Bare Branches and Clashing Doors:

Masculinity, Morality, and the Marriage Economy in Contemporary China

a dissertation by kimcraig

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Abstract

Today, China counts roughly 35 million more men than women. Assuming that the majority of these men will never marry, the massive gender imbalance has revived the social figure of the *guanggun* or "bare branch", an unmarried thus incomplete man. In a society where heteronormative marriage remains a moral mandate, rising male singleness collides with the enduring ideal of *mendang hudui*, or "matching doors," which encourages women to marry close to, and even slightly above, their social status, leaving many men without partners. Public discourse stigmatizing singleness amplifies these tensions, portraying unmarried men as potential threats and single women as selfish. Yet even within this growing anxiety, marriage rates continue to decline worldwide, signaling broader shifts in kinship and gender expectations. This dissertation asks: How do Chinese singletons make sense of their unmarried status in the context of demographic scarcity, shifting gender relations, and the enduring moral authority of marriage? Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork from five Chinese cities, including participant observation, in-depth interviews, and media analysis, I examine how people navigate the contradictions of a culture that demands marriage but makes it both difficult for men, and unappealing to women. **I argue that women increasingly forgo marriage out of fear of men and the burdens of domestic life, while men experience their singleness as a mark of moral failure revealing how gendered expectations continue to sustain the moral weight of marriage in contemporary China.**

KEYWORDS: Singleness, China, Confucian Morality, Gender, Masculinity, Marriage

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Introduction

"A single man cannot be a complete person. There will always be something missing in his life."
-Mr. Chen, 65+, professional matchmaker (CH3)

"I can't go home. I have no girlfriend. My parents would be ashamed."
- Jiang, 34, single man and in a hurry to get married (CH4)

"I will keep coming [to this marriage market] until my son is married."
- Mrs. Zhou, 70+, mother, sees finding a spouse for son, 38, as her parental duty (CH3)

"I am looking forward to marriage - I don't want to be too selfish."
- Jason, 33, single man but not in a rush to get married (CH1)

"It would be weird to see [an older man with no wife], Who cooks who washes the clothing? Who goes to the market? Do men actually go to the market everyday to buy ingredients?"
- Yuqing, 21, single male college student (CH 2)

"I never want to get married, I think [men] change after marriage."
- Laura, 24, single woman who never intends to marry (CH5)

"I never planned to get married until I met my husband who was good and trainable."
- Jia, 33, married woman (CH5)

These quotes reveal the wide spectrum of beliefs about marriage in contemporary China. Attitudes vary by age, class, and gender, shaping how individuals imagine their futures and interpret the meaning of marriage. Although marriage remains a central life-course expectation, refusing or failing to marry is seldom recognized as a legitimate individual choice within mainland Han Chinese families. From this foundation, this dissertation examines how singleness is constructed and experienced as a moral or ethical flaw that threatens family honor and even national virtue. This reframing of marriage into a moralized binary logic of "married equals good" and "single equals bad" highlights its presence both in everyday speech as well as media discourse and civil law. This dissertation examines the tensions that arise when Chinese adults remain single, whether by circumstance or deliberate choice to opt out.

Like many countries worldwide, China is experiencing declining marriage rates, rising divorce, and delayed unions (Cai & Feng, 2014; Hong-Fincher, 2014; Inhorn & Smith-Hefner, 2020). In other societies, singlehood is often framed positively as a matter of personal autonomy (Davidson & Hannaford, 2023; Lamb, 2022; Kislev, 2019). In China, however, singleness more often results from structural conditions and carries serious social stigma. What is described globally as a "singleness epidemic,"[1] "the [male] loneliness epidemic" (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023), or "marriage crisis" (Kaur, 2013), is more commonly called a "bachelor crisis"

[1] Example: Beverly Adaeze [username] (2025, March 26).We're In A Singleness Epidemic | Why are so many people single? [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKScyI6rcI4

in China.[2] Marriage rates have dropped steadily in the last four decades, with a record low of six million newly registered marriages in 2024, down twenty percent from the year prior (Mukherjee, 2025; also see Statistica, 2024).[3]

Demographer Kim Qinzi Xu (2019) notes that among the current 50+ population, only four percent of men and 0.3 percent of women remain unmarried (p. 210).[4] Yet the first cohort of only children born after the One Child Policy is now in their 30s and 40s with far higher rates of singleness (National Bureau of Statistic of China, 2023). Because of the intense pressure to marry, particularly under the weight of being an only child, these singletons face even more scrutiny than their peers in other societies (Xu, 2019, p. 207)

The gender imbalance resulting from the One Child Policy (OCP) has further fueled alarm (Babiarz et al., 2019).[5] Census data reveal 35 million more men than women in China, with a gap of approximately eighteen million among those aged 20-40, considered of marriageable age.[6] Media headlines frame these unmarried men either as pitiable figures or as social threats (Greenhalgh, 2012, 2014; Hudson & den Boer; 2004), while single women are accused of being "too picky" (Liu, 2025; Yu, 2019; see Figure 1). In both cases, singleness is constructed as a social problem to be fixed. At its core, the dominant emotion is fear. Women fear predatory men (especially unmarried men). Men fear incomplete masculinity. And parents fear failing their own filial duties. This project examines the dynamic of male singleness and the fears it generates for men, women, their families, as well as the state.

Although the numerical imbalance draws attention to men, women are also subject to intense marriage pressure. Media representations often label single women as "leftover"[7] (Gui, 2020; Lake, 2018; Liu, 2025; Yu, 2019), framing them as overly selective or selfish. Historically, women were assumed to need marriage more than men to secure social status (Ebrey, 1993; Sommer, 2000). Some scholars argue that women remain more stigmatized for singleness (Gaunlett, 2008; Gong et al., 2017; Sharp & Ganong, 2011). My research suggests the opposite: in contemporary China, unmarried men are equally condemned, but while many women resist or ignore stigma, many men internalize it deeply. Economic reforms and demographic shifts have given educated, urban women more leverage to reject marriage, while unmarried men are more likely to be seen as failures or even dangers to society. The chapters to come reveal that although marriage pressures affect men and women, men are made to feel monstrous when they remain single, whereas women are more likely to dismiss being labelled fastidious. This study focuses

[2] He, H. (2024 Jan 27). Chinese villages offer cash rewards to matchmakers as anxieties grow over rural 'bachelor crisis.' *South China Morning Post.* https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/3250010/chinese-villages-offer-cash-rewards-matchmakers-anxieties-grow-over-rural-bachelor-crisis

[3] Mukherjee, V. (2025 Feb 10). China's marriage rate hits 40-year low in 2024, deepening population woes. Business-Standard. https://www.business-standard.com/world-news/china-marriage-rate-40-year-low-demographic-crisis-population-birth-rate-125021000766_1.html

[4] Based on population censuses and intercensal surveys from 1982 to 2010 (Xu, 2019, p. 210).

[5] Example: Brant, R. (2016 Aug 28).The lonely men of China's 'bachelor village. *BBC News*. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-37192818

[6] Feng, J. (2021 May 18) China Has Nearly 35 Million More Single Men Than Women. *Newsweek*. https://www.newsweek.com/china-has-nearly-35-million-more-single-men-women-1592486

[7] 剩女（shèngnǚ）- "leftover women" - derogatory term for unmarried woman over 30 years old.

on the collective mission to eradicate male singleness, and the cultural context that has led to this mission.

Figure 1. A cartoon depicting a single woman looking bored as she wears a crown sits atop a highrise building while a swarm of men with roses chaotically attempt to climb the very tall building. Artist: Song Chen published Mu, G. (2017 September 5). Staying single is not good for demographics. *China Daily.* https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2017-09/05/content_31574794.htm

The **crisis of male singleness** is concentrated in rural areas and among lower-income men. Education, wealth, and *hukou*[8] (household registration) status shape who is considered desirable.

[8] 户口 (hukou) - China's "household registration" system that records each citizen's official residence and family ties. Every person is classified as either rural or urban, depending on their registered hometown. Similar to a

According to one report, in rural regions, men aged 20-49 with only primary education face gender ratios as extreme as 474.5:100, while urban men aged 35-49 with college degrees approach parity at 97.7:100.[9] These disparities highlight how class and geography intersect with marriageability, and they illustrate that the "bachelor crisis" is not evenly distributed across China. It is these differences and what they represent that will be the focus of the study.

Marriage in China has consequences that reach far beyond the couple themselves. For elders, their children's marriage is essential for securing old-age support (Ebrey, 1993; Hsieh & Zhang, 2021; Keimig, 2021). For the state, declining marriage rates threaten population growth (Babiarz et al., 2019; Jacka et al., 2013), since childbearing outside of marriage remains legally and socially constrained (Song & Ji, 2020). Globally, population decline is a growing concern, with the CIA (2025) estimating that forty percent of the world now faces shrinking populations (see Figure 2).[10] **While the Chinese state frames singleness as a demographic and economic challenge, this dissertation reveals that it is lived and felt as a moral condition at the individual level, one that nonetheless produces broader political and economic consequences.**

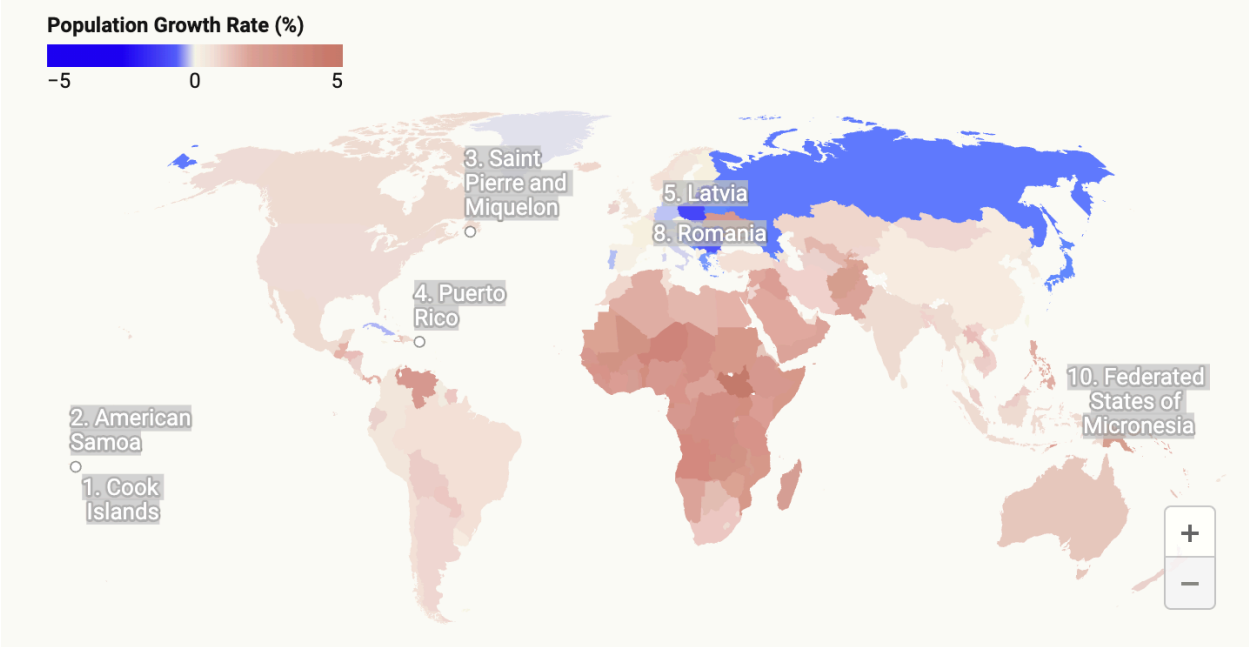

Figure 2. Map of Population Growth Rates by Country. Created by Ian Randall via data from CIA (2025). Interactive map accessible Dewan, P. (2024 Aug 18). Map Reveals Countries With Disappearing Populations. *Newsweek*. https://www.newsweek.com/map-countries-shrinking-population-russia-1940341

Deeply rooted in Confucian ideals of virtue and moral citizenship, most participants in this study

domestic passport, the hukou determines where individuals are eligible to access social services such as education, healthcare, and housing.

[9] Zheng, Y. (2023 Nov 8). Is China Drifting Toward a 'Singles Society'? Experts worried about a rise in singledom are missing a key part of the puzzle. *Sixth Tone*. https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1014038

[10] Interactive map accessible Via Dewan, P. (2024 Aug 18). Map Reveals Countries With Disappearing Populations. *Newsweek*. https://www.newsweek.com/map-countries-shrinking-population-russia-1940341

assessed a man's character through his marital status. Women are also subject to moralizing discourses of "marriage = good, unmarried = bad," and are often blamed for the so-called "single crisis" through accusations of pickiness or careerism. Yet, my findings show that many urban Chinese women resist internalizing such stigma, bolstered by their expanding social and economic independence. By examining how both men and women experience, interpret, and negotiate singleness in everyday life, this research reveals a more complicated picture of what it means to remain unmarried after a prescribed age in contemporary China.

This dissertation asks: **How do single men and women in China make sense of their unmarried status amid demographic scarcity, shifting gender relations, and the enduring moral authority of marriage?** It considers whether public framings of singleness as a demographic and social problem align with or diverge from the moral experiences of those who live it. It examines what it means to be a "good man" in the Chinese marriage economy, how ideologies of marriage and masculinity are enforced, and how social status shapes the moral expectations placed upon single individuals.

Drawing on ethnographic methods of participant observation, interviews, and media analysis, I argue that singleness in China is not only a demographic concern, but also a moral failure. Citizens are pressured into heterosexual, monogamous marriage and reproduction to avoid being labeled "unfilial" or "bad." While much prior scholarship of Chinese singleness centered on urban women in Beijing and Shanghai (see Gui, 2016; Lake, 2018; Liu, 2025), this study focuses on men in other urban areas to show how the pursuit of marriage is enmeshed with the performance of masculinity and virtue.

I demonstrate that male singleness in contemporary China is publicly framed as a demographic crisis but privately experienced as a threat to moral personhood. Men are judged on both by their reproductive potential and their capacity to embody Confucian duties of filial piety, and perform masculine duties of provider, protector, and procreater in the roles of son, husband and father, which are essential to uphold family honor. Women also face marriage pressure, but **my findings show that men more often internalize the stigma of singleness, associating their self-worth to marriage. By contrast, many women frame their singleness as an expression of autonomy or high standards.** As sociologist Tianhan Gui (2016) puts it, the tension lies between "traditional ideologies and contemporary circumstances" (p. 1934). This project traces how that tension plays out along lines of class and geography and how it fuels industries that promise to solve singleness for a price.

Ultimately, this dissertation argues that the demographic imbalance that makes marriage harder to achieve reveals the endurance of long-held ideologies that equate the achievement of full-fledged Chinese masculinity, and by extension, moral worth, with marriage. Examining how individuals contend with these pressures sheds light on the moral dimensions of China's marriage economy and illuminates the broader relationship between gender, virtue and state stability.

The Contexts of Singlehood in China Today:
Demographic, Economic, and Social Changes

What it means to be single in China is deeply gendered. For women, influenced in part by recent global feminist movements, singleness can signal progress, choice, and even freedom (Davidson & Hannaford, 2022). For men, however, it often represents failure, in terms of ending their family line as well as in threatening their sense of self. To understand these different meanings, it is necessary to look at the broader context that produces them. The story of singleness in China cannot be told without considering the sweeping political, economic, and social transformations of the last century. Shifts in laws, changing expectations of kinship, and evolving gender roles have created a social landscape where increasing numbers of people remain unmarried, disrupting long-standing cultural ideals of family and continuity. These changes, rooted in both state-led reforms and global influences, provide the foundation for the contemporary anxieties around singleness explored in this dissertation.

Over the course of the twentieth century, China sought to mold itself into a global power by raising the overall "quality," or ***suzhi,***[11] of its population (Anagnost, 2004; Greenhalgh, 2010b; Jacka, 2009; Kipnis, 2006). One approach was to reduce the number of people whose quality needed to be raised. The logic was that fewer children would allow families to concentrate resources on each one, allowing the state to manage its social body more effectively (Greenhalgh & Winckler, 2005; Greenhalgh, 2008; White, 2006). This strategy linked national strength to the regulation of reproduction, but it also had unintended consequences for marriage and family life that are still unfolding today.

The most significant intervention was what is commonly referred to as the **One Child Policy** (OCP)**,** in effect from 1979 to 2015 (Babiarz et al., 2019; Greenhalgh 2003; Gu 2022; Whyte et al., 2015).[12] This legislation, along with a long standing cultural preference for sons, led to widespread sex-selective abortion, female abandonment, and in some cases infanticide. Demographers note that while more boys are naturally born than girls, higher male mortality rates usually balance the sex ratio over time (Kruger & Nesse, 2004; Wang, 2009). In China, however, state policy amplified patriarchal norms, producing a sustained imbalance where men greatly outnumber women. Previous historical periods also saw gender gaps, but this was the first time state action so directly created a structural surplus of men (Crow, 2010; see Figure 3).

[11] 素质 (sùzhì) - literally "quality", but meant to denote one's value as a person.
[12] This was actually of series of policies that allowed different numbers of children to different demographics and is more aptly called China's Family-Planning Policies (see Greenhalgh & Winckler, 2005)

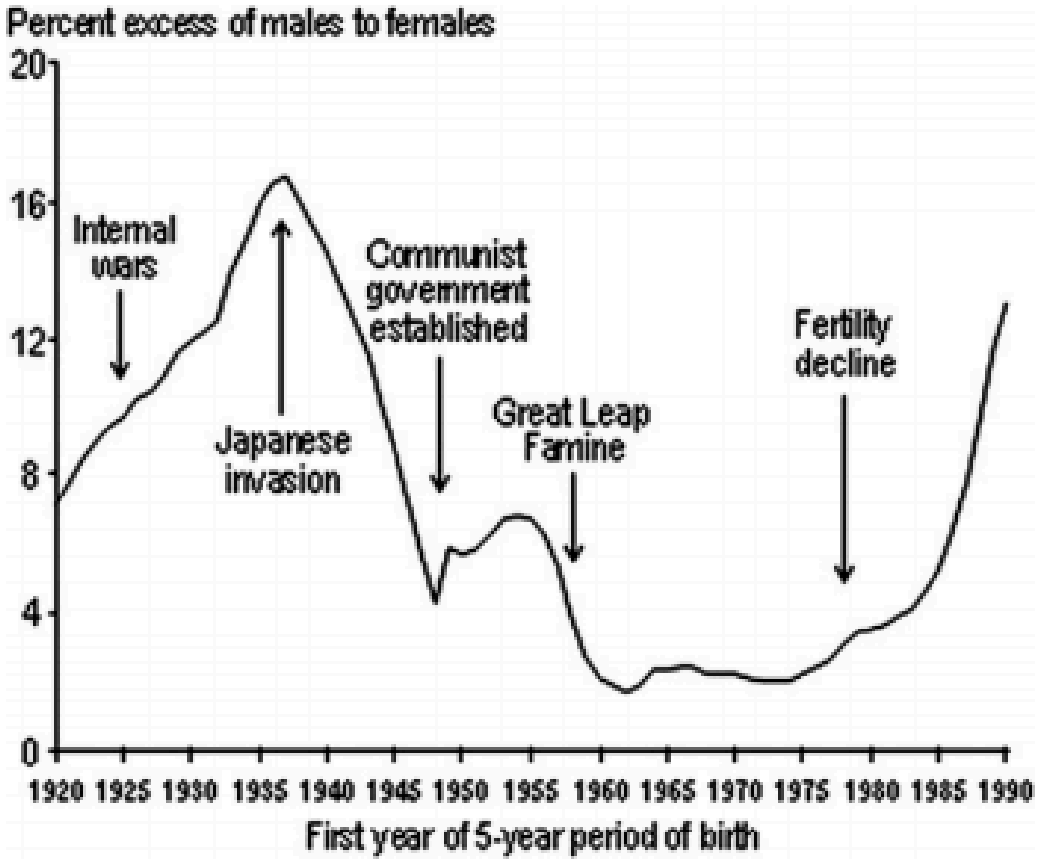

Figure 3. Graph depicting gender ratio imbalances in China 1920-1995. Crow, B. (2010). Bare-sticks and rebellion: The drivers and implications of China's reemerging sex imbalance. *Technology in Society*, *32*(2), p.73.

The **demographic impact** is stark. By some estimates there are now 280 men for every 100 women between the ages of 15 and 49 (Denyer & Gowan, 2018). Roseann Lake (2018) suggests that between 1985 and 2005, Chinese families aborted nearly thirty-two million baby girls (p. 14). Others estimate nearly one million baby girls were abandoned or placed for international adoption (Evans, 2000). The absence of these women reverberates decades later, resulting in problems both demographic and cultural. The dearth of women leaves behind millions of unmarried men who are portrayed in public discourse as failed sons, dangerous bachelors, or symbols of social instability.

The **gender imbalance,** however, is unevenly distributed across the country. National statistics confirm that men outnumber women overall (NBSC, 2025), the gaps look different in rural and urban contexts. In some megacities, like Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, female populations remain larger than male (Li, 2021). While this is not true of all urban areas, the ratio almost always skews male in rural areas, where men outnumber sometimes as drastically as 126 to 100 (Riley, 2017, p. 149). The shortage of available women in such areas reinforcing stigmazing labels such as *guanggun,*[13] or "bare stick" (Greenhalgh, 2014; Jin et al., 2013; Liu,

[13] 光棍 (guānggùn) - literally "bare branch", but commonly used as a derogatory term for unmarried man. Usually meant to denote a man who is likely to remain unmarried forever, thus his branch of the family tree with be empty

2019). This regional difference illustrates how both men and women can experience barriers to marriage, but the moral weight of singleness often falls more heavily on men as we will see in the chapters to come.

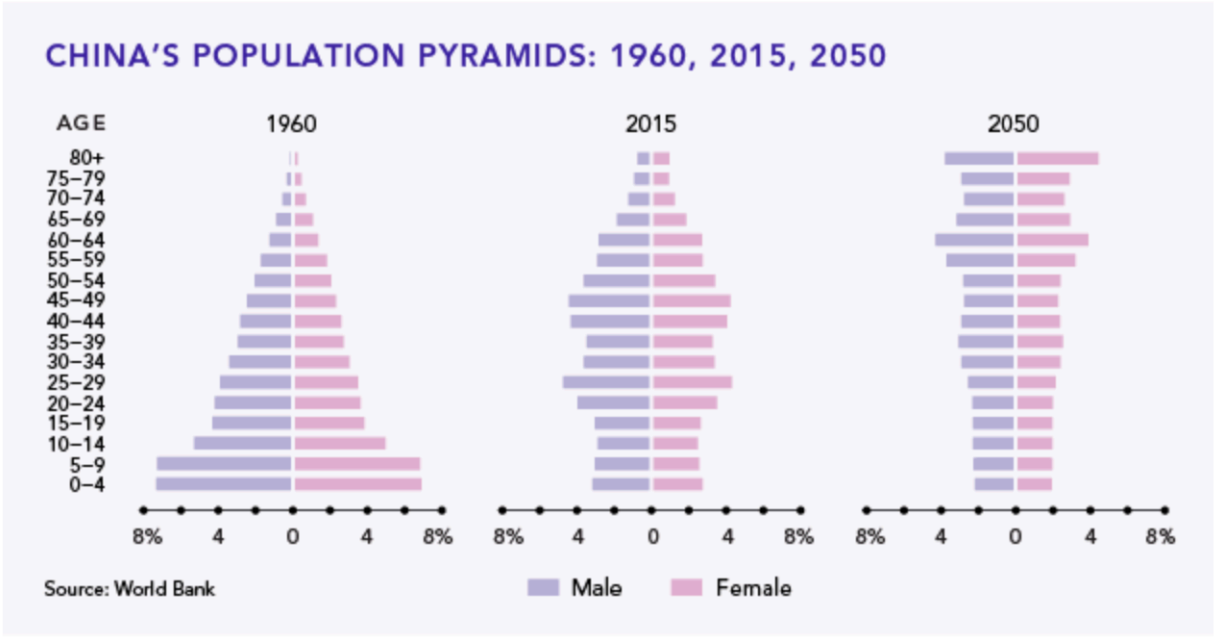

Figure 4. Graph depicting China's projected population pyramids for the years 1960, 2015, and 2050. In a perfect population pyramid there are always more people on the bottom than the top to support the elderly at the top. https://asiapacificcurriculum.ca/learning-module/chinas-one-child-policy

China now faces the paradox of having both too few women and too few children. **Fertility** has fallen below replacement levels, despite recent policy shifts allowing two children in 2015 and three in 2021 (Yang et al., 2023). The shift in the population is worrisome, especially as the generation born before the family planning policies go into retirement (Hu & Chen, 2019; see Figure 4). The move from a growth rate of 1.43 percent in 1980 to -0.23 in 2022 reflects this rapid decline; see Figure 5). The fertility rate currently stands at just 1.02 children per woman, compared to 2.74 before the launch of family planning interventions (Worldometer, 2025). Although the government now encouraged larger families, the cultural norm of one child, high cost of childrearing, and persistent stigma against births outside of marriage coupled with declining marriage rates have made reversal difficult (Greenhalgh, 2010a; Gu, 2022; Zhang, 2022). Because marriage remains central to reproduction, the state has turned toward pro-marriage campaigns that frame single people as selfish, irresponsible, and socially dangerous. In other words, demographic engineering has altered both the size and shape of China's population while also reinforcing the cultural message that singleness is a moral failing that threatens family honor and the nation's future.

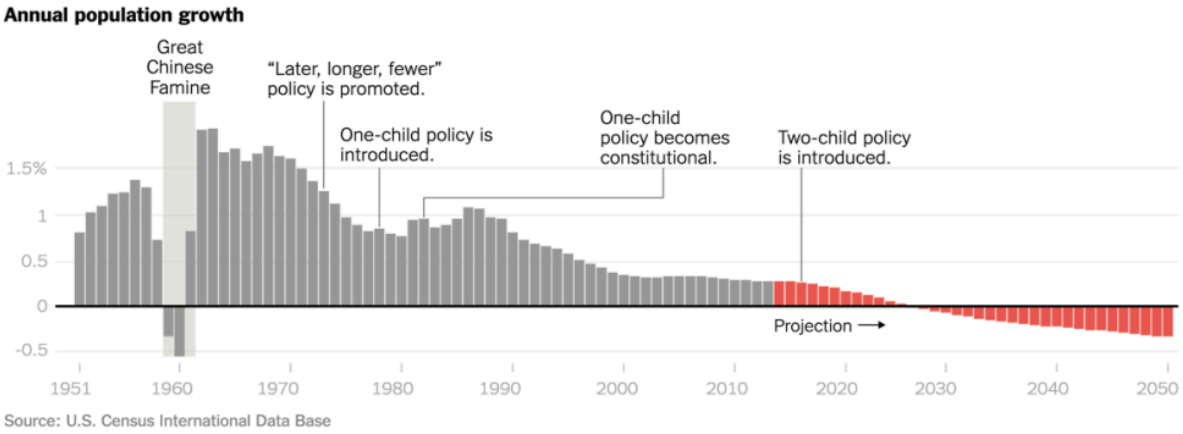

Figure 5. Graph of Chinese population growth projection 1951-2050. A growth rate of 0 indicates that the number of children born or individuals immigrating into the country is replacing those dying or emigrating. China will cross the threshold into the negative numbers in 2022. Gu,Y. (2022). Legacy of the One-Child Policy: Marriage Dilemmas in Urban and Rural China. *Asian Culture and History*, 14(2), 174. https://doi.org/10.5539/ach.v14n2p173

China's **economic landscape** has shifted dramatically over the last century, and these changes play a crucial role in shaping contemporary experiences of singleness. During the Maoist era, poverty reduction was central to the Cultural Revolution and by many accounts, quite successful (Zhang 2021, p. 1191). At that time, most of the population lived in rural areas, and income differences between urban and rural households were relatively narrow (Gunn, 2020, p.3, see Figure 6). However, economic reforms introduced in the late 1970s prioritized overall GDP growth rather than addressing disparity. The result was rapid urbanization and a widening wealth gap (Zhang, 2021). Today, the worst poverty is concentrated in rural areas, while cities attract the majority of investment and opportunity (Zhang, 2021; Zhou, 2019). According to recent data from the National Bureau of Statistics China (NBSC, 2025), average rural incomes are only about forty-three percent of urban incomes (see Figure 7). These divides limit some citizens' access to education and housing, affecting upward mobility and who is considered a desirable partner, as class has become an increasingly important factor in the marriage economy.

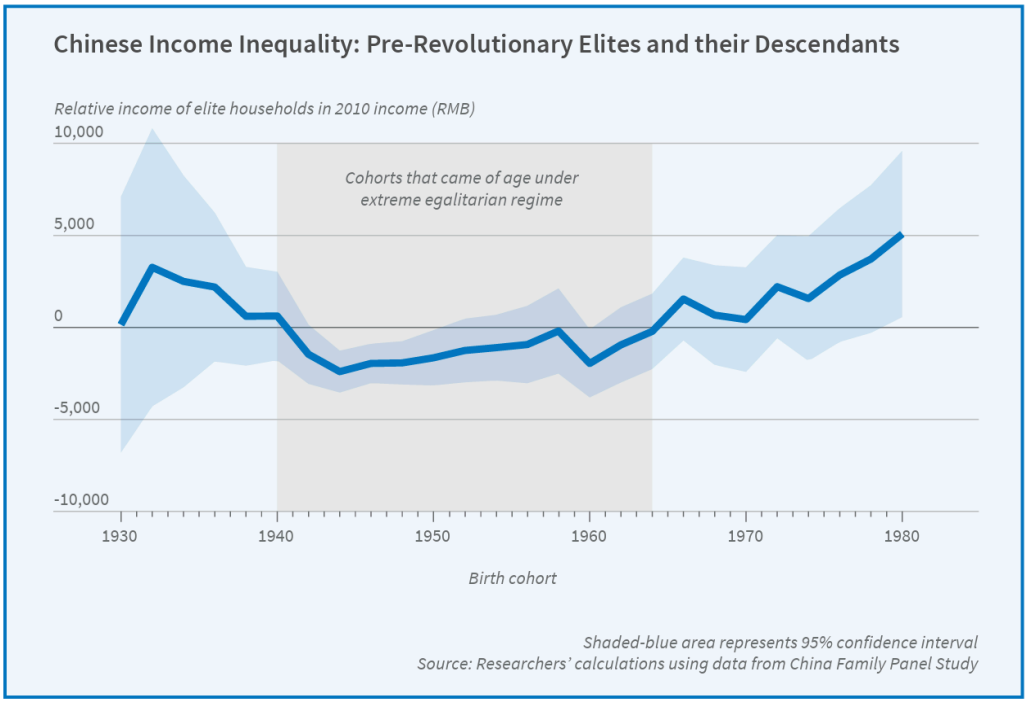

Figure 6. Chart of Income equality in China between the years 1930-1980. Gunn, D. (2020). Riches to Rags and Back Again: The Impact of China's Revolutions. *National Bureau of Economic Research Digest*. p. 3. https://live-nber.pantheonsite.io/sites/default/files/2020-08/aug20.pdf

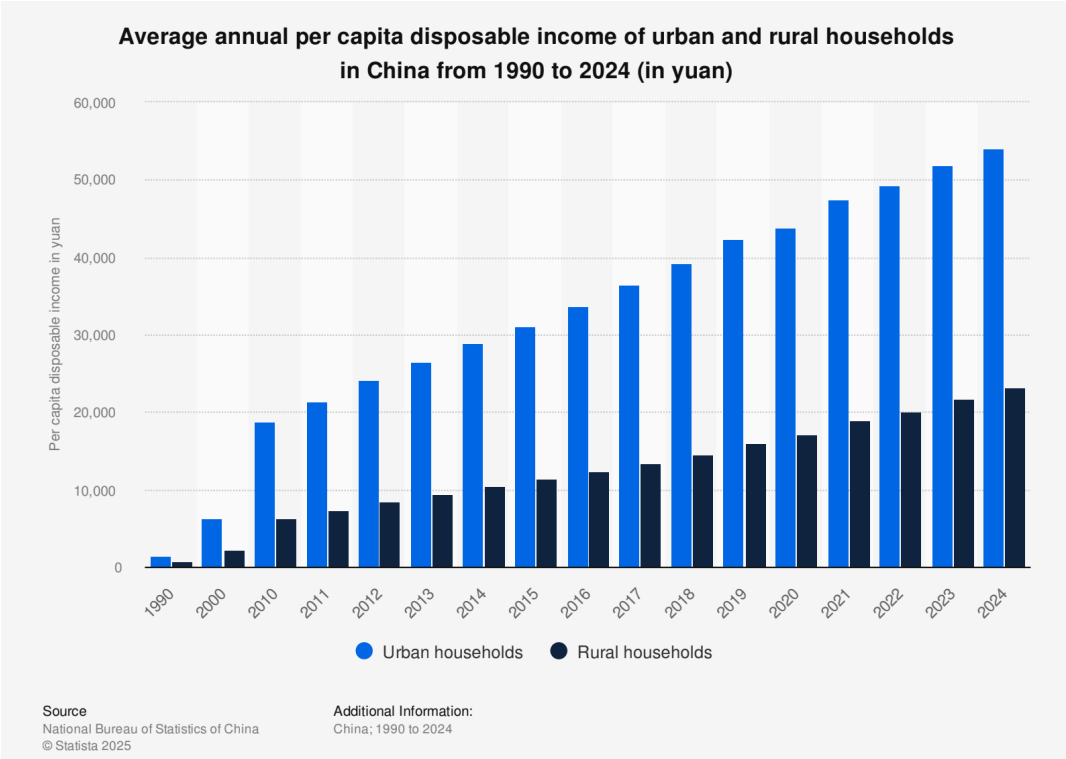

Figure 7. Income inequality between urban and rural China 1990-2024. NBSC. (2025) Total Population. *National Bureau of Statistics China*. https://data.stats.gov.cn/english/easyquery.htm?cn=C01

But **class** in China is not simply about income. Access to education, healthcare, and secure housing are equally important markers of social status, and the *hukou* system remains a key barrier. Originally established in the 1950s to control population movement and manage development, *hukou* continues to disadvantage millions of rural-born Chinese (Cheng & Seldon, 1994; Choi & Peng, 2016; Hu, 2024). Those with rural registrations often face discrimination when trying to access housing or schooling in urban areas (Zhang, 2021, p. 1196). Without these social markers of success, rural men in particular struggle to present themselves as viable marriage partners. This exclusion is more than economic. It frames their bachelorhood as evidence of moral and personal failure, reinforcing the cultural link between poverty, singleness, and stigma.

The economic divides are further exaggerated by the practice of female **hypergamy**, a cultural expectation defined by gender and class, where women should "marry up" and men should "marry down" (Feldshuh, 2018). For centuries, hypergamy was practiced alongside the guiding principle of **"door matching,"**[14] a form of "homogamy"[15] where families sought partners of roughly equal social standing (Lake, 2018; Zhou, 2019). While the two concepts seem to be at odds with one another, the relatively even gender ratios across social strata, and only slight differences in status made it possible for both rules to exist. While both practices persist today, the rising inequality has made it increasingly difficult to find suitable matches, especially in a shrinking marriage market where women are fewer in number and better educated on average. The combination of economic disparity, class stratification, and gender imbalance magnifies anxieties about singleness, particularly for men who cannot compete in what has become a cutthroat marriage economy.

One of the more unexpected outcomes of China's OCP was the **rise in women's social status**. While many girls were never born or abandoned, those who survived, often as only children, benefitted from concentrated family investment that earlier generations would have reserved for sons (Fong, 2004). Over the course of four decades, this investment produced women with higher levels of education, stronger earning power, and greater social mobility (Gaetano, 2008; Kaur, 2013; Lake, 2018; Liu, 2025). In many urban families today, daughters are even preferred over sons (Babiarz, 2019; Kim & Fong, 2014). Contemporary Chinese women are now more likely to hold higher degrees than their male counterparts and to be financially independent, which means that marriage has shifted from a necessity for survival to a matter of personal choice.

The rise of women's social status has placed new **pressures on men**. Hypergamy, coupled with a shortage of women, means that competition for partners is intense. While women continue to prefer marrying up, men no longer dominate in academics or the workplace and are increasingly outperformed by their female counterparts. The state has framed this shift as a "crisis in masculinity" (Yang, 2010; Zheng, 2015), interpreting women's gains not as a success for women but as a failure of men. Such narratives stem from fears of producing a weak and apathetic

[14] 門當戶對 (méndānghùduì) - "matching doors," a expression meant to mean that two people are social equals and therefore a good pair for marriage.

[15] Defined as a "common characteristics that individuals take into consideration during the mate selection process are similar educational level" (Gui, 2016, p. 1927)

nation, one that is insufficiently competitive on the global stage (Louie, 2024, p. 3). In response, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has used shaming tactics to regulate male behavior, popularizing the derogatory label *niangpao*,[16] or "sissy" (Louie, 2024; Song 2022; Zheng 2025). State initiatives now encourage young men to cultivate physical toughness and discipline, framing this as a threat to national strength (Louie, 2024, p. 2-5). Some commentators even blame the softening of men for the decline of marriage (Zheng, 2015, p. 347). Yet these prescriptions clash with women's evolving expectations and desires, leaving many single men in their 30s and 40s projecting a rigid state-sanctioned versions of the masculine ideal that women are unwilling to embrace (Yang, 2022; see Chapter 5).

The disconnect has fueled a dangerous cultural narrative. Unmarried men, especially those past forty-years-old, are often depicted as a **social threat.** Drawing on long-standing Confucian suspicions of single men as destabilizing forces, contemporary media and public discourse cast them as "boogeymen" who are prone to violence if denied marriage (see Chapter 2). In this way, singleness for men is not framed as an individual circumstance but as a potential danger to society itself.

The competing pressures have produced **two opposing frameworks for understanding marriage.** On one side are traditionalists who argue that family units ensure social harmony through organization. In this model, men serve as heads of households and women occupy subordinate roles, creating a gendered social order in which everyone has a defined place tucked neatly into the family system. This vision remains influential among many older generations who are familiar with the social scripts, as well as men, who benefit from the practice (see Chapter 1). Although the specific expressions of these so-called "traditional values" have evolved to accommodate changing contexts, they remain rooted in Confucian patriarchal ideals. On the other side are more forward-looking perspectives that emphasize gender equality, education, individual choice and financial independence, a model often favored by women who tend to benefit from it more than men. While advocates of this view are not necessarily calling for a complete rejection of Confucian values, they seek to allow the institution of marriage to continue its evolution away from patriarchy. The state attempts to promote aspects of both at different times, depending on their agenda. It champions male strength, marriage and reproduction as key to national stability while also encouraging educational advancement and personal freedom. This contradictions is central to the tension explored in this dissertation.

[16] 娘炮 (niáng pào) - literally "lady canon" but used to describe an "effeminate man" or a "sissy" (Louie, 2024, p.1).

Figure 8. Cartoon depicting the 4:2:1 phenomenon that was caused by China's One Child Policy. Artwork by Luojie who publishes as Cagle Cartoon. Originally created for a 2013 *China Daily* article. https://asiapacificcurriculum.ca/learning-module/chinas-one-child-policy

The struggles created by these **tensions extend beyond individuals to entire families**. In China, children are expected to provide for their parents in old age, a duty rooted in filial piety (Ebrey, 1993; Hsieh & Zhang, 2021; Keimig, 2021). Although there is a state social security system, it remains uneven and unreliable leaving most elders to rely on their child during later years (Huang et al., 2015).[17] With smaller families, the so-called "4:2:1 phenomenon" has emerged, in which a single couple is responsible for supporting both sets of aging parents, themselves, and their own child(ren) (Wang & Fong, 2009; see Figure 8). Women's improved status and their ability to maintain ties with natal families have made daughters increasingly desirable, since they are no longer assumed to prioritize their in-laws (Babiarz, 2019; Kim & Fong, 2014). In my interviews both sons and daughters describe feeling equally responsible for parental care, particularly as only-children with no siblings to share the burden. This intergenerational demand makes marriage decisions strategic, since the choice of a spouse affects three generations (see Chapter 3). When singletons do not marry, the challenge intensifies. Parents must rely on one person's income, which deepens the sense that singleness is not just a private matter but a threat to familial wellbeing and, by extension, social stability at large.

[17] Hu & Chen's (2019) study found that in some areas up to 84% of families rely on adult children rather than the state for eldercare.

Performing Manhood Without Marriage:
Theorizing Masculinity, Kinship and Singleness in China

This research draws on several bodies of theory to shape my approach to singleness in China. Insights from gender studies, particularly work on masculinity, as well as singleness studies, kinship studies – including in terms of economics and queer formulation – provide the tools I use to frame my questions and interpret my findings, and ultimately push each of these fields a bit further.

Building from foundational theories of **gender performativity,** this dissertation highlights a moral dimension to the study of how gender is enacted in China. Judith Butler (1990) shows that gender is produced through repetition and citation, creating the illusion of an original where none exists (p. 138). My research builds on this theory and demonstrates that in China, these repeated acts are evaluated along an explicitly moral scale. There is not only a socially acceptable way to perform masculinity, but a morally correct one that is closely tied to marriage and filial responsibility. Butler never explicitly discusses "morality," but rather, societal norms that *function* as moral obligations – as evidenced in language implying moral connection to gender in their use of "natural" and "unnatural" gender (1990), "good mothers" (1990, p. 185), or the loss of "proper" or "real" gender (1993, p.182).[18] This dissertation more explicitly ties performance to morality, by which I mean the basic idea of some one, or some action, being regarded as either "good" or "bad."[19]

Butler (2004) further reminds us that **gender is always context specific and socially situated,** describing it as "a way of organizing and interpreting the world, a social relation that involves the recognition of others" (p. 1; also see Abu-Lughod, 1990; Gilmore, 1990; Scott, 1986; Valentine, 2007; West & Zimmerman, 1987). This framework helps explain why ideals of masculinity and femininity in China are not fixed but shift with changing social and economic conditions. Cultural norms increasingly impose moral boundaries around acceptable gender performances. Despite the growing prevalence of both chosen and involuntary forms of singleness, marriage continues to serve as the ultimate moral test of manhood, linking men's filial duties to their marital status. By contrast, women's moral worth is increasingly measured through different metrics that are not limited by marital status. Men who remain unmarried, such as those labelled *guanggun*, are often stigmatized as moral failures and even social threats. In this way, performing masculinity in China is inseparable from performing morality, binding virtue and marriage together as co-constructing ideals.

Building on this moralized view of performance, I turn to the questions of how gendered hierarchies are maintained through moral and relational practices. Drawing on Raewyn Connell's (2005) definition of **hegemonic masculinity** as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of

[18] Note that Butler uses Nietzsche's *Geoneology of Morals* as the bedrock to many of her arguments (see Butler, 1990; 1993; 1997; 2005).
[19] "Morality" has become a prominent topic within anthropology (e.g., Das, 2012; Mahmood, 2005), in this study, I employ the term in a plain sense, referring to people's notions of "good" and "bad".

women" (p. 77). Connell's formulation underscores that patriarchy must be continually legitimized through everyday gender practices, which are themselves unstable and subject to contestation (Fausto-Sterling, 1997; Gilmore, 1990; Gutmann, 1997). Building on this foundation, I argue that in the Chinese context, hegemonic masculinity depends both on men's performances of moral virtue, but also on women's compliance with Confucian roles of wife and mother. Masculine legitimacy is sustained through women's participation in marriage and reproduction, meaning that when women opt out, the very structure of patriarchy is destabilized.

Connell (2005) also reminds us that masculinity is experienced differently across lines of class, race, age, ethnicity, and sexuality, distinctions that are equally salient in China. These differences help explain why unmarried men from various social classes negotiate their singleness through divergent strategies shaped by Confucian ideals of *wen* and *wu* (Louie, 2002; 2015; 2016). Using Siyang Cao's (2021) concept of "**elastic masculinity**," which highlights the ways Chinese men choose to perform masculinity in different circumstances, this research explores how men adapt their gender performance to sustain patriarchal ideals under shifting social and demographic conditions. Ultimately, I ask whether the patriarchal values these bachelors perform to uphold male dominance still serve them, or whether they have become liabilities in the face of demographic inequality and women's growing autonomy.

This project highlights a paradox that exists in Confucian thought between the presumed naturalness of patriarchy and the notion of masculinity as an earned status. If male authority is presumed inherent, rooted in the supposed natural superiority of men, then the idea that manhood must be achieved through moral cultivation and social validation reveals the instability of the system itself. China's current demographic imbalance has made this contradiction especially visible within its marriage economy. As Michelle Rosaldo (1974) observes, women are often granted full gender recognition without tests of verification, whereas men must "learn to become men" (p. 25). Gilmore (1990) echoes this when he writes that "nobody was born a man; you earned manhood provided you were good enough, bold enough" (p. 19; also see Fausto-Sterling, 1997; Gutmann, 1997). These perspectives help explain why **singleness poses a unique threat to both masculinity and patriarchy** in China. Without the recognition conferred through marriage and fatherhood, men risk exclusion from full gender status, undermining the very logic of male dominance. Although scholars argue that singleness is more socially damaging for women (Gauntlett, 2008; Gong et al., 2017; Sharp & Ganong, 2011), this framework suggests the opposite. Because of this contradictory tension, women, by contrast, are afforded slightly more space to question or resist these narratives, which helps explain why they may face social stigma but rarely the same existential threat that unmarried men experience. Thus, singleness exposes the contradiction at patriarchy's core. The system that promises men dominance also sets the terms for their exclusion.

The contradictory tensions come to life within the moral economy of marriage, where demographic pressures collide with the demand for marriage. Sarah Lamb's (2022) concept of the "gendered marriage imperative" and Eleanor Wilkinson's (2012) notion of "**compulsory coupledom**" both capture the social logic that makes marriage a moral obligation rather than a personal choice. In China, where only heterosexual marriages are recognized, this imperative is especially strong. The state actively promotes marriage as the foundation of family and

citizenship, linking a "good, normative coupled life" to moral worth (Wilkinson, 2013, p. 209).[20] The result is a moral economy in which singleness becomes socially unacceptable and ethically suspect. Bella DePaulo (2011) calls this stigma "**singlism**," the systematic devaluation of those who remain unmarried, divorced, or widowed (p. 19). Public perceptions across many societies depict the unmarried as "deviant" (Budgeon, 2008), "immature", and "self-centered" (Depaulo & Morris, 2005), and such judgements resonate throughout the narratives of my interlocutors. In China, however, the moral stakes are gendered. While single women are often portrayed as independent or "too picky," male singleness is read as a failure of masculinity itself. In this sense, compulsory coupledom in China enforces both conformity but also moral hierarchy making singlism particularly harsh for men.

If marriage is the measure of moral completion, then those who remain unmarried inhabit a prolonged state of moral suspension. I conceptualize this condition as *waithood* that extends beyond a temporary phase of delayed adulthood to a sustained moral condition that can define an entire life. Singleness is often imagined as a transitional state, a holding pattern until the "right" partner or circumstances emerge (Inhorn & Smith-Hefner, 2020). For some, however, it stretches into a state of "never-marriedness" (Lamb, 2020). Diane Singerman originally coined "waithood" to describe the "prolongation of the period of time between adolescence and the achievement of full adulthood, which is typically associated with marriage and the establishment of a family of one's own" (cited in Inhorn & Smith-Hefner 2020, pp. 3-4). Emerging from the context of economic instability during the Arab Spring, the concept initially described young men unable to marry without secure employment (Singerman, 2020). This dissertation extends the term to the Chinese context, showing how waithood becomes not just an economic predicament but a moral orientation toward an imagined future that may never arrive. My findings reveal that even men well past the conventional marrying age remain suspended in this anticipatory state, unable or unwilling to accept permanent singleness. What emerges, then, is a form of **perpetual waithood,** an unending deferral of moral completion.

This dissertation suggests that perpetual waithood produces non-normative temporalities that queer heterosexual life courses, thereby expanding theories of time beyond sexuality-based frameworks and clarifying how normativity is produced, enforced, and unevenly lived. Rather than treating waithood as a phase that precedes normative adulthood, I argue that prolonged waithood reorganizes life courses in ways that diverge both structurally and and affectively from heteronormative timelines of marriage and reproduction. In this sense, waithood does not merely delay adulthood, it queers time by suspending individuals in an indeterminate present oriented toward a future that remains morally demanded yet increasingly unattainable. This move brings waithood into conversation with Jack Halberstam's (2005) argument that queerness is defined not only by sexuality but by temporalities that depart from normative life milestones. In China, demographic pressure, rather than sexual orientations or alternative gender expression, push many heterosexual singletons into timelines that resemble what queer theorists describe as queer time.

Drawing on Eve Sedgwick's (1993) framing of queerness as "the open mesh of possibilities" that resist singular definitions (p. 8), I interpret the lives of unmarried men and women who delay,

[20] Bethany Letiecq (2019) took this idea a step further, coining the term "family privilege" to denote how some structural inequalities are tied to whether or not a person is settled within a family unit.

forgo, or reconfigure marriage as exemplifying a form of **heterosexual queerness.** Their trajectories disrupt compulsory coupledom and expose how marriage continues to serve as a moral benchmark for personhood and virtue. Building on Casey James Miller's (2023) analysis of queer activists in China who balance moral obligation with non-normative life paths, I suggest that even ostensibly heterosexual single men experience the moral weight of queerness. Both groups are constrained by filial scripts that equate morality with marriage and procreation. While Miller questions whether queerness is always anti-normative, I extend this line of inquiry to ask whether singleness itself, when it becomes enduring, can be understood as queer.

The non-normative timelines produced by waithood make this **queering of heterosexual life** courses visible. I initially expected long-term singletons to form alternative kinship arrangements, such as platonic entanglements or "chosen families" (Weston, 1997). Instead, most long-term singletons in this study adopted strategies of self-isolation, withdrawing from friends and even natal kin as a response to shame about remaining unmarried. Only a few lesbians I met enacted the forms of chosen family Weston describes, and even they remained closely tied to their families of origin. This pattern suggests that among Han communities in urban mainland China, natal kinship continues to anchor intimacy even when heterosexual marriage is unattainable, echoing Lamb's (2022) findings on never-married women in India. Brian A. Horton's (2017) work with queer Indian men further demonstrates how individuals integrate non-normative identities with enduring ties to the family home rather than severing those relationships.[21] In contrast, the heterosexual men in my study remained oriented toward their blood relatives, but interpreted their "queered" life course as a moral failure, enacting this belief through self-imposed distancing as a form of self-punishment.

Turning from time to exchange, I employ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (1985) theory of **male homosocial organization** to ask what becomes of masculine bonds when the exchange of women is disrupted by demographic scarcity. Sedgwick, building on Claude Lévi-Strauss' (1969 [1949]) theory of kinship as the exchange, argues that male relationships are sustained through women, who serve as both literal and symbolic conduits of male connection. Applying this lens to contemporary China, I explore how men's relationships with one another continue to depend on women as the means through which masculine virtue is demonstrated and affirmed. In other words, what Chinese men ultimately exchange through women is not women themselves, but moral capital that legitimizes their masculinity and filial worth. When women become scarce or withdraw from the marriage economy, men lose their primary source of virtue attainment. Rather than forming new bonds or new methods to maintain homosociality, this research demonstrates that many retreat into isolation, revealing that without women as moral intermediaries, masculine solidarity in China collapses under the weight of its own patriarchal logic.

To understand how these exchanges are organized, I turn to the **commodified structures** that govern love, marriage, and morality in China. Drawing on Matthew Sommer's (2000; 2015) history of marriage and bride price and Junsen Zhang's (Ong et al., 2020; Weiss et al., 2018; Zhang et al,. 2023; Zhang & Sun, 2014) extensive economic analyses of marriage markets, I use the term "marriage economy" to capture how intimacy and morality are shaped by the system of exchange. Feminist scholars such as Gayle Rubin (1975) reframe Levi-Strauss' model to show

[21] Horton (2017) cites an interlocutor's mother who refers to her bachelor son as *vansh mrityu* or "the death of the clan," a phrase that carries comparable connotation to the Chinese term "bare branch" (p. 2).

that women are not merely objects of exchange by active participants. Marilyn Strathern (1988) furthers Rubin's argument by demonstrating that it is the relationship itself that becomes the traded good, not women. Viviana Zelizer (2005) furthers this line of thought, arguing that economic exchange does not corrupt intimacy but is woven into it, revealing how love and money are always intertwined. In China's hypergamous marriage practices, women are often dismissed as "gold-digging" or "picky," but this position instead reflects gendered negotiations of love, virtue and security within a moralized economy. As female education and income rise, I argue that the gendered dynamics of exchange have reversed historical dynamics. Women now increasingly act as consumers with power to choose, while men, particularly those of lower status, become the object of consumption, waiting to be selected. Age, class, and geography largely determine who gets to buy, sell, and be sold in this emotional marketplace, where filial duty, love, virtue, and capital are deeply enmeshed and circulate through the same logics that structure economic value.

Singleton Seeking Singletons:
How My Positionality Inspired My Research Topic

As a 40-year-old single person who does not intend to marry or have children, I am deeply invested in the lives of those whose life courses deviate from the norm. While my family and social environment allow me the freedom to choose this trajectory, I recognize that not everyone has the luxury of framing singleness as a choice. Exploring how others negotiate their marital status, or lack thereof, also helps me reflect on my own decision to step outside of the normative expectations of marriage.

My skepticism toward marriage is rooted in my own family dynamics. As a child of divorce, I learned early how legally defined relationships can complicate human connections and ideas of family. When asked the simple question of "how many people are in your family?" I never know who to include in my count. The boundaries of family in my own life have been fluid and unconventional. I have full, half, and adopted siblings, family friends I call cousins, friends I call siblings, relatives I have never met, and aunts and cousins whose marriages were for visa purposes rather than love. Even my parents offered contrasting models of commitment as it relates to legal classification of family. My mother remarried, giving me a legal stepfather, while my father has remained with the same partner for over three decades without marrying or cohabiting, insisting that marriage would have ruined their relationship. Growing up with these alternative models of intimacy and kinship gave me the freedom to imagine family outside of conventional and legal categories.

My sexuality likely also influenced my resistance to traditional marriage. While my siblings have all followed heterosexual and monogamous scripts and married by thirty, the only relationship I ever consider formalizing was with another woman before same-sex marriage was legal in the United States. We lived together for five years and called one another "wife," but ultimately did not stay together long enough to make the title official (more on this in the Epilogue). Although I can now legally marry a woman if I wish, my desire to marry at all has waned, and I no longer practice monogamy. I now prioritize platonic love over my sexual partnerships, and many of my most significant bonds are with my friends I consider "chosen family" (see Weston, 1997). Within my circles, it is common to cohabit, pool resources, or even produce and raise children

together in groups of more than two, without necessarily legal recognition. These experiences shape my interest in how alternative relationship practice might emerge in other contexts.

Likely informed by my own history and relationship practices, initially I hypothesized that men in China facing lifelong singleness might also form non-traditional kinship networks out of necessity. I drew on reports of "bachelor villages" (Jin et al., 2013) and Susan Greenhalgh's (2012) observations suggesting that men lean on each other for social and emotional support (p. 135). I imagined that deprioritizing marriage in favor of friendship of chosen kin might become a natural adaptation out of pressure rather than choice. What I found in the field, however, was far more complicated and less aligned with my expectations as the following chapters will show.

My interest in China began during a year I spent in Beijing from 2012-2013, when I taught English for adults while my then-partner (the aforementioned "wife") worked as a journalist. I was struck by how profoundly the OCP, enacted decades earlier, continued to shape everyday life. I both read news stories and met individuals who had lost homes or jobs for violating the policy, women pressured to have children while also struggling to carry pregnancies to term while navigating uneven access to healthcare, and queer only children negotiating lavender marriages to satisfy filial obligations. These encounters revealed the intersection of gender, kinship, social expectations, and state power, and collectively seeded my long term interest in the cultural politics of reproduction and family life in China.

My academic trajectory reflects these intertwined interests. With training in visual art, illustration, and documentary film (BFA in Film and Television from the Savannah College of Art and Design), as well as sociocultural anthropology (MA from Binghamton University followed by anthropology doctoral training at Brandeis University), I approach research with an eye toward both representations and analysis. This dissertation brings together visual methods, ethnographic data, and media analysis to examine how gender and kinship are being reshaped in a demographic landscape where men vastly outnumber women. At its core, my work asks what it means to be single in China today and how singleness has come to be framed as an important moral issue rather than simply a demographic or personal condition.

Research in Post-Covid China

With the context of contemporary singleness in China in mind, I now turn to the details of how the research was conducted. This "patchwork ethnography" took place in clusters over four years (Günel et al., 2020).[22] The work began in 2021 with remote interviews during COVID-19 lockdowns, and culminated in six months of in-person fieldwork in China in 2023 once borders were reopened (more details on this in the Epilogue). The analysis of the data began in the field but the majority took place once back in the United States over 2024-2025.

The COVID-19 pandemic shaped where and how I was able to conduct research. While based in Boston during the first phase, I relied on Zoom to interview pre-existing contacts in China as well as Boston-based Chinese individuals I recruited during my first year at Brandeis University.

[22] Patchwork ethnography - a mode of fieldwork introduced during COVID that departs from the long-term, uninterrupted fieldwork in exchange for fragmented, shorter-term, and often collaborative field engagements (Günel et al. 2020).

This early stage of research centered on public opinion of unmarried Chinese men and produced a short film, which I discuss in Chapter 2. When borders remained closed in 2022, I turned to the issue of bride migration from Southeast Asia. In 2023, with China reopened, I began the bulk of my fieldwork, focusing on five cities over six consecutive months. With a home base in Wuhan, I also spent time in Shanghai, Dali, Chongqing, and Chengdu (see Figure 9).

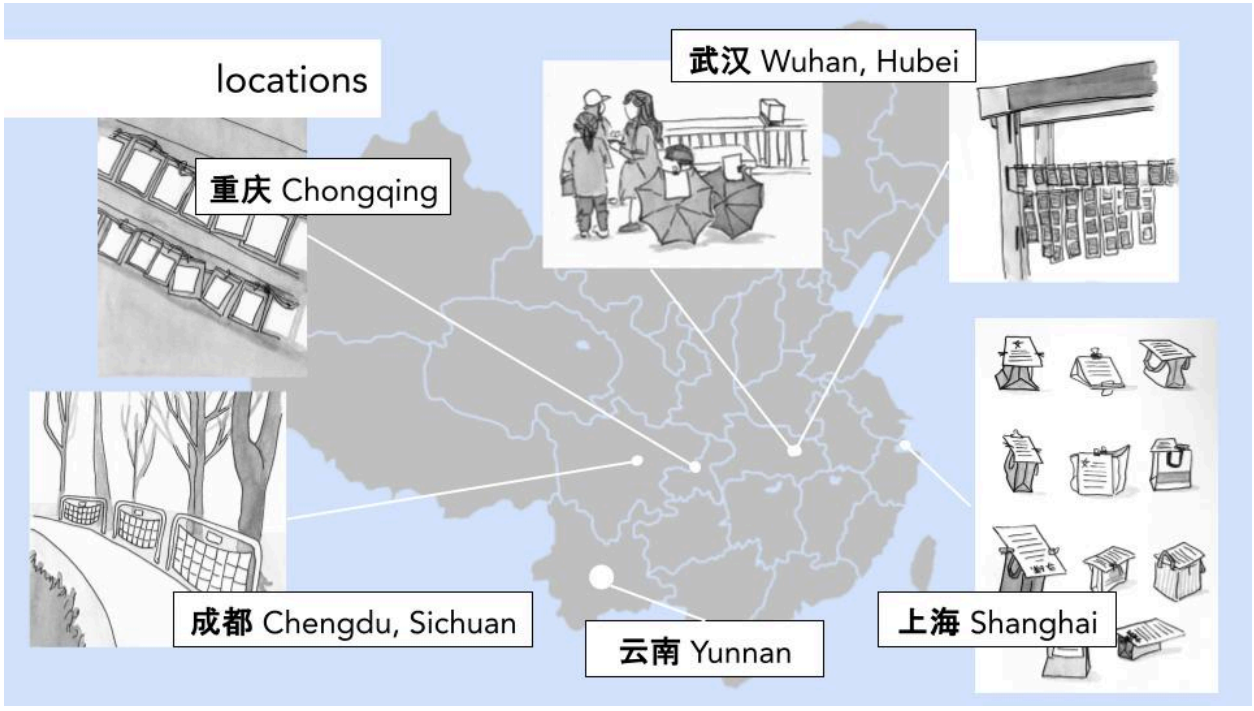

Figure 9. Map of research locations for this multisited project. Image and Illustrations by author.

My original research plan was to document the lives of rural Chinese bachelors. However, I was not able to obtain clearance to conduct research in remote areas and instead shifted to a broader study of singleness. While I interviewed bachelors from both rural and urban backgrounds, my interlocutors all resided in urban areas. I also conducted interviews with unmarried women, married individuals, parents of unmarried adult children, and professionals working in what I call the "marriage industries". This broader demographic allowed me to examine how men perceived themselves, how others perceived them, and how cultural messages about marriage shaped those perceptions.

The breakdown of my Chinese interlocutors is as follows:

Demographic	Age Range	Marital Status
Parents (n = 24)	50+	*(Note: I did not ask most parents about their ages nor current marital status)
Straight Men (n = 23)	22 -47	Single = 13 Married = 5 Divorced = 5

Straight Women (n =16)	19 - 45	Single = 10 Married = 5 Divorced = 1
Queer Women (n = 10)	19 - 41	Single = 8 Divorced= 2
Queer Men (n = 1)	28	Single = 1

Initially, I had intended to interview only those who had never married, but during fieldwork it became clear that the experiences of divorcees were equally relevant to the story of singleness. Some divorced men, for instance, engaged in questionable behaviors online that contributed to women's fears of men, which in turn reinforced barriers to marriage (see Chapter 4). For clarity, I define single as never married, married as currently legally coupled, and divorced as no longer legally married. Individuals who divorced and remarried are counted as married.[23] These nuances highlight that being married does not always mean withdrawing from the marriage economy, as many continue to search for new partners (see Chapter 4).

Because this study centers on heteronormative marriage in China, most participants are categorized as straight. That said, I did not ask people to identify their sexuality and instead inferred it from their assumed gender identity and the gender of their desired partners, unless they disclosed otherwise. Queer and gender nonconforming individuals entered the study unintentionally, either as friends, friends of friends, or as women I dated while in China. Their stories offered valuable insights into the wider discourse on singleness, so I incorporated them into the data, most of which is discussed in Chapter 5.

The socioeconomic status of my interlocutors ranged from middle to upper class. Some technically held rural *hukous* (household registration) but were living and working in urban areas. None of my participants would be considered lower class or extremely impoverished by Chinese standards. I also spoke with several ethnically Chinese individuals with foreign citizenship who were married to Chinese women, who are included in the count.

As mentioned above, this dissertation research follows a patchwork ethnography carried out in stages over four years. The different phases required different methods, so I describe recruitment, participant observation, visual work, media scanning, interview practices, and analytic procedures in sequence.

Recruitment in Boston relied on my institutional networks and snowball sampling. I recruited many initial participants through Brandeis programs and Chinese language departments, which resulted in a sample demographic of younger, college-educated people from wealthier Chinese families. These conversations helped shape the research questions and produce a short film discussed in Chapter 2.

[23] I found that as long as a man had been married at some point in his life, he was not in such moral danger, especially if the marriage resulted in children. I do not explore these within this dissertation as it is outside the scope of this particular study.

Figure 10. Illustration of parents matchmaking at a marriage market in Chongqing. Original artwork by the author.

Recruitment in China built on preexisting contact from a prior period of residence and digital outreach. My existing network of journalists and academics introduced me to additional urban interlocutors. I used dating apps such as *Tantan* and *Momo* with a profile that signaled I was an American researcher studying singleness in China. Those apps yielded hundreds of chats[24] and five key face-to-face interlocutors who appear throughout the dissertation. The marriage markets were another major recruitment site because they were public, frequent and populated with parents (see Figure 10), matchmakers, and some single adults. My foreign identity and gender produced many approaches, which I managed by clarifying my role, at times, using a staged signal of unavailability in order to reduce unwanted propositions (see Figure 11).[25]

[24] These individuals are not included in the count of participants unless I meet them in-person, but some of the strictly-digital interactions have been mentioned in Chapter 4.

[25] I quickly learned that my being unmarried, especially at my "advanced age" of 38, would often take the conversation in a direction that focussed too much on me, so I began to wear a fake wedding ring I had purchased at a corner store for 18 RMB ($2.50 USD) and fib about my marital status.

Figure 11. Photo of fake gold wedding band I purchased during fieldwork to signal that I was married and therefore not available, avoiding unwanted advances from both parents and single men I interviewed. Photo by the author.

Participant observation took place in coffee shops, tea houses, public parks, marriage markets, dating clubs and in the virtual spaces of dating apps. Most encounters began with a casual meeting in a public place and then moved to a semi-private but still public area like park benches for an interview. These encounters resembled dates in form at times, which required careful ethical reflection. I secured IRB approval for my interview protocols, was explicit about research goals, and sought consent at multiple points. The blurred boundary between ethnographic immersion and "date" also became a methodological insight that the project probed analytically.

Research assistants supported recruitment, translation and note taking. I recruited local graduate students from language and social science departments who ranged in age from their early twenties to early thirties. These assistants helped with language nuance and cultural bridging, and they sometimes increased trust when I entered unfamiliar social spaces. Having a Chinese assistant present also functioned as a practical recruiting tool, although I adjusted personnel when an assistant's presence became a distraction to data collection.[26]

[26] One of my regular assistants in Wuhan was a very attractive young woman who I jokingly referred to as my "participant bait." Anytime I brought her to a marriage market we would be swarmed by elderly parents asking her to marry their sons. She was so popular that it made interviews difficult to complete because so many parents would

Interviews varied from structured to fully unstructured depending on the situation. I used a semi-structured guide approved by the IRB for formal interviews and a more conversational approach for spontaneous encounters. Only a minority of participants consented to audio recording. When recordings were not possible I took detailed notes, cross-checked translations with assistants, and recorded immediate post interview voice memos to preserve nuance and exact phrases.

Virtual interviews were important in early stages and remained an option throughout the project. I conducted Zoom interviews during lockdown and continued to gather data through app chats and voice messages when participants preferred not to meet in person. These virtual encounters generated rich material about online dating practices and perceptions of dating services.

I kept a **daily process diary** and used audio journals to capture reflexive thinking and immediate impressions. During the day, I would spend time in public settings, jotting and sketching highlights from interviews and interactions to analyze later. Each evening, once I was alone I recorded an audio summary of the day detailing the context of each of the jottings, rift on emerging themes, which helped me trace patterns and adjust subsequent questions.

Drawing and visual practices were central methods for this project because of my background in visual art. I used quick sketches to map spaces, to slow down observation, and to create openings for conversation (see example in Figure 12). Unlike writing, often seen as a private endeavor, drawing is often seen as a public practice, inviting people to approach and talk. It therefore became a productive recruitment technique. I include many of these visuals in this dissertation as visual data that complement textual analysis. Drawing also helped me anonymize scenes when needed because I could represent events without using identifiable photographs (see Figure 13). That said, photographs are also used, but certain details are blurred to maintain privacy.

butt into our conversations attempting to speak to her that notes were often hard to read afterward - trying to remember who said what.

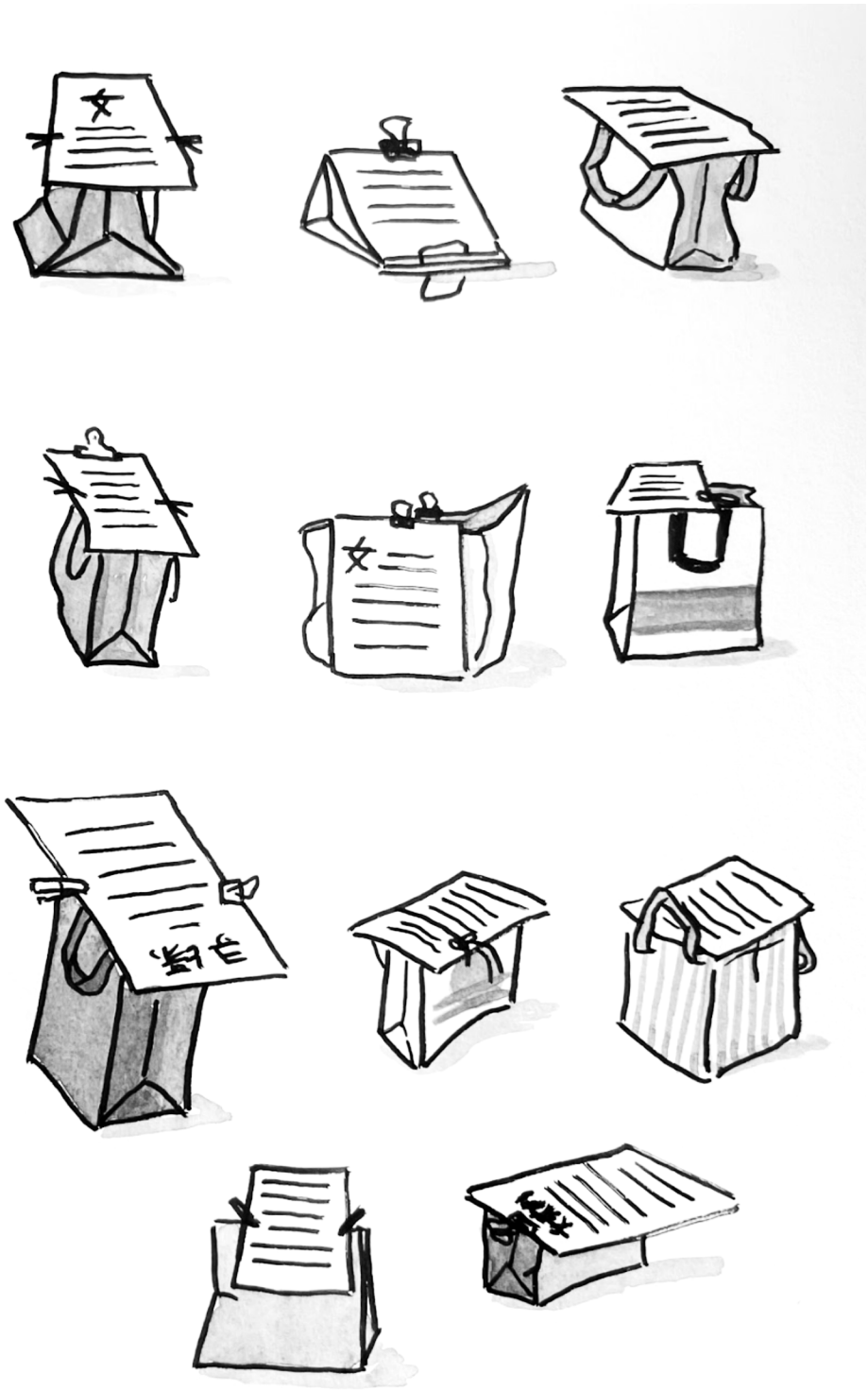

Figure 12. Illustration of personal fliers advertising singleton attached to luxury shopping bags at a marriage market in Shanghai. Original artwork by author.

Figure 13. Illustration of a man on the dating app, Tantan. Original artwork by author.

Media and environmental scans supplement ethnographic work. I commissioned young research assistants who had access to Chinese social media to collect articles, comment threads, videos, and memes related to keywords I provided. This effort produces a corpus of public discourse that I analyzed alongside fieldnotes and interviews included in each chapter.

I used **composite storytelling** to protect identities in the highly censored environment of post-Covid China. Composite narratives combine details from multiple people to create coherent cases that capture broader patterns while obscuring individual identifiers (Willis, 2018, p. 471). Inspired by Laurence Ralph's (2014) ethnography, *Renegade Dreams*, I followed his methodological approach for composite narrative and anonymization given the sensitivity of the subject and the possible consequences for participants. Similarly, all individuals have been given pseudonyms to protect identities with the exception of well publicized media stories.

Data compilation and analysis followed a multi-step process. I transcribed all recorded interviews and cleaned the data before uploading them to Atlas.ti for coding. I digitized field notes, sketches, chat logs, screenshots and media artifacts and stored them in a unified project folder. I began coding with a small set of deductive codes (like "urban vs rural," "bachelor," "marriage") and then added indicative (like "fear," "boogeyman," and "shame") and in vivo codes as new themes emerged (for example "trainable," "monster," and "pickiness"). Multiple

passes through the data allowed me to refuse categories and to assemble chapter level files that shaped the organization of the dissertation. I maintained a master spreadsheet that documented participant demographics, research locations, and pseudonyms, which served as the basis for ethical tracking and anonymization.

There were a number of **methodological limitations** to this research due to my positionality and the geopolitical context of China in 2023. Firstly, I recognize there is an uneven representation of urban and rural participants because of permissions and logistical constraints. My status as an American limited my ability to travel to certain parts of the country without prior connections. Because of this I relied on urban and relatively privileged networks which shaped the sample in a way that I have attempted to acknowledge in my writing. I also acknowledge that my own language limitations affect my understanding and require me to rely on assistance for nuance in translation. Lastly, the uneven rate of audio recording increased my reliance on contemporaneous notes, which means some of the quotes may not be verbatim.

Chapter Summary

The first chapter of this dissertation examines cultural expectations for men. I begin by introducing Confucian ideas of virtue and the Chinese division of *wen* and *wu* masculinity, asking how these ideals shape whether a man is considered complete. Two case studies show how manhood can be claimed from opposite ends of the socioeconomic spectrum. Jason, a so-called "diamond bachelor," demonstrates how wealth and education buffer the stigma of remaining single past 30. In contrast, the figure of the "Father of Eight" captures public admiration despite poverty and presumed lack of a wife, presenting another way of performing virtuous masculinity without traditional markers of marital success.

The second chapter turns to men who fail to meet these ideals and the cultural narrative that surrounds them. Here I trace the history of the term *guanggun* or "bare branch," a derogatory label for men thought unlikely to ever marry, and show how it has evolved into a powerful "boogeyman-like" metaphor for deviance and danger in the social imagination. Drawing on media discourse, historical records, and interviews, the chapter shows how unvirtuous masculinity has been synonymous with bachelorhood. The chapter concludes with contemporary examples of men who struggle to find partners, including a case study of an older rural bachelor whose transgressive interactions highlight the social tension surrounding singleness.

The third chapter shifts the focus to parents, who play a central role in sustaining marriage as a moral expectation within the family. If the first two chapters describe the broader cultural stakes, this chapter reveals how those ideals are enforced through parental intervention. It analyzes the re-emergence of matchmakers, the rise of marriage markets and related industries that frame singleness as a problem to be solved while (re)creating new opportunities for profit. Drawing on case studies of parents and professional marriage brokers, the chapter examines how families navigate a system that blends moral obligation with commercial enterprise and why many remain skeptical of the motives of those who profit from singleness.

The fourth chapter continues the exploration of commercial interventions but looks at self-partnering services that bypass parental involvement. It investigates dating apps, blind

dating services, dating clubs, and mail-or-bride platforms, that promise solutions but are rife with scams, financial exploitation, and unmet expectations. Through the case study of Jiang, a man who has tried nearly every option but still struggles to find a partner, the chapter highlights how these services reshape performances of masculinity. Jiang's experiences illustrate how men internalize shame and anxiety when they cannot meet expectations of provision, protection, and procreation, showing that self-initiated partnering is embedded in larger cultural and commercial systems rather than being an individual pursuit.

The fifth and final chapter centers women and their perspective on male singleness. As the ones who ultimately decide whether a bachelor becomes a husband, aka the "gatekeepers, women reveal different relationships to the cultural marriage mandate. While female singleness is also stigmatized, many women resist the idea that marriage is necessary for moral worth even as they reproduce the view that unmarried men pose a social threat. The chapter presents five case studies of women at different life stages to show how they evaluate potential partners, why many opt out of traditional pathways, and how their choices shape the persistence of bachelorhood.

Together, these five chapters show how while singleness in China is typically framed as a demographic concern, it is also reinforced by a narrative of singleness as a moral failing. Such perspective highlights how efforts to resolve the social problem of singleness are shaped by a deep lack of trust. Men of certain social classes and circumstances struggle to trust themselves to embody cultural ideals, parents mistrust commercial brokers and even their children's judgement, women distrust men as potential partners, and everyone questions the promises of industries that profit from their anxieties. This pervasive skepticism reveals that singleness is never just about being unmarried, but about contested claims to virtue, legitimacy and belonging in contemporary China.