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**EXPLORING SIGNIFICANT FACTORS IN CHINESE
WOMEN'S DECISION-MAKING ABOUT BIRTH
OUTSIDE MARRIAGE**

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Abstract

The thesis delves into the intricate and evolving perspectives of Chinese women's decision-making about birth outside marriage. The emergence of a new family form, characterized by single mothers by choice and their donor-conceived children, has become a common phenomenon in many Western countries. The younger generation of Chinese women is gradually drawn to this new family form, and some pioneers have already accomplished it. However, social norms in China pose challenges to birth outside of marriage, let alone single women becoming mothers by donor insemination, which is contrary to current laws and regulations.

This study meticulously collected data through qualitative, in-depth interviews. The researcher conducted extensive fieldwork in Chengdu, China, and interviewed 17 Chinese women from diverse backgrounds. Grounded theory, a rigorous and systematic approach, was used for data analysis. From this, 11 factors emerged as influential for women deciding whether to choose birth outside marriage.

These factors, including operational concerns about ART, social stigma, donor-conceived children's well-being, childrearing burden, fertility intention, motherhood penalty, maternity risk, biological clock, marriage perception, the influence of the original family, and affordable substitute, collectively shape women's decisions. Among them, only operational concerns about ART, social stigma, and donor-conceived child well-being are directly related to their unmarried status. The author thus defines these three as "the extra price for choosing a nonconventional childbearing" in China. The research also found no evidence showing that "being single, legally not allowed to and socially frowned on having babies" is more decisive than any other factors, such as "operational concerns about ART" and "child well-being" when women consider being solo mothers.

KEYWORDS: birth outside marriage, solo mothers, Chinese women, decision-making, ART

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1 INTRODUCTION

Once the world's most populous country, China grapples with urgent demographic issues. It has not only been overtaken by India in total population (UN, 2023), but it is also rapidly descending into a troublesome situation with a low fertility rate and an aging population. The National Bureau of Statistics (2021) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) confirmed at a press conference that the total fertility rate (TFR) was 1.3 births per woman over her lifetime in 2020. This figure has been on a continuous decline. Chinese scholar He (2023) revealed that China's TFR in 2022 dropped to 1.07 per woman. Although the short-term low TFR alone does not determine whether a country has already fallen into a "low fertility trap" (Lutz & Skirbekk, 2005; Lutz et al., 2006), and it remains to be seen if it can reverse the declining fertility rate, it is fair to say that China currently has "the lowest-low fertility level" (Kohler et al., 2002) since it reached the criteria of the TFR at or below 1.3 (ibid.). Regarding the aging population, it is expected that around 2035, more than 30% of the population, a total of 400 million, will be over 60 years old (National Health Commission, 2022). Against this background, it does not require a demographic expert to judge: China needs more babies!

The Chinese government has tried to address the problem by relaxing family planning policies and implementing several pronatalist ones. First, the one-child policy, which was in effect nationwide since 1980, was replaced by the selective two-child policy (a couple with at least one being an only child can have two children) in 2013 (Shen & Wang, 2019). Second, the universal two-child policy (every couple can have two children) came in 2016 (ibid.). Five years later, the three-child policy was introduced in 2021. These policies and various local regulations have also tried incentivizing childbearing through cash allowance, extended maternity and childcare leave, and even preferential policies in the real estate market (Du & Wei, 2023; Xu, 2022).

However, all these policies, regardless of their effectiveness, have yet to address a significant portion of the population- the unmarried. Given China's large population and the decreasing interest in marriage among the younger generation, the number of unmarried individuals is substantial. According to China Statistical Yearbook 2022 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022), the country's single population over 15 years old was approximately 239 million (male 143 million, female 96 million), accounting for 17.14% of the total population. From the perspective of increasing fertility, excluding unmarried individuals from the pronatalist policies is unwise. Do these single people want to have children and contribute a bit to increasing the birth rate? What are the factors that influence their reproductive decisions? Has being single hindered their plans to

become parents? Will gender differences be reflected in the discussion of this topic? This research tries to contribute to the area by focusing on the reproductive rights of single women and answering the question- what are the factors that impact Chinese women's decision-making about having babies without marriage? Do they have the same concerns as married ones? Does "being single" stop them from motherhood?

This study adopted qualitative, in-depth interviews to collect data. The author conducted fieldwork for over a month in Chengdu, the capital city of Sichuan Province in China, and interviewed 17 Chinese women from various backgrounds. Grounded theory was used for data analysis, and 11 factors emerged as influential during women's decisions. This paper comprises seven chapters. Chapter 2, *Birth Outside of Marriage in China*, introduces China's traditional marriage models, new trends, the absent father phenomenon in family life, local regulations benefiting births outside of marriage, and the trending opinions on social media. This chapter briefly overviews Chinese society and culture relevant to this study. Chapter 3 is a *Literature Review*, briefly summarizing the research in the West and China. Western research is systematic and has achieved fruitful results, including quantitative surveys on attitudes among the public and specific groups, studies on the characteristics of single mothers by choice, research on cross-border reproductive care, and observations on solo motherhood families and children's growth. In China, the topic of single mothers by choice has not formed a separate research field. Compared with the West, the outcomes are relatively few and scattered in research on single-mother families, women's fertility intentions, or LGBTQ studies. Chapter 4, named *Methodology*, explains the choice of research methods, fieldwork preparation, and data collection. The author introduces why she chose grounded theory, how to choose the location for fieldwork, how to recruit interviewees and design interviews, and how to collect reliable data. Chapter 5 of *Data Analysis* demonstrates how the three steps of grounded theory (open coding, axial coding, and selective coding) were used to analyze data, how the 11 factors emerged, and further elucidates how those factors impact women's decision-making. Chapters 6 and 7, *Discussion* and *Conclusion*, include a discussion, a conclusion, and a suggestion for future research. The researcher shared her significant findings that operational concerns about ART, social stigma, and donor-conceived child well-being are directly related to single women only. The author thus defines these three as "the extra price for choosing a nonconventional childbearing" in China. Meanwhile, the researcher clarified the limitations of her research and put forward reasonable and valuable suggestions for future study in this field.

2 BIRTH OUTSIDE OF MARRIAGE IN CHINA

Birth outside marriage is not a unique phenomenon that only happens among certain regions or groups; it can be seen everywhere. However, how people view and deal with it varies significantly in different societies and cultures. During the fieldwork and subsequent data analysis, supplemented by literature reading, the researcher found some unique characteristics in Chinese society that can help readers better understand the sociocultural background when discussing birth outside marriage. This chapter will briefly introduce the current situation in China from four aspects: The challenge facing the traditional marriage model, the gradually disintegrating notion of bilateral childrearing, the relaxation of local policies on non-marital birth, and the impact of new trends on social media.

2.1 Patrilineal Inheritance Challenged

The traditional Chinese marriage and childbearing system includes two characteristics: patrilineal inheritance and bilateral parenting (i.e., both parents raise their children jointly) (Fei, 2022 ed, Chapters 2 and 13). To be specific, patrilineal inheritance means marriage and family are male-dominated. Men marry and bring someone to their parents' family, while women marry and move out of their parents' family. Children take the father's family name and inherit property from the father's side. In the past, the rules worked because every family had sons and daughters. The son inherited the family name and property. The daughter moved to her spouse's family and inherited it there. A few families without sons also passed on the family name and property by adopting sons or uxori-local marriages.

However, starting in 1980, the family planning policy created so many one-child families, which have been the dominant family type in China for a long time. Families with only daughters want to protect their family name and property. They are unwilling to let their daughters move out and let the grandchildren take their son-in-law's family name. Therefore, a need for a marriage model arises when both sides want to inherit their family lineage. That is when a new marriage model of "liang tou hun (两头婚)" has prevailed in some places (Qiu, 2023; Zhao, 2022; Tang, 2022; Liu & Xu, 2023). In media coverage and online discussion, this new marriage model is usually called "liang tou hun," translated literally as "two-sided marriage" by some researchers. However, it does not have a nationwide unified name. Chinese research has found that the names and marriage arrangements vary in different areas, according to regional customs and what people want to emphasize in this marriage. In studies of southern Jiangsu, a researcher (Yuan, 2021) called

it “bing jia hun (并家婚),” meaning a marriage that merges two families. This name emphasizes that both original families jointly combine resources to support the young couple’s nuclear family. In fieldwork conducted in the central part of China (Gao W., 2018), Hubei province, it is called “liang tou zou (两头走),” which literally means walking towards both sides. This name focuses on the fact that young couples maintain almost the same frequency of communication with both sides’ parents. This marriage model has other names with local characteristics in other parts of China, which will not be fully listed and distinguished here since it serves as background information but is not the key topic of this thesis.

As the names show, each family has different priorities in this new marriage model. Therefore, there are no unified standards for the young couple making marriage arrangements; the two families always negotiate together. The negotiation process generally includes family name and property inheritance, elderly care, and post-marital residence (Qiu, 2023; Zhao, 2022; Tang, 2022; Liu & Xu, 2023; Yuan, 2021; Gao W., 2018). Next, the author will briefly introduce this new marriage model from the abovementioned aspects to explain how it changes the traditional patrilineal inheritance.

The family name and property inheritance, the core interest reflected in this new marriage model, show less regional variation. It refers to the husband and wife inheriting the property of their own families, respectively, and having at least two children, one of which inherits the mother’s family name. The other takes the father’s family name. Some families may go further on details. However, the critical point is that each family name and wealth must be passed on. “The elderly care” is also relatively sure: the young couple must support parents from both sides equally, instead of the notion that caring for the husband’s parents should be prioritized in a patrilineal inheritance (Fei, 2022 ed, Chapter 13). The most significant difference exists in post-marital residence. Some adopt neolocal residences, with both side parents contributing money to purchase a residence for the young couple to live independently (Qiu, 2023). This is common when young couples work in a city other than their hometowns. Some couples take turns living with both parents, for example, with the husband’s parents on weekdays and the wife’s parents on weekends (Yuan, 2021; Gao W., 2018) or taking monthly or annual turns. This pattern is typical in rural areas and small towns.

No matter what name or kind of post-marital residence they prefer, this new marriage model turns patrilineal inheritance into a bilateral equal inheritance (Zhao, 2022; Gao W., 2018), representing a change in the marriage system. Previously, family inheritance could only be passed down through male heirs because a female’s children usually would not take her surname and family wealth. However, through this new marriage model, people have increasingly noticed that

women want to and can be subject to passing on family names and bloodlines, just like men do. This becomes one of the sociocultural inspirations for single women to consider births outside of marriage.

2.2 Bilateral Parenting Weakened in Modern Society

Bilateral parenting is another feature of the traditional marriage system. Fei Xiaotong (2022 ed, Chapter 2) believed that the rationality lies in the fact that raising children is a long process and requires endless effort, which one person, especially a female who does not have an income, cannot handle alone. Besides, in the past, children learned survival skills in the family, with the male experience from the father and the female perspective from the mother. Nowadays, both men and women can provide economic support for children, and society is becoming complex, which means children's socialization process, namely education, must be completed in specialized institutions, such as schools. As a result, the bilateral parenting system has, at least to some extent and to some people, lost its practical basis.

Next, new childrearing methods have emerged to cope with modern society. First, the increasing divorce has resulted in more single-parent families and blended families. In the former, unilateral childrearing is quite normal, while in the latter, childrearing can involve three parties: father, mother, and stepparent. Even if the parents are not divorced, the commonly seen absent fathers have also shaken the bilateral childrearing notion. Chinese society has a long history of recognizing labor division and family gender roles as “men taking charge of the outside and women taking charge of the inside (男主外, 女主内 nan zhu wai, nv zhu nei).” Despite the young generation gradually embracing a more gender-equal family pattern, the norm that men rarely participate in family life and childcare is highly accepted. This tradition, combined with China's “996” work schedule (illegally requiring employees to work from 9:00 am to 9:00 pm, six days per week), means that different levels of absent fathers are everywhere in real family life. Many women and children practically live in quasi-single-parent families. Therefore, in Chinese social media, there is a dedicated buzzword to describe this parenting style called “sang ou shi yu er (丧偶式育儿),” widowed parenting, similar to married-single mothers, meaning the husband rarely participates in family life in all aspects except for providing money, so the wife must take on all the childcare work as if she was widowed.

In addition, the absent-father phenomenon can be strengthened by a work relocation under a strict household registration system named *hukou*. In China, the *hukou* system limits the type of

education a child can access. To study in a particular school, children must have a corresponding *hukou*. When moving from one city to another, a child without *hukou* in the target city will not be granted equal educational access. Therefore, when the father's job is transferred, which is usual in a rapidly changing economy, the mother and children always stay in the home city in the best interest of the children's education. As a result, couples living separately in two places are readily accepted in China. Interviewee Fu told a story which illustrates how common this phenomenon is:

My friend lives in Chengdu with her two daughters, and her husband works in Anhui province (The two places are about 1,500 kilometers apart). Her husband returns every one or two months, spends a weekend, and then returns to work. I think her situation is almost (single parenthood), except for the financial support from her husband.

**The researcher supplements the content in parentheses based on the interview or serves as background information on Chinese society to help readers understand. Same below.*

To sum it up, for many Chinese women, bilateral parenting has been an unattainable illusion for various reasons, and they have been practicing varying degrees of unilateral parenting in daily life. In other words, solo childrearing that comes with birth outside of marriage does not necessarily mean a huge difference in workload compared with de facto unilateral parenting in married circumstances. On the contrary, if they do not need financial support from "a husband," this solo mother lifestyle seems appealing since there are no marital conflicts, parenting disputes, mother-in-law issues, or maintenance of a long-distance marriage. Therefore, bilateral parenting, closely tied to marriage, has gradually lost its monopoly in contemporary childrearing. Unilateral parenting by one parent is increasingly feasible.

2.3 Relaxation of Local Policies

Chinese law prohibits single women from accessing sperm banks and Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) to have babies. Although the PRC's constitution recognizes individuals' reproductive rights, a marriage relationship is always a prerequisite for specific reproduction regulations, which is often described as implementing ART is forbidden to anyone who does not comply with the Population and Family Planning Law (Yu J., 2021; Yang & Chen, 2022), meaning no marriage certificate, no ART. To be clear, there are only two ways for a single woman to have children domestically: finding a sperm donator and receiving medical treatment illegally or

naturally conceiving without a marriage certificate. Although the former is still prohibited by law, local regulations have gradually tolerated the latter (natural conception).

China's southwestern province, Sichuan, released a new rule in 2023 to drop the marriage certificate requirement for "birth registration" (Sichuan Health Commission, 2022). In China, "birth registration" is when people register their children (generally after pregnancy and before childbirth) with the authorities, which is considered a prerequisite for maternity benefits, medical welfare, and other allowances. In the above-mentioned Sichuan's document (Ibid.), it says that "maternal and child health institutions should provide timely fertility consultation, folic acid supplementation, pre-pregnancy check-ups, maternal health management, vaccinations, infant care, children's health management, and other relevant services to citizens with birth registration." The birth registration used to exclude unwed mothers and their children by asking for a marriage certificate. The new rule has granted equal rights regardless of mothers' marital status. According to the media, at least four provinces (Sichuan, Guangdong, Fujian, and Shaanxi) have relaxed marriage requirements on birth registration (Kong & Gong, 2023).

Meanwhile, in the most watched political occasion-- the Two Sessions (National People's Congress and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, which are held every March in Beijing to discuss political issues in the country), representatives from various industries have recently proposed granting reproductive rights to single women which has sparked heated discussions (Fu & Zhang, 2023; Chen, 2024). Against this background, it is unsurprising that births outside of marriage are no longer taboo, and some women have started to openly share their experiences of having children without marriage (Wang & Li, 2023). All of these undoubtedly benefited this research in recruiting respondents and performing fieldwork.

2.4 Social Media Rocking Traditional Norms

In Chinese tradition, childbirth is closely tied to marriage. The social norm of "marriage first, the childbearing second" has, for thousands of years, pushed anyone who wants children to get married. Nonmarital fertility, although it happens, is considered abnormal. The author has yet to find accurate statistics from the government on births outside of marriage, which is probably because it used to be a taboo that people avoided talking about or lied to cover; however, Chinese scholars (Yu J., 2023; Song & Zheng, 2023) estimated the proportion of births outside marriage to be around 10%, higher than Japan's 2.4% and South Korea's 2.5% (OECD, 2022), while far below

the average proportion of 42% among OECD countries (Ibid.). It can be said that the mainstream in China believes that marriage is a prerequisite for having children.

Nevertheless, on social platforms, people still see increasing amounts of information that goes against the mainstream. For example, Douyin (a Chinese equivalent of TikTok) and Weibo (a Chinese equivalent of X/Twitter) are popular platforms where births outside marriage are discussed. During the interviews, four interviewees mentioned that they knew a Douyin celebrity named “Ye Haiyang” (@叶海洋<迪仕艾普>, n.d.), who went to the U.S. and used a sperm bank to have her first daughter in 2017, the second daughter in 2022, and now is expecting her third baby. By sharing her daily life as a single mother by choice, her business, and her experience with medical treatment, she has over 8 million followers. On Weibo, the topic of birth outside marriage usually manifests as related discussion topics marked with # and trending occasionally. The discussion #女性为什么会选择独自生养孩子 (why do women choose to have children alone) # has 31 million views and more than 6000 posts and comments (Weibo, 2024). Other online discussions include topics such as #非婚生育 (illegitimate childbirth)# (Weibo, 2023) and #未婚女性不能使用精子库供精去父留子 (unmarried women cannot use sperm banks to have children)# (Weibo, 2024).

The extent to which these new trends reflect women’s life choices remains to be verified. Still, it has revealed that many people are exposed to new family views. They may have started to think about the possibility of women having children on their own, not because of an unfortunate divorce or relationship breakdown, but because they choose to do so.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter briefly surveys previous research on single mothers by choice in the West and China. Western research has been abundant and systematic, covering a wide range of sub-themes, such as motivations of middle-aged women planning to be solo mothers and cross-border reproductive treatment. In contrast, Chinese research on single mothers by choice is still emerging, with findings and outcomes scattered in research on women's fertility intention, single-mother families, and LGBTQ groups' childrearing. Building on this comprehensive understanding of previous studies, the researcher's study is poised to contribute significantly to this field. It is a pioneering field survey in China on the attitudes and decision-making of single women to become solo mothers, promising to lay the foundation for subsequent in-depth research.

3.1 Solo Mothers by Choice in Western Literature

As mentioned before, births outside marriage, which means “the mother's marital status at the time of birth is other than married” (OECD, 2022), are common phenomena in many countries. Over 50% of children are born outside marriage in thirteen European countries, including Belgium, Denmark, France, and Sweden (*ibid.*). The OECD average number of births outside marriage is 41.9% and 46.1% in Finland (*ibid.*). Those women who choose single parenthood and have children through donor insemination are distinguished from traditional single mothers and are often referred to as “single mothers by choice” or “solo mothers” (Golombok, 2017). Western research on this topic involves multiple disciplines and various angles, from people's views to women's motivations and characters, from how single-mother families work to donor-conceived children's well-being. Next, the author will select several aspects that inspired her most to give a brief overview.

First, a generally positive attitude towards single women and lesbian couples using ART to have babies was reported among the public in six European countries (Fauser et al., 2019) and women aged 30-39 in Sweden (Wennberg et al., 2016). Both were large-scale quantitative surveys. Researchers in Germany found that women's attitudes toward using ART were “less affected by socio-demographic characteristics but rather by cultural factors” through comparison research on migrant minorities and non-migrants (Haug & Milewski, 2018).

Second, previous research found that women who choose single motherhood by choice are relatively well-educated (Volgsten & Schmidt, 2021; Hertz R., 2023), financially and socially stable (*ibid.*), and at an older age when receiving treatment, compared with cohabiting women (Salomon et al., 2015; Balcells et al., 2021). Single motherhood was not their first choice (Frederiksen et al.,

2011; Salomon et al., 2015; Steenberg et al., 2024), but a “ticking biological clock” may speed up the decision (Birch Petersen et al., 2015; Volgsten & Schmidt, 2021). Thirty-three was considered ideal for having the first child (Birch Petersen et al., 2015), and they hoped to find a partner in the future (Volgsten & Schmidt, 2021; Salomon et al., 2015; Hertz R., 2023).

Third, women crossing borders for reproductive treatment is a phenomenon that has been systematically studied (Bergmann, 2011a, 2011b; Hoof et al., 2015; Gürtin & Inhorn, 2011; Salama et al., 2018) and is often referred to as “fertility tourism,” “cross-border reproductive care (CBRC),” or “reproductive travel.” Gürtin and Inhorn (2011) categorized four reasons why people travel to another country to have babies as “legal and religious prohibitions,” “resource considerations,” “quality and safety concerns,” and “personal preferences.” Almost simultaneously with the flow of people, there were sperm and gamete flow from one country to another. For example, Denmark is famous for its abundant donations for financial reward and altruism (Bay et al., 2014) and sperm exported to other countries like Italy, Sweden, and the UK (Hertz et al., 2016; Salama et al., 2018). People also went to Spain and the Czech Republic for better eggs (Bergmann, 2011b; Madero et al., 2017; Salama et al., 2018). Meanwhile, the research discovered that single women and same-sex couples were at a disadvantage in accessing medical treatment both in the European country Portugal (Baía et al., 2021) and in the United States (Johnson, 2012). Therefore, it is suggested to implement communication campaigns and surveillance systems to improve equity in treatment (Baía et al., 2021).

In addition, growing research focuses on differences and similarities between solo motherhood families and two-parent families, gamete donation families (including donor insemination and egg donation), and natural conception families. A longitudinal study showed heterosexual solo-mother families had no difference in parenting quality (Golombok et al., 2016), child psychological adjustment (ibid.), mother’s mental health (Golombok et al., 2021), mother-child relationships (ibid.), and children’s emotional and behavioral problems (ibid.) compared with partnered heterosexual mothers. Surprisingly, some advantages were discovered, such as no marital conflict in solo mother families (Golombok, 2017), a more positive mother-child relationship in gamete donation families compared to natural conception families (Golombok et al., 2004), fewer economic hardships and mental problems for single mothers by choice compared with single mothers resulting from divorce or breakups (Golombok, 2017), and higher personal growth for the single mothers by choice (Chasson & Taubman-Ben-Ari, 2021). Still, differences were discovered among donor insemination (DI) families; solo mothers showed “lower levels of mother-child interaction and lower levels of sensitivity toward their infant” compared with married ones (Murray

& Golombok, 2005). A more challenging test may come when the child grows up — how to handle the situation of an unknown father (not just an absent father, but the biological father’s identity is unknown). A qualitative study conducted in Israel (Weissenberg & Landau, 2012) pointed out that all children participating in the study expressed curiosity and the eagerness of a father. Besides, the research (Golombok et al., 2016) suggested that as children reach puberty, the desire for a biological father may cause challenges to the family.

3.2 Relevant Chinese Research

Chinese research on this topic is relatively few and scattered. As mentioned earlier, births outside of marriage account for only about 10% of all births (Yu J., 2023; Song & Zheng, 2023), let alone single mothers by choice. Besides, since it is illegal for single women to use ART to have babies, people tend to keep it secret when they receive treatment domestically or abroad. As a result, there are not many qualitative and quantitative studies targeting single mothers by choice. However, when expanding the topic to related areas, such as single women’s reproductive rights, women’s fertility intentions, non-marital births, single mothers, and marriage models, the author found sufficient and inspiring literature to enlighten this research.

Firstly, Chinese legal scholars have intensely debated “single women’s reproductive rights,” including definitions, legal provisions, judicial practices, and legislative suggestions. Some scholars emphasize that reproductive rights are part of human rights that people are born with, regardless of marital status, and thus, they call for legislative adjustments (Yang & Chen, 2022; Yu J., 2021; Gao X., 2022). Some earlier research reckoned that under the Chinese legal framework, reproductive rights were bound to marriage and shared by both husband and wife, even though the wife had priority in decision-making. It was, therefore, inappropriate to grant single women reproductive rights (Rui, 2003; Tang Q., 2002). They also argued that the law should consider intergenerational equality and prioritize children’s well-being instead of single women’s rights (Tang Q., 2002). Besides, scholars who support single women’s reproductive rights still expressed concerns that it might trigger surrogacy and egg commercialization, leading to the exploitation of socially and economically vulnerable women (Wang & Wang, 2021).

Medical studies have discussed this topic from the perspective of single women’s fertility preservation. In general, women in their mid-30s may have declining fecundity issues (Baird et al., 2005), and pregnancy among women over 40 is more associated with diseases for the mother and the child (ibid.). Chinese scholars generally have similar judgments and believe that allowing

women to freeze their eggs at the optimal fertile age reduces the health risks for both the mother and the child (Yu H., 2021; Yang et al., 2022). The author agrees that the window period for single women to have babies is short and irreversible. Both individuals and society cannot afford the consequences of losing it.

Third, many studies focus on fertility intentions in China. Zhuang, Jiang, and Li (2020) analyzed the fertility intention of Chinese women, including married and unmarried ones, based on data from the National Fertility Survey 2017 and revealed age, the intended number of children, the number of children women already have, and regional differences impacting people's fertility intention. Other research (Xiang et al., 2023) found that region, educational level, psychological factors, income, political status, and medical insurance were important. Su-Russell and Sanner (2022) also explored the difference in decision-making between first and second childbearing. When they had a second child, mothers were reported to be more deliberative, valuing the benefits of siblinghood and hoping two children share the responsibility of elderly care in the future. Peng (2019) studied family negotiation on having a second child in urban families and pointed out that childrearing-related concerns (e.g., previous experiences, family collaboration, labor division, and forecasts of costs), economic status, and family members' well-being together shaped the decision. Regarding the fertility intention for the third child, Ning et al. (2022) reported influential factors such as the instrumental values of children (e.g., having siblings benefiting children's mental health), policy support, and perceived risks (e.g., fertility risk and childbearing burden). Another research (Zhang et al., 2021) discovered the top positive factor as "a subjective norm of having both son and daughter" and the negative one as "being busy at work." Age, gender, education level, urban or rural residence, and family income were reported to impact people's desire for a third child (ibid.).

Fourth, the topic of single mothers by choice has attracted Chinese academia as a new family type (Gao & Wei, 2022; Wang X., 2017) under the research on changes in Chinese marriage; however, because this group is small, research does not always distinguish them from the traditional single mothers resulting from divorce or breakups. The topic scatters in marriage and family studies (Wang X., 2017), single mother research (Gao & Wei, 2022; Zhao & Basnyat, 2018; Gao B., 2021), and investigations on childrearing in same-sex families (Wei, 2016; Wei & Gao, 2020). In terms of birth outside marriage, Li (2020) indicated that 66.81% of unwed pregnancies ended up giving birth within marriage with the child's father or someone else, and 32.24% left with unmarried births. However, 30% of these unwed mothers married before the child was one year old. Therefore, she pointed out that although the order is "unconventional," people did not break the close tie of

“marriage - childbirth.” Research also observed (Gao B., 2021) that unwed mothers kept their children instead of abortion for reasons such as religion, a mother’s love, being able to financially independent childrearing, and unexpected deception by men during decision-making. For some well-educated and high-income women, the choice was made because of a resistance to traditional gender roles and family models, with the support of their original families (Gao & Wei, 2022).

Finally, it may be concluded that Chinese research on single mothers by choice is relatively rare compared with Western academia. Even though some research touches on this topic, it is mixed with issues in other research areas and disciplines. Undoubtedly, researchers need to study this topic academically and systematically, as Western research has been doing all these years. This research, which focuses on attitude and influential factors study, is a start in this area. As expected, the field survey conducted in Chengdu, China, with in-depth interviews with 17 respondents, found the answer to the question —what factors influence Chinese women’s decision-making about birth outside of marriage?

3.3 Terms in the Thesis

Regarding “women choosing to have children without marriage,” there are no unified Chinese terms for this behavior and its outcome, namely children born in this situation. People use different words in daily life depending on whether they want to emphasize the mother's unmarried status without judgment or to show disapproval of this behavior. For the convenience of research, the author has selected some terms that best fit the context and will briefly introduce them below.

3.3.1 Birth Outside of Marriage

When a woman gives birth to a baby without being legally married, there are two Chinese words: “wei hun sheng yu (未婚生育),” meaning unmarried/unwed birth, and “fei hun sheng yu (非婚生育),” meaning illegitimate birth. “Unmarried or unwed” emphasizes the mother’s marital status. Traditionally, it is associated with a failed marriage attempt (e.g., a relationship breakup or a disappeared boyfriend). “Illegitimate” often stresses that this behavior conflicts with the law or regulations. For example, the mother is unmarried, while the father is married to someone else.

However, there is no clear and unified distinction between the two definitions. Sometimes they are differentiated, and sometimes they are not. Besides, when used in a daily conversation,

these two expressions often connote slight disapproval because they result from wrong actions that people are not supposed to do. Therefore, neither of the two Chinese expressions is appropriate for neutral research. When conducting fieldwork in Chinese, the author meticulously adopted the Chinese expression “dan shen sheng yu (单身生育),” which is literally translated as being single at the time of birth, to indicate that the mother was legally unmarried when the birth occurred, without caring if the reason was an irresponsible boyfriend, an entanglement with a married man, or medical insemination. This choice was also intended to reduce the pressure on respondents to participate in the study and avoid associating the topic with legal or ethical violations.

When discussing births outside of marriage in English, the term “births outside of marriage” from the OECD family database is adopted. It means “births to mothers whose legal marital status at the time of the birth is other than married,” which is precisely what the author wants to express by using the Chinese expression “dan shen sheng yu.” The research only focuses on the fact that mothers are not legally married when birth happens without any intention of judging this behavior on legal or moral grounds.

3.3.2 “Solo Mothers” and “Solo Childrearing”

Two expressions in Chinese describe the situation when a woman raises her children without a husband: “wei hun mama (未婚妈妈)” means unwed/unmarried mothers; “dan qin mama (单亲妈妈)” refers to single mothers who are divorced or widowed. Most of the time, “single mothers” refers to all women who raise their children alone, regardless of their marital history. Because unwed mothers who give birth without a marriage certificate have been stigmatized for a long time, people nowadays are trying to be considerate and avoid moral judgment by not distinguishing them. Still, neither expression is suitable to be adopted in this study. Because they only emphasize the fact that “women raise children alone” and do not clarify that “it is their own choice.”

In recent years, for research and news cover, single mothers by choice are sometimes distinguished as “zhu dong xing dan qin mama (主动型单身妈妈),” emphasizing that they choose to be single mothers, not forced to be because of divorce, widowhood, or a failed marriage attempt. The author, as a native Chinese speaker, thinks this term’s meaning is consistent with the terms “single mothers by choice” and “solo mothers” used in Western literature mentioned above. Inspired by this comparison, in this thesis, “solo mothers” and “single mothers by choice” are adopted to describe women who choose to have babies without marriage.

Similarly, the terms “solo childrearing/parenting” and “independent childrearing/parenting” are used when discussing the parenting of solo mothers to emphasize the fact of “no support from the father’s side.” It is different from traditional single motherhood situations where the father’s identity is known, and the father provides varying degrees of childcare support, financially and emotionally.

4 METHODOLOGY

This chapter introduces the selection of research methods, the data collection process, and ethical issues. The author explains the rationality of using grounded theory, the advantages of using in-depth interviews to collect data, why Chengdu became the optimal location for fieldwork, how to prepare for interviews (e.g., designing interview questions and verifying them and openly recruiting respondents), and data collection process and results.

4.1 The Choice of Grounded Theory

Previous research performed large-scale quantitative surveys to study people's attitudes toward single women using ART to become mothers (Fauser et al., 2019; Wennberg et al., 2016), the social and demographic characteristics of solo mothers (Salomon et al., 2015) and factors that influence women's views about the usage of ART (Haug & Milewski, 2018). The sample number in one survey could be as large as over 6,000, covering six countries: France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden, and the UK (Fauser et al., 2019). Research by Chinese scholars on fertility intentions and influential factors detection also indicated large-scale, quantitative surveys and nationwide teamwork (Ning et al., 2022; Xiang et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2021). However, considering the limited time, money, and energy of a master's student, such large-scale quantitative surveys are overambitious. Secondly, this study aims to discover influencing factors as much as possible and briefly explain how they influence women's decision-making. The researcher had no intention to exhaust all influential factors and generalize an importance ranking of those factors. Third, the validity of qualitative research has been verified in the studies on unwed and single mothers. Researchers successfully conducted qualitative interviews to find out why unwed mothers choose to keep their children after a failed marriage attempt (Gao B., 2021), why women became single mothers (Gao & Wei, 2022), and how they deal with solo parenting (*ibid.*). In addition, the researcher herself once worked as a journalist in China and has years of interview experience, so qualitative in-depth interviews seem more reasonable as a data collection method.

Next, as mentioned above, this topic has yet to be thoroughly studied in China, so there is little theoretical framework in this area. This research is significant precisely because it could be one of the first studies to consider single mothers by choice as an independent and separate topic. This makes grounded theory, a method known as theory generation and "opening a new area for sociological inquiry," the perfect choice (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 38). Furthermore, the first-hand data would be words, opinions, and attitudes rather than numbers, percentages, or clear data

conclusions. Sometimes, respondents might even struggle to give a clear answer to many questions of approval or disapproval, right or wrong. The author herself was expected to capture and extract explicit and implicit meanings, analyze and categorize them systematically, and see what core themes emerged from those categories. Conclusions cannot be directly obtained from the data but must emerge from data analysis through the researcher's comparison, categorization, refinement, and summarization. It is precisely the characteristics of grounded theory— “most hypotheses and concepts not only come from the data but are systematically worked out in relation to the data during the course of the research” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 6).

4.2 Fieldwork Preparation

As noted, the researcher had extensive media experience and was confident in conducting interviews. However, as a master's student in Finland, her fieldwork in China was confined to July and August 2023 due to her personal study plan. Given the challenge of selecting qualified respondents and arranging interviews within this limited timeframe, she adopted a strategic approach. Before the formal interviews, she meticulously prepared, aiming to streamline the process, identify potential pitfalls, and optimize time. This involved carefully selecting the interview location, forming questions and a pilot test, and public recruitment, all of which will be explained below.

4.2.1 Location

For three reasons, Chengdu, the capital city of Sichuan province, was chosen as the fieldwork location. First, as mentioned in the introduction, Sichuan Province recently dropped restrictions on unmarried people having their children registered (Sichuan Health Commission, 2022). Although it does not necessarily lead to more women choosing to be solo mothers, we can infer that the number of births outside of marriage must have been impressive enough that the local government felt it necessary to adjust the policy. The more people are exposed to this phenomenon, the more comfortable they feel talking about it, and the easier it is to find interviewees. Second, the government's tolerance and open-mindedness assure people that participating in this research is not politically sensitive, leading to further stress relief for respondents. Third, Chengdu, populated by 30 million people, has been ranked as the leading new first-tier city in the mainland in terms of strength and attractiveness (CBN, 2023), only behind Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen. Its slow-paced and inclusive lifestyle has attracted an abundant young generation with

broad-minded thinking. It is also where the researcher worked and lived for 12 years. Personal networks and broad-mindedness were the keys to recruiting qualified respondents and building rapport for unconventional research topics such as births outside marriage.

4.2.2 Pilot Test

Before going into the field, the researcher planned a semi-structured interview and formulated ten questions, referring to four aspects: demographic data, perception of birth outside marriage, how to make the decision, and concerns about policies and social stigma. Then, a pilot test was conducted with two friends in May 2023. The first interview was an impromptu Q&A style, with Wang, a 36-year-old HR manager from a private company. The second was scheduled in a friend-chat style with Yang, a 35-year-old senior employee of a state-owned enterprise. Both were online interviews.

The pilot turned out to be helpful. First, some questions needed to be modified for being too blunt and offensive. Next, it proved that the Q&A style was rigid and overformal. The interviewee felt obliged to answer but was not motivated to offer more. Besides, for some questions, the interviewee subconsciously tried to offer the “correct answer” that she assumed the researcher would like. On the other hand, the friend-chat style triggered the second interviewee’s desire to share and gossip. She took the initiative and provided everything she knew related to the topic. More importantly, being different or contradictory with the researcher did not hinder her expression because “offering something new and different” was the exciting part of gossip. Eventually, the data collected from the second interview was more sufficient than expected. In addition, the pilot test also showed the importance of the interviewee’s adequate consideration before the formal interview. Thinking in advance helped the interviewee clarify her key points and avoid scattered and unfocused answers.

Based on the feedback, the researcher formulated 20 questions and categorized them into four broad categories: Personal information, including demographic data and love life; the general perception of marriage, fertility intention, and birth outside marriage; decision-making about births outside of marriage, and opinions on Sichuan’s policy relaxation (Appendix 1). The semi-structured interview was turned into a focused one with a friend-chat style. The researcher kept the questions in mind during the interview but did not ask them in order. Instead, she adjusted, reduced, or added some questions according to the interview flow and kept the discussion around the topic.

4.2.3 Public Recruitment

Recruiting qualified respondents is the prerequisite for obtaining high-quality data. In today's China, recruiting online and then holding offline meetings if both sides agree is a common and efficient method of finding the people you need. WeChat, which has over 1.3 billion monthly active users (Tencent, 2024), is generally considered a Chinese equivalent of WhatsApp and the most used online communication platform. People build their social lives and maintain friendships through WeChat. One can also create a personal WeChat public account and publish articles or videos to attract followers. Fortunately, the researcher, as a native Chinese, owns an account with 300 followers and an active WeChat social life with 1,200 friends. These people were the first readers of the public recruitment.

A simple public recruitment was published on the researcher's WeChat account on July 11, 2023, and people started sharing and forwarding it to friends and acquaintances. In the recruitment, the researcher explained the recruiting standards, questions to be discussed, personal information to be collected, how to participate in activities, etc. It was a big success. The number of respondents exceeded the highest expectations of 15 and reached 17. They all volunteered and registered within one week, and no one was uncooperative during the whole process or ever considered quitting in the coming process.

Once they signed up, an online one-on-one chat was scheduled, and the researcher further introduced herself, the research plan, data storage methods, possible risks, and exit policies. Next, both parties decided on the exact time and place for the formal interview.

4.3 Ethical Statement

The researcher collected, processed, and stored all data following the University's research data management guide. Since interviews in the research inevitably involved respondents' personal data, the researcher collected and processed the data under the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and obtained paper consent to process their data from all respondents. Before the interview, each interviewee read and signed three documents: 1. *The Participant Information Sheet* introduced how the research would proceed, possible risks, and how people participated and withdrew; 2. *The Data Management Plan* and *Privacy Notice* together explained what and how data would be collected, processed, and stored and specified the data controller. 3. *The Informed Consent Form for Participants* summarized what participants would face by attending this research and how

their identity would be shown in the thesis. All documents are bilingual in Chinese and English. The interviewees read them first, and then the researcher explained them in detail.

Throughout the interview, the researcher frankly informed the interviewees of her identity as a researcher, a master's student, and a single Chinese woman with both itches and hesitation about being a solo mother. The researcher fully understands that this identity helped her explore the research topic profoundly and comprehensively. It made it easier for her to build rapport with the interviewees and obtain more reliable data in fieldwork. However, it also limited her thinking by unconsciously causing her to feel sympathy, show unconditional support, and be reluctant to argue with respondents even though some of their views might be irrational and arbitrary. Meanwhile, feeling the researcher was on their side perhaps made respondents overly optimistic about their plans to be solo mothers and ignored potential inhibitors.

The researcher adopted two methods during the interviews to minimize her personal influence and keep the data collection neutral and fruitful. First, asking the researcher not to express opinions in a friends-chat interview is unrealistic. Thus, trying to make the interviewees uninfluenced by the researcher's idea seems more reasonable. Therefore, the researcher tried to create a relaxing atmosphere, reduce the interviewees' pressure of "I need to provide the right answer," and make them feel free to say whatever they wanted. For example, interviews were conducted where interviewees feel comfortable, including coffee shops, tea houses, parks, or even the interviewee's home. Every interview started with small talk. After informing the interviewees of the recording device, the researcher hid it behind books, vases, or bags. The purpose was to make interviewees forget about the "interview" and strengthen the feeling of "chatting with a friend." As we learned from the pilot test, when people gossip, they are not afraid of sharing different ideas. Second, the researcher borrowed her previous journalist experience to improve data reliability, validity, and density. For instance, asking follow-up questions and repeating similar questions twice or thrice from different angles to cross-validate respondents' answers.

4.4 Data Collection

Qualitative in-depth interviews were performed to document Chinese women's perceptions of birth outside of marriage, especially to find the influential factors in decision-making. The researcher conducted seventeen one-on-one interviews in Chengdu from July 13 to August 22, 2023. Fifteen were in Mandarin Chinese, and two were in Sichuan dialect. The shortest interview lasted 41 minutes, and the longest was an hour and 56 minutes. All were audio recorded and transcribed. The researcher also took field notes and referred to digital ethnography (e.g., Checking people's daily posts, online chat about the research progress, and sharing each other's life and work.) to understand respondents better. In closing, a total of 300,000 words of Chinese transcription were collected, organized, and reviewed.

The researcher initially planned a supplementary interview in case the first one failed in data collection. However, the respondents were unexpectedly open-minded and talkative, with almost no reservations about their income, life trajectories, relationships, fertility intentions and attitudes, and even family issues. After completing the first round of data analysis, the researcher realized that the categories generated from the data were almost saturated; the newly generated categories either had a twin category that appeared before or deviated from the theme. Based on Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 73), additional data collection and supplementary interviews were unnecessary.

What follows is an overview of the data. The 17 respondents, ranging from 27 to 40 years old, belonged to four different marital groups: seven were single, two were in a relationship, three were divorced (one with a child, two without children), and five were married (two have children and three no children). Fifteen own properties in Chengdu, individually or jointly with their partners. Nine are the only daughters of their parents, and eight have siblings. Three claimed an annual after-tax income equaled or slightly below 100,000 RMB (about 12,840 euros, calculated on 1 euro = 7.79 yuan in RMB, same below). Others' income (except for one student without a permanent income) was over 100,000 RMB. Since the average salary (before tax) of urban employees is 96,413 RMB per year (Chengdu Municipal Statistics Bureau, 2023), it can be deduced that the economic status of the 16 employed respondents is above the average. Regarding educational background, all have a college degree or above. Considering that 25.58% of Chengdu's population has a college degree or above (ibid., 2021), all respondents undoubtedly belong to a well-educated group. To sum up, the features of the 17 interviewees are: around 30 years old or above, well-educated, financially above the average level, half being the only child, 70% are legally unmarried, and 30% have overseas living experience (See Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic Data of Respondents

Name	Age	Marital status	Only-child or not	Profession or industry	Income (RMB per year)	Educational background	Property in Chengdu	Overseas experience
Hui	38	Divorced, no children	No	Teacher/ tutor	≤100,000	Master	Yes	Yes, Singapore
Jiao Yan	28	Single	Yes	E-commerce	≤100,000	Bachelor	Yes	No
Hailie	29	In a relationship	No	Fashion	200,000-300,000	Bachelor	Yes	Yes, the U.S.
Winnie	28	Married, no children	No	Student	-----	Master's student	Yes	No
Renee	31	Divorced, no children	No	Lawyer	300,000-400,000	Bachelor	Yes	No
Fiona	38	Single	No	Civil servant	100,000-200,000	Bachelor	Yes	No
Fu	37	Married, no children	Yes	State-owned enterprise	100,000-200,000	Master's student (part-time)	Yes	No
Jane	36	Single	Yes	Public school teacher	100,000-200,000	Master	Yes	No
Rachel	27	Single	No	Foreign company	100,000-200,000	Master	No, in planning	No
Luna	30	Single	Yes	Private company	≤100,000	Bachelor	No, living with parents	No
Jia	40	Divorced, one daughter	Yes	State-owned enterprise	200,000-300,000	Bachelor	Yes	No
Huang	29	Married, no children	No	State-owned enterprise	100,000-200,000	Bachelor	Yes	No
Evan	32	Single	No	State-owned enterprise	100,000-200,000	College degree	Yes	No
Alice	39	Married, one daughter	Yes	Entrepreneur	200,000-300,000	Bachelor	Yes	No
Hannah	31	In a relationship	Yes	Artist, freelance	200,000-300,000	Bachelor	Yes	Yes, Canada and the U.S.
Danielle	37	Single	Yes	Civil servant	100,000-200,000	Master	Yes	Yes, Japan
Min	39	Married, two daughters	Yes	State-owned enterprise	200,000-300,000	Master	Yes	Yes, the U.K.

1. All are pseudonyms, and all were living in Chengdu then.

2. The respondent estimated her income. Only personal income was counted. Partner's income and family wealth were excluded.

3. Overseas experience refers to studying, working, or living outside mainland China for about one year or more. Short-term travel, business trips, exchange student experiences, etc., are not included.

5 DATA ANALYSIS

This chapter offers a comprehensive and clear overview of the data processing and analysis methods. Based on grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1994; Strauss, 2010; Corbin & Strauss, 2008), the entire process, involving coding, writing memos, and analysis, is summarized as open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The analysis steps are guided by examples of processes from Strauss (2010, Chapters 4, 8, and 9) and Corbin and Strauss (2008, Chapters 8-11).

Starting from open coding, the researcher read and familiarized herself with transcripts, analyzed sentence by sentence, and ensured she correctly understood the meaning and the subtext. The primary analysis strategies used (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, pp. 65-86) were questioning (e.g., what were the practical difficulties here? How did her friend's unhappy story impact her?), continuous comparison (e.g., Did the "economic pressure" here mean the same as "children bring burden" minutes ago?) and drawing upon personal experience. Regarding personal experience, it meant that the researcher and the interviewees were stuck in the same predicament (single, a "leftover woman," considering being a solo mother but full of doubts, and fully aware of Chinese family tradition and social norms), all of which were helpful during data analysis. In-vivo codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 82) were widely used to retain respondents' original expression, and the researcher created some codes by summarizing raw data properties when necessary. Besides, the researcher's field observational notes and online chat records with interviewees worked as references.

At this stage, more than 600 open codes were generated. Some examples were: "I am an only child, and I need blood ties," "Marriage or motherhood is not on the to-do list," "Keeping a cat (as a company) is satisfying," "You cannot trust your child to a nanny," "After divorce, still longing for children but no interest for marriage," "Few child-friendly jobs," "I cannot imagine the situation when a single mother loses her job," "My father wants me to carry blood tie and the family name," "A celebrity shares her surrogate daughters, and her life looks nice."

Next is the theme analysis, in principle, with axial coding first and selective coding second. However, the researcher constantly reviewed, adjusted, and modified the codes and classification, so there were no strict time boundaries in advancing these two steps. That is the reason they are introduced here together. First, all codes were conceptually clustered into broad categories based on the complex and multidimensional relations (e.g., interactions, conditions, consequences, affiliations, etc.) among phenomena and categories (Strauss, 2010, pp.64-75). Some codes were classified directly according to the keywords. For instance, the code

“financial pressure accounts for at least 50% of the reasons for me” obviously belonged to the category of childrearing burden. For some codes, the implicit meaning and context of speaking determined which category they most belonged to. The researcher kept checking the original interview transcript to determine the categories of codes. For instance, the code “the nanny market is a whole of issues; child abuse happens a lot” seemed to demand regulations. However, the researcher returned to the context and found that the interviewee mentioned the problem to prove her point: “Childrearing is overwhelming because no one can help with children.” Therefore, although it can further analyze what the government could do to improve childcare support, the code should first be categorized as “the non-capital investment in childrearing.” Second, during selective coding, the analysis process was similar, except that the categories generated in the previous stage were further classed into broader and more abstract clusters by continually iterating, examining, integrating, and adjusting the connection between these categories and subcategories.

Researchers gradually discovered that all categories (factors) could be further clustered based on whether their emergence was related to the respondent’s marital status. Some were only related to unmarried women, some were influential whether women were married or single, while the rest of the factors’ relationship with marital status was unclear and required further research.

5.1 Results

Eleven factors belonging to three types were found to answer the research question: What factors influence Chinese women’s decision-making about birth outside marriage? Unmarried status-related factors are **operational concerns of ART, social stigma, and donor-conceived child well-being**. Marital status-free factors are **childrearing burden, fertility intention, motherhood penalty, maternity risk, and biological clock**. Three other factors influence people’s decision-making, but the connection with marital status is unclear. These factors are **marriage perception, the influence of the original family, and affordable substitutes**.

Table 2 below briefly illustrates these factors. Each file represents one respondent, and the number of references means how many times the code/topic was mentioned. For example, when the file is 17, all 17 respondents mentioned the code/topic. For 208 references, it means the code/topic was mentioned together 208 times by all respondents. After Table 2, the author explains how these factors influence women’s decision-making.

Table 2: Codes Data

Each file represents one respondent, and the number of references means how many times the code/topic was mentioned.

The original data is from the NVivo software used by the researcher for coding. The author adjusted the order and some expressions to facilitate understanding.

Codes (originally in Chinese and translated by the author)	Files	References
1. 养育负担 Childrearing Burden	17	208
养育成本高，生育意愿低 The high cost of raising children leads to people not wanting children	1	1
单身意味着养育负担集于一人，风险大 Being a solo mother means taking all responsibilities alone, and that is risky	8	13
无形的投入，情感，责任等 Intangible investment (love, emotions, responsibilities, etc.)	16	129
有形的投入，金钱可以量化的 Financial investment	16	73
2. 生育意愿 Fertility Intention	17	123
喜欢或不喜欢孩子 Like or dislike children	13	41
在生育问题上和家人或伴侣有分歧 Family or partner's different ideas on fertility	2	2
提升生育意愿的因素 Factors that increase fertility intention	16	59
降低生育意愿的因素 Factors that reduce fertility intention	10	20
3. 婚姻观 Marriage Perception	17	147
不同程度的“丧偶式”育儿 Different levels of widowed parenting	6	15
传统婚育模式不适合我 Not the traditional marriage and childbearing material	3	5
倾向于“先结婚再生娃” Still prefer “marriage first, childbearing second.”	5	9
女性在婚姻中“失去自我” Women lose themselves and are buried in marriage	2	5
婚育捆绑，是否合理？ Is it right to tie up marriage and childbearing?	5	10
对亲密关系有顾虑 Have concerns about intimate relationships	4	7
对婚姻悲观：不期待，不信任，不想，不满意 Pessimistic about marriage: no expectations, no trust, no desire, dissatisfaction	11	45
期待婚姻（亲密关系），但找不到合适的 Want marriage or intimate relationships but cannot find the Mr. Right	10	32
生活压力大，很难经营亲密关系 Life is too stressful for people to maintain intimate relationships	1	1
4. 执行层面的考虑 Operational Concerns of ART	15	61
半单身生育半传统：搭伙/借精子/去父留子 Creative ways: cooperate with a sperm partner (e.g., gay friend) or break up the biological father after pregnancy	9	15

Codes (originally in Chinese and translated by the author)	Files	References
不了解单身生育的途径 Unaware of the approaches	1	1
国内精子库、冻卵等，合法的均不开放 Inaccessible sperm banks, egg-freezing technologies domestically	3	5
国内较成熟的灰色产业 Mainland gray industry	1	1
工作性质，出国不自由 Cannot travel abroad frequently because of work	1	2
担忧精子质量 Who can guarantee the sperm quality?	5	6
有人单身生育成功了，可见方法是有的 Some people have successfully done it, so there must be a way.	4	6
法律风险：一旦出事儿，维权难度大 Legal risks: Once something goes wrong, it will be challenging to protect my rights	3	3
海外单身生育（个人或者借助机构） Overseas institutions or agencies	6	18
海外精子库门槛高且有弊端 Overseas sperm banks: high threshold and drawbacks	2	4
5.社会道德压力 Social Stigma	16	66
大城市还行，社会舆论的城乡差异 Social stigma level is different between urban and rural areas, and living in cities means less pressure	1	1
工作单位和社会，有流言蜚语 People gossip	5	8
比较亲近的朋友圈子 The open-mindedness of close friends	8	9
海外生活的影响 The impact of studying and living abroad	2	3
父母会怎么想 What would my parents think?	9	26
自身是否在意外界眼光和评价 Self-assessment: Do I care what others think?	5	7
还好，社会关系网的压力在老家 The pressure comes from relatives and acquaintances in my hometown, but I live in a city far away	1	2
道德压力，背离传统自己感到不安 Anxious about deviating from tradition	4	5
6.原生家庭 Influence From the Family of Origin	13	56
独生女 or 非独生女 An only daughter or not?	7	14
亲子关系不理想 Not having an ideal parent-child relationship with my parents	9	31
我是养父母带大的 Adoptive parents raised me	1	3
父母较开明 My parents are open-minded	4	8
7.是否有平替 Affordable Substitute	13	59
侄子侄女部分承担“子女”的功能 Nephews and nieces are like my "children"	2	3

Codes (originally in Chinese and translated by the author)	Files	References
养个猫就挺好的 Keeping a cat	2	2
好朋友的孩子给我“育儿体验” To gain "parenting experience" from friends' children	1	1
当老师，部分实现了我的育儿成就感 Being a teacher partially fulfills my parenting and educating accomplishment	1	2
考虑代孕 Surrogacy	1	1
考虑领养或资助 Adoption or sponsor poor children	10	50
8.女性生育生物钟 Biological Clock	6	9
不会因为时间紧迫而马上去生 The ticking biological clock cannot change my childbearing schedule	2	2
社会 push, 朋友觉得, 30 岁前不生“就不行了” Society and friends are urging you to have babies before 30 years old	1	1
科技可以推迟生育生物钟 New technologies can delay the biological clock	4	4
9.职业发展问题 Motherhood Penalty	12	28
育儿和事业冲突 Motherhood conflicts with my career	12	21
自己事业发展最重要 It is more important to advance my career	2	3
行业差异, 部分单位育儿友好 Some industries and companies are child-friendly	1	4
10.生育风险 Maternity Risk	10	25
产后抑郁等精神创伤 Postpartum depression and other trauma	3	3
女性身体损伤 Physical injury	6	10
我认为风险可控且收益大 Overall, the benefits overtake the risks	1	2
生育过程遭罪 Too much suffering during labor	3	3
11.孩子怎么想 Donor-conceived-child Well-being	10	30
以“孩子上户口”为例的事实上的、隐形的歧视 Concealable discrimination against the child, such as extra paperwork for household registration	1	1
孩子未必想被你生下来 The child may not want a solo mother family	3	6
孩子被霸凌怎么办-单身生育 or 领养都有这个问题 Will the child be bullied? Solo mothers and adoptive parents must consider it.	1	1
教育上“摸着石头过河” How to educate donor-conceive children? There is no precedent to refer to.	8	22

5.1.1 Operational Concerns About ART

As noted, three factors, namely operational concerns of ART, social stigma, and donor-conceived child well-being, are only associated with single women. From here on, the author will cover them one at a time. For women at the early stage of weighing the choice, the concern at hand is where and how to use medical-assisted technologies to have children against the background that the unmarried are legally forbidden in the mainland to access sperm banks, egg freezing, and other ARTs. In practice, they either choose the domestic gray industry and consciously ignore the possible legal violation or resort to overseas service.

Firstly, it is expensive, and the market is opaque and risky, domestically or overseas. Respondent Jane learned from a transnational agency that receiving treatment in Thailand would cost 135,000 RMB to 200,000 RMB (17,330 euros to 25,674 euros) and that it would be more expensive in America. A Weibo celebrity said she spent 138,000 RMB (@大掌柜妈妈, 2024) on her first sperm-conceived daughter, while the Douyin celebrity Ye Haiyang, told in an interview that she spent 33,000 US dollars in 2017 (GZDOC, 2019). Because the treatment usually needs to be tailored to the mother's physical condition, and the sperm source can be a black box, the final cost fluctuates accordingly. It is almost impossible for individuals to learn standard operating procedures and charges without supervision from national medical institutions. People rely on personal networks, information-collecting skills, and bargaining capabilities to choose services.

Secondly, since the process is not supervised under the public health system, defending participants' rights and getting legal compensation is challenging once something goes wrong. Problems may arise from sperm sources, medical procedures, and the disposal of gamete. Women felt they must be particularly cautious because they could not detect anything wrong until the baby was born, which leaves no room for redress. A baby is not a product. It cannot be returned to anyone under any circumstances, no matter whether you get the one you want. Women first worry about the quality of sperm, especially health issues. Fiona shared this concern:

If a sperm donor claims not to have any disease, is it possible that he is lying? Besides, an agency can replace the sperm you have paid with another one. What you use is not the one you have bought. (It can result from deliberately deceiving customers or accidental mistakes).

Apart from the disease from the donor, some women are concerned about the operating procedures of these agencies, such as illegally keeping gametes (sperm or egg). Respondent Renee, a lawyer in Chengdu, said she once handled a case in which a man sued the agency because they secretly stored his sperm after medical treatment.

Third, working women found it unrealistic to travel abroad for treatment; visa paperwork and limited holidays can be obstacles. It is even more problematic for some civil servants whose passports are held by their working unit and whose overseas travels need to be approved by a supervisor.

Nevertheless, people have creatively figured out some approaches that may work well in Chinese society. There are no unified patterns. Dating a guy and then breaking up after getting pregnant or faking a marriage with a gay friend can be two examples. If things go well, they are “killing three birds with one stone” —getting free sperm, giving the child a biological father, and avoiding social stigma. Danielle once had a serious discussion with a gay friend about reproductive cooperation:

We were close classmates, and I was probably the first person he came out to back then. A couple of months ago, I was really depressed. I sent him a message asking if we could cooperate to have a child. We could reach an agreement that he would provide the sperm, and I would take full responsibility for raising the child. No emotional or financial support would be asked from him.

He thought about it and turned me down because he did not want to risk our friendship. We were too close to consider it purely business. He and his partner tend to consider surrogacy, no emotional entanglements, just money and baby delivery.

Fu said a friend of hers had a similar plan of giving the child a socially recognized father, even though her first choice was adoption, not giving birth by herself:

She is divorced and single. She says that when she wants to adopt or have a baby, she will pay someone to apply for a marriage certificate and use it to consolidate the legitimate identity of the child. Once all the paperwork for adoption is done, divorce comes.

Readers may be able to judge from the above description that those creative ways depend heavily on a personal network, negotiation, and luck. Compared with sperm banks, their advantages are low cost and providing a biological father’s identity. However, it also carries

unknown risks, meaning subsequent entanglements and conflicts with the biological father and his family cannot be entirely avoided, leaving issues for the mother and the child in the future. This concern is not groundless. Hertz R. (2023) also found some American solo mothers with children fathered by known donors disturbed by the increasingly perplexed connections with the biological father and his family as the children grow up and the father's life changes. This problem may become more prominent in Chinese society, which attaches great importance to blood inheritance and filial piety; no matter how the mother negotiates with the biological father or sperm donor, the lifelong father-child entanglement based on kinship and blood cannot be prevented.

5.1.2 Social Stigma

As mentioned in Chapter 3, birth outside marriage (including natural pregnancy and donor conception) accounts for 10% and is a minority phenomenon in China. Let alone using ARTs to have babies. Donor-conceived children are considered “different” and “non-traditional,” meaning visible and invisible discrimination cannot be avoided. It is an issue that the mother and child must deal with for their whole life.

For the mothers, pressure may come from four sources: themselves, their parents, close friends, and the workplace. Four interviewees expressed similar views regarding pressure from oneself: having a mother and father seems right and better for children's education, the stress of becoming a solo mother may come from concerns about the consequences of violating social norms and guilt about the child's life being affected. Evan, who considers herself not to care much about others' views, still felt unimaginable pressure:

From pregnancy to childbirth, I would face much pressure from my colleagues and friends in a state-owned enterprise. Since my entire social circle is in Chengdu, people would question me on various occasions, whether well-intentioned, out of curiosity, or malicious.

Also, although “not having a father” does not affect the child's actual welfare nowadays, I still need to explain why my child does not have a father on many occasions and paperwork. For instance, household registration and signing up for kindergarten. It is very humiliating.

Fiona explained this pressure from the perspective of affecting the child's future:

I think Chinese culture emphasizes gender roles and the different characteristics of boys and girls, what each gender should be like, and what advantages and disadvantages each has. When observing my nephew's upbringing, I feel it is essential to have a mother and a father to give the child a comprehensive education from female and male perspectives. The child can learn the strengths and weaknesses of both men and women. If I raised a child alone, I would not have the confidence to teach him/her about the personalities and strengths of both genders. I would worry that something would be missing in my child's personality and character.

Second, parents' attitude is another source of stress. However, it cannot be generalized as big or small, positive or negative, because it is closely related to the parents' personality, open-mindedness, and parent-child relationships. Among only 17 sample respondents, we found parents with entirely different attitudes towards births outside of marriage. Jiao Yan's mother believed that children were necessary, but marriage was not, so she encouraged her daughter to have a child independently when necessary. She also collected relevant information in case her daughter needed some day, such as overseas sperm banks, medical treatments, and advancing ARTs. Jane's mother opposed it because she reckoned that their workplace culture was conservative (mother a civil servant, daughter a teacher) and that being a solo mother would face unthinkable moral pressure. However, her father thought having a child who could carry on the family name and bloodline would be nice. The attitude of Danielle's parents may be more representative. Her parents' primary concern was that she, as an only daughter, would be left alone in the world when they were gone. They thought the best choice for their daughter was to follow the traditional path of having a husband first and then a child. Nevertheless, if she could not find a husband, having a child and being a solo mother could be a second-best option.

Third, friends' views and occupations may also affect the intensity of stress women experience. Women with more open-minded friends and work environments will be less stressed. Civil servants or women working in conservative industries will be under tremendous pressure. Huang expressed confidence in her media industry, where idiosyncratic and self-expression are widely accepted:

We have diverse values. Look at people in my office; some have two children, some are unmarried and childless in their late 30s and 40s, and some are DINK (married, double income, no kids). I do not think it (anyone being a solo mother) would be a problem.

Even though social norms are powerful, women mentioned some elements that help resist moral criticism, in addition to their strong faith and personalities. Hannah shared her experience studying and living in New York, where she saw many people separate marriage and childbearing and did not care what others thought. Winnie and Evan emphasized that their lives in big cities had been isolated from the social networks of their parents and relatives back in their hometowns. The gossip was left in their hometown and limited to holiday time. Their lives in the city were hardly affected. Alice believed that as women age and life experiences increase, they can be more resistant to social pressure:

I have gone through a lot to start my own business and survive COVID-19. I have started to care less about what other people say. There are always people who like you and those who do not. A person only needs to maintain relationships with like-minded people and ignore those who are different.

5.1.3 Child Well-being

The previous section partly covered the difficulties donor-conceived children will face when growing up. This chapter will try to explain more about social and structural backgrounds. First, donor-conceived children are rare in people's daily lives, even though they are increasingly exposed on social media. Although the exact number of these children is unknown, the fact that some solo mothers became celebrities and attracted millions of followers on social media has proved that they live unusual and rare lives.

Against this background, it can be said that all child-related system designs in Chinese society assume that every child has a father and a mother. Although they may be absent parents, their names and identities are certain. For example, parents must fill in their names, occupations, and contact information for kindergarten registration. Parent-child activities require the participation of both father and mother. It can be overwhelming for the child and the mother to explain why they are different whenever they encounter such a situation. When these donor-conceived children are reminded all the time that they belong to a minority group whose father's identity is unknown, no one knows if they can handle it. Current academic research (Gao & Wei, 2022) and Internet celebrities (e.g., Ye Haiyang, mentioned in Chapter 2) have not explicitly and deeply discussed this topic because the children in these two cases are too young to understand the situation. However, both academia and women who are the stakeholders reckon it is crucial and deserves thorough research. As mentioned in Chapter 3, western researchers (Golombok et al., 2016), based on long-term professional work in this field,

predicted that children's desire for a biological father may be apparent and cause mental issues when they reach adolescence. While interviewees, thinking from their own observations and life experiences, also noticed the issue. Jiao Yan said she learned this angle from a podcast about single mothers by choice:

What if the child gets bullied at school? I can choose to give birth to a child, but I do not know if he/she will be willing to be born and raised in such a family as a donor-conceived child. I desperately want to know more cases about solo mothers and their children. Do these children blame their mothers when they grow up?

Respondents Hailie and Hui were more optimistic. Although donor-conceived children might have difficulties, they believed the mother adopting appropriate and creative education could minimize the psychological shock. More interviewees were in a state of ambivalence, unknown, uncertainty, and confusion. There is no previous research or evidence to tell them that donor-conceived children will or will not have problems, what kind of education is suitable, and what they, as solo mothers, should do to prevent their children from being hurt. Sometimes, this unknown is scarier than the predictable and definite obstacles (e.g., high cost, moral pressure) they will face on the way to becoming single mothers by choice.

People understand that donor-conceived children's well-being requires social reform. The government and public must be educated about births outside marriage and these new family types so that the government can improve its system design and governing style and people can be more supportive of solo mothers and their children. Meanwhile, some respondents also suggested that women undergo a "self-evaluation" in advance for their children's interests. This suggestion is consistent with Chinese scholar Yu J.'s idea that special restrictions should be implemented on exercising single women's reproductive rights (e.g., requiring physiological conditions and parenting abilities) to maximize children's welfare (2021). Respondents recommended that women have a complete assessment of their economic conditions, mental and physical health, and a backup guardian plan, which is to take care of the children when the mother cannot assume custody responsibilities. In an ideal situation, this evaluation could be conducted by themselves, the government, or NGOs. Huang reiterated that having only one parent meant significant risks to a child; the more cautious, the better:

From an economic point of view, although money is not the only indicator that makes a good parent, it is indeed a rigid standard for ensuring a child's life. If a woman earns little and has no savings, how can she support herself and her child if she loses her job,

which is highly possible after birth due to various reasons? In this case, I think she should be restricted from having children alone.

Besides, the mother's mental health should be checked. Imagine the mother already has mental disorders; she may be more likely to suffer from postpartum depression because childbearing stress combines with mental issues. Who will take care of the child?

Overall, the researcher reckons the main reason why women worry about their donor-conceived children's growth and happiness is that there is no precedent to follow. They cannot find enough evidence from their own life experiences, other people's stories, or academic research to tell them what will happen and how to deal with it. No matter how well-prepared they are, they will always feel it is not good enough. From this angle, the concerns for donor-conceived children's welfare seem to have no final solution, although some methods can release it to some extent. The concern for their children's well-being will never stop unless the child grows up and tells their mother she has done a great job.

5.1.4 Childrearing Burden

As previously pointed out, some factors are independent of a woman's marital status when considering having a child: childrearing burden, fertility intention, motherhood penalty, maternity risk, and biological clock. Below, these marital status-free factors will be interpreted in a Chinese context.

Unsurprisingly, the "childrearing burden" is considered regardless of income, profession, and property. It generally consists of two aspects: a tangible input measured as money and a lifelong devotion to love and care that cannot be measured by money or anything. The monetary investment is relatively easy to estimate. First, it refers to all direct consumption of children before adulthood, such as food, clothes, health care, entertainment, education, etc. Second, family expenditures such as houses and cars must be upgraded when a child comes. Although no uniform expense exists, each family makes it based on their financial situation. A report by Yuwa Population Research Think Tank (Liang et al., 2024) showed that the urban average cost of raising a child from birth to 17 years old was about 667,000 RMB (85,623 euros), with an annual expenditure of 37,055 RMB (about 4757 euros). In Chengdu, where the average annual income before tax is 96,413 RMB (Chengdu Municipal Statistics Bureau, 2023), a child will cost 38.43% of an adult's income annually. This ratio looks even more

shocking if we consider that young couples in cities usually have mortgages, daily household expenditures, medical expenses, and occasionally financial support for their elderly parents. Besides, the child's expenditure was estimated for basic needs, not including cram schools whose price ranges from tens to thousands of RMB per hour. When comparing worldwide, the national average cost of raising a child to 18 years old equals 2.08 times the GDP per capita in Australia, 4.11 times in Japan, and 6.3 times in China (ibid.).

If the financial cost has already caused anxiety, the time, energy, and emotional cost can be a million times more stressful. Respondents first questioned themselves who could take care of the children. The “breadwinner father and stay-at-home mother” model can barely make ends meet for middle and lower-class families in cities. A working mother is necessary. Therefore, young couples invite grandparents to live together to look after the children or hire a nanny. For the grandparents- solution, different parenting skills and relations with in-laws constantly cause tension and conflicts. Hiring a full-time nanny can be expensive and risky. The media has continually reported on the chaos in the nanny market, including child abuse (Pan, 2023), contractual disputes, fabricated work experience, and fake qualifications (Yang Q., 2017; Yu C., 2021). The government encourages both public and private childcare centers. However, the industry is far from well-developed, with limited regulations, a lack of professionals, and relatively high prices. Huang, a newly married woman who plans to have two children, searched the internet for childcare, and the findings were quite frustrating:

Do you know how expensive it is? For children aged six months to 1 year, daycare may cost 7,000 to 8,000 RMB per month. (In an ideal situation, it costs over half of her salary. During the company's low-profit months, her entire salary barely covers it.)

More importantly, qualified daycares are not always available, even if I am willing to pay this money. I found a chain daycare center with about five branches in Chengdu, but sadly, no one is near my house.

Daily care becomes unnecessary as children grow and attend school; at this point, homework begins (not the same as cram school tutoring. Homework means parents supervise their children to complete school and cram school homework). Liang et al. (2024) cited data from China Family Panel Studies (CFPS) and explained that from 2010 to 2018, pupils' parents' weekly homework tutoring hours increased from 3.67 to 5.88 hours. Imagine that, beyond this, there is time spent picking the children up and back from school and cram schools, doing hobbies, daily meals, holidays, and parent-child time. How could a person with a “996”

work schedule handle it? Unfortunately, as many interviewees addressed, solo childrearing means solo mothers must bear all the burden alone: money, time, energy, and love, without even a shift worker (i.e., a husband in a married woman's case).

5.1.5 Fertility Intention

Although their ultimate decisions regarding whether, when, and how to have children varied, all 17 respondents emphasized fertility intention as an essential factor. Generally, fertility intention is a personal view about whether to have children. Apart from the fact that some people naturally like children while others do not, the intention can be influenced by others and surroundings. The instrumental values of children are one of the most substantial reasons to have children. The traditional Chinese saying “yang er fang lao (养儿防老),” meaning raising children as a safe net for old age, is deeply rooted in people's minds. Min, a happily married woman with two daughters, said her decision to have children originated from worrying about the pathetic elderly life:

I never wanted children. Why did my view change? About ten years ago, as a reporter turning 30, I covered news about empty nesters and childless old people. During holidays when others were celebrating with families, those elderly people had nowhere to go except to sit alone in an empty home. I strongly felt their loneliness, and it scared me. After that, I determined to have a baby……

Other motivations can be that children bring happiness and strengthen family connections, carry forward their unfinished dreams, bridge the elderly parents and the rapidly changing world, bring changes and surprises to life, etc. Friends' or relatives' adorable children and pleasant parenting experiences could also be an incentive. By observing her cute nephew, Luna strengthened the idea that a child brings joy. Even unforeseen events sometimes influence a person. Jia recalled desperately wanting a child after the Wenchuan 8.0 magnitude earthquake. As an only daughter, she wanted to keep the blood ties for her family in case bad things happened to her.

On the other hand, some factors reduce or postpone women's fertility intentions. For example, work pressure and the high cost of living in cities make people too exhausted to build a family or have children. Women who enjoy their lives feel unprepared for such a life-changing decision. Some do not like female-unfriendly society. Some get traumatized by a

short-term babysitting experience or the miserable motherhood life shared by friends. Evan, who once dreamed of being a mother, significantly changed her view after assisting her mother to take care of her two nieces:

My brother's two daughters recently moved in to live with me. My parents, my sister-in-law, and I, the four of us, cared for two children, and I still felt exhausted. The little one must be nursed every two to three hours, and diapers must be changed. The older one shared a bed with me and my mother at night. She first wanted milk at 2 am and cried for half an hour. Then she woke me up again at 4 am for more milk. I barely slept that night. You can imagine how hard it was for me to soldier on the next day. Then I realized I could never survive this kind of life. I would collapse!

5.1.6 Motherhood Penalty

The motherhood penalty is a thoroughly studied subject worldwide. Research has examined the extent to which women suffer from workplace discrimination because of having children in developed countries like the United States, the UK, Germany, Denmark, and Spain (Gangl & Ziefle, 2009; Kleven et al., 2019; Molina & Montuenga, 2009), in the developing world (Agüero et al., 2012), and in China (Shen C., 2022; Xu Q., 2021).

This part briefly introduces the interviewees' perspective, combined with research data. By comparing and analyzing six scholars' different data covering from 1989 to 2018, Liang et al. (2024) estimated that nowadays, having a child would lead to a 12%-17% wage drop for Chinese women. Besides, having a child significantly increases housework and decreases leisure time (Liang et al., 2024). During fieldwork, twelve single, married, and divorced interviewees emphasized the conflict between raising children and advancing their careers from different angles. For instance, they do not have time and energy spared for children when they are in the stage of pursuing careers. Childbirth and maternity leave may cost promotion or lead to demotion and lower salary. The job market does not provide sufficient flexible jobs with decent incomes to help mothers balance work and children. As a mother of two girls, Min said she turned herself from a career woman into a family person because there were no other options. Evan, however, does not want to sacrifice her career:

Giving birth means there will be more than one year when you prepare for pregnancy, get pregnant, take maternity leave, and breastfeed. The company will replace you when you are absent. When you return from maternity leave, you may be transferred to a

lower rank and less allowance. For a person who works around the clock to become a manager in her 30s, how is she supposed to accept this?

Nevertheless, the motherhood penalty varies among companies and industries. Huang worked in a motherhood-friendly state-owned enterprise. Employees with children can have ten days of parental leave every year. The company also does not encourage performance rankings or inhumane peer competition, and female employees do not worry about getting fired after maternity leave. Still, she knew she could lose a promotion or leave a key position after becoming a mother.

5.1.7 Maternity Risk and Biological Clock

Whether they choose marriage or not, the ticking biological clock and maternity risks are the Sword of Damocles that hangs over women when discussing childbirth. Among the 17 respondents, ten mentioned fertility risks, and 6 mentioned the biological clock. The importance attached to these two factors varies from person to person. Huang felt that although the maternity risks were high (maternal death is possible), the high benefits (e.g., becoming a mother and raising a child carrying your blood) were worth a try. For Winnie, it is the first thing that stopped her from having babies, even more noticeable than the childrearing burden:

When I read content related to childbirth and pregnancy on social media, I felt phantom pain all over my body. It is so scary, and it will damage my body.....

Meanwhile, for women over 30, the ticking biological clock also affected fertility decisions to a certain extent. It is also the most direct reason single women fight for access to social egg-freezing. Danelle said:

Why aren't women allowed to freeze their eggs? If I had frozen my eggs when I was 30, I could use those 30-year-old eggs to conduct in vitro fertilization and have a baby when I finally got married in my late 40s. I am indeed worried that I may not be able to conceive naturally in my 40s. The inaccessible egg freezing leaves no way out and forces single women to get married immediately.

However, some interviewees believed medical technology could help delay the biological clock. Meanwhile, older women with more money can always compensate for the

physical disadvantages of advanced medical services. Therefore, there is no need to force themselves to have children without being fully prepared. Renee said:

Should I be too old to have children in the future, I may consider surrogacy. This is why I am less anxious now and focus on my career. I realized that some problems can be solved with money.

5.1.8 Marriage Perception

As introduced in this chapter's "results" section, the researcher found that some factors impacted women's decision-making, while their connections with marital status are unclear. These factors are marriage perception, the influence of the original family, and affordable substitutes. The author will concisely state them in this section onward.

Marriage perception determines whether people prefer the traditional approach or become single mothers by choice. The traditional path of "marriage first, children second" is undoubtedly the mainstream, but some women have started considering alternatives for various reasons. To begin with, divorced women who suffered emotionally and financially from failed marriages are more inclined to stay single or postpone remarriage. Others see unpleasant marriages of friends and family members, begin to rethink the outdated gender roles, calculate women's contributions and benefits in marriage, and question the marriage model. Jane said she had learned a lesson from her parents' marriage:

There is barely love in their marriage. When they first got married, they were matched in terms of quantifiable requirements, such as family background, occupation, social status, etc. However, their spiritual pursuits and mindsets are entirely different, and they have no common interests or hobbies.

My mother is the breadwinner, responsible for family expenses, and does all the household chores. My father seldom cares about anything at home except for walking the dog. I cannot imagine such a marriage nor want to live such a life. I once said to them, thanks for telling me exactly what I do not want.

The complexity of Chinese marriage also scares away women who value personal freedom. Families and in-laws from both sides are deeply involved in the young couple's life, making home as the UN General Assembly and married life as complicated as diplomatic relations. Besides, divorce is always discouraged in society and judicial practice. The PRC Civil

Code, enacted in January 2021, requires a minimum 30-day “cooling-off” period (Civil Code, issued on May 28, 2020, Part V Marriage and Family, Chapter 4, Divorce), hoping to prolong a marriage and change the couple’s minds. Rachel, the 27 years old respondent who works so hard and plans to buy an apartment solely, expressed no interest in marriage:

When I meet someone, I definitely want to keep a relationship and cohabitate as long as we love each other. Nevertheless, binding two people with a marriage certificate is unnecessary. Marriage brings troubles, property disputes, annoying families and in-laws, and the divorce process will be troublesome...

Furthermore, even though some women embrace marriage and work hard on getting one, it has never been easy to find the right partner, especially for those who are unfairly called “leftover women.” This expression refers to well-educated and financially independent urban professional women in their late 20s and 30s who are “left behind” in the marriage market (To, 2015). Among all the ten single and divorced interviewees, the youngest was 27 years old, and the oldest was 40 at the time of the interview, meaning they all are subject to varying degrees of discrimination in the marriage market. Evan said that her parents no longer urged her to get married, partly because she was considered “out of the market” and had “no hope for marriage”:

In my hometown, a small city, everyone thinks getting married before age 25 is the best. After that, women should lower their standards and sell themselves out quickly. I am now in my 30s, enjoying my life and career, loving who I am, and basically in a beautiful stage of my life.

However, my parents felt I was out of the season in the dating market. Whenever they tried to advertise me, others would say, ah? Over 30? She is too old.....

To conclude, birth outside of marriage comes as an alternative for various reasons: some people do not want marriage; some have failed marriages and are traumatized, and others want to get married but have missed the best window.

5.1.9 Influence From the Family of Origin

The influence of the original family (e.g., the respondent's childhood, their parents' marriage, and the relationship with their parents and siblings) is evident and complicated when discussing topics such as marriage, childbirth, and starting a family. First, only children generally face more pressure because they sometimes feel obligated to carry on the family bloodline. They are also more likely to fall into the fear that when parents die, they will be left alone in the world, thus feel having a child with their own blood is necessary. Passing down the family name and blood ties may also be considered filial piety that hedges the moral pressure of violating social norms. Danielle honestly shared her fear:

I am an only daughter. I cannot imagine how I would continue my life when someday my parents were gone and I was the only one left in this world. Having a child would be fantastic if I could not find a partner. My parents are worried about me for the same reason.

I have friends who are also only daughters, and they think they could live together or in the same community with their friends when they are old. However, this plan does not work for me

On the other hand, people with siblings have someone else to share the responsibility and parents' expectations. Hui felt less pressure from her parents because her younger sister's two children had already given her parents the joy of having grandchildren. Evan thought her younger brother and two nieces had already drawn her parents' full attention, and they barely had any time or energy to judge her.

Another influence that the original family has on people is the parent-child relationship. Unpleasant childhood memories (e.g., parents favoring son over daughter, which is quite common in China; tiger parents; control freak parents, etc.) may change people's view of childbirth, the parent-child relationship, and their confidence in being a wonderful mother. Some felt they did not have the extra love and energy for a child because they wanted to live life to the fullest to make up for themselves. Fu said that her memory of being a left-behind child had profoundly affected her views on having children, despite that she now fully understood her parents and grandparents:

I lived with my grandparents while my parents worked far away in another place. My grandparents kept saying that my parents worked so hard, and it was all because of me.

I felt guilty, thinking that my parents could have lived a better life if they had not had me. For quite a long time, I thought children were a burden that trapped the parents' lives, and I was not mentally and financially ready for such a huge responsibility.

(This kind of gratitude education is popular among the older generation in China, and it is designed to teach the children to be grateful and always remember their parents' love. The researcher herself was taught the same way in childhood.)

5.1.10 Affordable Substitute

When women feel unprepared to be single mothers by choice, an affordable substitute may, to some extent, provide comfort. Adoption and sponsorship of poor children, especially girls, become popular alternatives. In China, people over 30 years old can adopt children following the provisions of the law (Civil Code, issued on May 28, 2020, Part V Marriage and Family, Chapter 5 Adoption). However, single women are at a disadvantage as adoptive families because both the government and the public favor families with both parents. They may also encounter opposition from their own parents and relatives because traditional Chinese families always value blood ties. Fu was still struggling to convince her parents, although she had reached a consensus on adoption with her husband:

It is horrifying to give birth to a child, so I want adoption in a few years when I am financially well-prepared. However, my family firmly disagreed. They (parents) can tolerate that I will not have children, but they cannot accept adoption. Whenever this topic comes up, they say, since you want a child, give birth to it yourself.

They do not understand. I just want to be a mother to accompany a child growing up. It does not mean I have to give birth to this child by myself.

Luna also encountered the same problem, and her strategy was to wait a few more years until her parents were desperate about their daughter being too old to give birth to a child and were forced to agree to adoption.

For some women, a more straightforward solution that does not require legal proceedings but can also help children is sponsorship of poor children from remote areas, especially girls. China's nine-year compulsory education guarantees every child a six-year elementary school and a three-year middle school for free. However, accommodation fees and daily expenses (e.g., food, clothes, stationery, extracurricular books, etc.) rely on the family.

For children from poor families, especially girls from son preference families, their basic needs are compromised or intentionally neglected. For example, parents may reserve nutrition for their sons, such as milk, eggs, fruit, and meat, and prohibit their daughters from touching those. Some families may ask the daughter to drop out of school to work to support the son's studies when they have financial difficulties. Teenage girls in rural areas do not get money to buy sanitary napkins for economic reasons and menstrual shame. "Girls help girls" has become a trend on Chinese social media; financially independent women are willing to help teenage girls. Hailie shared her plan of sponsoring poor girls:

I was once a volunteer teacher and saw how badly people prefer sons over daughters in poor areas. I want to adopt a little girl. Actually, it does not matter if she is a child or a teenager. Even if she is seventeen or eighteen years old, I can pay her college tuition.

When I am financially well-off in my forties or fifties, I will adopt (or sponsor) 1 or 2 girls and raise them until college graduation. I do not expect anything in return. They do not have to support me when I am old. I just want to help.

For those with siblings, their nephews and nieces naturally become substitutes, which their family highly approves or intentionally promotes. Hui said:

My parents help with my younger sister's two children. They always bring the little girl to my house to visit. Although they did not say anything, I guess they were trying to help me and my niece build a strong connection so that she may be willing to look after me when I am old.

In addition, keeping pets, helping friends with their children, and being a teacher surrounded by students are also mentioned as alternatives to experiencing love and being a mother. Surrogacy overseas was also mentioned as a way that did not affect career advancement or bring maternity risk. Nevertheless, whether these alternatives will replace their reproductive plans remains to be seen, although they seem to have provided comfort and relaxed anxiety to a certain extent.

6 DISCUSSION

When using marital status as the crux to analyze, all eleven factors can be categorized into three types: factors closely related to unmarried women, meaning only single women have these worries; marital status-free factors that women must consider regardless of whether they are married or single; factors whose impact on women's decision-making is assured but whose relation to marriage is unclear. This chapter will summarize three different types in detail.

6.1 The Price for Choosing Births Outside of Marriage

Three factors are undoubtedly connected with unmarried women: operational concerns (e.g., where to find sperm and receive medical treatment), social stigma, and donor-conceived children's well-being. In general, they are disincentives in women's decision-making about birth outside of marriage. In other words, these three are the prices women must pay for choosing to be solo mothers and against the mainstream in China. Apart from the operational concerns that are related and rooted in China's legal framework, the other two have been touched upon to several degrees in Western research (Johnson, 2012; Baía et al., 2021; Golombok et al., 2021; Golombok et al., 2016; Weissenberg & Landau, 2012), mainly under the themes of medical treatment equality, donor-conceived children's psychological adjustment, mother-child relationship, solo mother parenting quality, and children's reactions to the absence of a father.

Nevertheless, this research has demonstrated that these factors do not have the veto power in the decision-making process, although they are significant. In Chinese society, where pragmatism prevails, when single women are deprived of ARTs and frowned upon having children, they always find a way to deal with it. As mentioned in the previous chapter, individuals creatively evade these factors (e.g., cooperation with a gay friend to provide a biological father) or alleviate the hindering effects (e.g., living in cities far away from rumors and criticism in their hometown) by using their connections and life wisdom. Still, it does not mean they are blind to the most noticeable dilemma. There is a lack of authoritative information to refer to, concrete academic results as endorsement, and accurate and detailed procedures to follow. Women must explore the solution independently, depending on personal networks and referencing other people's cases. Therefore, the researcher highly recognizes solo mother celebrities sharing their lives on social media, whether for altruism or attracting followers to make money. Through individual cases and stories, they fill the gap of insufficient official information and help people make more rational decisions.

Nonetheless, individual approaches are a temporary fix, no matter how effective they seem. People must rely on governmental, legal, and social reform to tackle these issues. For example, legally allowing women to use sperm banks and ARTs to have children makes it possible for them to receive medical treatment safely under the public health system. Educating the public and promoting social and cultural changes can minimize discrimination against solo mothers and donor-conceived children in all aspects. If it is any comforting, local policies releasing marriage requirements for birth registration introduced in Chapter 2 can be seen as a sign of change, even though the realization of social reform may take a long time, many years.

6.2 Marital Status-free Factors on Childbearing-decision

Among the eleven factors, five are universal variables that women must consider when discussing childbirth, whether within or outside marriage: childrearing burden, fertility intention, motherhood penalty, maternity risk, and biological clock. It may be concluded that these five factors belong to the cost of women for childbearing, and it is not limited to birth outside of marriage but related to birth under all circumstances. If a factor is a disadvantage for married women, it is also a disadvantage for single ones. Moreover, to reduce the inhibitory effect of these factors on fertility, the government, rather than women themselves, is subject to action, such as providing public childcare facilities, offering affordable and high-quality education, and eliminating motherhood penalties in the workplace.

Regarding the influence of these five factors, the results of this study are generally consistent with previous surveys of married women's fertility decisions. In the 2017 National Fertility Status Sample Survey, the top three reasons why women of childbearing age do not plan to have more children are “heavy financial burden (经济负担重),” “too old (年龄太大)” and “no one to take care of children (没人带孩子),” accounting for 77.4%, 45.6%, and 33.2% respectively (He et al., 2018). The first and third ones are consistent with the childrearing burden in this study, and the second one is the same as the biological clock. The fertility intention in this research partly overlaps with “the instrumental values of children (Ning et al., 2022)”, and the maternity risks were explained under “perceived risks (ibid.).”

However, “being single” may complicate the situation and make these factors harder to tackle. Take the “childrearing burden” as an example. In principle, married women in bilateral parenting can mobilize more resources than solo mothers because they have double incomes and double human support (their parents and parents-in-law) for raising the children. Even if

they are divorced or widowed, the support from the father's side may be reduced, but it does not change the fact that the childrearing is under double support. To make up for this gap, solo mothers must possess a high income or wealth or have an exceptionally supportive family. For instance, a solo mother should earn more than her friends' couple income combined. Her parents should provide twice as much childrearing support as her married friends' parents do. With a solo mother as the backbone and her parents as assistance, combined with two generations' economic and family resources, a matrilineal family can be formed to raise the children jointly.

6.3 Other Factors

The remaining three factors — marriage perception, the influence of the original family, and affordable substitutes are prevalent in the decision-making process. However, this research has not convincingly demonstrated how they work. Field data has shown that these factors are inextricably linked to the final fertility decisions, and their importance might be significant sometimes. However, the effect of these factors results from the combined action of multiple elements, including personality, marital status, personal experience, self-awareness, etc. For example, some only daughters felt it necessary to create a human being with their blood and flesh, while others think friendship provides enough emotional support and security.

Moreover, factors such as “marriage perception” and “the influence of the original family” need to be further refined into more detailed classifications. Then, the impact of each classification on the final fertility decision needs to be examined. To be specific, the “marriage perception” at least has two subcategories, “pro-marriage” and “anti-marriage,” and their impact on women's solo mother decision-making shall be studied respectively. Similarly, only-child families and multi-child families require research in comparison. Regarding “affordable substitutes,” the interviews said people gain a “quasi-motherhood” experience by adopting or sponsoring poor children, helping to raise nieces and nephews, keeping pets, or becoming teachers. In the short term, these alternatives satisfy people's emotional needs to a certain extent, delaying or temporarily canceling fertility plans. Still, whether they can sustain this role in the long run remains to be seen. These alternatives may reinforce, rather than replace, reproductive planning. One interviewee, Luna, said that raising a nephew reinforced her belief that children can bring joy to a family. Will it eventually push her to abandon the “adoption plan” and have her own children?

6.4 Differences Between Single and Married Women

The researcher initially hypothesized that marital status and having children might have a more significant impact on women's views on birth outside of marriage. She assumed that divorced women from horrible husbands might strongly oppose marriage and support independent childrearing, and those who have children might promote motherhood as the true meaning of life. However, it has not been confirmed in this study. Among the 17 interviewees, nine were legally unmarried (including seven single and two in a relationship), five were happily married, and three were divorced. Of all the women, three have children (all daughters) and showed pleasant mothering experiences and a good parent-child relationship.

First, women's current marital status does not have as significant an impact on their views on birth outside marriage as the researcher previously expected. Married women themselves have lost the option of being a solo mother, but it does not necessarily lead them to support or oppose others choosing this path. As a successful entrepreneur, happy wife, and mother, Alice said she knew an acquaintance who was a solo mother with a 12-year-old child, and the family was doing well. She thought women with the financial capability and confidence of independent childrearing should be allowed to do so. She showed no doubts about women raising children alone. Perhaps because she is a female entrepreneur with a strong personality and financial ability. Besides, divorce does not necessarily make women oppose marriage and deliberately choose to be solo mothers. Hui's life changed drastically because of a failed marriage, but she still wanted to find a husband with whom she could love and support each other. She felt that 50% of the reason why she no longer considered having children was due to financial pressure, and then there were "being too old to give birth" and "not in good physical health to deal with maternity risks." Next, to assess single women's views on birth outside of marriage, one needs to know the reason why they are single because their attitudes towards birth outside marriage can differ entirely. For those who do not want marriage, being a solo mother may be considered the first, even the only, option to have children. For those who long for marriage but have not met the right person at present, marriage is still the best choice, while single mothers by choice is a plan B. Additionally, the future is more unpredictable for unmarried women because they usually have more un-lived lives and choices. Their views evolve, and what they prefer in the interview does not mean they will stick to this option, let alone choose to do so.

Second, whether having children may have a more significant impact on women's views about birth outside marriage. On the one hand, these factors may have different weights in the decision-making process for mothers and those who are not. On the other hand, the same person

may change the hierarchy of these factors before and after birth. Respondent Min, a mother of two daughters, inspired the researcher with a very interesting point of view. She said that for childless women, their own needs (e.g., like children but do not want marriage. I have reproductive rights) always come first, and children's well-being comes second as one of the consequences of the decision. They worry about their children's future and try to eliminate or at least reduce children's troubles. However, women themselves are always the perpetrators and core stakeholders of this behavior (i.e., birth outside of marriage), and their children are the recipients of this behavior. This point has been echoed in the research (Volgsten & Schmidt, 2021) when Swedish women expressed their motivations for choosing motherhood through medically assisted reproduction as "because of age, having a child was more important than waiting for the right partner."

However, Min naturally put her children's happiness first as a mother. If there is a chance that the child will be unhappy someday, she is willing to give up the opportunity to be a mother. When she considered the benefits and drawbacks of birth outside of marriage, the child was the subject of the decision, and their needs were the priority. Unfortunately, she was the only one of the three mothers in this study who explicitly held this view. This sample was insufficient for a more in-depth comparative analysis. In the future, when there are more samples, it can be an entry point for conducting profound research.

Third, supporting single women's reproductive rights does not necessarily lead to advocating for women to have children on their own. All interviewees believed that single women should have reproductive autonomy. Since modern technology allows them to have children through ARTs, women should be allowed to do so. Still, they would discourage women from having children for practical reasons or at least be more cautious before the final decision, such as the physical damage from childbirth, the negative impact on women's careers, and the heavy burden of raising children.

7 CONCLUSION

In closing, to answer the question posed at the beginning of the research - what factors influence Chinese women's decision-making about birth outside of marriage? The answer is that eleven factors, namely operational concerns about ART, social stigma, donor-conceived children's well-being, childrearing burden, fertility intention, motherhood penalty, maternity risk, biological clock, marriage perception, the influence of the original family, and affordable substitute, collectively shape women's decisions. Among them, operational concerns, social stigma, and donor-conceived child well-being are directly related to their unmarried status. The author thus defines these three as "the extra price for choosing a nonconventional childbearing" in China. Women have shown incentive, creativity, and pragmatism to overcome difficulties from the three aspects. Nevertheless, individual efforts are merely a temporary fix; paving the road for single women to have babies requires government, legal, and social reform.

Five factors (childrearing burden, fertility intention, motherhood penalty, maternity risk, biological clock) are marital-status-free. They are associated with childbearing actions rather than women's being single. However, the difficulties brought about by these five may be more challenging for single women because they raise the child independently without a husband and his family as a backup. Therefore, outstanding economic strength and particularly supportive parents are essential for solo mothers-to-be. Besides, the ultimate solution to these issues depends on the government. Promoting facilities and policies to reduce the childrearing burden, minimize the motherhood penalty, and thus create a child- and women-friendly society may help increase fertility.

The remaining three factors, marriage perception, the influence of the original family, and affordable substitutes, influence women's reproductive decisions. Unfortunately, this research was not able to clarify the mechanism. How do they affect women's decisions? Under what circumstances does it play a positive role, and when does it hinder the attempt to be a solo mother? These questions remain to be studied in the future.

In addition, there is no evidence showing that "being single, legally not allowed to and socially frowned on having babies" is more influential than any other factors such as "operational concerns about ART" and "fertility intention." Neither is this study's data sample (17 respondents) sufficient to generalize such an idea. However, "being single and legally deprived of ARTs" indeed constitutes a significant operational difficulty in China, which needs to be noticed and solved by the government for the sake of protecting single women's reproductive rights as well as increasing the birth rate.

7.1 Suggestions for Future Research

The diversity of the respondent group (see Table 1) and the richness of the data are sufficient to support the reliability of this research. The factors that influence their decision-making undoubtedly resonate with many Chinese women. Still, the researcher fully understands that all respondents are in their late 20s or above, have at least a college degree and access to domestic and overseas information, earn an income above the middle level in the mega city Chengdu (population over 20 million), and are relatively open-minded (from the fact they took the initiative to sign up to talk about birth outside of marriage). Their views best represent a group of well-educated, middle or high-income urban professional women. Those less educated and financially vulnerable women who live in small towns or rural areas may have different opinions on this topic. Besides, given China's massive regional, generational, and class differences, larger-scale, quantitative, and qualitative research needs to be conducted to understand more factors and variations influencing people's decision-making regarding birth outside marriage, just like what the Western scholars did in Europe to examine the attitudes of the public and different groups.

In addition, as specified in the methodology chapter, the researcher exposes her identity as “middle-aged, single, an only daughter, and currently weighing the option of being a solo mother.” While this identity helped her understand the research topic profoundly and comprehensively, made it easier for her to gain credit with the interviewees, and obtained more reliable data in fieldwork, it also limited her thinking by unconsciously taking the interviewee's side. Future researchers with different backgrounds may offer other perspectives to further this research.

All in all, “single mothers by choice” and “birth outside of marriage” are still in their infancy in China. This study belongs to the primary stage of attitude and opinion studies. Referring to the development of Western academia, future scholars can at least conduct research on group characteristics, medical and surgical issues, the function of solo mother parenthood, and research on donor-conceived children's growth. As analyzed above, as Chinese society gradually opens up and policies relax, there will be more and more single mothers by choice, and research in this field will embrace its golden age.

7.2 Acknowledgment

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APPENDIX 1: Interview Questions

English

Part 1: Personal information

1. Demographic data, including age, income level, profession, education, family background, and property (own property, rent an apartment, living with parents, or other situations).
2. Life trajectory and relationships, including previous and current love life, expectations in the future, for example, assessing the likelihood of remaining single, married, divorced, or cohabiting, etc.

Part 2: The general perception of marriage, fertility intention, and birth outside marriage

3. How do you perceive marriage? Positive? Negative? Hard to tell?
4. Do you want to have kids?
5. Do you consider having kids outside of marriage? Why?
6. Do you feel pressure to get married from family, friends, relatives, workplace, or society?
7. What do you think about single women's reproductive rights? Should it be tied to marriage or not?
8. When and from where did you learn that it is possible to have children without marriage?
9. Do you think it (birth outside of marriage) works in Chinese society?
10. Nowadays, people marry and give birth late, meaning health risks for the mother and the baby. Some say that women who want kids can have kids first and marry after. Because marriage does not have an age limit while giving birth to babies does. Do you agree or disagree, and why?

Part 3: Decision-making about outside of marriage

11. When you/people consider having babies outside of marriage, what are the influential factors, and how can they affect people's decisions?
12. Do you think birth outside of marriage will increase or decrease? Why?
13. What approaches or technology do you know? Which one do you prefer?
14. Will granting single women reproductive rights increase the birth rate?
15. Who do you discuss this topic with? Parents, friends, netizens, or people with previous experience?

Part 4: opinions on Sichuan's policy relaxation

16. Have you heard of Sichuan's new rule relaxing marriage restrictions on birth registration? Did you gossip about it? Is it good, bad, problematic, or too complicated to say?
17. In your opinion, will it encourage single women to have babies outside of marriage?
18. Imagine a referendum discussing whether to grant single women reproductive rights. Would you vote for or against it?
19. Imagine your best friend or sister wanted to be a solo mother. What would you say?
20. What would you worry about parenting and education if you had a baby outside of marriage? Do you think the child would have more issues growing up?

中文

第一部分：个人信息

- 1.基本信息：年龄、收入水平、职业、学历、家庭背景、买房还是租房等，尽量详细。
- 2.生活轨迹和恋爱关系，目前是否处于恋爱/婚姻关系中，将来对恋爱和婚姻关系的期待？自我评估，未来保持单身/已婚/离婚/同居关系的可能性。

第二部分：对婚姻、生育意愿和婚外生育的基本看法

- 3.你如何看待婚姻？积极？消极？不好说？
- 4.你想要孩子吗？为什么？
- 5.你考虑婚外生育吗？当时是什么情况下考虑的？
- 6.你有被家人，朋友，亲戚，领导同事这些催婚吗？
- 7.你怎么看单身女性的生育权？你觉得它应该和婚姻捆绑吗？
- 8.你什么时候、从什么渠道了解到女性能单身生育？
- 9.你认为单身生育在中国行得通吗？
- 10.现在人们结婚生孩子都晚，高龄产妇，母亲和孩子都有风险。就有人觉得，想要孩子的可以先把娃生了，然后再慢慢考虑结婚。因为结婚没有年龄限制，但生孩子呢，年纪太大了就不行。你同意这种观点吗？为什么？

第三部分：单身生育的决策

- 11.当你，或者普通中国女性，考虑单身生育时，你觉得大家一般考虑哪些影响因素？
- 12.你觉得单身生育以后会变多吗？
- 13.你知道用哪些方法或技术，来单身生育？你更倾向于选哪种？
- 14.允许女性单身生育的话，生育率会提升吗？
- 15.你一般和谁讨论这个话题？父母、朋友、网友、医生、或者有经验的人？

第四部分：关于四川新规

- 16.你知道四川放宽生育登记的新规吗？你们和朋友都是咋讨论的？好事儿？坏事儿？不好说？
- 17.你觉得，这种法规会鼓励女性单身生育吗？
- 18.假设：咱们可以公投来讨论是否允许女性单身生育，你投赞成票还是反对票？
- 19.假设：你亲闺蜜/好姐妹说要单身生育，来问你的意见，你会怎么说？
- 20.如果你单身生育了一个娃，会不会担心教不好孩子？你觉得，这种家庭的孩子，成长过程中会遇到问题吗？

APPENDIX 2: Glossary of Chinese Terms

Pin yin	Chinese characters	Meaning in English
nan zhu wai, nv zhu nei	男主外女主内	man in charge of the outside, woman in charge of the inside
liang tou hun/ bing jia hun/ liang tou zou	两头婚/并家婚 / 两头走	new marriage models to oppose patrilineal or matrilineal inheritance. Husband and wife inherit their own family name (by having two children) and property, respectively. Names vary regionally
sang ou shi yu er	丧偶式育儿	widowed parenting, meaning the wife does all childcare work as if she were widowed
wei hun sheng yu	未婚生育	unmarried/unwed birth, to emphasize that the mother is legally unmarried
fei hun sheng yu	非婚生育	illegitimate birth, to emphasize that the birth happens illegally, commonly used when the biological father is married and the mother unmarried
dan shen sheng yu	单身生育	the mother was legally unmarried during childbirth, commonly used to emphasize it is a personal choice
wei hun ma ma	未婚妈妈	unwed/ unmarried mothers
dan qin ma ma	单亲妈妈	single mothers
zhu dong xing dan qin ma ma	主动型单亲妈妈	single mothers by choice
yang er fang lao	养儿防老	to raise children as a safe net for old age
jing ji fu dan zhong	经济负担重	heavy financial burden
nian ling tai da	年龄太大	too old to have babies
mei ren dai hai zi	没人带孩子	no one to take care of children