hope she would be free and happy... Because of my personal experience, I have seen the married life through and felt that living alone is very comfortable for a woman. You see, the life center of a woman is family after she gets married. The child is only raised by women and men are socializing outside.

Chloe, although living with her husband, went through conflict with her mother-in-law and she was dissatisfied with how her husband dealt with that issue. She expressed the same idea excitedly:

To be honest, I am not in a hurry. I realize many parents are in a hurry, but I don't feel anything. I feel like a woman enters the role as soon as she gets married, she has to do at least 80% of the housework, not to mention family responsibilities. Women have to take care of not only their parents but also the in-laws. It seems that it is none of men's business. It seems that filial piety to the in-laws is a woman's duty. It seems that there is nothing wrong with the son. They only blame the daughter-in-law. If I were young, I wouldn't get married.

Kate was a working-class married woman living in a small town. She described her husband as a "decoration (baishè)" and a "hands-off landlord (shuaishou zhangguì)." She said:
I always feel that… that's how I think… women are vulnerable and easy to be hurt. Therefore, mothers could accept that their daughters choose to marry late or be single. In many families, a man is a hands-off landlord. While a woman is vulnerable, the mother is strong (weimu zegang)… Anyway, I feel like there are very few men around me who really care about his family, wife, and child…Marriage means that not getting married is a pity and getting married is also a pity. On the whole, you have to adjust yourself after getting married…I often admire women who dare to divorce. I think they are so brave to leave a toxic marriage. It is not easy. The social pressure was great in my generation.

All three female participants, with different experiences and backgrounds, supported their daughter's decision from their hearts. All of them were not satisfied with the gendered role of women in family. From their narratives, I can see that even though the term "widowed marriage" has only been widely discussed in recent years, this phenomenon was common in the old generation. At the same time, most women who were not satisfied with the marriage dared not to divorce because regardless of the divorce reasons, divorced women were stigmatized and shamed by the public and bore all the infamy. Only a few brave women had the courage to break out from this gendered hierarchy and strive for their own happiness. As Davis and Robinson (1991) argued, single and divorced women felt more inequality than married women and they supported the actions to fight against gender inequity more than women with a working husband. If we interpret these women's support for their daughters' unmarried status as a challenge to traditional gender roles in the patriarchal society, the reason they did so was that they felt too much inequality in their marriages.

Although women hurt by marriage shared the same view of marriage, their opinions differed in terms of the daughters' fertility. Some participants treated their daughters as mental sustenance
after experiencing "widowed marriage," while others with similar experiences were unwilling to let their daughter suffer the same. Either perception presented that they were more open to non-traditional forms of marriage.

Several women felt pessimistic about the marriage because their marriage stories were full of misery and they went through a very fragile and tough time in the past life without the spouse's emotional support. Instead, blood relatives made up for this missing, so they projected the emotion towards the husband onto the daughter and regarded the daughter as the most important companion in their lives and hoped daughter could possess this kind of blood relationship. They believed that "a child is important for my life because a child is a companion, more important than my husband" and could offer emotional support.

For example, Jessica was engaged in art when she was young. Since the female artists she admired at that time were all single and she was young, she never felt that it was necessary to have a child until she had her own daughter. She said:

When I was seriously ill a few years ago, my daughter was concerned and came to ICU to visit me every day. She pulled me back to reality like a kite string. At that time, I felt that a child was very important to me....... A child is actually more important than a husband. My husband just helped me raise the child. In fact, we are separated for a long time. We communicate through WeChat, but we don't live together. I think it is freer for me, I have to cook for him if I live with him. But the child, even if we are not together, I still feel that there is a dependence in the world.......I traveled to visit the matrilineal society, I think it's very nice, the child is raised by the mother, the family is very stable.
Jill, although living with her husband under one roof, didn't communicate with him a lot after middle age. They slept in separate rooms and were indifferent to each other. She supported every decision of her daughter, except for the decision about having children:

As a matter of fact, I have a very strong request for her childbirth. She must have a child. If she won't have a blood relative in this world when we leave the world, I cannot die in peace. It is too terrifying!... Only blood relatives come to help you from the bottom of their hearts and without grudges. I used to have a very adversarial relationship with my brothers and sisters, but when I was sick, it was they who really thought of me and helped me. My husband couldn't do this… Couples can't do it. When the relationship between husband and wife is not good, they are just like passers-by.

Kate, who described her husband as "decoration (baishe)" and "a hands-off landlord (shuaishou zhanggui)", argued that there was no need to be a DINK. "If you get married, I think you should have a child. If you don't plan to have a child, I advise you not to marry." She explained:

Because marriage… there must be romantic love at the beginning, but after getting married, the romance is unlikely to last long. If you put your personal happiness into marriage, I think the starting point is a bit wrong. If you have a child, you can convert the focus to the child. Even if there are trivial issues in the marriage, you can get through those because you have greater hope. I think it's better. The child is the hope of life.

Due to the distrust of marriage relationships, these female participants accepted their daughter to form an unconventional family through artificial insemination, egg-freezing, or surrogacy. Chloe said:

I feel that she still has to give birth. She is getting old. Especially when she is old, it is good to have a child by her side... I secretly thought that she could be an unmarried mother. I can accept that.

Jill said:
I told her many times to freeze her eggs. It doesn't matter if she gets married or not, but she should have a child. She could even choose artificial insemination.

Judy said:

Whether she will get married or not, I think it is good to get a surrogacy. I don't want my daughter to suffer from delivery, I could accept her to seek a surrogate mother if she wants a child to be related to herself, but it is not allowed in China now.

However, some female participants were unwilling to let their daughter repeat the same story because women sacrificed a lot in parenting. As Patty said,

The process of childbirth and childrearing was too hard, I worried too much about her safety, study, and growth when I raised my daughter. I don't want her to repeat that.

Another participant said:

The young girl will be chained by the child. You can't breathe for so many years after you have a child. All energy and all your focus are transferred to the child.

Additionally, different expectations of gender roles in a marriage affected how men and women thought of assisting to raise their grandchild. Due to the traditional Chinese ethics of altruistic responsibility and parental roles, men tended to tell a stranger that they would like to reduce the daughter's burden. However, because men were not expected to be in the main role of rearing a grandchild, most of them never thought that they had the duty to help raise their grandchild. Even if they liked children, they thought about parenting in a very abstract way, and they were only willing to play with them. The most frequent answer was "I might help, but it is up to the situation."

Female counterparts considered it more practically and comprehensively because they were the ones to take on the main responsibility of grandchild rearing. Several women persisted in
fulfilling the expectation of "selfless women" and demonstrated that it was selfish not to help to raise the grandkid. As Grace argued, "I'm not selfish, I don't think if I brought her up, I completed my task. Anytime she needs me, I will definitely do my best to support her." Some participants started preparing for childrearing to live up to the expectation of "high-quality grandma." As Kate said, "I learn a lot of skills, such as singing and doing crafts, to prepare to be a high-quality grandma in the future. I don't want to be outdated because of retirement. It also has no advantage to raise a grandkid." According to them, only by helping to rear grandchild can a woman be "great" and "selfless" and stay on the top of "good woman" hierarchy.

However, some women who realized that the value as an individual has the priority admitted they were not "great and selfless." As Zoe said, "if she has a baby, I don't want to help… It was not easy for me to raise my daughter, so stressful and I don't want to experience it again." These participants found several ways to navigate the clash between role expectation and personal freedom. One way was to compromise for the sake of the daughter. As Judy said, "I could help her for the sake of reducing her burden… That's because I love my daughter and I am willing to share her burden. I don't have an urgent desire to do that. I'm very busy now and I have my own life." The second way was to outsource and "offer the nanny fee." The last way was to transfer this responsibility to family-in-laws. As Tiffany said, "because I am on my daughter's side, it is a tradition for the male's parents to raise a baby and I can assist." Interestingly, here we can see the coexistence of traditional and modern ideas that even if these women preferred not to follow
traditional gender roles of a good grandma, they still intended to require the female relative by marriage to be a good grandma so that they could escape their traditional "responsibility."

In this section, I explained how the entangled relationship between tradition and personal experience in marriage affected parents' perceptions of daughters' marriage and fertility. Both males and females who benefited from conjugal marriage and were satisfied with their gender role in the marriage were more conservative, such as happy couples and divorced men. They approved the traditional marriage form and expected their daughter to get married and have children. For females who faced strong family and work conflicts, struggled to fulfil their gender roles, and did not get support from the partner, they were more open-minded to accept the daughter's unmarried status.

In terms of whether to assist raising grandchildren, the influence of traditional gender roles on men and women was still very obvious. Men didn't think about it seriously because they never considered it as men's job. In other words, they believed that it was enough to follow the tradition of grandma parenting. But women had considered this issue seriously and had taken corresponding actions. Some were willing to abide by the traditional expectations of a "good woman," and the other struggled having to choose between individualism and traditional norms.

5.2.3 Family planning policy

China's family planning policy has affected the life trajectories and family structure of at least one generation. These participants who got married in the late 1980s and early 1990s
completed their fertility plan during the one-child policy, hence their views of daughter's marriage and fertility were influenced by it (Whyte, 2015).

On the one hand, the one-child policy strengthened the traditional idea that a woman must get married and allowed some parents to push their daughter into marriage in the name of love and companionship. Given that their daughter had no sibling, it was "a relief" for these parents to look for an appropriate man to replace their roles to care for their daughter because they couldn't accompany their daughter to the end. Leo, an engineer of a state-owned company in a small city, noted,

She will be lonely. Life is a long journey, she should have company. Young couple, old partner (niangqing fuqi laolai ban)... I hope she can find someone to grow up with. Without going through the marriage, I always feel that her growth is very simple, and only marriage makes her grow and progress.

Interestingly, those who held this belief were in their first marriage, and most of them were satisfied with their marriage. They tended to believe that "family is a haven of happiness," and marriage was the main way for a woman to "obtain happiness and completeness." Here we can see how personal experience of marriage and the one-child policy interacted to shape their views.

On the other hand, the one-child policy prompted some parents to depart from the tradition of marriage and fertility. Some parents thought that the one-child policy had a side effect on the young generation. They disdained young men in this era, reporting that they were "dependent" and "lacked the sense of responsibility." "It's better to live alone than to find someone not so good."

As June said:
Especially in their generation, they are basically the only child of the family. Boys are lack of self-discipline, independence, and a sense of responsibility. Our school education only focuses on the grade and ignores other capabilities. When you finish your study, you are suddenly pushed into society. Your goal is to find a decent job, get employed by a good company, and earn a stable salary, but all these things do not represent you have the ability to live a family life. In fact, it's difficult for most people.

Secondly, the one-child policy liberated some participants from the pressure of passing on the family name, so they did not care whether the daughter would have offspring or not.

According to traditional custom, when a daughter gives birth to a baby, the child will take the father's family name naturally and the mother cannot continue her family line. For these daughters' parents, the birth of the only daughter had already extinguished the lamp of the family. As Harry said, "I don't have the pressure to pass on the family name. I should consider that if I had a son." Another example, Jason said,

Because we just have a daughter and have no pressure to inherit the family line, we just want her to get married to complete the major event of life so someone could take care of her in the future.

From these narratives, it is not hard to figure out that after years of propaganda of the one-child policy, many parents had abandoned the view of boy preference and accepted the idea that it is the same to have a daughter or a son, but in fact, they were still constrained in the structure of patriarchy believing that only sons could inherit their surnames from generation to generation and their daughters would be the member of another family. As Zheng and Ho (2016) said, "even if the mindset of continuing the family line is still well ingrained in many Chinese parents, the responsibility for doing so tends to fall on male children." The conflicts between tradition and
family planning policy facilitated the development of a new view of the succession of the family line: I treasure my daughter but only a son can pass on the family tie.

Lastly, the one-child policy brought China into the "4-2-1 Era" (4 grandparents, 2 parents, and 1 child), making the only child, rather than the elderly, the focus of a family (Fong, 2004). When the child grows up, s/he should take the heavy responsibility of supporting six elders, which is almost an impossible mission without social assistance. Therefore, many parents did not count on the child to guarantee support in old age. As Patty said,

I cannot rely on her, not to mention her child. She cannot count on her child to look after her when she is old, so I really don't care if she has a child.

Another participant Judy said,

In the past, we raised a child to make sure the old life, but this benefit does not exist now. I feel like raising a child requires far more effort than gain. Some people may enjoy the process of raising a child, but I think you pay too much for the sake of raising for old.

In summary, the family planning policy intensified and alleviated parents' traditional perceptions of their daughter's marriage and fertility simultaneously. For one thing, the loneliness of the singleton gave parents the opportunity to urge their daughter to get married to have company, but it is worth noting that only when combined with the personal experience of a perfect marriage could the one-child policy help maintain the traditional concept of marriage. In other cases, the one-child policy reflected parents' departure from the traditional marriage form more: the stereotypical perception of arrogant character of the only son made some daughters' parents worry about handing over their daughter to an irresponsible person. The one-child policy also partially eliminated the traditional ideology of inheriting the family line and the expectation of adult
children to support the elderly. Therefore, parents had fewer reasons to firmly stick to the tradition that the daughter must get married.

5.2.4 Socioeconomic transitions caused by the market economy

Since the reform and opening up in 1978, the socialist market economy has developed rapidly and the social population management system has continued to change, which caused the increasing urban-rural gap and continuous large-scale population mobility. Various modern financial systems have also been established gradually. The great socioeconomic shifts have dispelled the traditional social order and values (Ji, 2015; Liang, 2016; Xu, 2011; Yu and Xie, 2017).

First, the deregulation of the hukou system for the sake of economic development offered young people the chance to move out of their hometowns and realize upward mobility through education and employment (Liang, 2016). The fact that parents and daughter were far away from each other helped to reduce parents' external pressure. Tiffany living in a small city pointed out that the change of social environment took some pressure off her:

Many young adults go outside and work in big cities, so relatives and friends around don't know if they are married or not, so there is no such pressure.

Some parents felt that the physical distance made the daughter "out of reach" and discouraged them from pressing pressure on their daughter. Consequently, they had no choice but to create a relatively relaxed atmosphere for the daughter and left anxiety to themselves. As Grace said,
My daughter works in Beijing, even though I come to meet her every year but the distance hinders me to push her too much. She could ignore my opinion. In fact, she is beyond my control.

Besides, daughters seeing the world outside brought new ideas to parents, especially mothers, in the hometowns. Mothers usually played the main role of caregiver in the process of raising the daughter, which enhanced the relationship between mother and daughter, so mothers were closer to the daughter and communicated more with the daughter. Many females mentioned, "I video chatted with my daughter every week," "we can talk about everything, our communication is very smooth," "she will share her thoughts and articles she read with me, and we will discuss together."

As Patty said, "my daughter is like my eyes, showing me the outside world." Mothers could get new knowledge and ideas from their daughter living in a big city or overseas which made them more liberal and open-minded. Chloe lived in the countryside, but her daughter worked in an economically developed city after graduation.

I'm relatively open in the countryside because my daughter talks to me a lot, she has a very clear idea...She thinks very well.

Taylor described what she saw when she visited her daughter in Beijing:

There are more singles in old age now. I live in a small town and there are many unmarried people at my daughter's age. If in Beijing, maybe more. I used to go to Beijing to visit my daughter. They just go to work every day, and they don't seem to have any sense of urgency. There are a lot of singles in Beijing, it is a common phenomenon, not an issue. They are feeling good to work and make money.

Second, changes in the economic structure in the past few decades had an enormous impact on personal life. Some parents whose life experience was bumpy or who witnessed the difficulties of other people around them took the practical factors into consideration and thought that young people would be under great pressure building a family. For example, soaring housing prices
brought about by the housing reform and childcare issue made the young generation stressed, especially in big cities (Xu, 2011). For example, the first half of June's life was a microcosm of China's economic system reform shifting from a centrally planned to a market economy. Once she had had a lifelong secure job (tiefanwan) in the northeast of China and as the stated-owner company collapsed and restructured, she was laid off (xiagang) and divorced. She ran a street stall, sold cold drinks, moved to South China to run a restaurant to make money, and raised her daughter alone. Now she lived a stable life with her mother. She believed that "marriage is just a choice rather than a necessity" and that the social environment put tremendous economic pressure on young people:

Many of the post-80s and post-90s I know… they get married earlier and are quite obedient. Most of them have two children. Usually, four elderly people help to take care of the grandchildren. They have to work. Without parents' help, I think it's difficult to raise two kids by themselves. The living cost is very high.

John had a decent and cushy job and waited for retirement. He argued that young people worked for a house and a child. He said:

I think it's freer to be alone. It may be hard to build a family in China now. Men and women are the same. Look at the young people nowadays, striving for the house and kids. Oh, it's too tired. Life is so stressful. I observe the young people in my company and I change my views. It was very easy to survive in the past, all jobs were similar, the work unit assigned you a house at a certain time. It is different now.

These two participants had opposite life experiences, one was full of suffering and the other one was relatively smooth. But both of them saw the imprint left by the change of the era on the individuals as well as marriage patterns. In many western developed countries, marriage, especially the wedding, is a milestone or a marker of prestige to declare that I am economically
independent (Cherlin, 2004). Chinese also hold the belief that a flat and a car are necessary for marriage. Even though the groom's family is expected to pay more marriage costs, the bride's family still has the pressure to provide a dowry to help build the new family. Therefore, no flat, no car, no money have become the fetters of marriage in China (Yu & Xie, 2013).

In addition, as women became economically independent and the system of outsourcing services developed, the practical role of men in marriage weakened and even collapsed. Judy was a college teacher, got married for more than 30 years, and had a harmonious relationship with her husband. She said:

People of my age are influenced by traditional ideas a lot and got married and bore a child at a young age. But it's normal for girls not to get married now. Why do they get married? … If the water pipe is broken or the light bulb needs to be changed, you can call the property to repair it. If something goes wrong, a phone call can solve the problem. If the woman has high economic attainments, she can buy a house by herself, right? Why should I look for a man and adapt to the man's family? The mother-in-law may be picky. It is quite reasonable. Maybe the man's family urges the son to get married so that they could hold the grandchild earlier. For the woman's family, is there any benefit to the daughter if she is married?

Finally, some participants argued the advanced social security policy and insurance systems replaced their daughters' support in old age. Mike said, "we are not my parents' generation who can only rely on the children. There are various insurance systems now, my life quality may depend on whether the insurance company can pay my bill."

In short, along with the development of the market economy and the following rapid urbanization, the traditional "acquaintance society" has been shifting to the "stranger society" (Fei, 1985). With regard to their daughter's marriage and fertility, on the one hand, due to the physical
distance, parents had limited ways to intervene in their daughter's marriage; on the other hand, both men and women believed that the development of modern society and the sound social policies could enable young people to live well without building a family and it might be even happier to be single than to be a wife and a mother. It should be noted that the importance of gendered role of the mother. Due to the mother's role as main caregiver and nurturer in the family, daughters far away from home were more likely to show a stronger emotional connection with their mothers which helped mothers become more open-minded than fathers.

6 DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

There is an old saying in China that marriage is a matter of two families, not two individuals. Parents arrange blind dates and introduce potential partners to the single child; when the adult child has a stable relationship, parents help assess whether they are matched; then, the parents of the newlywed couple meet and discuss their life as well as parental roles in assisting childrearing. Due to the participation of parents, the meaning of marriage for the Chinese is different from that of romantic love. In addition to emotional consideration, marriage includes more rational calculations and realistic measurements (Tian & Davis, 2019). Although every parent wishes that the child could live a happy life in the future, different parents have different ideas about what it means.

Through the interviews with 32 parents of unmarried daughters in their late 20s and 30s, I found that despite the disparity of class, age and education, most parents had a complicated and mixed feeling about their daughters' marriage and fertility. If every participant's perception was on
the spectrum from complete support (modernity) to strong disapproval (tradition) of the daughter's unmarried status, the ambivalent majority was in the middle. This finding challenges the argument that the parents of unmarried daughters are traditional and extremely anxious about their daughters' marriage (Gui, 2016; Ji, 2015; To, 2013). As I mentioned previously, most studies described parents' attitudes from the narratives of their unmarried daughters, and parents were portrayed as old fogies that put great pressure on their daughters. But when I spoke directly with these parents, I realized that despite the ingrained traditional ideas, they were struggling between traditional and modern values as much as their daughters were. Connidis and McMullin (2002) developed the concept of "structural ambivalence" to reflect the inconsistency between individual behaviors and social context. When examining the perceptions of parents, I can see that the seemingly personal struggles and the failures to be a firm defender of tradition were shaped by the interaction between traditional culture, personal experience with marriage, family planning policy, and far-reaching socioeconomic transformations.

From my participants' narratives, it is not hard to find that the traditional ideas that women must get married and have children were deep-rooted in many parents' minds. The specific social gender norms required women to marry up and conceive when they were fertile. When their education and career conflicted with the major events of their lives - marriage and childbirth - the latter should come first. Some parents even treated daughter's high education and decent job as a way to save face in their social circles and as a bargaining chip for their daughters in the marriage
market. Therefore, traditional ideas constituted the foundation of their views of the daughter's marriage and fertility.

However, not all parents were equally ambivalent. Echoing Liu and Tong's (2014) research that women's gender perceptions were generally more modern than men's, my interviews showed that compared to male participants, female counterparts were more open-minded, which embodied in two parts: first, on the side of supporting their daughters' choices, most were women; second, even though people in big cities were more liberal and less willing to urge their daughters to marry than those in small cities, towns, and countryside, some women in small places were supportive, too. Such gendered rationales lied in the entrenched subordinate gender role of women in the marriage. For men, they had already had the privilege in the existing gender norms, so what they did was to maintain the gender hierarchy. By contrast, as the first generation to face strong work-family conflicts, all of the female participants were the main caregiver and nurturer of the family. Except for some lucky women who had industrious, considerate, or wealthy husbands offering physical, emotional, and economical support to reduce their work-family conflicts, other females balanced the work-family pressure by themselves, so they were far more willing to abandon the old ideas when new trend hit the traditional structure.

Additionally, the family planning policy contributed to the parental deviation from the tradition. As one of the most significant state policies in the 20th century China, the one-child policy overturned the traditional idea of the more sons, the more blessings (duozi duofu) which had existed for thousands of years and forced this cohort of patents to form a family of three.
Nearly 40 years of propaganda and implementation partly broke the obsession of carrying on the family line, and the following 4-2-1 family structure also loosened the conventional idea of raising children to protect the elderly. Guided by this reality, many parents no longer regarded the daughter's marriage as a guarantee for her future life. However, the interaction of family planning policy and satisfactory marriage experience pushed these happy couples to the traditional side. They were eager to see the daughter get married and have children so someone could replace their roles to take care of their daughter.

This study also shows how massive socioeconomic transitions brought about by the economic reforms attacked traditional thoughts. On the one hand, economic development brought both pressure and benefits to personal life. For example, the commercialization of housing and the marketization of childcare increased the cost of marriage for young people and discouraged parents from rushing their children into marriage. At the same time, outsourcing services liberated women from relying on men for traditionally masculine housework. Also, the improvement of the social security system would replace the offspring as providers of financial support for the future elderly. On the other hand, the change in the social population management system and the deregulation of the household registration (hukou) resulted in the continuous large-scale population mobility and changed family structure: parents and children were separated, which not only reduced parental control over their daughters' marriage but also allowed parents, especially mothers, to learn about the new world outside through the eyes of their daughters.
This study was motivated by the phenomenon of "leftover women" to investigate parents' attitudes towards "leftover" daughters' marriage and fertility. Unlike most other studies that only focused on "leftover women" or explored the parents' attitudes as a whole reported by daughters, this research provided a new perspective on parents' perceptions of their daughters' marriage and childbirth by exploring how tradition, personal experience with marriage, and the macro-institutional context interacted to shape their attitudes.

This study has several limitations. Firstly, due to the pandemic, some of my participants were referred by unmarried daughters, which means that my participants had an at least flexible parent-child relationship. I encountered some young women saying "I am interested in your project, but I dare not mention the project to my parents because we must have a conflict. I just want to have a few peaceful days." Therefore, I had no chance to interview the so-called aggressive and forceful parents. To completely understand parents' roles in daughters' marriage, future research should include those parents whose family relationship broke down due to their daughters' refusal to get married. Secondly, I interviewed my participants ranging from 30 minutes to one and a half hours online. Some participants were talkative and some, especially men, were not. It was not easy to establish rapport with them through Internet, which may have led to the lower trust. Some participants may have acted in a perfunctory manner, or tried to make a good impression on a stranger without telling the truth. At the same time, because of the different time zones, I usually conducted the interviews at night through audio chat, so I could not observe my interviewees' facial expressions and gestures and could only infer their expressions from voices and tones. Thirdly, as
a 30-year-old woman, I could not be seen as a complete outsider and keep a neutral position to communicate with them. Yet, the advantage was that I could easily build trust with some of the female participants because I am about the same age as their daughter and I could empathize with their experiences and ideas.

Since there are few studies on parents' independent attitudes, future research should explore the differences between parents' attitudes toward the marriage and childbirth of sons and daughters. Besides, since research examining parents' perceptions in the framework of macro-institutional context is limited, future research should compare how cultures and policies in different countries shape parents' attitudes toward their children's marriage.
APPENDIX A

Interview Guide

1. How old are you?
2. Your level of education?
3. Are you currently working? What kind of work do you do?
4. Where do you live, the countryside, town or city?
5. What is your marital status?
6. Who do you live with?
7. How is your family relationship?
8. How is the division of domestic labor in your family? Can you walk me through your daily life?
9. What role did you and your spouse play in the process of your daughter's growth? Can you walk me through a day your daughter was in elementary/middle/high school?

10. How many kids do you have?
11. How old is your daughter?
12. Her level of education? What is her major?
13. What kind of work does she do?
14. Does she live with you? Where does she live?
15. How often do you usually contact? Does she usually communicate more with you or with your spouse? How do you contact?
16. You and your spouse, who is closer to your daughter? Why?

17. Do you know your daughter's relationship? How do you know? How is that?
18. What were your thoughts and feelings when your daughter told you about her relationship? How did you feel about it? What are your current thoughts and feelings?
19. Do you know your daughter's ideas on marriage and fertility? How do you know? What are those?
20. What was your first reaction when your daughter first talked to you about her ideas on marriage and fertility? How did you feel about it?
21. Have you ever had conflicts or argues with your daughter because of her marriage issues? What was that?
22. Do you have expectations for your daughter's future marriage? What is that? Why?
23. Have you ever worried about your daughter for her unmarried status? Why?
24. When did you start to worry? Can you describe the changing process?
25. Did you have pressure from relatives and friends because your daughter is unmarried? What was that? How do you think of that?
26. Have you taken any measures to interfere with your daughter's idea? What were those? Why? (Did you talk to your daughter about the marriage or wedding ceremony of friends' child?)

27. What are your expectations for your retirement life?
28. Do you think your daughter must have a baby? why?
29. If your daughter had a baby, would you help your daughter raise your grandchild? Why?
30. Do you have anything else to add?
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