

**Between tradition and individualism: the *sheng nu* (leftover women).**

*To what extent does education and urbanity influence singlehood, marriage timing and life satisfaction among women in contemporary China, with a focus on cultural contexts, the advance of individualised mindsets and the agency of women?*

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## *Dedication*

To M, D and J

## *Acknowledgements*

Back in January 2020, in the wake of the coronavirus, I left my home in Beijing without saying goodbye to my friends, colleagues or favourite noodle restaurants. I left quickly and overnight. This study was inspired and written with the love gathered from people, places, knowledge and moments during my time working in Beijing. A goodbye written in circa 20,000 words to a place I still call home.

Thank you to all at the Faculty of Spatial Sciences for looking after me during a tumultuous two years. This master's programme was a lifeline for me. Words can't say how proud I am to be (hopefully/ *finally*) a 'Master of Population Studies'.

Leo, thank you for putting up with my abstract creativity and chaotic research ideas. Your support and interest in my topic meant so much to me.

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## Table of contents

List of Figures .....	4
List of Tables.....	4
<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1.1 Problem statement.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1.2 Academic and Societal Relevance .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>1.3 Research Objective and Research Question .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>1.4 Structure of the presented master study .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>2. Literature review, theoretical framework and conceptual model .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>2.1 Literature review .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>2.1.1. A shift in ideologies – from collectivism to individualism.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>2.1.2. Marriage in China .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>2.1.3 The <i>sheng nu</i> ( leftover women ) .....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>2.2 Theoretical framework .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>2.2.1 Second demographic transition model .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>2.2.2 Individualisation .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>2.2.3 Female empowerment and agency (or the lack of).....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>2.3 Conceptual model .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>3. Research design .....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>3.1 Description of the data set .....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>3.2 Methodological approach of analysis.....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>3.2.2. Sample selection.....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>3.2.3 Core variable selection .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>3.2.4 Chosen analyses and their methods .....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>3.2.5 Models.....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>4. Results.....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>4.1. Descriptive analysis .....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>4.2 Ordered Probit: <i>Urbanity and education influence on life satisfaction</i> .....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>4.3 Event history analysis: <i>Urbanity and education influence on marriage timing (ideal and actual)</i>. .....</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>5. Synthesis, discussion and conclusion .....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>5.1 Synthesis of the results .....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>5.2 Discussion and limitations .....</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>5.3 Concluding remarks.....</b>	<b>55</b>

## List of Figures

Figure 1: Density and distribution of the sample population map.

Figure 2: The relationship between marriage registrations and birth rates graph.

Figure 3: The unmarried population, by sex, of China over time graph.

Figure 4: The Conceptual Model

Figure 5: Proportion of respondents who wished they were already married, by age graph.

Figure 6: Kaplan-Meier survival curves: 'Ideal marriage age' by household registration and education

Figure 7: Kaplan-Meier survival curves: 'Actual marriage age' by household registration and education (selective representative sub sample)

Figure 8: Kaplan-Meier survival curves: 'Actual marriage age' by household registration and education (selective married only sub sample)

## List of Tables

Table 1: Descriptive statistics - Main

Table 2: Descriptive statistics - *Sheng nu*

Table 3: Descriptive statistics – Urban/rural

Table 4: Descriptive statistics - Life satisfaction

Table 5: Life satisfaction – Ordered probit model

Table 6: Ordered probit model: predicted marginal effects

Table 7: Descriptive statistics – ideal/ actual marriage age

Table 8: Cox regression model - event of (ideal) marriage

Table 9: Cox regression model - event of (actual) marriage (selective representative sub sample)

Table 10: Cox regression model - event of (actual) marriage (selective married only sub sample)

### Abstract

**Background** China, a country with longstanding fame for its population size and its population policies, a country which is aging, shrinking and experiencing a demographic crisis. A country which today still sees marriage as a gateway to childbirth. In an effort to encourage marriage, and thus *child birth*, the Chinese state label single women over the age of 27 as ‘leftover women’ or in mandarin *sheng nu*. **Objective** Taking into consideration China’s longstanding traditions, history, cultural heritage combined with its current authoritarian political rule, this study is guided by theories of agency, individualism and female empowerment to investigate influences on singlehood, marriage timing and life satisfaction as well as exploring the demographic reality of the *sheng nu*. **Method.** Using survey data from the 2010 and 2018 China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), socioeconomic indicators such as education and household registration are used as explanatory variables for both an ordered probit model created to test ‘life satisfaction’ and an event history analysis model to observe influences on ‘marriage timing’. **Findings** Analysis of the data signals that educated, urban women in China equate a marriage to positive life satisfaction but do look for a later moment to wedlock (for the most part, keeping within cultural expectations of marrying before age 27). Conclusions can be made that suggest the term *sheng nu* is working as a linguistic tool: women from the China Family Panel Survey appear to not only value marriage but most strive to achieve it within the ideals set out by the Chinese state.

*Keywords:* China, marriage timing, life satisfaction, female empowerment and agency, event history analysis, ordered probit

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Problem statement

Marriage has and will always be an important building block of humanity. Recently many countries have seen, including China, declines in marriage rates alongside rises in marriage ages ( Wrenn et al 2019). China is experiencing its lowest population growth rate since the 1960's, declining marriage rates and parallel falls in fertility are frequently cited as one of the core reasons behind China's anticipated / imminent population decline ( Jones 2007). This study aims to add to the feminist sociological debate on women's agency and *its* impact on marriage in China. Through an exploration of the interplay between education and urbanity, realised individualisation and agency are gauged by observing marriage timing and life achievements. This study aims to reveal the voices and actions of Chinese women who face competing pressures, within the marriage arena, from traditional and gendered obstacles. The current literature on changes in ideologies, which are seen as products of individualisation, make up the core theory in this study and are addressed through a population study standpoint (Hofstede 1984, Moore's 2005). The larger literature (Giddens 1992, Triandis 2018, Beck 2002, Ehrhardt and Kohli 2011) is used to explore the development of the female individual decision space which sees shifts in tandem with rising socioeconomic statuses. The wealth of existing knowledge, acquired via the literature review, is used to frame and direct this study and test the set of hypotheses which seek to understand the impact education and urbanity have on singlehood, marriage timing and life satisfaction: where a focus on life satisfaction is used as a product of individualisation and its link to individual self-fulfilment and female wellbeing.

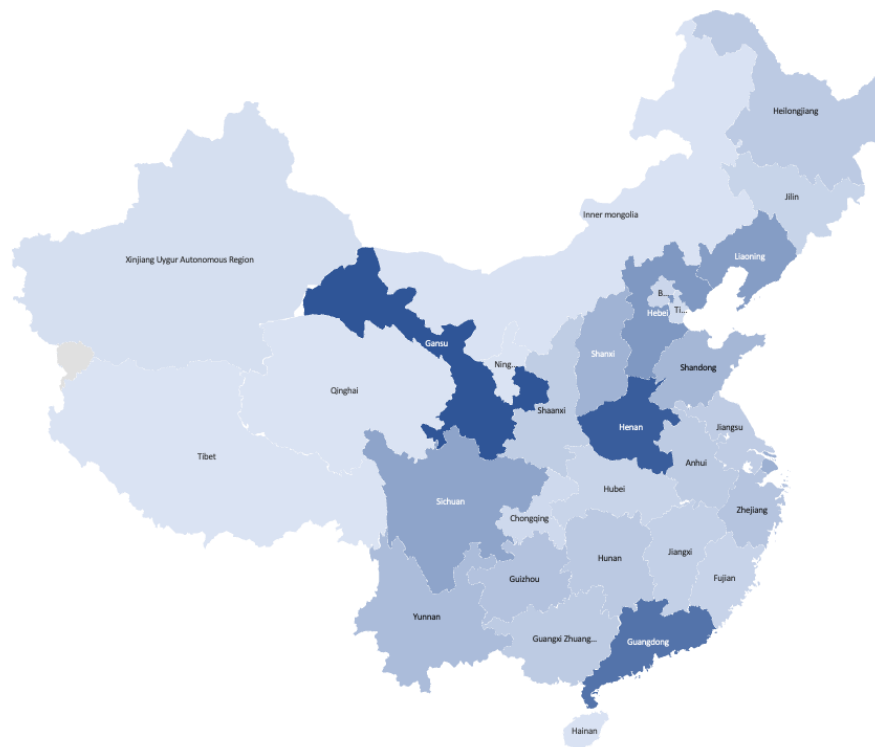
In recent years, the derogatory term *sheng nu* , which directly translates from the Chinese Mandarin *sheng* 'leftover' and *nu* 'women' has emerged as a label, promoted by the Chinese state, since 2007 , to 'encourage' the marriage of women before the age of 27 (The Chinese Ministry of Education 2007). The *sheng nu* are typically cohorts of urban and educated women (Feldshuh 2018, Murti 2019). Hypotheses are set that theorise women are choosing later marriage as a direct result of rising female independence through increasing education and access to urban resources, albeit against a backdrop of cultural norms and constraints. This study assists in understanding the motive behind the phrase and looks to see if the defined '*sheng nu* phenomenon' is in fact a demographic reality. Along the way, this study, considers the socio linguistic role of *sheng nu* as a policy tool to help encourage Chinese women to marry, and the potential part *sheng nu* plays as a scapegoat to mask China's larger societal and

population issues. Through a reading of the literature and data analysis, this study observes the extent to which female agency can be achieved in China and the effects societal ‘definitions’ can have on populations.

By focussing on the role of the woman in today’s China, this study can contribute to the larger literature on marriage timings in China, doing so with consideration of the richly entrenched and cultural expectations that a society as ancient as China has. This study makes use of The China Family Panel Studies (CFPS 2015) launched by Peking University in 2010: a questionnaire survey, from which response-data are reported and/or analysed to identify relevant attitudinal and behavioural factors. Using this survey and applying theories supported by the literature, current marriage situations through a demographic and sociological lens can be discussed. The CFPS is an on-going, two yearly, longitudinal social survey. The survey offers a comprehensive insight into daily life across the rural and urban provinces of contemporary China ( Xie and Hu 2014). The collection of individual, family and community-level longitudinal data is invaluable for research studies such as this. The study’s analysis is guided by theories of individualism and gender equality by Anthony Giddens (1992) and Ulrich Beck (2002). From these theories a conceptual model was created and acts as a framework for the study.

## **1.2 Academic and Societal Relevance**

The motivation behind this study is to observe and challenge the perceived reasons behind the fall in marriage rates in China ( Guilmoto 2016, Murti 2019, Blair et all 2022). Hypotheses set demonstrate the impact of changing ideological attitudes at the personal level on family formation in China. Through the help of existing literature and appropriate theories, this study aims to test the links individualisation, agency and female empowerment have on marriage. This is to be done primarily through the lens of the woman and her associated ‘sociological’ differences. Including a demographic examination of the so called *sheng nu*, through which the origin of the term is questioned along with its legitimacy by observing macro census data. This study looks to examine the demographic realities that underpin the changes in China’s marriage and fertility rates. Appreciating, and examining, the mass heterogeneity in China is beyond the scope of this study. However, to recognise the disparities: residence and educational backgrounds will be used to compare the outcomes of different upbringings with respect to ‘marriage intentions and outcomes’. This study is fortunate enough to have a representation of women from all Chinese provinces ( see Figure 1).



*Figure 1: Density and distribution of the sample population, women aged 20-38 years old. As recorded in the 2018 wave of the China Family Panel Studies (2018). Darker shade equates to more respondents.*

The need to understand the trend towards later and less marriage can be seen as critical in societies where fertility rates are dropping and populations are declining (Raymo et al 2021). China is a country where marriage is still the ‘norm’ and childbearing out of wedlock is still largely stigmatised (Ji and Yeung 2014, Raymo et al 2021) therefore the drop in marriage ignites fear in the realm of population studies and also presents as a concern for Chinese policy planners (Guo et al 2019). China operates as a place where marriage can be seen as the gateway to fertility (Ji and Yeung 2014), making reasons for changes in marriage patterns essential for contemporary China population studies. Marriage in China is a complex arena to study (Leung 2003) as a consequence of its maintained male dominance in society and culture (Hwang 1999).



### 1.3 Research Objective and Research Question

With a focus on the idea of the *sheng nu* – a cohort of ‘leftover’ educated women living in urban areas - this study asks:

*To what extent does education and urbanity influence singlehood, marriage timing and life satisfaction among women in contemporary China, with a focus on cultural contexts, the advance of individualised mindsets and the agency of women?*

More broadly, this study aims to contribute to marriage and family formation research in contemporary China by utilising the theory of individualisation and female empowerment and an understanding of the complex cultural, social, and political dynamics of today’s China. China offers the opportunity to explore a society, which has been uniquely fashioned through thousands of years of tradition and ‘recent’ communist political ideology. Recorded marriage registrations have been falling in recent years, 2010 saw 124.1 marriage registrations per 1000 couples, the year 2020 saw a drop to 81.4, figures taken from the National Bureau of Statistics of China (n.d). Common explanations include the focus women have on their education, careers and choosing to remain single or to marry later (Yeung 2013, Xie 2013). With marriage still more or less seen as a prerequisite for childbearing ( Yeung and Hu 2016), the ramifications of delaying marriage thus ignites fear of population decline. It is thought that the emergence of the term *sheng nu* is born from this population decline fear, a term used to socially encourage earlier marriage (Wang 2011, Ji 2015). The research question looks to seek answers on the degree of change that the Chinese marriage market is experiencing.

Through the lens of the woman, the hypotheses and subsequent analyses delve into the measured shift towards later/less marriage and the effects rising education and urbanity have on marriage and thus, fertility. The impact of individualisation and associated female empowerment make up a core component of this research study. The principal objective is to combine and to examine both the outcome and influences the pressure to marry before aged 27 has on women in China. Through a cultural and situational comprehension of the Chinese marriage arena, this study seeks to observe influences on marriage timing. Relatedly the study asks: are levels of ‘life satisfaction’ influenced by variables such as urban living and higher education? Who are the *sheng nu* and is the phrase impacting female life choices in today’s China? Ultimately, how important is marriage and can it be seen to dictate life satisfaction for women of differing educations and residences?

## **1.4 Structure of the presented master study**

This research paper is split into 5 principal chapters: theoretical, methodological, results, discussion and finally conclusions are drawn. Chosen theories were identified with the help of the literature review, said theories of ‘individualisation’ and ‘female agency’ shaped the conceptual model which subsequently assisted in the development of the hypotheses. The data analysis methods are explained in subsequent sections. The outcomes of the analysis are presented as results and discussed. Limitations and evaluation of the data and analysis are provided. Finally, conclusions are drawn against the backdrop of context gathered from the literature review.

## **2. Literature review, theoretical framework and conceptual model**

### **2.1 Literature review**

#### **2.1.1. A shift in ideologies – from collectivism to individualism**

Recognising and appreciating the extent of societal pressures to conform to and generational divides, is necessary whilst making sense of the viewpoints and attitudes that surround marriage in today’s China. *Filial piety* is a Confucian virtue whereby women must obey men, citizens must obey their ruler and the young must obey the elderly. These three pillars have helped maintain the patriarchal social order that we still see in today’s China and can be used as a context behind this entire project (Hwang 1999). For, in the realm of marriage, respecting one’s parental wishes to marry is seen for some as fundamental. Along with *filial piety*, ‘collectivism’, a product of the strict communist years of Mao Zedong can still be seen entrenched in Chinese national thought processes. China is still considered to be a collectivist country (Steele and Lynch 2013). Where collectivism stresses the importance of the community, individualism is focused on individual betterment. Individualism is said to be a direct consequence of wealth, economic growth and rising educational statuses (Beck 2002, Allik and Realo 2004, Jiaxue 2009). Addressing the advantages/disadvantages of individualism is beyond the scope of this study. For the purpose of this research, individualism and its impact on female agency is seen in a positive light owing to its alleged increase in female empowerment (Kabeer 1999).

In its relative recent history, China has seen a dramatic and rapid change across all walks of life (Yeung and Hu 2016): change is seen both socially and economically. These developments are said to be responsible for the transformations of values and the emergence of individualistic tendencies which thus can be attributed to changes in life choices such as

marriage ( Moore 2005). Chairman Mao Zedong brought in communist ideologies into the People's Republic of China, Mao's communist ideologies in his new socialist society denounced actions that favoured the individual. This was the peak of collectivism, even love was seen as an act of selfishness ( Gold 1985). The post Mao generation, +1980's generation, the 'Millennials', are the children of the children of the Cultural Revolution. In other words, parents of today's youth lived through the height of socialist China where collectivism was all ( Moore 2005). Parents of today's youth lived in a very different and difficult China. Owing to the Post-Mao and economic reforms of the 1980's parents of today have children who live in a 'new' China ( Yeung and Hu 2016). Of course, generational divides are ubiquitous to societies all over the world, but in the China context, the stark difference between China –then- and –now- is incontrovertible. History that is so memorable, can still be seen to affect and influence today, for this reason, cultural contexts provide the backdrop for the theory to be applied.

Moore's (2005) research on 'Individualism and China's millennial youth' provides an insightful discussion into the changing attitudes of today's China. Specifically, the impact globalisation has had on women's education and employment which can be attributed to female change in values. It is these changes of attitudes that are consequently cited as a cause behind changing marriage habits of today's China ( Moore 2005). The theory chosen to shape this study is that of individualism and female empowerment. According to Giddens (1992) and Beck (2002), the move towards female empowerment, individualism and heightened agency is a signifier of changed attitudes and female decision-making capabilities

### **2.1.2. Marriage in China**

From the time of Mao Zedong when 'Women Hold Up half the sky' (Ye and Zhao 2018) there has been much improvement in the realm of gender equality, however, the following literature suggests that traditional Chinese gender discourse prevails. Up until recently, Chinese parents were at the forefront of nearly all marital decisions (Croll 1981, Xu 2011). China's patrilineal family system is responsible for the act of 'bride dowry', paying for one's bride is a social phenomenon that still exists in China today ( Jiang and Sánchez-Barricarte 2012). The marriage markets which fill city parks with parents and advert-esque posters of their children, exemplify not only the maintained traditional parental involvement but also the urgency parents feel for their children to marry (Wong 2016, Ji and Yeung 2014). Although marriage has evolved over the years, enduring marriage traditions still exist. The two principal credentials are women must 'marry up' the socioeconomic ladder, this is known as *hypergamy*. If hypergamy is not

possible then at least the couples should be of similar backgrounds, known as *mendang hudi* ( To 2013).

Up until recently the goal of marriage in China was somewhat universal and, more often than not, concentrated into narrow ‘appropriate’ age brackets ( Ji & Yeung, 2014; Jones & Gubhaju, 2009; Yeung & Hu 2016 ). Marriage was an integral part of the life course, and marrying young was expected. Now, China and the rest of East Asia, see a shift in ideals. The shift to ‘later and less marriage’ in East Asian societies is gaining academic interest (Raymo et al 2015, Raymo et al 2021 ) and appears to go hand in hand with reduced fertility rates (Raymo et al 2015). The new trend is seen as dramatic and warrants time and energy in understanding especially when said trends look to be occurring in otherwise low fertility and ageing societies (Jones 2007). China’s remarkable social and economic growth is said to have revolutionised attitudes, norms and expectations of young people in today’s China (Lin 2011). It is these socio-economic changes that are used in the hypotheses to recognise the attitudes and actions of women in the CFPS.

Jones (2007) uses China as an exception to the trend of delayed marriage and very low fertility seen throughout Asia. Although, Jones’ recent literature somewhat amends this view (Guilmoto and Jones 2016, Jones 2016, Jones 2017) he reiterates the remaining importance of marriage in the Chinese society as shown by the ‘small’ increase of around 5% of single women (compared from figures taken in 1970) relative to China’s East Asian neighbours who see a larger increase of 30% of women still single in their 30’s in Japan and Taiwan (Jones and Yeung 2014) . Jones and Yeung (2014) demonstrate that although the fast pace of economic changes does have influence on social norms, strong cultural traditions persist, specifically the traditions around marriage expectation and childbearing. Maintaining and navigating traditional standards in the Chinese marriage arena is frequently cited in the literature (Ji and Yeung 2014). It is even said that marriage is seen as ‘a gateway to fertility’. Autocratic incentives to marry include: the requirement of a birth licence subject to the possession of a marriage certificate making marriage the only *legal* way of conceiving a child (Ji and Yeung 2014).

Universally, delays in marriages can be attributed to a country’s change in economic, social and ideational circumstances (Jones 2007). In the case of China, with fertility linked to marriage (Jones 2007, Jones and Gubhaju 2009, Yeung and Hu 2016, Guo et al 2019) changes in marriage warrants further research as fertility rates are inherently associated with population growth changes. Figure 2 sets the scene with the help of data collected from China’s Statistical Yearbook accessed through the National Bureau of Statistics of China (n.d). Marriage rates can

be seen in shift in tandem with birth rates ( figure 2). Current figures show falls in marriage rates and a falls in birth rates, is this ammunition for the term *sheng nu* done to encourage marriage and thus encourage births?

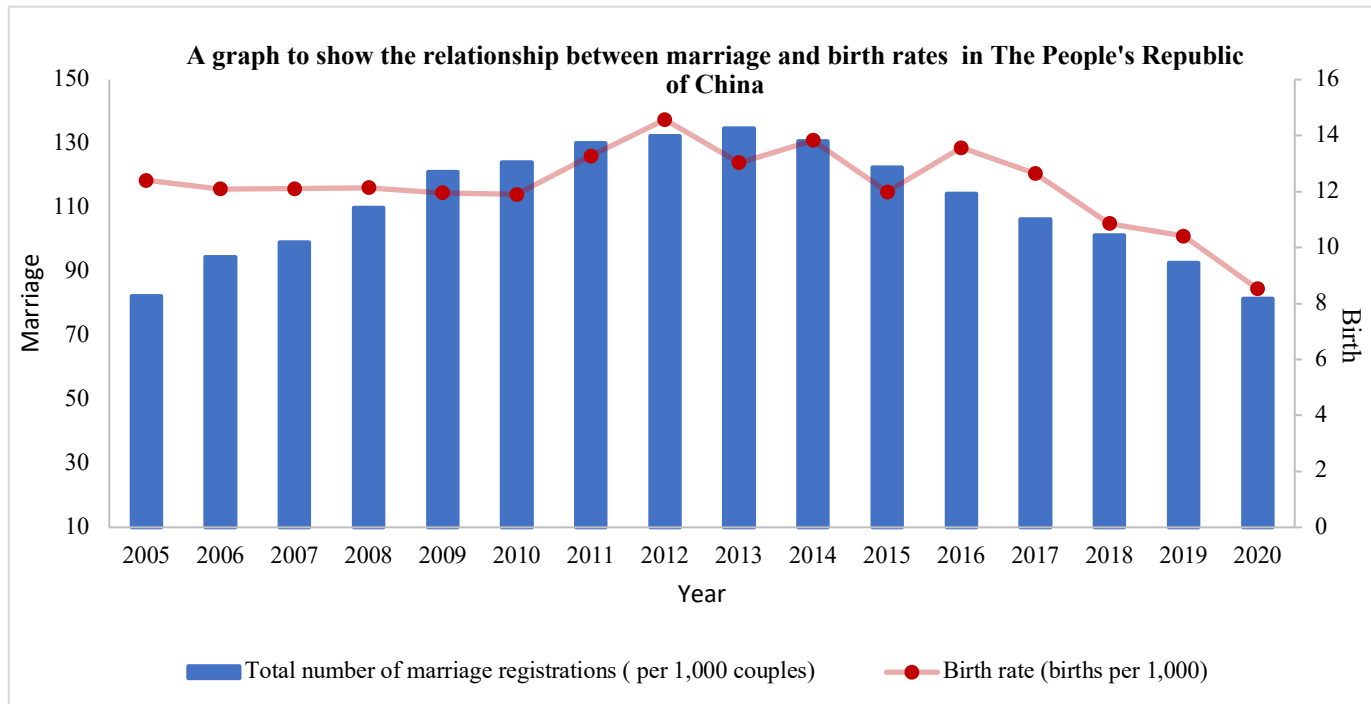


Figure 2: The relationship between marriage registrations and birth rates in China from 2005-2020. As recorded in the Demographic Yearbooks of China (Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China (n.d)).

To's (2013) qualitative study 'The Phenomenon of Late Marriage among Chinese Professional Women' is used extensively in this study. To (2013) maps out changes seen in marriage in today's China. To (2013) introduces the difficulties women face after they have been pushed through strict educational attainment. Observations include these highly educated women who see a rise in their social status and in response a rise in their expectations. This 'transition' is said to be as a product of individualisation- elevated social statuses enable women to have the *agency* to prioritise her individual ideals (Beck 2002). To (2013) draws attention to the unintentional parental role in raising daughters with increased agency. Aspirations of parents to ensure their daughters achieved academic and economic success can be seen as a paradox to their traditional ideologies surrounding marriage norms where the male is still expected to be the primary breadwinner. To (2013) asks the question, was it the parent's push towards high achieving daughters that now places them with higher statuses where they are often discriminated against, especially in the marriage arena?

### 2.1.3 The *sheng nu* ( leftover women )

#### *Sheng nu: an introduction*

The term *sheng nu* is not a definition born from popular discourse, rather it is a well-orchestrated Chinese state message, which pressures women of a certain age to get married. The Chinese Ministry of Education (2007) defines *sheng nu* as ‘highly successful unmarried women over the age of 27 with advanced degrees’ and attributes the *sheng nu* and their single status as a result of their ‘overly high expectations for marriage patterns’ ( Wang 2011). The theory that singlehood is higher for women with increased education is peppered throughout the literature ( Engelhardt and Prskawetz 2004, Jones 2017, Feldshuh 2018). In the western world, these highly educated, single women are portrayed as ‘independent’ ‘liberated’, ‘individualised’, whereas, in China, the same women are labelled as ‘leftover’ (To 2013). China has a unique and pressing issue relating to singlehood that exacerbates the situation: the ‘surplus male situation’ a demographic legacy from the One Child Policy years (Trent and South 2011), it is estimated that there are in excess of 34.9 million more men than women. These unmarried men are known as leftover men (*sheng nan*) (Blair et al 2022). However, how can any woman be ‘leftover’ in a sea seemingly full of males (Larson 2012). It is thought amongst many that the carefully crafted message of the *sheng nu* is in part a response to sex imbalance and ‘excess male’ situation (Chen 2004, Poston et al 2011, Jiang & Feldman 2014).

#### *Sheng nu, gender bias*

The term *sheng nu* and its message to ‘get worried and get married’ when women approach the age of 27 years old, is common place in today’s social order ( Larson 2012) and ignites gender bias by the associated devaluation of education ( Feldshuh 2018). The derogatory label is challenged as being counterintuitive in the marriage arena where men can be deterred from pursuing relationships with women who are labelled as ‘left over’ (To 2013). The term ‘marriage squeeze’ is used to represent the outcome of the sex imbalance that being, men who reach marriageable age are finding it hard to find partners (Chen 2004, Jones 2007, Poston and colleagues 2011, Jiang & Feldman 2014). To add insult to injury the practice of men marrying women who are of a lesser educational status (Croll 1981) is challenged by women’s rise in education compared to their male counter parts ( Yeung 2013) . As female education surpasses male, the risk of a highly educated women finding a suitable partner decreases as a consequence of the practice of men marrying lesser qualified women.

*Sheng nu, in the media*

If the term *sheng nu* is a linguistic tool made by the Chinese state to encourage marriage before the age of 27, the term will only work if it is common place in society. Therefore, a world of *sheng nu* ‘propaganda’ exists, it is the media usage of the term that can be seen as a precursor to the academic literature, and the topic as whole. As understood from the *sheng nu* literature (Wang 2011, Larson 2012, To 2013, Ji 2015, Murti 2019) the *sheng nu* message that is spread in the Chinese media is done to encourage well educated women into matrimony and motherhood. These adverts and mindsets help fuel traditional Chinese family hierarchies and offer discomfort for women who opt for later and or no marriage. The use of the term *sheng nu* in the media ripples through China’s daily life and it is seen to be influencing both male and female life choices (Wang 2011, To 2013, Murti 2019).

The awareness of the term *sheng nu* has gathered momentum in non-Chinese speaking countries, particularly after the 2019 documentary entitled ‘Leftover Women’ (Shlam and Medalia 2019). A story which follows three women who navigate China whilst being labelled as *sheng nu*, as they attempt to maintain their professional careers, look for a husband and make their parents proud. Messages in the film include, being unmarried is being incomplete along with *filial piety*, respecting one’s elders and their wishes to get married. Due to language barriers extensive analysis of Chinese marriage propaganda is not possible in this study.

*Sheng nu, an introduction to theories of agency and individualisation*

Specific literature has been collected to gain a deeper understanding of the rise of the *sheng nu* (Wang 2011, Larson 2012, To 2013, Ji 2015, Murti 2019). Larson (2012) presents several in-depth interviews via her qualitative study. These interviews do a good job at introducing the *sheng nu* rhetoric with the use of women’s voices. Making use of qualitative research gives the invaluable opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of singlehood in China. As mentioned previously, China is a country that has seen drastic social and economic development in a relatively short space of time, yet reforms in gender equalities and values have not been in tandem (Lin 2011). The theory of *agency* and *individualisation* used in the empirical part of this study can be seen to stem from the collection of findings from the literature. Larson (2012) joins the body of literature (Engelhardt and Prskawetz 2004, Ji 2005, Jones 2017, Feldshuh 2018) that attributes the rise of single women to be a product of increased education and associated wealth which thus results in increased autonomy. In other words, women have increased agency as a result of the elevation of social statuses. Where marriage once was a ‘passport to adulthood’ (Larson 2012), a new age woman exists in China, a woman who values

independence that they learnt through education and employment, a woman who does not necessarily shun marriage, rather try not to succumb to a marriage of convenience, a woman who wish to marry for love. With the term *sheng nu* being associated with elevated social statuses, research is predominately focussed on urban, highly educated and professional women in China. In addition to Larson (2012), To (2013) looks to understand the *sheng nu* and associated delays in marriages through a collection of in-depth testimonials. To (2013) adds to the understanding of Chinese culture and the cultural contexts at play during marriage in today's China. Given the rich historical, cultural and political status of China, it is unsurprisingly paramount to contextualise theories and findings.

To (2013) introduces the sociological concept of individualisation. When women are educated, they have increased agency and ability to be autonomous, this theory is subsequently explored later and acts as the principal theory for the analysis. To's (2013) findings further show a complexity to the *sheng nu* which is later explored and explained. Such findings again add to context and insight that can be used to aid the analysis and discussion of this study. To (2013) draws attention to the discrimination women of elevated social statuses face. With a message that success in education and employment does not necessarily create a recipe for singlehood. However, the un-synched development of female equality with male attitudes makes it so that women are frequently discriminated against because of their educational and economic accomplishments. Success in education and employment can therefore be seen as a recipe for desiring respect. The universal philosophy that well educated women are choosing singlehood is established via female education being seen as a powerful predictor of singlehood ( Jones and Yeung 2014). This is further supported and seen in combination with higher levels of singlehood for educated and urban women (Jones 2010). However, voices from Larson ( 2012 and To (2013) debunk this theory in the Chinese marriage context. Where education and urbanity are not seen as the sole predictor of singlehood, more the male superiority of not marrying highly educated independent women as a predictor of singlehood. Education and urbanity appear to therefore inhibit some women and their access to the marriage market thus *sheng nu* can outlaw these women from marriage because of traditional standards. It is their label and not their education or residential status.

#### **2.1.4 Singlehood in the China context**

Lesthaeghe and Surkyn (1988) surveyed literature on fertility and family formation at the time. Their findings introduced, what they describe as 'theoretical chaos' when it comes to applying theory to fertility and family formation change. Fertility tastes and aspirations are almost



always grounded in moral constructs, social, economic or political realities. In the case of China, this makes for an insightful analysis. Ultimately, singlehood explanations include, but are not restricted to: change in attitudes, comfort in singlehood, high childcare costs and difficulties in balancing work and family life Raymo and colleagues (2021) and Yeung and Hu (2016) highlight the lack of literature that exists in the realm of ‘marriage values’ in China. They draw attention to and aim to fill the gap in the literature that fails to link marriage behaviours with values against the backdrop of remaining traditional ideologies and increasing ‘Westernization’.

To further demonstrate the developments seen towards changing attitudes against the backdrop of tradition, analysis undertaken by Yeung and Hu (2016) revealed that in recent years there has been an increase in the acceptance of premarital cohabitation and sex and same gender sex in China. However, the stigmatisation of childbearing out of wedlock, singlehood and divorce showed little change. The tight link between marriage and childbearing can be seen in macro data from the China’s Demographic yearbook (figure 2) and in Yeung and Hu (2016) where it is said that this marriage prerequisite curbs the pursuit of female independence, as women who want a child must be married. Both Ji and Yeung (2014) and Yeung and Hu (2016), state that China’s unique marriage system makes for incomparable comparisons with Western societies, insinuating the plethora of traditional dominations limits the ability to apply theories of individualisation in the China context. Motivation for the present study is to therefore combine the theories of individualism with tradition.

### *Situating singlehood, past and present*

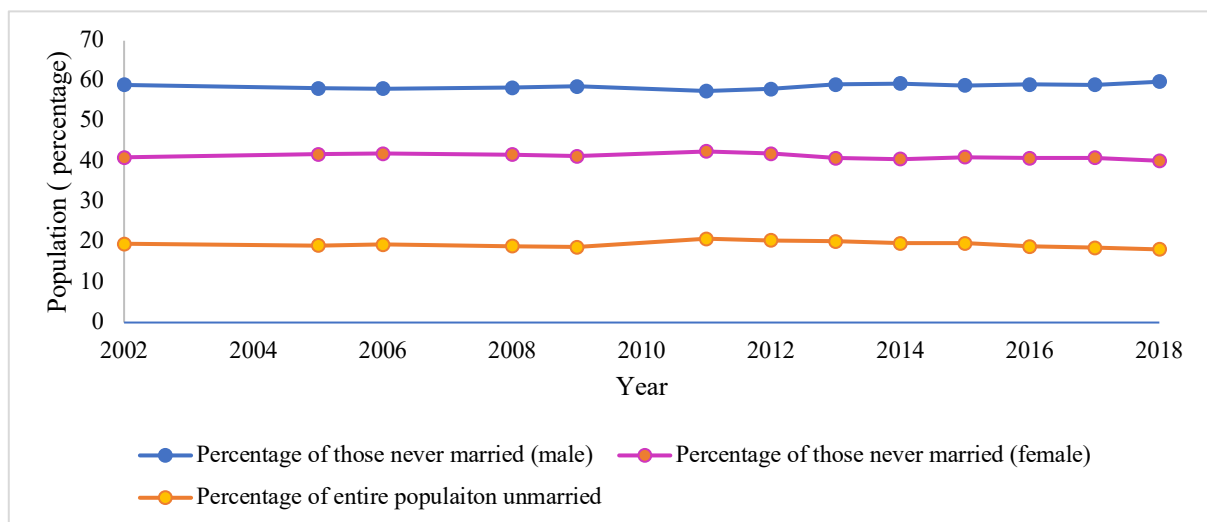


Figure 3: Trend Graph –the unmarried population of China over time, from 2002-2018. As recorded in the Demographic Yearbooks of China (Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China (n.d)).

Macro data from China's Demographic yearbooks, National Bureau of Statistics of China (n.d) is used in this study to provide background statistics. Witnessing the trends in singlehood (recorded as 'never married') allows an overview of the situation in China. Figure 3, is a powerful tool to show that the proportion of 'never married' remains constant for both males and females. There appears to be continuity in female singlehood contrary to the supposed overall rise of singlehood, a motivation behind the term *sheng nu*.

Marriage rates gathered from China's 2000 and 2010 census are accessed via the United Nations Demographic Statistics Database (UN n.d) and used to further set the scene. Figures taken from the 2000 Chinese census, show around 1 in 8 (12.8%) of age 25 – 29 women in urban China remained single (never married) whilst the proportion of urban women remaining single in the age group 30 – 34 falls to around 1 in 40 (2.3%) signalling a fast-forwarding of marriage activity for women entering their 30s: a pattern which predates the promotion of the *sheng nu* idea. Comparable data from the 2010 census shows a rise in singlehood as around 1 in 4 (25.3%) urban women aged 25 -29 remained single (never married) and for the cohort aged 30 – 34 years, 1 in 17 (6.0%) remained single (never married). Comparing the data from 2000 with data for 2010 we see a similar 'marriage' shift among urban women in their early 30s (age 30 – 34). However, from 2000 to 2010 the proportion of urban women in the age cohort 30 to 34 years of age remaining single (never married) more than doubles, but remains at a low base, from 2.3% to 6% respectively. Combining both urban and rural women, the final proportion of single women between the ages 20-39 in 2000 was recorded at 19.1% and 23.3% in 2010. The 2010 census (UN n.d.) figure is remarkably similar to the CFPS (2010) proportion of the population of 'never married', 23.3%.

Data from both census' show a slight rise in singlehood. We see single, urban women in their middle to late 20s shift into wedlock in their early 30s. However, with greater proportions of singles seen in 2010, the data is signalling an upward drift in singledom among urban women in their early 30s. It is emerging trend towards more 'non-marriage' that is likely to have been registered as a concern by the Chinese authorities. The introduction of the *sheng nu* label may be seen to serve as a 'warning' promoted to slow down (or to reverse) a detected upward drift in singledom among urban women moving beyond their late 20s and into their early 30s.

However, the general backdrop against which this change can be set is one where just over 9 in 10 (94%) urban women in 2010 aged 30 -34 years had a status other than 'never married'. These findings show that for urban women their early 30s remaining unmarried was

clearly untypical - a status also apparent a decade earlier- a status which is worth further discussion and is used to embed the results of this study.

## **2.2 Theoretical framework**

The extensive literature above was constructed, to both educate and inform the reader of the cultural, traditional and contextual happenings of marriage in China. Acting as a platform, the literature draws attention to the theories that underpin the motivations and actions for the emergence of the term *sheng nu*, whilst being alert to China's cultural context. Individualisation, female empowerment and agency are topics and theories that were discussed in the above literature and were chosen to answer the question this study sets: the understanding of the *sheng nu* along with influences on marriage and marriage timings in today's China. All are equally multifaceted all are inherently linked. Hypotheses are built from the mentioned theories of individualisation and agency and the subsequent analysis is done to discover whether the backdrop of tradition is too solid to disrupt these universal theories, thus leading to limited change to the status quo of the importance of marriage and marriage timings in China.

### **2.2.1 Second demographic transition model**

Before delving into the chosen study theories, it is prudent to mention the second demographic transition (SDT) model, a fundamental concept of contemporary population studies. Proposed by Lesthaeghe and van de Kaa (1986), the SDT goes beyond the balance and replacement-level population of the (first) demographic transition model (Thompson 1929), towards an aging and declining population. The SDT acts as an explanation of today's world. A world where shifts in attitudes is occurring, where individual freedoms influence societal decisions and thus population outcomes.

Where China looks to follow the SDT via its drop in fertility and delays in marriage, China diverges from the convention and prediction of the SDT as a consequence of its strong cultural and societal values. Song and Ji (2020) introduce the SDT in the China context with their paper 'Complexity of Chinese Family Life: Individualism, Familism, and Gender'. Although the SDT is the groundwork of most demographic research, China and its prevailing importance of cultural and societal norms allows space for a reassessment, or a bespoke spin, of the SDT. Thus, theoretical elements of the SDT are chosen individually for this study

analysis. This is done to respect the advice of Song and Ji (2020) by bearing in mind the SDT but by not applying it doctrinally to the China context.

### **2.2.2 Individualisation**

The growing cross-cultural importance of the ‘individual decision space’ is becoming increasingly noticeable today (Hofstede 1984, Giddens 1992, Moore 2005, Beck 2002, Moore 2005, Ehrhardt and Kohli 2011, Triandis 2018). The ramifications of individualisation can be seen to affect all areas of society, specifically, that of marriage and family formation. This makes the theory of individualisation one of great value in providing an explanation to, and making sense of, today’s ‘marriage influenced’ demographic changes. When observing the changes seen in China’s marriage rates, one can attempt to analyse the transition through a variety of different lenses. For the purpose of this study, all will be done from the woman’s perspective.

The theoretical framework of this study is formulated with the help of concepts provided from the shift from collectivism to individualism, specifically the role that the growth of female empowerment and subsequent agency play. ‘Individualization’ is a sociological concept that was first coined by Giddens (1992) and subsequently developed by Beck (2002). In the context of this study, individualization attempts to theorize the reasons behind women remaining single or marrying later in life. The shift away from traditional expectations of marriage at a young-age is said to be the product of a more individualised mind-set: a mind-set likely to be influenced through an uptake of enhanced educational opportunities by young Chinese women (Engelhardt and Prskawetz 2004, Moore 2005, To 2013, Jones 2017, Feldshuh 2018). To quote Triandis (2018, p66), ‘Education generally leads to greater exposure of cultural diversity and trends towards individualism’. It is education which is said to facilitate the capacity to have greater ability, increased agency, to choose and achieve life goals (Giddens 1992, Beck 2002). These actions can be further supported by the below theory of female empowerment (Kabeer 1999). Alongside theory, this study realises its deep-rooted context, China. China is a country rich in culture, politics and history. China’s individualism is occurring against the backdrop of entrenched collectivism, one outcome of China’s political system, that being a core component of ‘the People’s Republic of China’ (Moore 2005). It is this backdrop of entrenched ideals along with more ancient traditions that this study acknowledges. The theoretical framework and subsequent hypothesis recognise the effect individualisation has on the detraditionalization of one’s life (Beck 2002) and recognises it as a contradiction to China’s inherent traditional and societal values.

### 2.2.3 Female empowerment and agency (or the lack of)

Kabeer (1999) conceptualizes empowerment and its existence through observable change, from one state to another. Power, as defined by Kabeer (1999) is the ‘ability to make choices’ in the case of this study: the ability to decide if, when, and who to get married to. The notion of empowerment is theorised by Kabeer (1999) as the change from a state of disempowerment, where choices cannot be made, to a state of empowerment, where choices can be made. Thus, the term ‘empowerment’ according to Kabeer (1999) entails a ‘process of change’ such as: increased autonomy via education and employment. This can be seen through the *sheng nu* literature, where increased access to education and employment is seen to change women’s ideals and perceptions (To 2013). Women with more individualised mindsets and thus increased autonomy are expected to be able to choose personal life projections.

Kabeer (1999) draws attention to female empowerment in the marriage arena. Noting ‘agency’ as one of the three interconnected categories that dictates empowerment, the other two being resources and achievements. When one has the *resources*, one has the *agency* to *achieve* (Kabeer 1999). Here, resources ‘enhance the ability to make choices’ (Kabeer 1999). For this study, resources are noted as: access to education and access to ‘urban’ opportunities. Sen’s (1985) capability approach is known as one of the leaders of female empowerment and female agency research. Sen (1985) lists resources and agency as key steps in the achievement of self-satisfaction. Working women have the *resources* via their financial autonomy, in theory this provides them with the *agency* to marry for love rather than practicalities. Robeyns (2003) discusses how capabilities as freedoms differ depending upon external factors. It is seen that women in China who want both: marriage and family, are ostracised in a society that traditionally expects women to fulfil the role of motherhood and housewife (Murti 2019). The work of Murti (2019) is the inspiration behind the addition of that cultural and societal values in the theoretical framework that this study poses. When a woman wishes to continue to be in professional employment as well as have a family, but the man holds traditional opinions and believes motherhood is not conducive with employment then the woman is at risk of not being thought of as a favourable partner, she loses agency to choose this man. Not yielding to traditional cultural norms of a gendered domestic life hinders the otherwise ‘agency rich’ professional woman in the marriage arena. Therefore, the idea that external factors such as tradition and societal norms can hinder agency is posed and found throughout the analysis (Sahu and Jeffery 2016). Agency is jeopardised and has the risk of being fenced off by external

influences. This theme is also looked at by Fincher (2011) and it is this cultural societal weight of Chinese society that is peppered throughout this study.

Conversely, the *lack of agency* deserves equal consideration and further exploration but is beyond the scope of this study. Women who do not possess the *resources* also exhibit less *agency* in the marriage arena (Sahu and Jeffery 2016). Lack of agency gives rise to increased levels of risk as they are forced to succumb to potential threatening relationships. This is supported by the findings of the national China Women Social Status Survey, where less educated women were seen to be more likely to have lower satisfaction within their marriage and are more likely to be victims of domestic abuse (Song et al 2021). This take on lack of agency is a worrying topic and has different, and perhaps, more concerning ramifications for many women in China.

### *Contextualising agency in China*

Contextualising agency within the Chinese setting is essential for this study. As discussed in the literature, the Chinese culture is historically collective. In China, individualism or individual acts of choice, often carry negative connotations of selfishness (Hwang 1999, Moore 2005, Jiaxue 2009). Especially amongst the older generation who grew up during the peak of Chairman Mao's socialist China (Meisner and Meisner 1999). Western emphasis on choice and opportunity can often blind researchers on what is right and what is wrong. That being, if a woman can't work and have a family then there is an injustice. The 'individualised mindset' which is supposedly born from education and employment is said to enhance a woman's life through increased agency (Triandis 2018). Suggesting that women who choose to or 'succumb' to housewife status should be pitied. Alertness to cultural and societal norms creates a bigger, more complex, picture for analysis. This study tests this notion and uses both the theory of individualisation with a backdrop of tradition and observes which best applies to the women of the CFPS.

### *Synthesis of the chosen theories*

The existing *sheng nu* literature combined with theories of individualisation and female empowerment predict that the trend towards singlehood and the avoidance of marriage is done not for the sole desire to be alone but to avoid the risk of the alternative: a disappointing marriage. Educated women are gaining increased autonomy and agency within the realm of their life choices, they are seen to have a 'project of self' (Beck 2002) they have increased agency in their 'intimate life' (To 2013). It is for these reasons that the theory of

individualisation is suitable tool when analysing changes in kinship and marriage life. A body of literature exists to examine reasons for women opting for a more 'individual lifestyle' (Wang 2011, To 2013, Ji 2015, Yeung and Hu 2016, Murti 2019). This study seeks to test the chosen theories against the backdrop of China's traditional and societal influences, on a sample population of women from the CFPS aged between 20 years and 38 in the years 2010 and 2018.

### 2.3 Conceptual model

In extension to the argumentation above, the following hypothesis are formulated to include theories and concepts discussed in the literature. The presented theoretical framework and literature review provide an overview on who the *sheng nu* are and the influence education and urbanity might have on singlehood, self-reported life satisfaction and marriage timings in China.

The literature review suggests that women of increased education and of urban residence desire and achieve later marriage timings compared to women of lesser education and of rural residence. Considering this, the hypothesis: H1a, H1b, H2a and H2b were developed, all of which will be addressed by using event history analysis.

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#### *Marriage timings, ideal and actual*

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H1a *Women with urban residence **wish to achieve** later marriage timings compared to rural women.*

H1b *Women with higher education **wish to achieve** later marriage timings compared to less educated women.*

H2a *Women with urban residence **wish to and achieve** later marriage timings compared to rural women.*

H2b *Women with higher education **wish to and achieve** later marriage timings compared to less educated women.*

To test the effects urbanity and education have on the individualised mindsets of women the following hypothesis were formed: H3a and H3b. The literature review and theoretical framework suggest that women of elevated social status, by means of increased education and urban environments, have increased individualised mindsets. This will be tested within a descriptive analysis.

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#### **Individualisation**

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H3a *Women with higher educational attainments have increased individualised mindsets compared women with lesser educational attainments.*

H3b *Women with urban residence have increased individualised mindsets compared to women of rural residence.*

The presented theoretical framework uses the variable life satisfaction as a life achievement, following suit with the theories of individualisation, where resources provide the agency to follow a project of self rather than appeasing others and thus leads to an increase in overall self-happiness. For this reason, H4a and H4b were created. Where increased agency is supposed to be practiced by women of increased education and or urban areas, their associated life achievement measured by ‘life satisfaction’ is theorised to increase.

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### **Life satisfaction**

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H4a *Women with higher educational attainment have increased life satisfaction compared to women with lesser educational attainments.*

H4b *Women with urban residence have increased life satisfaction compared to women of rural residence.*

This study draws light on the intense cultural and societal expectations that a country such as China has. Especially regarding the term *sheng nu* and how its message, ‘to marry before 27 or risk being leftover’, effects the proposed theories of individualisation and agency. Situating knowledge and appreciating the bigger picture is vital when reviewing demographic statistics. China and its historically collective mind frame along with its male dominance sees theories of individualisation and agency jeopardised. For this reason, H5a, H5b and H5c were set to observe the effect prevailing traditional and patriarchal power has on women who would otherwise follow different life trajectories. These hypotheses are answered by means of the synthesis of data collected throughout the study.

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### **Cultural contexts**

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H5a *Traditional Chinese norms still dictate life satisfaction*

H5b *Traditional Chinese norms still dictate marriage timing*

H5c *Traditional Chinese norms still dictate marriage decisions*

The final group of hypotheses and, initial motivation behind this study, is the observation of the *sheng nu*. Women of *sheng nu* status ( 27+ and unmarried) are typically highly educated and of urban residence. The hypotheses H6a and H6b test this using descriptive statistics.



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**The sheng nu**


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H6a Women of *sheng nu* status (unmarried over the age of 27) are more likely to be of urban residence compared to rural residence.

H6b Women of *sheng nu* status (unmarried over the age of 27) are more likely to be highly Educated over lesser educated.

Taken together, all six clusters of hypotheses noted above can be seen to fit within and be drawn from the below conceptual model. The model is designed to represent the interplay between agency and marriage timing where resources present as key ‘input’ factors and marriage timing is aligned to the achievement of ‘life satisfaction’. Overarching, connections and outcomes within this circuit are taken to be influenced by or formed through a web of dominant cultural and societal values.

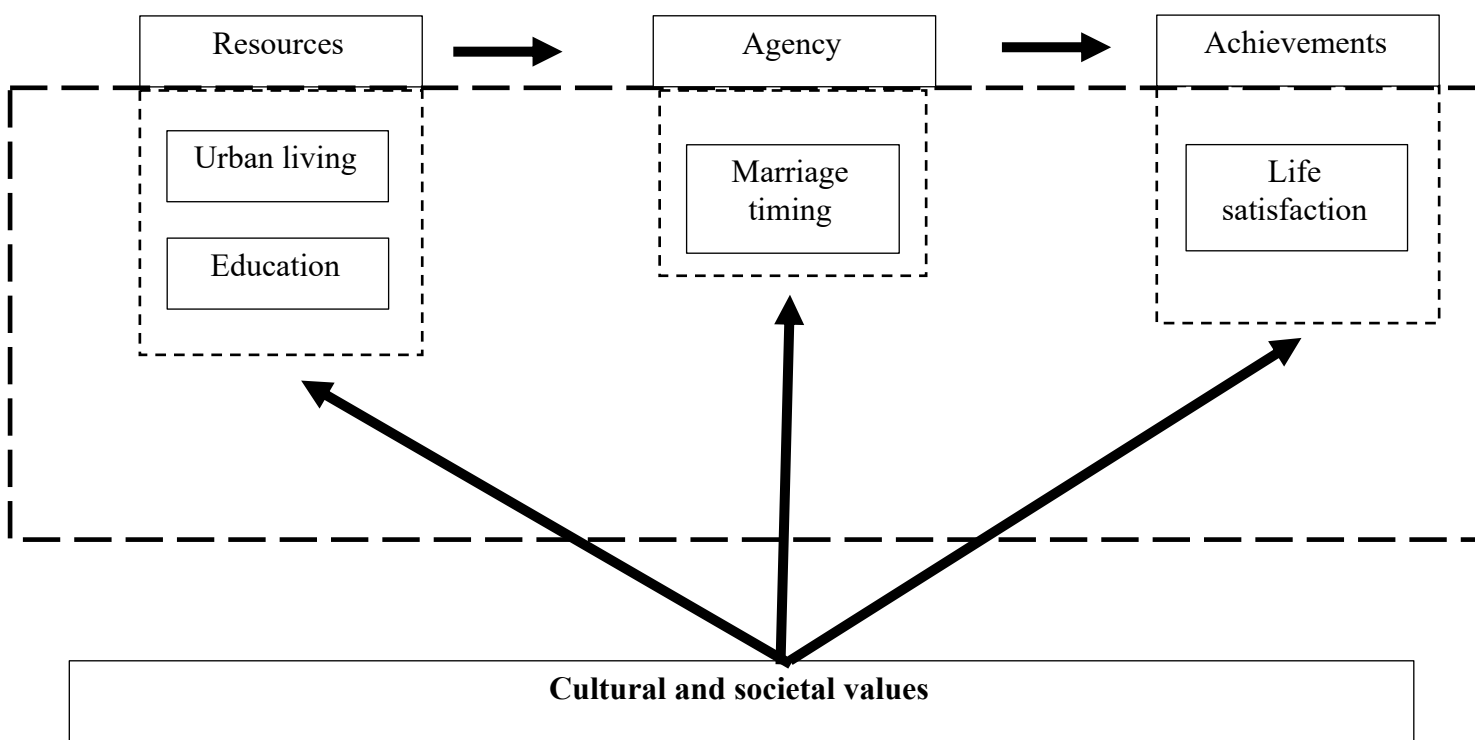


Figure 4: The conceptual model

- \*Where agency is the ability to identify goals and to act upon them
- \*Where resources assist in the ability to identify goals and act upon them
- \*Where achievements are goals seen in a ‘life satisfaction’ scale

### **3. Research design**

#### **3.1 Description of the data set**

The current study uses the China Family Panel Studies survey (CFPS 2010, CFPS 2018), funded by the Chinese government via Peking University's Institute of Social Science Surveys. Granted access through the Peking University Open Research Data Platform (n.d), it is one of China's largest 'academically-orientated' surveys ( Xie and Hu 2014). Launched in 2010, the CFPS aims to be a nationally representative survey documenting Chinese family and society. It is a biannual, longitudinal survey designed to observe and record individual-, family-, and community-level longitudinal data. The survey results are collected via computer-assisted person-to-person interviews. For the purpose of this study the follow up survey of 2018 will be the principal dataset used. The 2018 cohort is chosen for analysis to gather the most up-to-date responses. China is a fast-paced country with economic and social change occurring year-on-year, thereby using the latest data set attempts to present the clearest picture of today's China. The CFPS recognises family evaluation as being essential in the quest to comprehend the changes in social phenomena that can be seen in China. However, to provide a contextual overview and opportunity for a comparison, the first CFPS survey taken in 2010 will be presented primarily by means of descriptive statistics.

The survey sampling initially took place in the year 2010. All members of a sampled household over the age of 9 were interviewed. Since then, the participants have been followed up in successive 2 yearly surveys. Initially, five provinces' of 1600 families in each, were chosen allowing for regional comparisons. The remaining sample of 8000 families was then drawn from other provinces and were weighted in order to achieve a representative overall sample as best as could be. The study is therefore based on a permanent sample of households who entered the survey in 2010, additional family members who enter the families and or become of age (over 9) are then added to the sample as the years go on.

The content of the CFPS observes the economic, educational attainment, family make up, health and other social-change population-based parameters of today's China. Considering the aims of this study, the plethora of possible data from CFPS survey was narrowed down in light of the chosen topic. That being data collected which measures of socioeconomic statuses

via: educational attainment, employment, urban/rural residency along with marital expectations and actualities.

### **3.2 Methodological approach of analysis**

The following section maps out the quest for answers that this study sought. With the research question at hand predominately focussing on *life satisfaction* and *marriage timing* appropriate efforts were made to produce indicative results. The core analysis of this study makes use of the existing literature whilst applying findings of life satisfaction measured using an ‘ordered probit’ model and marriage timing examined through the ‘event history analysis’ approach.

Descriptive statistics are presented and the exploration of traditional values, cultural contexts and individualisation are realised with the help of: ‘one of your most important life goals is to make your parents proud’ and ‘how I met my partner’. The models are looked at in tandem with descriptive statistics which act as a helpful tool to rectify pit falls in the data, to draw attention to, and comment on, differences relating to education, urbanity and cultural contexts.

#### **3.2.2. Sample selection**

In order to match the framework of the current research the following population was created. In this study, a focus was given to women of marriageable age. Starting with 33,598 respondents from the 2010 CFPS and 37,354 respondents from the 2018 sample the following sample restrictions were then applied.

Firstly, all male respondents were removed as this study looks at females in the marriage arena. Next, all women under the age of 20 were removed because marriage in China is only legal for women on and after the age of 20 years. Finally, all women over the age of 38 were removed, this was done for the following reasons: 1980 marks the rough end of the Mao Zedong years and the beginning of rapid urban change in China. Evidence of this phenomenal socioeconomic transformation can be seen in the changing attitudes and behaviours of women (Yeung and Hu 2016) it is these attitudes and their effects on agency, female education and employment that this research aims to test (Wu et al 2006). The principal data set of 2018 was further reduced to accommodate this literature and therefore those born before 1980 were excluded from the study.

After applying the above selection criteria, age 20 => age 38=<, the final sample stands at 9,706 women for the 2010 CFPS and 4,640 women for the 2018 CFPS. As previously

mentioned, it is the 2018 CFPS that will be used for the principal analysis. Descriptive statistics from 2010 CFPS along with outputs of life satisfaction were used for a comparison across time, allowing also the opportunity to observe a moment before the extensive usage of the term *sheng nu* in the public sphere. The 2018 CFPS allows for time since the emergence of the definition and facilitates the analysis that seeks to understand the possible impact the term *sheng nu* has on marriage timing and life satisfaction along with the influences of residence and education.

### 3.2.3 Core variable selection

Below are the definitions of each variable along with their corresponding measurement scale, all the appropriate explanatory variables found in the survey according to theory. According to the theory of *individualisation* and *agency*, increased education and employment gives rise to increased ability to be autonomous thus increased individualisation in the realms of life choices that being, marriage. Urban areas are known to be more accessible to opportunities, especially in China where the urban Hukou (household registration) holds power (Chan and Zhang 1999), thus making women who hold urban residence more likely to have access to higher education and employment (Kohli and Ehrhardt 2011). Additionally, the age of 27 is used as a benchmark for the age variable owing to the definition of *sheng nu* including the age 27. In order to test and see if women of *sheng nu* have different lifestyles, a dummy variable was created for women over the age of 27 who were married and women over the age of 27 who were not married at the time of the survey.

The dependent variables are set as, **satisfaction with life**, **ideal marriage age** and **age of marriage**. The core explanatory variables for this research stand as: **age**, **education** and **residence**. ‘I follow my own goals’ and ‘how I met my partner’ are supplementary variables used during this study.

#### Variable list:

##### *Satisfaction with life*

This variable is ordered categoric, 1 – 5 rising degrees of life satisfaction. For the purpose of descriptive analysis this variable was split into three; low satisfaction (1-2), mid satisfaction (3-4), high satisfaction (5).

***Ideal age of marriage***

The variable for the question ‘Ideal age for marriage’ is a continuous variable. Initially the variable held the potential power to assess whether the individual married before or after her desired age. However, provided only by those who are unmarried at the time of the survey, this variable still acts as a valuable dependent variable.

***Age of marriage***

Continuous variable calculated via the age of the respondent and their year of marriage

***Place of residence***

For the purpose of this analysis, only the answers of ‘Agricultural’ and ‘Non-agricultural’ were used. The answer options in the survey were; -8 = Not applicable, -1 = unknown, 1 = Agricultural (‘Rural’) 3= Non-Agricultural (‘Urban’), 5= no registration and 79= non-Chinese nationality. The answers ‘not applicable’, ‘unknown’, ‘no registration’ and ‘non-Chinese’ are treated as missing values and the corresponding cases thus removed from the analysis .

***Educational level (socioeconomic status proxy)***

The highest educational level at the time of the survey is asked of for each respondent. Where 1= illiterate, 2=Primary School, 3= Junior School, 4=Senior School, 5=3-year college, 6=4-year college, 7=Master’s degree, 8=Doctoral. A categorical variable was created to synthesise the educational attainments into a more manageable number; ‘No education’ ( 1), ‘Primary education’ (2). ‘Secondary education’ ( 3,4), ‘Higher education’ (5,6,7,8).

***Age***

Age at the time of questionnaire (2010 or 2018)

***I pursue my own values***

The variable ‘I pursue my own values’ is another ordered categorical variable, 1-5 rising degrees of following own values.

***Goal is to make my parents proud***

The variable ‘my goal is to make my parents proud’ is another ordered categorical variable, 1-5 rising degrees of following own values

### 3.2.4 Chosen analyses and their methods

#### *Descriptive statistics*

Descriptive statistics by means of proportions and percentages were computed, done to describe, show and summarise the data from the CFPS 2010 and CFPS 2018 survey. The descriptive statistics of CFPS 2018 make up a core component of the analysis by acting as a constructive way to discuss the theories provided alongside the data. All analyses were performed with the Stata/SE package (15.0) in conjunction with Microsoft Excel (2016). The three key descriptive comparisons being between: residence, education and *sheng nu* status. Descriptive statistics were used to help test the following hypothesis: H3(a/b) and H6(a/b). To deepen the analysis the following models were performed.

#### *Ordered probit*

The ordered probit model is used to test H4a, H4b and H5a. These hypotheses measure influences on life satisfaction and test overall impacts of traditional and cultural contexts both imbedded in theories of agency and individualisation. Survey data from both CFPS 2010 and 2018 were used separately for this analysis in order to gauge changes in the dictation of life satisfaction. The probit model is used to explore different influences on life satisfaction and present findings to show the strongest influence on life satisfaction among the study population. The ordered probit model was deemed as an appropriate framework for the statistical analysis of life satisfaction (Greene and Hensher 2010). Within this model, the dependent variable is a categorical variable with ordered categories, the differences between the orders may not be the same, this is why ordered probit model is given preference over OLS where the differences between categories are seen as equal. Within the CFPS questionnaire, respondents can choose a life satisfaction level from 1 -5 with 5 being highly satisfied. To synthesise the variable, a new categorical variable was created with the values 1,2,3 'low/mid' 4 'high' and 5 'very high' the explanatory variables were chosen from the literature and are as followed: marriage, educational attainment, household registration and age.

Ordered probit is an attractive method to analyse survey responses that include strength responses such as 'agree' 'strongly agree' (Daykin and Moffatt 2002, Ferrer-i-Carbonell 2005). An ordered probit model is particularly suitable for this type of analysis, as it allows analysis of a categorical dependent variable with ordered categories against chosen explanatory variables. The ordered probit framework estimates the parameters of the respondents rather

than the responses themselves (Daykin and Moffat 2002). With the core theme of the study being marriage, marriage was a vital explanatory variable, along with relevant socioeconomic variables that could be used from the CFPS: age, educational attainment and household registration. Odds ratios were also calculated to provide more empirical results, coefficients were then analysed, and conclusions drawn to aid the understanding of the hypothesis.

An assumption of the ordered probit regression is known as the parallel regression assumption and it assumes that the coefficients that describe the relationship with low/midlife satisfaction with high life satisfaction are the same as the coefficients that will describe the relationship between high life satisfaction with very high life satisfaction (Daykin and Moffat 2002). To test this assumption a lrtest with similar characteristics to the Brant test was performed.

#### *Event history analysis*

Event history analysis was deemed the most appropriate technique to measure not only marriage timing, but the results can be used to infer levels of agency varying over the two core variables: educational attainment and rural/urban residence. Thus, being used to test H1(a/b) H2(a/b) and H5(b/c). Event history analysis is a method by which is used to describe, explain or predict the occurrence of an event (Allison 2004). In the case of this study, the event is marriage. The event history analysis tests: influences on marriage timing (both ideal and actual) and agency is deduced via observing the difference between the timing of ideal age of marriage and timing of actual age of marriage. Explanatory variables continue to be: age, educational attainment and household registration.

The backbone of data preparation for any event history analysis must involve censoring and truncation. Both concepts decide and set the observation period, done to create an outcome that not only is the most appropriate for the hypothesis but one to maximise the understanding of the study aims. In the case of marriage timing, individuals who have not yet experienced the event of interest ( marriage) at the end of the observation time are censored. Truncation is the systematic removal of individuals who do not comply with the conditions of the analysis (Allison 2004), such as women who did not declare their marriage age or ideal marriage age.

*Inclusion of time and type of model.*

Time is treated as continuous for both event history analyses. With the measure of time being how long until the event of interest occurs, that being marriage (whether it be actual or ideal). Done in years, this continuous treatment of time allows for hazard rates to be calculated, hazards of marriage occurring at different points in time (ages). The difference between ideal marriage and marriage age has been used as a proxy for testing agency.

### **3.2.5 Models**

#### **Survival analysis 1: timing of *ideal* marriage age**

Firstly, using ideal age as the event of interest. A continuous-time model was created to map out the impact of the chosen variables: registration and educational attainment on the event of interest: ideal marriage age. As mentioned previously, one of the core limitations of this study is that those who are married did not declare their 'ideal' marriage age. Moreover, not every non married woman provided their ideal marriage age. Out of the 963 unmarried women, 911 provided their ideal age, this was the final sample used in the survival analysis 2.

#### **Survival analysis 2: timing of *actual* marriage age (selective representative sub-sample)**

Using marriage age as the event of interest, a continuous-time model was created. 2960 out of the 3583 married women in the CFPS 2018 sample did not provide their year of marriage (response rate 17%). Missing data with a proportion as high as this will severely limit the analysis as the weighting of married: non married is not representative. The selectivity of unmarried vs married is controlled by the limited data and risks producing biased results. To rectify the disbalance, a random reduction in the number of non-married women was performed to match the married women who declared dates, leaving 17% of the unmarried left in the sample.

The final population stood at 688 which included non-married women and married women who declared their date of marriage, between the ages of 20-38 (in line with the entire study). The data was then set to survival data. Time to marriage, could then be observed, displayed and analysed. Non married women were censored as they had not observed the event of interest (marriage) at the time of the analysis (2018). Key explanatory variables that have been used throughout this study: residence and educational attainments were used in order to test the influence education and urbanity has on marriage timings in China.



**Survival analysis 3: timing of *actual* marriage age (selective married only sub-sample)**

Again, using marriage age as the event of interest, a third model was created which dropped all the non-married women considering the unrepresentative nature of the sample. Using this selective sub sample of married women who declared marriage date ( N=540) Kaplan-Meier curves comparing the two parameters were created for an additional comparison.

*Outputs:*

**Kaplan-Maier** graphs were created to map the survival functions of the sample population by the above variables: education and household registration. Done to visualise the impact of the variables on the timing of marriage. Cox regression models were generated to further test the hazard of marriage on the chosen variables. Proportionality is an assumption of the cox regression, in order to test for proportionality time varying covariates are implemented into the model.

Below is the statistical formula to compute the Kaplan-Meier graphical estimates, as seen in Collett ( 1994).

$$S_i(t) = \prod_{j=1}^k \frac{n_j - d_j}{n_j} \quad \text{and} \quad H_i(t) = d_j / \{n_j (t_j - t_{j-1})\}$$

Where,  $S_i(t)$  is the survival function, with a survival probability  $\{n_j - d_j\}/n_j$  in the interval  $(t_j - t_{j-1})$

$H_i(t)$  is the hazard function/rate/ probability of marrying (ideal/actual) being equal to hazard rate multiplied by the time interval  $(t_j - t_{j-1})$

$d_j$  is the number of women who married up to the  $J^{\text{th}}$  time

$n_j$  is the number of women at risk of marriage prior to time  $t_j$

$t_j$  is the duration until marriage

An aid in answering the ‘to what extent’ part of the research question, a **log rank test** was performed. The null hypothesis that there is no difference in marriage timing for both ideal and actual for women of differing educational status and of rural/urban residence. If significance is seen, then a rejection of the hypothesis that survival rates do not vary.

**Cox-regressions** were then performed for both sets of event history analyses, interaction variables were tested, and hazard ratios were produced to show significance and to support the Kaplan-Maier outputs.

$$h(t|x) = h_0(t) \exp(x\beta_x)$$

Where  $h_0(t)$  is the baseline hazard and  $\beta_x$  is the coefficient to be estimated from the regression. The coefficients produced give rise to the hazard rates and it is these hazard rates that are used to show the probability of a woman getting married.

#### *Proportionality assumption*

A requirement of the Cox Proportional hazard model is that the hazard ratio is constant over time (Allison 2004). In the case of this study the hazard of ‘marrying’ (whether it be actual or ideal) for one individual is proportional to the hazard of another and the ratio of their hazards is a constant. To test if the proportionality assumption is violated, a phtest was performed after the cox regression. For further analysis, the interaction between the chosen variables and time are computed.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1. Descriptive analysis**

#### **Socio economic and demographic background of respondents**

The study population is firstly introduced in the way of descriptive statistics. By gathering background information of the study population, the socio-economic status of the respondents can be gauged. This, in turn, can help with the analysis later in the research. Done to explore the data and to provide context and in doing so test for  $H3(a/b)$  and  $H6(a/b)$ . The sample from the 2010 and 2018 waves of surveys are introduced and consist of 9706 and 4640 women, respectively. The women are between the ages

20 -38 years old (at the time of the survey), each of whom differ in characteristics such as marital status, education level, employment status and self-reported levels of life satisfaction. Table 1 illustrates the descriptive characteristics for the entire population, table 2 for the women of *sheng nu* status and Table 3 illustrates the differences between the rural and urban populations.

*Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the sample by background characteristics and socioeconomic variables for women aged 20-38 (CFPS 2010, CFPS 2018).*

	<b>2010</b>	<b>2018</b>
	N=9706 (%)	N=4640 (%)
<i>Current age</i>		
20-26	3319 (34.2)	1430 (30.8)
27-38	6387 (65.8)	3210 (69.2)
<i>Mean age</i>	29.55	29.24
<i>Place of residence</i>		
Urban	2936 (30.2)	1141 (24.6)
Rural	6770 (69.8)	3499 (75.4)
<i>Marital status</i>		
Never married	2261 (23.3)	963 (20.8)
Married	7269 (74.9)	3583 (77.2)
Co-habitation	48 (0.5)	16 (0.3)
Divorced	111 (1.1)	62 (1.3)
Widowed	17 (0.2)	16 (0.3)
<i>Mean marriage age</i>	23.68	23.82
<i>Education level</i>		
No education	1285 (13.2)	262 ( 5.5)
Primary	1852 (19.1)	465 (10.0)
Secondary	5124 (52.8)	2517 (54.2)
Higher	1445 (14.9)	1396 (30.1)
<i>Employment status</i>		
Unemployed	3656 (38.9)	351(7.6)
Employed	5754 (61.1)	3232(69.7)
Out of the labour market	n.a.	1057(22.8)
<i>Ideal age of marriage</i>		
20 -26	n.a.	552 (60.8)
27+	n.a.	356 (39.2)
<i>Satisfaction with life</i>		
Low/mid	5118 (52.7)	200 (4.3)
High	3143 (32.4)	3204 (69.1)
Very high	1445 (14.9)	1236 (26.6)
<i>Method by which spouse was met</i>		
Independently	n.a.	596 (44.5)

Via an introduction	n.a.	742 (55.5)
<i>Life goal to make parents proud</i>		
Agree	n.a.	25 (16.6)
Disagree		124 (83.4)

### Singlehood and the *sheng nu*

In order to test H6(a/b) and the demographic reality of the *sheng nu*, and thus the scale of singlehood the population was divided into those of *sheng nu* status (unmarried, age 27+) and their counterparts: married age 27+. H6(a/b) follows the theory that women of *sheng nu* status will be highly educated and hold urban residence. Expectations are that in the China context, assessed via H5(a/b/c), these unmarried women will have a reduced life satisfaction because of high pressures from society to marry.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of the study sample: by *sheng nu* status (27+ unmarried) against same age counterparts compared to entire population (CFPS 2010, CFPS 2018).

	Entire population		<i>sheng nu</i>		Married / age 27+	
	2010 N=9706 (%)	2018 N=4640 (%)	2010 N=427 (%)	2018 N=167 (%)	2010 N=5960 (%)	2018 N=2820 (%)
<i>Place of residence</i>						
Urban	2936 (30.2)	1141 (24.6)	213 (49.9)	75 (44.9)	1779 (29.9)	716 (25.4)
Rural	6770 (69.8)	3526 (75.3)	214 (50.1)	99 (55.1)	4175 (70.1)	2104 (74.6)
<i>Education level</i>						
No education	1285 (13.2)	262 (5.6)	65 (15.3)	7 (4.1)	974 (16.3)	194 (6.9)
Primary	1852 (19.1)	465 (10.1)	69 (16.2)	20 (11.7)	1279 (21.5)	375 (13.3)
Secondary	5124 (52.8)	2517 (54.2)	158 (37.1)	22 (12.9)	2939 (49.3)	1523 (54.0)
Higher	1445 (14.9)	1396 (30.1)	<b>134 (31.5)</b>	<b>122 (71.3)</b>	767 (12.9)	728 (25.8)
<i>Employment status</i>						
Unemployed	3656 (38.9)	1408 (30.3)	142 (33.9)	20 (12.0)	1927 (33.1)	692 (24.5)
Employed	5754 (61.1)	3232 (69.7)	<b>227 (66.1)</b>	<b>147 (88.0)</b>	3896 (66.9)	2128 (75.5)
<i>Satisfaction with life</i>						
Low/mid	5118 (52.7)	200 (4.3)	289 (29.7)	8 (4.8)	3144 (52.8)	132 (4.7)
High	3143 (32.4)	3204 (69.1)	109 (11.2)	136 (81.4)	1929 (32.4)	1857 (65.9)
Very high	1445 (14.9)	1236 (26.6)	<b>29(3.0)</b>	<b>23 (13.8)</b>	887 (14.9)	831 (29.5)

These descriptive statistics confirm that a larger proportion of *sheng nu* live in urban areas, are employed and have higher educational statuses compared to their same aged married counterparts as well as the overall average. These descriptive statistics draw attention to the life satisfaction of unmarried 27+, with a focus on ‘very high’ which is much lower compared to their married

counterparts and that of the overall average. These descriptive statistics allow for the core concept of this study to be tested: the *sheng nu* and in doing so help support H6(a/b) women of *sheng nu* status (unmarried over the age of 27) are more likely to be of urban residence. Moreover, women of *sheng nu* status (unmarried over the age of 27) are more likely to be highly educated. Thus, education and urbanity appears to influence singlehood (*sheng nu* status).

### Rural / Urban divide

Table 3: Descriptive statistics to show the characteristics of the sample: an urban rural comparison (CFPS 2010, CFPS 2018).

	Entire population		Rural		Urban	
	2010 N=9706(%)	2018 N=4640(%)	2010 N=6770(%)	2018 N=3456 (%)	2010 N=2921 (%)	2018 N=1128 (%)
<i>Marital status</i>						
Never married	2261 (23.3)	963 (20.8)	1360 (20.1)	671 (19.2)	896 (30.7)	292 (25.6)
Married	7269 (74.9)	3583 (77.2)	5303 (78.3)	2761 (78.9)	1954 (66.9)	822 (72.0)
Co-habitation	48 (0.5)	16 (0.3)	35 (0.5)	14 (0.4)	12 (0.4)	2 (0.2)
Divorced	111 (1.1)	62 (1.3)	55 (0.8)	40 (1.1)	56 (1.9)	22 (1.9)
Widowed	17 (0.2)	16 (0.3)	16 (0.2)	13 (0.4)	1 (0.0)	3 (0.3)
<i>Mean marriage age</i>	23.68	23.82	23.18	23.94	24.88	25.38
<i>Education level</i>						
No education	1285 (13.2)	262 ( 5.5)	1245 (18.4)	256 (7.3)	35 (1.2)	7 (0.6)
Primary	1852 (19.1)	465 (10.0)	1711 (25.3)	1755 (49.8)	137 (4.7)	155 (13.4)
Secondary	5124 (52.8)	2517 (54.2)	3546 (52.4)	807 (22.9)	1576 (54.0)	289 (25.0)
Higher	1445 (14.9)	1396 (30.1)	268 (4.0)	708 (20.1)	1173 (40.2)	706 (61.0)
<i>Employment status</i>						
Unemployed	3656 (38.9)	1408 (30.3)	2702 (41.3)	954 (28.8)	944 (33.1)	186 (17.1)
Employed	5754 (61.1)	3232 (69.7)	3840 (58.7)	2363 (71.2)	1910 (66.9)	902 (82.9)
<i>Satisfaction with life</i>						
Low/mid	5118 (52.7)	200 (4.3)	3523 (52.0)	1152 (32.9)	1584 (54.2)	306 (26.8)
High	3143 (32.4)	3204 (69.1)	2152 (31.8)	1395 (39.9)	989 (33.9)	551 (48.3)
Very high	1445 (14.9)	1236 (26.6)	1095 (16.2)	952 (27.2)	348 (11.9)	284 (24.9)
<i>Method met spouse</i>						
Independently	n.a.	596 (44.5)	n.a.	221 (43.5)	n.a.	76 (47.8)
Via an introduction	n.a.	742 (55.5)	n.a.	287 (56.5)	n.a.	83 (52.2)
<i>Life goal to make parents proud</i>						
Agree	n.a.	25 (16.6)	n.a.	16 (87.1)	n.a.	9 (65.4)
Disagree	n.a.	124 (83.4)	n.a.	108 (12.9)	n.a.	17 (34.6)

In order to visualise and test the perceived differences between women who live in rural versus urban areas the table 3 was created. These descriptive statistics confirm that higher percentages of urban women remain unmarried, have higher education and are employed. Where the *sheng nu* table 2 showed more variance with regard to life satisfaction differences, the 'rural/urban' divide appears to be less influential with the largest difference being that a lower proportion of urban women declare to have low/mid-life satisfaction.

### **Comparing descriptive statistics of CFPS 2010 against 2018.**

The descriptive statistics of table 1,2 and 3 allow for a comparison across time to occur. From 2010 to 2018 what has changed? The residential make-up, age and urbanity of the population remains similar. Along with similarities seen between age at first marriage. However, a story of increased educational attainments and increased life satisfaction is seen. In relation to the *sheng nu*, women of *sheng nu* status have seen a limited change in urbanity but see a rise in educational attainment, employment along with an increase in life satisfaction over the years. Focusing on the rural /urban divide over time, the main difference can be seen in terms of educational attainment: specifically, that of education for rural women.

### *Exploring: Individualisation*

To address the individualised mindset part of H3(a/b) the answers from the CFPS question 'one of your important life goals is to make your parents proud' were observed. Additionally, these findings are used for the testing of 'cultural contexts' in relation to marital decisions H5(a/b/c), as the question points to whether the respondents suggest accordance with societal pressures and follow cultural values that being: respecting one's elders first and foremost. H3(a/b) follow the theory suggestion that urbanity and increased education increases individualised mindset and thus jeopardises traditional ways of life through an increased 'project of self' (Giddens 1992, Beck 2002). The following findings look to see if said factors can be seen to influence life goals and traditional parental harmony.

Although based on a very low response rate, making your parents proud is another question used to evaluate 'traditional values' . 87.1% of rural women agreed that one of their 'important life goals' was to make their parents proud vs a lower 65.4% of urban women. Additionally, education influences the respondent's adherence to parental goals in adherence to theory. Increased education decreases the percentage of women stating that their 'important life goals' was to make their parents proud. With 90.9% of primary educated women answering agree vs 72.7% of higher educated women. However, the response rate for this survey question

was incredibly low. With only 149 out of 4640 it is therefore impossible to make definite statements regarding this element of the analysis.

#### *Exploring: Cultural contexts*

To test the strength of the cultural contexts as seen via the indication that traditional values are followed, the variables ‘*important life goal is to make my parents proud*’ is used again, along with the variable ‘*How I met my partner*’. Marriage in and of itself could be viewed as a traditional value as marriage underpins Chinese family culture. As the literature pointed to (Raymo et al 2015, Raymo et al 2021) to make your parents proud holds a strong tradition in the Chinese culture. Another method for testing traditional value is the conformance of the societal pressure to be married before the age 27. Out of those who answered 85% of married women married before the age of 27 ( 2010 CFPS) and 82% of married women married before the age of 27 ( 2018 CFPS). Marriage before the age of 27 is consistent and appears to be still the norm.

The second method used to observe traditional values is by observing the responses for the question ‘ How I met my partner’. Traditionally, parental involvement in marriage choices is high ( Croll 1981). Marriage via an introduction appears to remain common place, as seen in the survey results where 55.5% of marriages were a result of an introduction rather than autonomously. Increased education was seen to reduce the percentage of marriages formed by an introduction, but marriages of highly educated women still saw 48.8% via an introduction. Theories of individualisation suggest women from urban areas to have lower percentages of introduced marriages compared to rural, this was not the case. Similar to the response rate of ‘life goal to make parents proud’ only 1338 out of 4640 answered the survey question regarding partner meeting method. Again, results should be treated with caution and no definitive statements can really be made.

#### **4.2 Ordered Probit: *Urbanity and education influence on life satisfaction***

The results from the ordered probit of life satisfaction are as follows. To test H4(a/b) and H5a the ordered probit measuring influences on life satisfaction is used.

Table 4: Descriptive statistics to show the distribution and breakdown of the three categories of the ordered dependent variable: Life satisfaction (CFPS 2018).

	Life satisfaction		
	Low-mid	High	Very high
<i>N= 4640 (%)</i>			
<i>sheng nu status</i>			
Married age 27+	138 (4.5)	2018 (66.3)	887 (29.1)
Unmarried age 27+ ( sheng nu )	8 (4.8)	136 (81.4)	23 (13.8)
<i>Educational level</i>			
No education	20 (7.6)	132 (50.4)	110 (42.0)
Primary	28 (6.0)	247 (53.1)	190 (40.9)
Secondary	113 (4.5)	1753 (69.7)	651 (25.8)
Higher	39 (2.8)	1072 (76.8)	285 (20.4)
<i>Place of residence</i>			
Urban	31 (2.7)	826 (72.4)	284 (24.9)
Rural	169 (4.8)	2378 (68.0)	952 (27.2)
<i>Marital Status</i>			
Never married	36 (3.7)	768 (79.7)	159 (16.6)
Married	149 (4.1)	2374 (66.3)	1060 (29.6)
Co-habitation	2 (12.5)	11 (68.7)	3 (18.8)
Divorced	10 (16.1)	41 (66.1)	11 (17.8)
Widowed	3 (18.7)	10 (62.5)	3 (18.8)

A synthesis of descriptive statistics for the dependent variable of life satisfaction against each variable used in the ordered probit model is observed in table 4. Most women in the sample declare themselves to be of ‘medium’ life satisfaction, the descriptive statistics points to marriage dictating high life satisfaction. The findings also appear to suggest that increased educational attainment decreases levels of high life satisfaction and the difference between rural/ urban women declaring high life satisfaction is minor.

The results of the ordered probit allow us to observe the direction of the relationship between the chosen variables and life satisfaction. Computed for both 2010 and 2018 CFPS, comparisons between the two are discussed later. Key findings from the principal data set of 2018 are as followed: Significant and positive relationships were seen for the variables: urban residence and marriage whereas significant negative relationships were seen for the variable: education. Odds ratios are used to note the likelihoods of each outcome, providing a constant effect of the chosen explanatory variable. The odds ratio for urban women is  $\exp(0.1083) = 1.11$ , meaning that, the odds of urban women declaring very high life satisfaction is 1.11 times the odds of rural women declaring very high life satisfaction. The odds ratio for married women is  $\exp(0.2689) = 1.3$  meaning that the odds of married women declaring very high life



satisfaction is 1.3 times the odds of unmarried women. Education sees opposing trends, where the odds ratio of highly educated women is  $\exp(-0.367) = 0.69$ , meaning the odds of highly educated women declaring very high life satisfaction are lower than those with less educational attainments.

Table 5: Condensed output from the ordered probit model, where life satisfaction (low/medium, high and very high) was the dependent variable (CFPS 2010, CFPS 2018).

Variable	Coefficient		Standard Error		Z	
	2010	2018	2010	2018	2010	2018
Age ref: n.a.	-0.0166***	-0.0056	0.0026	0.0044	-6.42	-1.27
Urban ref: rural	-0.0834**	0.1083**	0.0309	0.0458	-2.69	2.36
Married ref: unmarried	0.2746***	0.2689***	0.0347	0.0553	7.91	4.87
Education ref: no education						
Primary	0.0638	0.0023	0.0429	0.0926	1.49	0.02
Secondary	0.0504	-0.2827***	0.0385	0.0787	1.13	-3.59
Higher	0.0504	-0.3671***	0.0385	0.0848	1.87	-3.86

\*\*\* p<0.001 \*\* p<0.05 \* p<0.1

Table 6 provides estimated marginal effects for the variables: age, urban, educational levels and marriage status for 2018 CFPS. The results from the estimated marginal effect for urban residence suggest that women holding urban residence, on average, have a positive effect on self-reported life satisfaction compared to women holding rural residence. This positive relationship is also seen for the variable marriage, where the estimated marginal effect for marriage suggests that marriage has a positive effect on self-reported life satisfaction for the women in this sample. Alternatively, the estimated marginal effects for both education variable levels: secondary and higher show negative effects. As education levels increase there is an increased negative effect on self-reported life satisfaction.

Table 6: Additional output from the ordered probit model: predicted marginal effects for each ordered outcome (CFPS 2018)

<b>(Outcome 1)Low/mid life satisfaction</b>			
	<b>dy/dx</b>	<b>std err</b>	<b>z</b>
Age (ref: n.a.)	0.0005	0.0004	1.27
Household registration ( ref: rural)			
urban	-0.0092**	0.0037	-2.47

Educational level ( ref: no education)			
Primary	-0.0001	0.0051	-0.02
Secondary	0.0205	0.0048	4.31
Higher	0.0288***	0.0058	4.94
Marital status ( ref: not married)			
Married	-0.0276***	0.0066	-4.21

---

**(Outcome 2 )High life satisfaction**


---

Age	0.0013	0,001056	1.27
Household registration ( ref: rural)			
urban	-0.0267**	0.0118	-2.27
Educational level ( ref: no education)			
Primary	-0.0007	0.0295	-0.02
Secondary	0.0783***	0.0245	3.2
Higher	0.0964***	0.0253	3.81
Marital status ( ref: not married)			
Married	-0.0556***	0.0099	-5.63

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**(Outcome 3 ) Very high life satisfaction**


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Age	-0.0018	0.0015	-1.27
Household registration ( ref: rural)			
urban	0.0359**	0.0155	2.33
Educational level ( ref: no education)			
Primary	0.0009	0.0346	0.02
Secondary	-0.0988***	0.0290	-3.41
Higher	-0.1252***	0.0306	-4.1
Marital status ( ref: not married)			
Married	0.0832***	0.0161	5.17

---

N= 4640

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\*\*\* p<0.001 \*\* p<0.05 \* p<0.1

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The predicted marginal effects do a good job in isolating and identifying relationships between the three orders of life satisfaction ( low/mid. High and very high). Significance is seen for the variables relating to education, marriage and household registration. Age is not considered to have a significant impact on life satisfaction. Significant negative values for urbanity, on the other hand, for both low/mid and high life satisfaction imply that women in urban areas are less likely to be in these categories compared to rural women. However, this changes for the very high outcome where the positive significant value shows that urban women are more likely to be in this category compared to women of rural residency. This is backed by the overall model which shows a positive relationship between urbanity and declared life satisfaction. This same trend can be seen for the marriage variable again confirming the significant positive

relationship between marriage and life satisfaction. Regarding education, women who hold higher education compared to those with none have reduced likelihood of being in the very high life satisfaction order.

The ordered probit begins to suggest that for women of *sheng nu* status, it isn't their urbanity that decreases high levels of life satisfaction, but their lack of marriage and their increased educational attainment. An ordered probit was created with women of *sheng nu* status, no significant results were seen. Moreover, the parallel line assumption was violated for both the ordered probit model for 2010 and 2018 as a result of a significant output. Awareness of the violation should be considered when addressing the results.

### 4.3 Event history analysis: *Urbanity and education influence on marriage timing (ideal and actual).*

To observe and further analyse marriage timings with respect to educational attainment and urban/rural residence H2(a/b) are tested with the help of a survival analysis. The study sample is made up of unmarried women with an average age of 23 and married women with an average age of 30. Differences in average actual marriage age and average ideal marriage age as per residence and education levels are presented in table 7 The key explanatory variables chosen for this study are education and residence.

Table 7: Descriptive statistics of ideal marriage age and actual marriage age for the study population (CFPS 2018)

	Average <i>ideal</i> marriage age (years)	Average <i>actual</i> marriage age (years)
	N=911	N=626
<i>Total population</i>	27	23
<i>Place of residence</i>		
Rural	27	22
Urban	28	25
<i>Education level</i>		
No education	27	21
Primary	27	23
Secondary	27	23
Higher	28	25



Figure 5: Share of unmarried women from the China Family Panel Studies (2018) who report their ideal marriage age to be below their age at interview.

For unmarried women only, figure 5 shows as their age increases so does their retrospective wish to be already married. Using the *sheng nu* benchmark age of 27, out of the women who are unmarried and below the age of 27 (N=764), 45% answered that their ideal age for marriage would be below 27. In contrast, out of the unmarried women who are aged 27+ (N=150), only 13% answered that their ideal age for marriage would be in their age bracket suggesting that they wished they had married earlier on in life. These findings help support the hypothesis (H5b) that marriage matters and is concurrent with the idea that marriage is a positive predictor of high life satisfaction.

Two survival analyses were performed in order to test H1(a/b) and H2(a/b). The first survival analysis was performed to observe actual marriage timings. The second survival analysis to observe ideal marriage age as. A limitation in the survival analysis is that marriage age was not provided by a 80%+ of married women, these missing values plus the survey design flaw of ideal marriage age only being provided by non-married women means that both sets of analysis results must be treated with caution. Kaplan-Meier estimates of survival probabilities and hazards along with their corresponding survival curves are displayed below. Done to illustrate and test marriage timings as a product of the core explanatory variables: household registration and educational attainment. The following section displays the associated Kaplan-Meier survival graphs along with the relevant cox proportional hazards models.

## Kaplan-Meier outputs

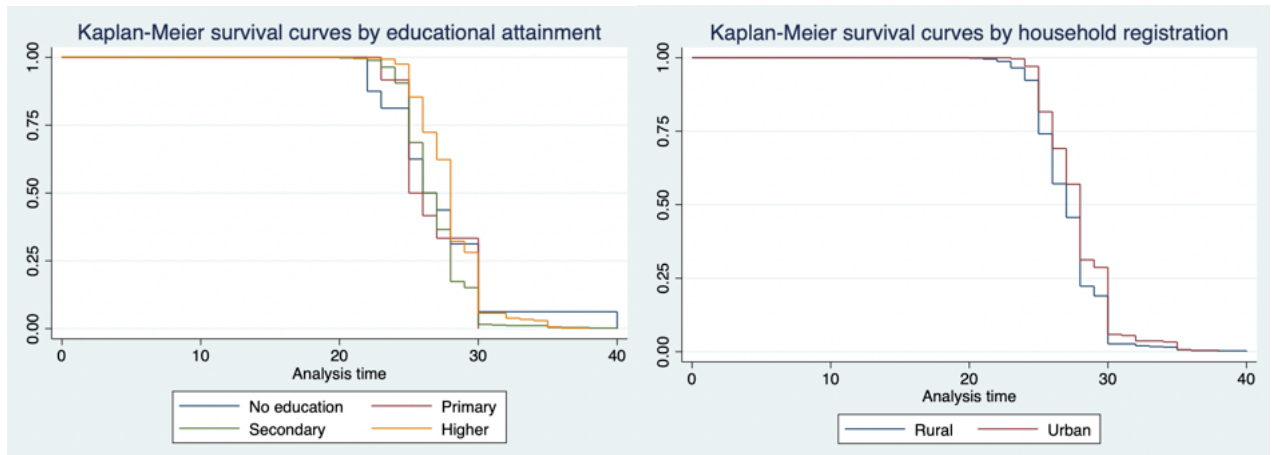


Figure 6: 'Ideal marriage age' Kaplan-Meier survival curves by household registration and education responses gathered from CFPS (2018).

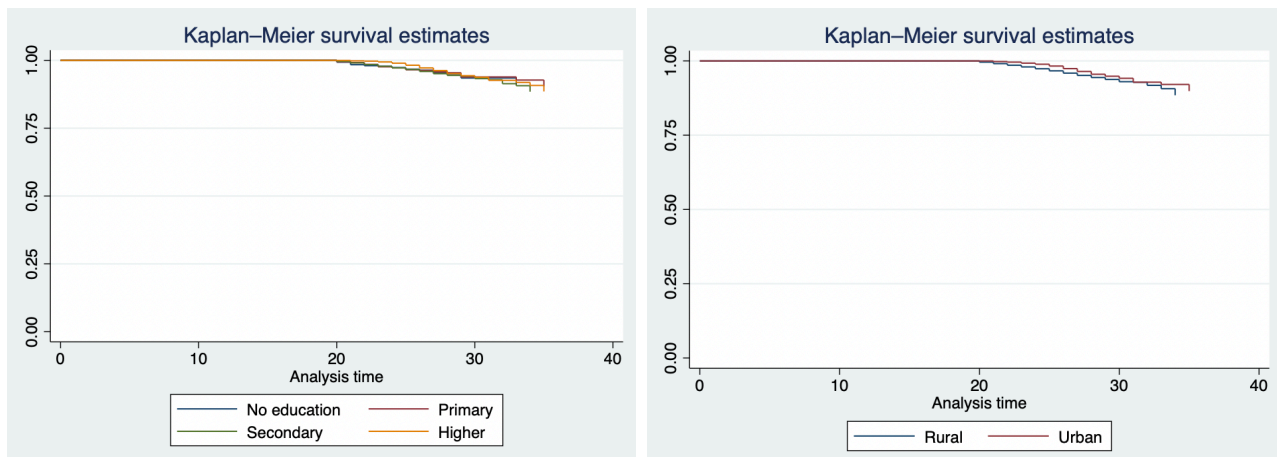


Figure 7: 'Actual marriage age' selective representative sub sample. Kaplan-Meier survival curves by household registration and education responses gathered from CFPS (2018).

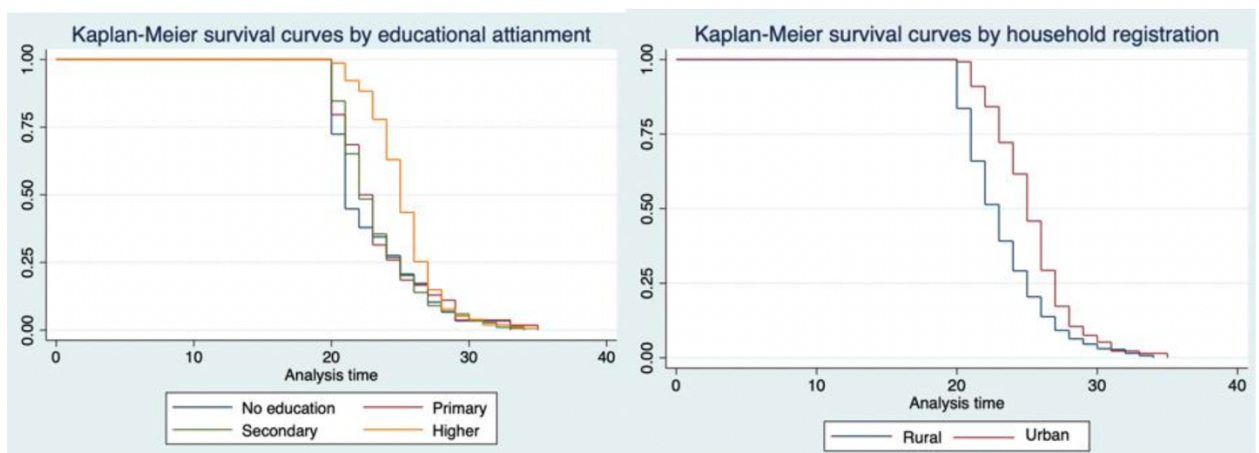


Figure 8: 'Actual marriage age' selective sub sample: only married women. Kaplan-Meier survival curves by household registration and education responses gathered from CFPS (2018).

The graphs plot the Kaplan-Meier survival functions for both ideal marriage age and actual marriage age and in doing so act as a visual aid to compare the different influences educational attainment and household registration has on marriage timing. Where recorded marriage age can be seen as the actual timings: the reality, 'ideal marriage age' is seen as: the desired. The difference in the two is then used as a proxy measure of agency.

The Kaplan-Meier ideal age of marriage graphs present little difference between the chosen parameters (figure 6). Literature states that women of higher educational status and of urban residence desire later marriage ages (Kohli and Ehrhardt 2011). Here it is seen that education and residence appears to have little to no influence on ideal marriage age, H1(a/b) are questioned, final confirmation will be provided via the cox proportional results. The Kaplan-Meier survival graphs created from actual marriage ages for the entire representative population (figure 7) fail to show any clear difference in marriage timings. Cox regression was performed to truly observe effects on marriage timing and discussed later. However, the survival analysis selected sub sample of only married women, show a clearer story in line with theory (Yeung 2013, Xie 2013) a story that appears to be in support of H2(a/b), women with higher education and of urban residence marry later than their rural and lesser educated counterparts. This Kaplan-Meier estimate ( figure 8) assists in answering the research question by providing outcomes that suggest that education and urbanity does influence marriage timing. However, as stressed throughout this study, an alertness to the limitations of the survival analysis must be had. The misrepresentation of married to unmarried because of the missing marriage ages surely biases the results provided. The Kaplan-Meier graphs also begin to assist in the analysis of agency, by seeing what women would aim for, in relation to marriage timings, and what women achieve, this analysis is flawed given the inability to compare the ideal marriage ages of married women. The results of 'marriage agency' should therefore be viewed as potential insights and first indications, more analysis needed.

### **Log rank test**

To further substantiate the impacts education and household registration have on marriage timing both ideal and actual, a log rank test was performed. The log rank statistics for all parameters were significant, therefore we can reject the hypothesis that the survival functions are the same: education and urbanity does impact marriage timing for women both in their ideals and in their reality. This output alone is very helpful in answering the research question

at hand, the below cox regression further analyses the individual impacts education and residence has on the ‘hazard’ of marrying, also known as marriage timing.

### Cox proportional hazard models

Interaction variables were used to club urbanity with higher education together, interactions were formed following the theory that women of higher education and of urban residence are more likely to possess elevated agency as a result of their increased financial autonomy, and thus together these are expected to influence marriage timing and ideals (Sahu and Jeffery 2016). The interaction variables did not heed any significant results and the likelihood ratio test deemed the addition of the interaction variables to be unsupportive to the overall model. For this reason, the following results will only draw attention to the outputs from the models without the interaction variables.

Table 8: Condensed regression table of the Cox regression model for the event of (ideal) marriage

<b>Cox regression model 1: Survival analysis ( Ideal marriage age) (N=909)</b>			
	Haz. Ratio	std. err	Z
<i>Higher education level ( ref: no education)</i>	0.8554	0.2232	-2.7
<i>Urban registration ( ref: rural)</i>	0.9206	0.0683	-1.11
<i>age &gt;27 ( ref: &lt;27)</i>	***0.5000	0.0483	-7.18

Prob > chi2 = 0.0000

LR chi2(5) = 94.02

\*\*\* p<0.001 \*\* p<0.05 \* p<0.1

The hazard of experiencing the event which is in model 1: marriage (ideal) (table 8), is 14% lower for women with higher education compared to those with no education, women with higher education (reference no education) have reduced risk of wanting to marry early. This reduced risk is in line with the theory that women with increased education take longer to get married ( Wu and Dong 2019). Again, the hazard of ideal marriage age is lower for women with urban household registration compared to those with rural registration: urban women have a 8% lower risk of wanting to marry early, this reduced risk follows suit with the theory whereby urban women take longer to get married ( Wong 2016). A supplementary category was created to analyse the study ’s ‘landmark’ age of 27. A dummy variable where 0 is age 27< and 1 is age 27=< was created. The hazard rates show that the risk of marriage (ideal) for women aged 27+ is 50% lower compared to women under the age of 27, thus, women over the age of 27 have an increased risk of wanting to marry earlier suggesting the power of the age of

27 and potentially implying that their ideal age is in fact an unreachable age – in the past ( as seen in table 8).

Significance for the cox regression of ideal age is only seen for the age category variable, women <27 years old, the results from model 1 show that urbanity and education do not significantly influence ideal marriage ages, not helpful when assessing H1(a/b). Along with the insignificance observed, when time is interacted the proportionality assumption is also violated.

Table 9: Condensed regression table of the Cox regression model for the event of (actual) marriage (selective representative sub-sample)

<b>Cox regression model 2: Survival analysis ( Actual marriage age (representative sub)) (N=688)</b>			
	Haz. Ratio	std. err	Z
<i>Higher education level ( ref: no education)</i>	0.8773*	0.0520	-2.21
<i>Urban registration ( ref: rural)</i>	0.7133**	0.0799	-3.01
<i>age &gt;27 ( ref: &lt;27)</i>	0.3013***	0.0442	-8.17

Prob > chi2 = 0.0000

LR chi2(3) = 80.48

\*\*\* p<0.001 \*\* p<0.05 \* p<0.1

Table 10: Condensed regression table of the Cox regression model for the event of (actual) marriage (married only sub-sample)

<b>Cox regression model 3: Survival analysis ( Actual marriage age (married only sub)) (N=540)</b>			
	Haz. Ratio	std. err	Z
<i>Higher education level ( ref: no education)</i>	0.7428**	0.0819	-2.7
<i>Urban registration ( ref: rural)</i>	0.7503*	0.0868	-2.48
<i>age &gt;27 ( ref: &lt;27)</i>	0.3084***	0.0452	-8.02

Prob > chi2 = 0.0000

LR chi2(3) = 83.23

\*\*\* p<0.001 \*\* p<0.05 \* p<0.1

The results for the model 2 cox analysis (table 9) look at marriage age as the event of interest for the representative selective sub sample. For urbanity (reference: rural), higher education (reference: no education) and age 27+ significant hazard ratios are computed at <1 which signals a reduction in the hazard of marrying and indicates that education, residence and age have significant effects on marriage age timing and thus support H2(a/b). Women with higher education have a 13% lower risk of marriage compared to women with no education. Women who hold urban residence have a 29% lower risk of marriage compared to women with rural residence. Women who are over the age of 27 have a 70% decreased risk of marrying compared to age <27 years. The results for the model 3 ( table 10) use the selective sub sample of only married women. Similar findings are presented.



### *Proportionality assumption*

For both model 1, 2 and 3, significant results for the test of proportional-hazards assumption were given. Meaning the rejection of the null hypothesis that the effect of all terms in the model meet the proportional hazard assumption. Therefore at least one term in the model violates the assumption. After re-running each cox regression with an interaction of time included (time varying covariates), further results were provided, and the proportionality assumption was tested in more detail.

For model 1 (ideal marriage age), the interaction of household registration and time is significant along with the interaction of age category 27+. These significant results show that the proportionality assumption is violated for both household registration and age category. However, the variable education is not significant when interacted with time. With regard to the hazard of marrying ( ideally), the effect of education is constant over time.

For model 2 and 3 (actual marriage age), the interaction between education and time is seen as significant along with household registration and time, thus violating the proportionality assumption.

## **5. Synthesis, discussion and conclusion**

### **5.1 Synthesis of the results**

The present research investigated the effects of *education* and *urbanity* on singlehood, marriage timing and life satisfaction for women in China. With a particular focus on evaluating the importance of marriage and investigating the *sheng nu* (the so called ‘leftover women’), questions included who they are and motivations behind the creation of the derogatory term. Using the CFPS (waves 2010 and 2018), descriptive statistics, marriage timing and life satisfaction indicators of 9,706 and 4,640 women, respectively, aged between 20 and 38 years old were analysed.

H1(a/b), H2(a/b), H3(a/b), H4(a/b) were created to back the universal theories of individualisation and agency for women. Where one has increased resources, one has increased agency to achieve what they would like – in the marriage arena - and thus is more likely to have an increased overall life satisfaction ( Giddens 1992, Triandis 2018, Kabeer 1999, Beck 2002, Sahu and Jeffery 2016 ). However, a concluding part of this study uses H5(a/b/c) which in-part debunks the previous theorised hypothesis, through its recognition of the Chinese

context and the intrinsic cultural influences that persist to impact life choices in China. H6 is a subsequent hypothesis which examines women with *sheng nu* status.

This section looks to assess the results of the survey to see if they illustrate and remain constant with the theory as posed. The results of the event history analysis should be taken as an indication rather than an absolute owing to the vast number of missing cases. The biased results therefore should be treated with caution but are presented non the less. Whilst observing marriage timing, higher education doesn't result in later ideal marriage timings (rejection of H1b). Concurrent with this, neither does urban residence (rejection of H1a). The Kaplan Meier graphs show little difference in perceived ideal marriage timings for both varying levels of education and residence. Further to this, the cox regression showed no significance for the variables: *education* and *residence* on ideal age of marriage. However, higher education does influence *realised* later marriage timings (H2a) complementary to this, women with urban residence realise later marriages compared to rural women (H2b). In further support of this, increased hazard is seen for women with urban residence and for women with higher educational attainments. Focussing on this study 's constructed route of testing agency that being: ability to marry at an ideal age. Results can be seen from the Kaplan Meier survival curves. Where ideal marriage timings do not differ much with regard to varying educational attainments and or residence, actual marriage timings show a different story: urban women appear to marry closer to their ideal marriage age whereas rural women get married earlier than their reported ideal age. Again, highly educated women marry closer to their ideal marriage age compared to lesser educated who get married earlier. Agency, in the marriage arena – to marry when desired- can therefore be seen to be reached by women of urban residence and of higher education but not for women of rural areas and lesser education. However, ideal ages for each category of education and residents are all higher than the actual timings suggesting that although agency is increased for urban and educated ( as a consequence of the smaller gap between ages) it is not completely achieved implying traditional Chinese norms to be at play in marital decisions (H5c).

The descriptive findings for the rudimental analysis of 'individualisation', using the CFPS questionnaire response: 'my goal is to make my parents proud', show that a larger proportion of women with urban residence and who hold higher education put their parents goals above their own ( H3a/b) compared to their rural, less educated counterparts. Again, these results are preliminary as a consequence of extremely small response rate.

The results of the ordered probit show women with higher educational attainment do not have increased life satisfaction (rejection of H4a) the significant negative relationship

between higher levels of life satisfaction and higher education show that as education increases self-reporting levels of life satisfaction decreases. When taking a look at the influence residence has on life satisfaction, a positive significant relationship is seen between women with urban residence and higher levels of self-reported life satisfaction (H4b). Moving on to the hypothesis that address cultural and societal values, life satisfaction appears to be dictated primarily by marriage (H5a) concluding that marriage matters. In addition, the event history analysis shows that neither holding urban residence or higher education leads to the achievement of *ideal* marriage timing, all women are seen to get married before their stated ideals (H5b) in conjunction to this, both the average ideal and actual marriage ages of women from the CFPS appear to be influenced by societal pressure of marrying before 27, marrying before the label of *sheng nu* (H5c). The survival analysis outputs that signal women aged 27+ have a reduced risk of marriage this further implies the influence the age 27 has on marriage and thus supporting traditional influence (H5b and H5c).

Creating a sub population of women who were unmarried and over the age of 27: the two prerequisites of being labelled as a *sheng nu*, allowed an observation and comparison between two cohorts of women. The descriptive results show that education levels appear to dictate *sheng nu* status (H6b). Alongside this, residence appears to also dictate *sheng nu* status, higher proportion live in urban compared to the entire population (H6a). Both of which follow suit with the ‘definition’ of the term *sheng nu* that is: professional, highly educated women over the age of 27 who live in urban areas (Murti 2019).

The ability to compare two survey data sets is invaluable for studies such as this, although comparison wasn’t a key component of the research question, the 2010 data set allowed for a moment in time to be observed against today. From 2010 to 2018, marriage remains a constant predictor of self-reported high life-satisfaction. Whereas urbanity sees a shift from a negative relationship with high life satisfaction to that of a positive one, suggesting that since 2010 urban residence has become more of a favourable place to live, or conversely perhaps rural residences have become more hostile as a consequence of ‘The China Dream’, a method to urbanise China in a hope that it brings prosperity to all (Taylor 2015). Education sees a shift to be a negative predictor of life satisfaction. When in 2010 education didn’t appear to effect life satisfaction, a remarkable change occurred in the intermediate 8 years. In 2018 women with secondary and higher education now see a strong significant negative relationship with life satisfaction. Potentially illuding to the troubles mentioned in the *sheng nu* literature (Wang 2011, Larson 2012, To 2013, Ji 2015, Murti 2019), highly educated women suffer in the face of the patriarch and ramifications include a decline in life satisfaction. The *sheng nu*

literature implies that this could be in part a response to the failure to realise agency within the marriage arena as a consequence of being unfairly treated because of their elevated social status.

The descriptive statistics also aid a comparison across time, key findings are as followed. Similarities between actual marriage ages exist for the years 2010 and 2018, questioning the demographic motivation behind the usage of the term *sheng nu* if women aren't appearing to marry later. In relation to the term *sheng nu* and women who hold *sheng nu* status, from 2010 to 2018 CFPS limited changes in proportions of them with urban residence is seen, however they illustrate a rise in educational attainment, increased employment along with an increase in life satisfaction over the years. Focusing on the *sheng nu* then and now, women of *sheng nu* status in 2010 follow suit with that of 2018, education appears to influence singlehood and thus *sheng nu* likelihood.

The research question *'To what extent does education and urbanity influence singlehood, marriage timing and life satisfaction among women in contemporary China, with a focus on cultural contexts, the advance of individualised mindsets and associated agency of women'* is answered with the statement: Although the results do begin to suggest urban and highly educated women to have increased individualisation and agency, by means of achieving marriage ages closer to their stated ideals along with a lower proportion not stating that their goals are to make their parents proud. On the whole, Chinese women, regardless of education and residence, as seen in the 2018 CFPS, appear to not only continue to value marriage but most strive to achieve it (before age 27) within the ideals set out by the Chinese state and in sympathy with traditional Chinese cultural expectations. Ergo, marriage trumps singlehood and appears to dictate life satisfaction in China, despite increased education, urbanism and agency of women.

## **5.2 Discussion and limitations**

This study aimed to contribute to marriage and family formation research in contemporary China by utilising the theory of individualisation, female empowerment and an understanding of the complex cultural, social, and political dynamics of today's China. Throughout this study, it became apparent that difficulties existed by means of data quality, the CFPS did not include the necessary survey responses that would have enabled a richer analysis. Via creative data approaches and through acceptance of the pit falls, suggestive results were still collected and are used to discuss the hypotheses set.

Does the China Family Panel Study survey illustrate and show consistency with the theories of individualisation and agency? That being which women get what? why when and

how, with the ‘what’ being ideal marriage timing and life satisfaction. Motivation behind this research started off by wanting to understand more about women’s marriage habits and desires in today’s China, through a demographic and sociological perspective. The driving force behind this study was the recognition of the all-consuming and unrelenting pressure that Chinese women are under to achieve respect in both work and family, in particular: the push to marry before age 27 as seen via the *sheng nu* movement (Wang 2011, Larson 2012, To 2013, Ji 2015, Murti 2019). Gathering data sets that have collected the voices of Chinese women is challenging for most, let alone a non-native speaker. This research used literature written primarily in the English language, access to Chinese voices would allow an understanding of the situation from the dominant language. Requesting and receiving access to the CFPS via Peking University Open Research Data platform (n.d), offered encouragement, however, during this study it became apparent that the chosen survey limited the study’s findings as a result of multiple unanswered questions and missing values. Although a more nuanced questionnaire would provide more indicative results, this survey acts in tandem with the theory and existing literature to delve into the realm of Chinese daily life. Efforts to observe the influence increased urbanity and education is having on female agency in China, with a specific contemporary focus on the term *sheng nu*, a pandoras box of complexity was opened. This study aimed to observe and record cultural expectations, life achievements, marriage timings whilst providing possible explanations.

This research is not without limitations. This study made use of enterprise and initiative, heavily relying on contextual understanding by means of the literature along with the chosen analysis, the study attempts to achieve its initial aims. Whilst following the theoretical framework the following limitations occurred. Where resources of agency are said to be education, employment and urbanity (Giddens 1992, Beck 2002). This study does not include employment as a resource. Firstly, the CFPS survey lacked clarity when it came to the type of employment declared by the respondent. Although ‘employed’ and ‘unemployed’ is noteworthy in and of itself, the nature of the employment was deemed unreliable since it’s not solely the notion of being employed that distinguishes women by *sheng nu* status, it’s the *type* of employment. Women of *sheng nu* status are typically professional, highly educated and of urban residence (Feldshuh 2018, Murti 2019). Therefore, type of employment status would have been a useful marker to use when analysing marriage timings, life satisfaction and *sheng nu* status. With no way to value employment, it was not used in the hypothesis testing and removed from the analysis. Of course, to strengthen the study and cover the full framework, a richer breakdown of employment would have been preferred.

Next, the deduction of measured agency through the analysis of the variables ‘ideal age for marriage’ and ‘actual age of marriage’ is far from perfect as the ideal age for marriage was only provided by those who were unmarried at the time of the survey. Preferably married women would have answered this question with a retrospect point of view- this would have allowed for an excellent analysis of *agency*: who managed to marry when desired? The lack of answers made the comparison of ideal age and actual marriage age from the same respondent impossible. Although age range, educational status and residence are ‘like for like’, with China being a country with rapid changes the room for error when comparing an 18 year range of women’s ‘ideal age’ with ‘actual marriage age’ exists. Making use of birth cohorts could have been a method to amend this limitation. Although this limitation exists, agency by means of expectations and realities acted as an interesting output. Where agency is reached through achieving goals, marriage timings can help observe female agency from timings women want verses what they achieve. Alongside this, limitations were profuse in the survival analysis method making the results more of a first indication. In addition to the ideal marriage age limitation, unmarried women were heavily overweighted in the marriage timing survival analysis. For this reason, two sub samples were created for the survival analysis one which reduced the number of unmarried to balance the weighting of married and the other which entirely removed the non-married. Proportionality assumptions were violated limiting the whole analysis.

Next, with respect to the ‘Achievement’ part of the framework, ‘life satisfaction’ was chosen as the indication of one’s ‘life achievements’. With ‘life satisfaction’ being as subjective as it is, the ordered probit model was never going to hold much explanatory power, the world would be a boring place if satisfaction could be reached with a simple equation. This limitation therefore is a product of the type of analysis, so the significance was treated as the primary outcome. Despite its limitations a consequence of its situational and subjective nature, ‘life satisfaction’ is still useful to analyse as it gives an indication of what the women who have been surveyed were feeling there and then.

Moving on from the theoretical framework, the usage of figures from the Chinese statistical yearbook and China’s census data additionally allowed for demographic scenes to be set and assisted in conclusions drawn from the literature. This macro data was useful to remedy the data limitations of the sample. From this a strength can be seen regarding the measured representative nature of the CFPS (2010 and 2018). The census data collected from the UN remarkably shows the exact same proportion of singlehood (women age 20-39) for the year 2010 compared to the figures taken from the CFPS (2010) proportion of ‘never married

women aged 20-38'. Although there is no census data available for the year 2018, the 2010 similarities can be used to strengthen and support the findings collected from this study.

Another limitation can be seen where this study didn't make use of the inherent nature of panel data. That is, observing the same respondents over time would have provided an analysis that individually mapped out changes in life satisfaction given individual circumstances. Although, the inclusion of the 2010 data set did allow for a comparison and a scene to be set, a richer analysis of the two sets would have been preferred, this surpassed the capacity of this study and would have been an additional analysis outside of the core study question.

Finally, the magnitude of the study question is apparent. Scaled down to focus on one element of the *sheng nu* would have been retrospectively more achievable. Alongside this, a limitation of this study could be seen via the nature of the analysis, in depth questionnaires, as seen in To (2013) and Murti (2019) would enable a richer measurement of self-reported life satisfaction and individualisation evaluation. The chosen study question could have been answered with more strength via a combination of quantitative plus qualitative survey data. To truly and further observe the current situation of the time of writing (2022), a more age specific cohort of women around the *sheng nu* age of 27 should be evaluated in both a quantitative and qualitative nature.

### **5.3 Concluding remarks**

The findings of this study draw a complicated picture of women's agency in the Chinese marriage arena. They begin to demonstrate that marriage is to be realised against a backdrop of Chinese traditional norms. A key point of this study whilst women of higher education and urbanity do see some loosening of traditional norms, analysis of the data signals that educated, urban women in China still equate marriage with positive life satisfaction. Although these women do look for a later moment to enter wedlock, for the most part, marriage is preferred over singlehood and ideal/actual marriage timings are kept within the cultural expectations of marrying before age 27.

Marriage remains seen as an important life event, one that brings acceptance and happiness. While increased education and urbanity are said to influence agency and thus life achievements (Giddens 1992, Beck 2002), this study results finds that an absence of marriage has an overriding effect on Chinese women. It appears that women from the CFPS do not only value marriage, but most strive to achieve it within the ideals set out by the

Chinese state. Although China is seeing a growth in female independence (Wu and Dong 2019), the social environment is not developing entirely in sync. This study begins to demonstrate that a growing number of urban and educated women in China navigate a society with gendered obstacles, rich cultural and societal pressures. As these women attempt to gain greater control over their lives, their agency to do so (marry when desired) appears to be capped. This is supported by the findings from To (2013), which indicate that educated and urban women who, in theory, have the agency to choose life decisions in fact cannot because of external influences, either because they wish not to or they are forced to succumb to traditional subordination. This can be seen in the study where educated and urban Chinese women in the CFPS (2018) in their late 20s who have the theorised pre-requisites to be a so-called *sheng nu* (highly educated and urban) show desire to marry. Single women over the age of 27 appear to regret not marrying earlier and present a lower risk of marrying after this age. Moreover, where all women declare similar ideal marriage ages, in reality only urban and educated women appear to marry at an age closer to their desired marriage age, showing increased agency for them but not absolute agency. Thus, supporting the rhetoric that individualisation and women's agency must be contextualised: agency can only reach a certain point, past which cultural constraints risk eclipsing any advance in achievement.

The term *sheng nu* and its essence show no sign of waning out of daily conversations and conventions (Wang 2011, Larson 2012, To 2013), 'Get married fast or else' is the coded message behind this derogatory label and it seems as though it has influenced the women of the CFPS (2018) survey. Although changes in ideology as a product of individualisation can be implied by the results of this study, literature maintains that these shifts in agency and empowerment, which are encouraging movements towards gender equality, only appear to bolster resistance from the patriarch (Wu and Dong 2019). Being a woman in China is still a challenge. As more women defy traditional subordination, deep rooted systemic sexist ideologies perpetuate terms such as *sheng nu* (Murti 2019). The findings of this study indicate that societal pressures continue to impact women's priorities.

In China, late marriage is presented as abnormal, supported by this study where 'earlier' marriage is seen as a prerequisite to life satisfaction. An underlying question of this study is the analysis of the term *sheng nu* and the motivation behind its existence. If the proportion of singlehoods has not greatly changed over the last 20 years and it is the males who are a larger share of the 'un-married', then why is the Chinese state fixed on blaming unmarried women? China's sex imbalance proves that marriage is a complexity beyond mathematics. What has seen a measurable change in the last 20 years is the rise of female education and associated



freedoms. If the term *sheng nu* has not stemmed from a social or an entrenched demographic reality, as the findings of this study begin to suggest. Can it be concluded that the term *sheng nu* exemplifies the promotion of language that degrades women in today's China, opposed to a phrase that is born from demographic or social reality.

The results of this study act in tandem to uphold the idea that the phrase *sheng nu* is created to 'other' urban and well-educated women into marriage. Where macro data shows singlehood to be increasing it doesn't appear to be at a rate that is of an immense demographic scale (yet), perhaps the Chinese authorities are using *sheng nu* as a precautionary term. This study documents the rise of female education becoming an indicator of lesser life satisfaction. This could indicate that term *sheng nu* is working to effectively diminish academic achievements of women in today's China, as posed by To (2013) and Murti (2019). Where women should be able to achieve higher life satisfaction via their elevated opportunities, the patriarchy creates an unwelcoming stage.

This study recognises singledom to be limited by cultural pressures and evidence that women's preferences to marry predates that of the *sheng nu* label, however it is impossible to disentangle the usage of the term from the rise of socioeconomic statuses of women via their elevated education, urbanity and employment. What would the situation be if the *sheng nu* label was not in circulation? The pressure to marry in order to not be 'leftover' runs with the grain of dominant cultural norms. Throughout this study it has been made clearer that the use of the *sheng nu* label has a broader political purpose. A purpose to reinforce cultural expectations that women should be married over educated.

This study provides evidence that women do not readily need to be shamed into marriage or warned against extended singlehood. Again, reinforcing the idea that the *sheng nu* label is either a) not needed because women want to marry early b) working effectively because women are marrying early or c) counterintuitive. Marriage appears to remain important even for those with the label, but will men marry women tainted with 'leftover'? Therefore, the term *sheng nu* epitomises the sexism that operates Chinese society and subsequently risks the devaluation of female education. It can be seen as a well-crafted message, a linguistic tool, which represents past and present norms, guiding the idea and ideal moment of marriage. With more research needed, one thing that is for certain is that the emergence of the term stems from an actual demographic reality- one that has no easy solution- the 'leftover men'.

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