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An ongoing shift in Chinese marital view –A case study of late marriage among young Chinese in Shenzhen

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An ongoing shift in Chinese marital view
—A case study of late marriage among young Chinese in Shenzhen

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Introduction

In Chinese society, marriage has typically been perceived as the most critical thing in life's journey. Almost everyone believed that marriage was necessary to go through life. Marriage was commonly viewed as a milestone. It could also be a turning point in life where the partner determines their happiness for the rest of their lives. However, over the past few decades, marriage rates have coincidentally declined sharply around the world, especially in some developed countries. The age at first marriage is rising and some people are even choosing not to marry. At the same time, negative population growth, in which the mortality rate exceeds the population growth rate, has also appeared in various countries. This phenomenon has triggered a heated debate among scholars on the nature of contemporary marriage and the family, and attempts have been made to explain this phenomenon in terms of the second demographic transition(SDT).

In traditional Chinese culture, marriage is a union between individuals and families. Arranged marriages were common, and parents and matchmakers were crucial in choosing suitable partners for their children. China has undergone significant social and economic changes that have impacted marriage practices in recent decades. In the 1980s and 1990s, China introduced market-oriented economic policies that shifted from state-controlled employment to individual financial autonomy. This shift altered the economic incentives for marriage and increased the importance of individual choice, thereby affecting traditional marriage practices.

According to the China Population Census Yearbook, the average age at first marriage was 22.83 years in 1986, which has been rising yearly. This trend has been unstoppable; in 2010, the average age at first marriage was 24.98 years; by 2020, it will have increased to 28.67 years, with the average age at first marriage for males at 29.38 years, and it is foreseeable that the

average age at first marriage will rise to over 30 years. The pattern of this growth trend is similar to that of developed countries. However, the reasons for this are different. This shift implies that China is undergoing a second demographic transition. The structure of marriage in China is also changing. The result is late marriages, with declining fertility rates.

Delaying marriage may bring about some potential issues, but these problems vary depending on individual circumstances and cultural backgrounds. Firstly, late marriage may reduce opportunities for childbearing or limit family size, which could affect fertility rates and population growth. Secondly, postponing marriage may pose challenges in finding suitable partners or establishing long-term relationships, as individuals may already have established careers, lifestyles, or social networks that are difficult to integrate with those of potential partners. Lastly, late marriage may also impact personal and family economic and social stability, affecting career decisions, homeownership, and retirement planning. The significance of studying late marriage lies in its reflection of the changing social norms and attitudes toward marriage and family in contemporary society. The Chinese government has recognized the trend of late marriage and its potential impact on the country's population and economy. In recent years, the Chinese Government has implemented several policies aimed at encouraging early marriage and childbearing, such as providing incentives to couples who have more than one child. However, these policies have had little effect because many young people still prioritize education and careers over getting married and starting a family.

Under these circumstances, it is important to study the current marriage values of the Chinese people. It can reflect China's ongoing demographic shift and transformation of family structures. Marriage in China can be analyzed by understanding the underlying dynamics of the shift. This is because the shift is more pronounced in the big cities than in the rural areas. For this

study, people living in Shenzhen will be selected. As one of the top three cities in China in terms of GDP, the marriage shift will be relatively easy to detect.

To address my research question, I will first explore the background of the phenomenon under study from a macro-level perspective. This involves an in-depth examination of relevant literature, theoretical frameworks, and sociocultural factors. Following this, I will present the methods employed in my study, detailing the research design, data collection procedures, and analytical techniques utilized. The subsequent three core sections are delved into distinct aspects of the research findings, organized according to life-course perspective.

Literature Review

The following review integrates various literature, including traditional Chinese marriage beliefs, the Second Demographic Transition theory, and explanations for various factors contributing to the phenomenon of delayed marriage. At the micro level, individual behaviors, attitudes, and choices vary for various reasons, such as personal education levels, economic conditions, and family backgrounds. From a macro perspective, in China, traditional marriage beliefs are influenced by factors such as social culture, religious beliefs, and government policies, leading to differences between contemporary marriage views and traditional ones. By synthesizing existing literature, the attempt is made to understand the marriage views of contemporary Chinese people and the potential factors influencing them.

Changing Views about Marriage

Marriage has long been an institution that sociologists have focused on, while interpretations of marriage have varied. As the smallest unit of society, the family is very important to the structure and development of society. Marriage that builds up the family plays a significant role. People take marriage very seriously. In Chinese tradition, marriage is essential. Everyone wants to get married, and those who don't are seen as deviants or "leftovers". The traditional Chinese concept of marriage has a "sacredness" that comes largely from the belief in ancestor worship. (Hao 2021) "Ancestor worship constructs the humanistic beliefs of traditional marriage." (Wang, 2022) This belief views the family as the object of belief and uses the forces associated with the family as the basis for constructing the belief. This belief strengthens the cohesion and stability of the family because the belief drives all behaviors that enhance the strength of the family. As a result, the Chinese family is focused on ancestor worship, and the

continuity of the family and the ethics that unite all families are centered on ancestor worship (Zhai, 2019) Husband and wife relationships are thus an essential part of the family, as well as the key to maintaining the family's strength. As a result, marriage has also been used as a means of strengthening the family in most cases throughout Chinese history.

In feudal societies, marriage was often used as a tool to link different families, tribes, or countries for political alliance or social stability. A strong family network could be established through marriage to enhance political status or economic power. The purpose of monogamy in traditional Chinese society is to regulate social order. (Sun, 2021) This type of marriage is influenced by Confucian values, and parents usually designate the marriage partner. This means that children are not able to choose their own marriage partner, and there is no freedom in this type of marriage. Confucianism believes that children should listen to their elders, meaning that the senior has absolute power over the junior. This idea hinders the freedom to love. The behavior of going against the marriage arranged by parents was illegal at that time, and people would punish such people. Such arranged marriages occurred when the man was 18 years old and was one of the “rites of passage” that signaled adulthood and the assumption of social responsibility. Confucianism views early marriage and childbearing as a social necessity (Cheng 2020).

However, in the early 20th century, as the ideas of Western society spread to China, many women began to propagate the idea of gender equality. (Western society here refers to countries such as the United States.) They organized many actions, such as street marches and court protests. In addition, these women formed the Women's Rights League to defend equal rights and improve women's status. This kind of thinking has greatly impacted the old view of marriage. (Liu, 2018) The traditional view of people favoring men over women leads to women having no

rights and low status. Women usually have to obey men and elders in conventional marriages. Liang Yunchang suggests that “women should be subordinate and dependent on men, and men should dominate and lord over women.” This is the traditional concept of marriage. The concept of equality between men and women opposes the traditional concept, and this conceptual change is an important factor affecting the view of marriage. Equality between men and women means that women and men have the same status in the family and society. In this case, both men and women will have different roles and the right to choose marriage. This breaks the old custom of arranged marriages. At the same time, Western individualism also affected the rights of parents. It was believed that Chinese people should "oppose slavery and advocate self-centeredness on earth. “Specifically, the custom of parents arranging their children's marriages was completely rejected, and the system of parents controlling the “right of marriage” was changed.” (Liang, 2005). This increased the autonomy of both men and women in marriage, meaning that the right of marriage was changed from the traditional parental control to the individual.

Individuals gain more than just the right to marry but, more importantly, more initiative. They have the right to decide what is important to them, such as family choice. This represents a change in the traditional family structure. A shift from the traditional Chinese marriage norms, deeply rooted in ancestor worship and Confucian values, to a more modern view influenced by Western ideals of personal autonomy and gender equality. To better understand the shift in family structure, we must understand the Second demographic transition (SDT)

Second Demographic Transition(SDT)

The study of the demographic transition has long been a key aspect of understanding how societies evolve, particularly in the areas of family structure and fertility trends. The Second

Demographic Transition (SDT) is a concept that is critical to understanding contemporary shifts in marriage patterns (especially the trend toward later marriage). The concept of the second demographic transition (SDT) was first proposed by European demographers (Ron Lesthaeghe) and (Dirk van de Kaa) in 1986. The second demographic transition (SDT) is a theoretical response to the limitations of the first demographic transition (DT) in explaining the fertility changes occurring in populations already at low fertility. The theory of the demographic transition, which focuses on the transition from high to low mortality and birth rates, is considered insufficient to capture the complex fertility dynamics of modern societies, especially in Europe. In essence, SDT implies a profound change in family and reproductive patterns, characterized by persistently low fertility rates and various living arrangements outside the traditional marriage unit. This shift has been primarily driven by a major cultural shift to postmodern attitudes emphasizing individuality and self-actualization. Van de Kaa and Lesthaeghe observe that the post-World War II era in Europe has led to significant changes in sexual norms and behaviors, resulting in a decline in marriage rates and an increase in cohabitation and out-of-wedlock fertility. The introduction of modern contraceptive methods has further reduced the marriage-fertility relationship.

Nevertheless, there is still some controversy as to whether the second demographic transition is unique to Western European societies or whether it is a phenomenon that also occurs in North America, the rest of Europe, and Asia (Zaidi and Morgan, 2017). The impact of the second demographic transition is mainly felt in the family sphere, and changes in family behavior are largely influenced by culture (Raymo et al., 2015), so it is inconclusive whether societies of different cultures produce similar changes in family behavior. However, based on the observation of SDT-related indicators, it can be concluded that “China is undergoing a second

demographic transition, and the Chinese family sphere has changed dramatically” (Yu & Xie, 2019). In 2022, China's natural population growth rate will be -0.6%, which means that the mortality rate exceeds the fertility rate to achieve negative population growth. At the same time, more individualized family behaviors such as marriage and cohabitation have become more frequent in China due to modernization and individualism. This has caused both men and women to delay entering marriage, resulting in the phenomenon of late marriage. Also, more and more young people are choosing cohabitation as a transition to marriage. Unlike in the West, the proportion of out-of-wedlock births and marital infertility is still low in China, which implies that there is still a relationship between marriage and childbearing. (Yu & Xie, 2019) At the same time, it also shows that traditional concepts still have an impact on the modern concept of marriage, and the social acceptance of out-of-wedlock births and in-marriage infertility is not very high, which will make people still consider the possible future birth plan when choosing the matter of marriage.

Maslowian Drift in the SDT proposes “a shift toward higher-order needs of self-actualization and individual autonomy to motivate behavior once more basic needs like survival and safety have been satisfied (Lesthaeghe 1995).” The concept of "Maslow's hierarchy of needs" refers to the idea that once an individual's basic needs (such as survival and safety) are met, their motivation shifts towards higher-level self-actualization and individual autonomy. This means that once individuals feel sufficiently secure and stable, they begin to pursue higher-level goals such as personal growth, self-fulfillment, and individual autonomy. This reflects a shift in an individual's pursuit and motivation towards higher-level needs after fulfilling basic needs. This value explains the rise of individualism. When most people in Chinese society have satisfied the basic needs of survival and safety, they begin to prioritize self-actualization and self-fulfillment.

This self-fulfilling individualism weakened the importance of marriage and also influenced decisions related to marriage, reproduction, and family life. This has changed the family structure and the family's traditional economic model. This change in individualistic values is reflected in cohabitation, late marriage, and declining fertility rates.

Article 6 of China's Marriage Law stipulates: "The age of marriage shall not be earlier than 22 years for men and 20 years for women." Under China's family planning policy, a person who marries more than three years after the legal age of marriage is considered to have married late, i.e., at the age of 25 for men and 23 for women. According to China's census yearbook, in 1986, the average age at first marriage was 22.83 years; in 2010, the average age at first marriage was 24.98 years; in 2020, the average age at first marriage will increase to 28.67 years, with the average age at first marriage for men at 29.38 years, and it can be predicted that, in the near future, the average age at first marriage will rise to over 30 years. This is even five years later than the late marriage defined by Chinese society. The age of marriage is directly related to childbearing, which is the purpose of marriage in traditional Chinese culture. Confucianism believes that childbearing is the most important thing for women. This idea has influenced the Chinese for a long time. Fertility rates in East Asian cities have declined dramatically as the age of marriage has risen, and the total fertility rate (TFR) has fallen below the replacement level of 2.1 to 1.3 children per woman. (Cheng, 2020) Delaying the age of marriage has significant implications for China's demographics, with projections suggesting that if current trends continue, the proportion of the population over 65 years of age will increase from 12% in 2020 to over 25% by 2050 (Esteve et al., 2020). This level of population aging is a direct consequence of late marriages and associated declines in fertility. However, as the traditional concept of marriage is challenged, marriage itself is becoming less relevant as an end in itself for procreation. The

strong correlation between marriage and fertility is gradually being weakened. This corresponds to what Lesthaeghe and van de Kaa call the second demographic transition, “a disconnection between marriage and procreation.”

Economics status and Gender

An important factor contributing to the phenomenon of late marriage is economic change. With socio-economic development, individualistic values have replaced collectivist traditions, leading to greater autonomy in personal life decisions, including marriage. This is particularly evident in urban areas such as Shenzhen, where young people delay marriage for career advancement and financial stability (Zhuge 2021). Social structural changes such as the housing market and property ownership have been identified as important factors influencing the timing of marriage. Nie Xia (2020) emphasizes that the economic pressures associated with property ownership in urban China have a delaying effect on marriage, especially for younger cohorts facing high housing costs. This is prominent in urban areas. As fertility and marriage remain correlated in China, childcare consumption also has an effect on marriage. However, childcare consumption does not have a significant impact on age at first marriage, but payment for the wedding has a significant negative impact on age at first marriage (Zhou & Liu, 2022)

Gender roles in marriages have also changed due to women's continuous efforts to advocate for gender equality and demand more equitable sharing of domestic responsibilities. These efforts have not only been instrumental in challenging the traditional domestic roles of women but have also led to significant policy changes and societal attitudes towards women's roles both at home and in the workplace. Women have also been able to get a good education subsequently. (Zhang Yangze 2020) This has helped them to enter the job market and break the

traditional stereotypes. Women are being seen less as being confined to housework and can also provide economic support for the family. This structural change is closely linked to education. However, the shift in gender expectations has led to an increase in late-stage singleness, especially among men of lower socio-economic status, who may not meet the changing criteria for women looking for a partner. Precisely because women are less economically dependent on marriage, this may lead to an increase in the number of older single people. However, gender stereotypes still exist, which means that societal attitudes towards this phenomenon will lag behind this change (Esteve et al. 2020) In addition, the competitive nature of the marriage market, as mentioned in the comparative study by Yi Yi Zheng, highlights the complexity of gender dynamics, with highly educated females facing both opportunities and challenges in their search for a suitable partner. This is compounded by the gender imbalance caused by historical policies that have led to a surplus of men in the marriage market, especially in rural areas.

This literature reflects a significant shift in marriage in China, not only in attitudes but also in behavior. However, the literature measures the factors influencing late marriage through quantitative studies, and there are few that use qualitative analysis to examine the underlying individual motivations or socioeconomic factors driving these changes. The lack of analysis of the real core of the problem makes it difficult for the government to formulate policies to solve the problem, which is why the government's relaxation of the fertility policy has not affected the fertility rate. This project will add weight to the qualitative research by analyzing current people's views on marriage. It will also examine the literature to determine the relationship between China's second demographic transition and the concept of marriage. In this way, it will help other cities with relatively low economies to develop programs to alleviate the phenomenon of late marriages and low fertility rates.

Methodology

This study will use purposive sampling to randomly recruit participants. The target population consists of individuals aged between 22 and 35 who have been long-term residents in Shenzhen. Long-term residency here is defined as residing in the city for more than 5 years. The main data collection method will be semi-structured in-depth interviews. The format of the interviews, whether face-to-face or online, will be based on participants' preferences. Each interview will last approximately 40-60 minutes and will be recorded with participants' consent. The aim is to answer the question “What are the attitudes of contemporary young people towards marriage, and what are the reasons for delayed marriage?” The location of the interviews will vary depending on the participants, including but not limited to conference rooms, restaurants, and cafes. The sample size will be around 15 individuals, and participants will be recruited through snowball sampling.

I conducted 11 semi-structured in-depth interviews with individuals aged between 23 and 31 who have been long-term residents in Shenzhen for over 5 years. The interviews focused on marriage-related topics and were conducted entirely in Chinese. Seven participants chose offline interviews, while the remaining four opted for online interviews. Four online participants declined video interviews due to personal reasons and chose audio interviews instead. All interviews were conducted after participants signed written consent forms. Recordings were made for all interviews with participants' consent.

Each interview lasted approximately 50 minutes, during which I asked all the questions listed in the survey questionnaire. Almost all participants chose to answer, although some skipped certain questions. In addition to the questionnaire, I also asked follow-up questions tailored to each participant to clarify their responses and explore their viewpoints in more depth.

The choice of Shenzhen as the research location was based on several factors. Firstly, Shenzhen is an international and immigrant city with a complex and diverse population composition, including people from all over China as well as various countries and regions. According to the *Statistical Bulletin on National Economic and Social Development of Shenzhen in 2022*, the city had a resident population of 17.6618 million at the end of 2022, with a significant proportion being non-registered residents, indicating a diverse population base.

Therefore, Shenzhen provides a broad and diverse sample that helps to better understand the underlying reasons and influencing factors behind the phenomenon of delayed marriage. Additionally, according to *the Statistical Bulletin on National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China in 2023*, Shenzhen ranked third in GDP and sixth in per capita GDP in China in 2023. These data indicate the city's high level of economic development and urbanization.

This suggests that people living in Shenzhen generally have higher levels of education and economic resources, making them more likely to have independent lifestyles and career choices, which can influence their marriage decisions. Furthermore, the process of urbanization has brought about social phenomena such as changes in family structure and shifts in values, which may also affect the phenomenon of delayed marriage.

This study adopted a qualitative research method in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of contemporary young people's concept of marriage. By organizing and summarizing the respondents' answers to different questions as a source of data, an attempt was made to understand and explain the contemporary young people's views on marriage. I reached out to these generally small samples through snowball sampling methods and social software. All

participants had lived in Shenzhen for at least five years. Most of the respondents were already working in Shenzhen and two were students.

This study was granted ethical clearance from College's Institutional Review Board. In order to protect the privacy of the study participants, I saved the responses in password-protected cell phones and computers. When referring to the data collected, I used pseudonyms for all participants' names and hid any other information that could jeopardize their confidentiality. After submitting this project on May 1, 2024, I destroyed all interview materials and transcripts.

Questionnaire

1. Tell me anything about marriage that you heard recently.
2. What are your thoughts about getting married?
3. Tell me about your ideal marriage.
4. Have you ever had a romantic relationship?
 - a. Tell me a story that may represent your feelings about the relationship.
 - b. What made you decide to be a couple?
 - c. Did you think of marrying the person?
5. What are the most important qualities for your spouse to have?

[if it is unclear] a. How would you define the quality?
6. What factors do you think are important in deciding whether or not to get married?
7. What are some experiences or thoughts that shape your marriage attitudes?
 - a. How do your family and friends influence your attitudes toward marriage? (If yes)

Have you ever experienced pressure to get married from friends, family, or society? How did you respond to this pressure?

- b. Do you think that you need to be financially stable to get married? Why or why not?
 - c. How do you think cultural or religious beliefs may influence your decision to get married?
 - d. How do you perceive the impact of social media and technology on relationships and marriage?
8. What is your ideal age of marriage? Why?
 9. How do you think marriage may change your life? (If they choose not to marry, Ask What makes you not want to marry)
 10. What do you think are the challenges of marriage?
 11. What do you think about cohabitation(Living with a partner without marrying each other)?
 12. What are some benefits and drawbacks of getting married at a younger age versus waiting until later in life?
 13. What changes do you see in people's attitudes toward marriage?
 14. Do you have any other thoughts or comments on the topic of marriage that you would like to share?

Fertility-related question:

1. Do you plan to have children? (Why or why not)
 - a.(if yes) How many children do you plan to have, and why? Do you have any preference for the gender of children? Why?
 - n.(if no) In what kind of situation may you change your mind about having children?
2. What do you think are the benefits and drawbacks of having children?

a. (If answer related) How does having children impact your work? Can you give me an example?

3. What are your thoughts on the relationship, if any, between getting married and having children?

Demographic question:

1. What is your age?
2. How would you define your gender?
3. What is your religious affiliation, if any?
4. What is your parents' marital status?
5. Have you grown up in a single or two-parent household?
6. What is your occupation?
7. What is your socioeconomic status?
8. What is your education level?

Table 1: Demographic and Socioeconomic Characteristics

Name(fake)	Age	Gender	Belief	Family	Occupation	Education	Income (RMB/year)	Marital Status
Luo	25	Female	None	Mother and Father	Qualification Management	Undergraduate	60000	Single
Pan	26	Male	None	Mother and Father	Finance	Undergraduate	60000	Single
Qin	24	Male	None	Mother and Father	Manufacturing	Undergraduate	100000	Single
Jie	23	Male	None	Mother and Father	Student	Undergraduate	0	Single
Yang	28	Male	None	Mother	Engineering	Junior College	120000	Married
Guo	24	Female	None	Mother and Father	Manufacturing	Undergraduate	50000	Single
Dou	29	Female	None	Mother and Father	Administrative office	Undergraduate	11000	Married
Chen	24	Female	None	Mother and Father	Administrative office	Undergraduate	60000	Single
Guan	32	Female	None	Mother and Father	Government-Enterprise Relationship	Undergraduate	120000	Married
Bao	32	Female	None	Mother and Father	Real-Estate	Junior College	50000	Married
Wang	24	Male	None	Mother and Father	Student	Undergraduate	0	Single

Findings and Discussions

Section 1: Marital View

In contemporary China, the concept of intimate relationships is experiencing a profound transformation, influenced by a convergence of cultural evolution, economic development, and demographic shifts. Traditionally, marriage in Chinese society entailed early marriage and early childbirth, often arranged by parents. Marriage and reproduction were strongly linked, with men marrying at the age of 18, their spouses being forcibly arranged by their parents, and childbirth following shortly after marriage. Cohabitation was strictly prohibited under such circumstances, as it contradicted traditional moral values. The traditional moral view held that individuals should marry only once in their lifetime, and remarriage was deemed shameful. Society did not accept premarital cohabitation, and premarital sexual behavior was condemned.

However, following the economic reforms of 1978 and rapid urbanization, people's lifestyles changed. Individual autonomy has increased, leading to changes in attitudes towards marriage and family. Cohabitation has become a lifestyle choice, transitioning from strict rejection to gradual acceptance by society. A study titled *Prevalence and Social Determinants of Premarital Cohabitation in China* in 2014 indicated that approximately 10% of Chinese individuals had experienced cohabitation before first marriage. By 2017, this percentage had risen to 30%. *A survey on young couples' cohabitation* in 2023 revealed that 77.8% of young people were accepting of cohabitation. This shift in cohabitation attitudes also reflects current views on marriage. In the following sections, I will discuss people's attitudes towards marriage, attempting to reveal the relationship between contemporary youth's attitudes towards cohabitation and marriage through qualitative analysis.

Cohabitation

Traditional marriage in China is characterized by early marriage, and society does not accept premarital cohabitation. Premarital sexual behavior is severely prohibited. Because premarital cohabitation and premarital sexual behavior are seen as inconsistent with traditional family values and ethical morals, they may damage the reputation and dignity of the family, thus being strictly prohibited and condemned in traditional society. Additionally, traditional culture emphasizes the purity and legitimacy of marriage. In traditional views, marriage is seen as a moral and ethical guideline, with sacred and inviolable significance. Premarital cohabitation and premarital sexual behavior are considered violations of the purity and legitimacy of marriage.

However, following the reforms of 1978, many aspects of life have been affected by these changes, including attitudes, behaviors, and lifestyles (Davis 1992, 2000; Tang and Parish 2000; Yu and Xie 2013). The perspective of economic development emphasizes material opportunities and economic foundations for cohabitation (Jia Yu and Yu Xie, 2015). With the development of industrialization, a large number of people have migrated, leading to many young adults living apart from their parents. While living costs have increased, they have also gained the freedom to choose their lifestyle. As indicated by numerous studies, high living expenses, particularly in large, more developed cities, make economic resources an increasingly important determinant of marriage (e.g., Sweeny 2002). Cohabitation provides young adults with a transitional period during which they can accumulate economic resources for marriage (Jia Yu and Yu Xie, 2015). This situation is particularly evident in the city of Shenzhen. The extremely high migrant population means that most people are individuals rather than families. Many people come to Shenzhen to work and support their parents in their hometowns. Living alone means having

absolute autonomy over one's lifestyle. Considering the exorbitant rents in Shenzhen, cohabitation is indeed a way for young people to reduce living costs.

Male attitudes towards cohabitation are even more supportive. Respondent Pan stated,

“Cohabitation is quite casual. If you want to cohabit, you cohabit; if you don't want to, you don't. I think by the time the relationship with the partner reaches the stage of marriage, cohabitation must have happened. The only difference between cohabitation and marriage is in terms of finances. During cohabitation, money is still managed individually. After marriage, money belongs to the family, and at this point, assets are completely combined.”

Scholars have noticed that economic prospects are becoming increasingly important factors in marriage decisions in China, which is becoming more similar to past research results in the United States (Yu and Xie, 2013). Therefore, the determinants of cohabitation in China are likely to change in the future, as cohabitation as a form of union has been widely accepted by those who lack economic resources to get married (Yu and Xie, 2015). Economic factors also have a significant impact on the decision to cohabit.

In interviews with four married individuals, three had engaged in premarital cohabitation, while another indicated they frequently lived together but did not fully cohabit. This indirectly corroborates the idea that “cohabitation is more readily accepted and adopted by those who have a better understanding of Western society. Ideological changes and economic development are important reasons for the emergence of cohabitation in China” (Yu and Xie, 2015). This implies that local economic development is positively correlated with cohabitation. The higher the economic development level in the individual's region, the higher the likelihood of cohabitation. This means that compared to rural areas or less developed cities, people in developed cities are more likely to cohabit. This aligns with the situation of the respondents, especially when all respondents have received higher education, their acceptance of cohabitation is much higher than that of those who have not received higher education. This also supports the findings of Yu and

Xie: education significantly increases the likelihood of premarital cohabitation, with a more significant impact on females. Additionally, living in Shenzhen, a city with over 60% migrant population, contributes to the high tolerance for cohabitation among people. These factors collectively lead to all respondents having positive and affirmative attitudes towards cohabitation. This indicates that premarital cohabitation is seen as helpful for marriage by many people. This is consistent with the findings of the 2023 survey on young couples' cohabitation, which stated that over 49.6% of couples felt their relationship improved after cohabitation, and 17.1% of couples entered into marriage after cohabitation. Similar to cohabitation phenomena in the West, a study by Rhoades et al. (2011) found that partners who went through a cohabitation stage were more inclined to support and trust each other in marriage, making them better equipped to handle challenges in marriage, thus improving the quality and stability of marriage.

From conversations with the respondents, I found that when discussing cohabitation, they subconsciously perceive it as cohabitation with the purpose of marriage, with its significance lying in testing for married life. Respondent Jie said, "I believe any cohabitation that is not aimed at marriage is playing rogue. I can accept short-term cohabitation. I think if cohabitation lasts long enough, I will get married." Cohabitation is seen as a trial and preparation stage before marriage. Many people choose cohabitation as a means to better understand and adapt to each other, with the aim of entering marriage life more securely and happily in the future. In a survey by *Family*, 17% of respondents stated that cohabitation was for the purpose of trial marriage; 25% of cohabitants believed that cohabitation could mentally prepare them sufficiently for formal marriage; and 24% of cohabitants believed that cohabitation was to facilitate easy separation if they found the relationship unsuitable before marriage. It can be seen that the

motives behind the majority of cohabitation are for testing rather than as an alternative form of marriage.

Attitudes about marriage

In contemporary society, although traditional views on the importance of marriage remain deeply rooted, attitudes and perceptions towards marriage are undergoing complex and profound transformations amidst changes in social structure, values, and individual choices. In traditional views, marriage is not merely a union between two individuals but is also regarded as the cornerstone of family, society, and even the entire cultural system. However, with the development of modern society, there has been a gradual increase in the emphasis on individual rights and freedoms, leading people to prioritize their own happiness and self-fulfillment. In this context, marriage is no longer seen as an essential part of life but rather as a form of personal choice. Increasingly, people are placing importance on their emotional needs and quality of life, resulting in more flexible and diversified attitudes towards marriage. Some choose to delay marriage or even opt for a single lifestyle in pursuit of career development or personal growth, while others choose non-traditional forms of marriage, such as cohabitation or open relationships, to fulfill their emotional needs and lifestyle preferences.

From conversations with the respondents, it was found that most participants believe that marriage is not inevitable and is not a necessity. The lifestyle of long-term singlehood may even be relatively easy for them. Respondent Jie mentioned, "I will only get married when fate brings me the right person." Respondent Yang stated, "Marriage is a luxury nowadays; you need to have enough money, time, and the right person to get married. It's not easy to obtain any of these three in today's society." Although most people acknowledge the lifestyle of not getting married, all

respondents expressed a desire to get married. This implies that marriage is still a very significant experience for them, reflecting that traditional views still influence the current public perception of marriage. Respondent Jie stated, “Marriage is sacred and important. The quality of your future life is determined by the quality of your marriage, so you should choose your partner carefully.” Marriage, as a way of life, indeed has a significant impact on people.

Some respondents express fear towards married life, believing that after a long time, love fades away in marriage. Respondent Luo remarked,

“I think people saying that marriage is the grave of love are right. In reality, most marriages are unhappy. I don't think my future marriage will be happy either. One of my girlfriends got married, and she complains about married life every day. She feels very unhappy. She's always hoping for this kind of unhappy life to end.”

The respondents who view married life negatively often base their opinions on their friends or the environment around them. The environment they refer to mostly consists of negative news about marriage from society. Respondent Qin stated, "Many couples I follow online have broken up. I think marriage is a shackle." Witnessing unhappy marriages in life brings significant pressure to them regarding marriage, leading to a lack of confidence in their own marriages. Despite still hoping for marriage, they are concerned about married life. Sun Liming pointed out in her study, “In the past, people's understanding of married life came mostly from parents and those around them. With the development of the film and television industry, people can see depictions of real married life in realistic works. Various media platforms produce a large amount of content about marriage and relationships, shaping people's new views on marriage. In addition to TV dramas, short video apps make negative issues such as domestic violence more visible, and young women are more likely to develop a 'fear of marriage' and other exclusionary attitudes.” (Sun, 2024) The development of social media fundamentally changes the formation of people's ideas and also greatly influences their views on marriage. Social media

platforms often choose extreme cases, such as domestic violence and infidelity, as the core of discussion to attract more attention. This behavior can lead people to mistakenly believe that extreme situations are common because they see them on social media, which worsens their attitudes towards marriage and even makes them afraid of entering into marriage and married life.

Not all respondents hold negative attitudes towards marriage. Respondent Pan believes that "Marriage is definitely something that brings happiness. It cannot be denied that a bad marriage can cause suffering, but you have the right to choose your partner." Respondent Dou thinks, "Marriage is finding someone who matches your soul, and then they treat you well, and you feel happy and content with them, and then you live together, and then get married. I think it's a beautiful thing." From their conversations, it's evident that they view marriage positively. They believe that marriage can improve their lives and they aspire to get married. Their attitudes towards marriage largely stem from their upbringing; if their parents had a happy marriage, they tend to view marriage as positive, believing it can bring joyous experiences. Regardless of the attitudes towards marriage held by the respondents, they all yearn for marriage. Marriage remains a significant stage in their lives. Single respondents aspire to experience the different lifestyle that marriage brings, viewing marriage as something beautiful, even though post-marriage life may not necessarily be happy. They perceive marriage as sacred. This notion aligns with the concept of "sacredness" mentioned in traditional Chinese views on marriage (Hao, 2021).

Section 2: Marital Decisions

In the previous section, I have explored the evolution of marriage concepts in China. Traditional beliefs regard marriage as a family rather than individual choice, where young people often lack the right to choose their own partners and instead have their marriages arranged by their parents. This traditional view places the selection of marriage partners at the family level rather than the individual level. However, with societal changes and developments, people's attitudes towards marriage have begun to shift. Marriage has gradually transitioned from being a family choice to an individual one, granting individuals greater decision-making power in selecting their marriage partners. This shift also affects the evolution of mate selection concepts, moving from a parental-led mate selection process to one led by individuals. Marriage has become more personalized, with people preferring to marry those they like. In this scenario, mate selection criteria vary significantly for each individual due to personal reasons. According to interview results, respondents typically prioritize three aspects when selecting a mate: love, family, and finances. Only when the partner meets their standards in these aspects do they consider marriage. Therefore, gaining a deeper understanding of these three factors and attempting to comprehend their influence on marriage decisions is crucial for further exploration of the evolution of marriage and mate selection concepts. Next, I will discuss these three factors separately and analyze their impact on marriage decisions.

Love

Love, as the core of human emotions and emotional relationships, is a complex and multidimensional experience. Its definition varies from person to person and is influenced by various factors such as culture, society, and personal experiences. In the field of social sciences,

scholars have conducted extensive and in-depth research on love, attempting to reveal its essence and characteristics. Early social psychologists like Maslow categorized love into two types, namely D-type love and B-type love. D-type love is primarily based on mutual dependence, while B-type love is based on mutual independence, but both parties still contribute to each other (Maslow, 1962). Hatfield & Walshter further divided love into companionate and passionate categories.

In addition to these dual theories, love has also been categorized into three types, namely intimacy, passion, and commitment (Sternberg, 1986). Intimacy includes feelings of closeness, connectedness, and a sense of being tied to someone in a romantic relationship, typically evoking warm experiences at its essence. Passion refers to the drive associated with physical attraction, sexual satisfaction, and related phenomena in romantic relationships. Additionally, self-esteem, success, belongingness, and dominance play significant roles in experiencing passion. Commitment involves responsibility and long-term decision-making. Lee further subdivided these three types of love into six categories: erotic love (Eros), ludic love (Ludus), friendship love (Storge), manic love (Mania), pragmatic love (Pragama), and altruistic love (Agape). In this discussion, we won't delve into the logical definitions of love by scholars, but rather focus on the expectations of contemporary young people when it comes to love. Based on the aforementioned categorization of love types, I found that a small portion of the interviewees describe love as erotic love (Eros), while more interviewees expect friendship love (Storge) and pragmatic love (Pragama).

When asked about the most important factor in deciding whether to get married, some interviewees place a high value on love between the couple. They believe that a marriage without love cannot last. Interviewee Jie said,

“Marriage should be built on the foundation of affection. It's like the romantic feeling at the beginning of a relationship. I don't expect it to be exactly the same as when we first fell in love, but at least 80% similar. If it becomes cold right after marriage, then there's no point in getting married.”

Here, the love mentioned by interviewee Jie is passionate and romantic love. He believes that the essence of love is romantic, dynamic, and emotional. This type of love, according to Lee's definition of love, falls under erotic love. Among the 11 interviewees, only 2 place a strong emphasis on erotic love. They are interviewees Jie and Luo. They are relatively younger compared to the overall group, and emotions of passion and romance often peak at their age, making them more easily attracted to the appearance, personality, or certain traits of their partners. This attraction is often based on physical attraction or emotional intimacy, closely related to physical maturity and sexual appeal. At this stage, young people often prioritize emotional investment and infatuation between individuals, longing to share romantic moments with their partners and experience the passion and emotions of love. In the pursuit of love, they often exhibit strong emotional expressions and exchanges, hoping to establish a deep emotional connection and intimate relationship with their partners. This leads them to emphasize emotional passion and romance more in the pursuit of love, longing to establish a deep emotional relationship and physical intimacy with their partners. This tendency is particularly evident in interviewee Jie, whose student status makes him more eager to experience romance in love. This need for love is consistent with the findings of An Qi Xin's research, who pointed out in "The Effect of Social Transition towards Marriage Concept in Chinese City" that 78% of teenagers

prioritize romantic love more when choosing a spouse, focusing on personal inner qualities rather than external conditions.

In addition to interviewees Jie and Luo, the rest of the interviewees expressed varying degrees of demand for pragmatic love. They long for stable and long-lasting love. For this reason, they are willing to spend more time dating to help them determine whether the other person is suitable for them. During this period, they will assess their partners from various aspects, including lifestyle habits, common interests, future goals, and family backgrounds. They often use the term "three perspectives" to describe this type of love. Interviewee Dou said,

"The main thing is whether two people can get along, whether there is a future between oneself and the other person. The most important thing is that this person must be suitable for me, and then comes the family and economic situation. It's about whether this person's worldview, values, and outlook on life are consistent with mine."

"Three perspectives" refer to a person's worldview, values, and outlook on life. The worldview is the lens through which an individual perceives and interprets the world around them. It encompasses their beliefs about the nature of reality, the purpose of existence, and their place within the broader scheme of things. Values are the guiding principles and moral standards that inform an individual's behavior and decision-making. Outlook on life refers to an individual's overall attitude and perspective towards life and its inherent challenges, opportunities, and uncertainties. It reflects their general disposition, level of optimism or pessimism, resilience in the face of adversity, and sense of purpose and meaning. These three perspectives form the foundation of an individual's identity and shape their perceptions, choices, and interactions with the world. Most interviewees desire partners with similar or compatible perspectives. Interviewee Qin said, "You need to establish an emotional connection with the other person. When this emotion gradually heats up and stabilizes, you will consider whether

marriage is needed to elevate this relationship.” The main reason for this phenomenon may be influenced by traditional Chinese culture. In traditional marriage concepts, marriage emphasizes family and societal stability and harmony, emphasizing familial affection and responsibility. In traditional views, marriage is seen as a union between two families, not just a matter between two individuals. Therefore, Chinese people typically pay more attention to whether their marriage partners can fit into their family and social environment to ensure the stability and harmony of the marital relationship. Furthermore, all interviewees demand loyalty from their partners, considering it as a responsibility partners should fulfill. This also aligns with the traditional notion of marriage being seen as a duty and obligation rather than just an expression of love.

Socioeconomic status

Economic status, as an important aspect of marital decision-making, also frequently emerged during the interviews. With the increase in the level of social and economic development, the cost of living has risen. When facing the decision of marriage, people tend to focus on their partner's economic situation. This more rational decision-making process corresponds to the majority of people's demand for pragmatic love, namely, hoping that marriage can bring economic stability and security to themselves and their families. All interviewees mentioned requirements regarding economic situations when asked about the conditions for marriage. Although different interviewees prioritize economic situations differently in their marital decision-making, they all have a minimum requirement. The description of the economic situation here is measured in terms of salary, while other factors such as family assets are not included in the survey scope. By averaging the minimum economic requirements for marriage

among all interviewees, the total annual income for both men and women is approximately 180,000 RMB, with an average annual income of 90,000 RMB per person. According to the Shenzhen Municipal Bureau of Statistics' 2022 report on the average annual wage of urban unit personnel, the average annual wage of private sector employees in Shenzhen in 2022 was 90,322 yuan. The interviewees' minimum expectations are consistent with the city's average wage, indicating that the interviewees' expectations for the income level of their prospective marriage partners are higher than the average level.

When it comes to the topic of income, there are significant differences in responses between men and women. Men often have higher requirements for their personal income.

Interviewee Pan said,

“I think if I want to get married in Shenzhen, I should at least have an annual salary of 120,000 RMB. If I want to have children, this salary is definitely not enough. I would consider having children only if I have at least 240,000 RMB. Of course, the more money, the better. I think if the total income of both parties is 360,000 RMB, married life should be more comfortable.”

Higher income can bring more economic stability to marriage. Interviewee Qin believes, "It's hard to get married without money because you might need to pay for the wedding, and after marriage, you still need to consider buying a car and a house. These all require a lot of money, I'm not sure how much exactly, but definitely more than what I can afford now." Subconsciously, men consider hosting weddings, buying houses, and buying cars to be their responsibility. They believe that this part of the expenses for marriage should come from themselves rather than their partners.

However, the high cost of housing has become a barrier to entry into marriage. For Chinese people, houses and cars are almost necessities for marriage. Influenced by traditional culture, Chinese people believe that owning a house can bring stability to marriage. According to

the *2022 New Youth Ideal Living Report*, 49% of people believe that buying a house is a must. Owning their own home has also become their goal. Due to the high demand for housing, housing prices are particularly expensive. In 2023, the average housing price in Shenzhen was 69,000 RMB per square meter. Calculated based on a minimum standard of a two-bedroom apartment, the size of the house is approximately 70-90 square meters. Assuming the purchase of an 80-square-meter house, it would require at least 5.5 million RMB. Calculated based on the average annual salary of 90,000 RMB in Shenzhen, both men and women would need to work for at least 30 years without spending any money to own their own home. According to the "Global 80 Cities House Price to Income Ratio Research Report," the housing price-to-income ratio in Shenzhen is four times that of New York. The pressure to buy a house has significantly contributed to the phenomenon of late marriage.

Female interviewees, when faced with this topic, appear to be less focused on it compared to males. Although they also recognize the importance of finances, they do not have such high demands for personal income as men do. For women, the significance of marriage lies not only in economic stability but also in emotional fulfillment, family responsibility, and improvement in quality of life. Interviewee Guo said, "It doesn't matter how much money he makes, as long as I can feel his love, I can feel at ease." Interviewee Chen said, "It's about feeling at peace, satisfying both my material and spiritual needs. Respect me, and be someone I can talk to. I think as long as this person is trustworthy, it's fine." In the eyes of women, loyalty and emotional needs outweigh material requirements. In the past, women often chose to marry someone who could earn money or was wealthy. On one hand, this kind of marriage was arranged by parents, who often pursued a better quality of life and overlooked their children's emotional needs. On the other hand, wealthy individuals in the past usually meant higher status,

a better lifestyle, and more power. Such individuals would be admired and respected by more people. However, with the development of society, women's status in education, employment, and other aspects has continued to improve, making them more capable of living independently and realizing their own value. Whether in the workplace or in the family, women have a stronger voice. Therefore, compared to the past, they are more likely to focus on finding a partner who can treat them equally and grow together rather than just focusing on the other party's economic conditions.

In addition, women still expect their partner's income to be higher than their own in marriage. Interviewee Dou said, "If you want to get married and have children, your monthly income should be over 10,000 yuan, I mean for the man. For the woman, 5,000 to 6,000 yuan is enough. This is the minimum standard I'm talking about. Normally, in most families, the man's income is higher than the woman's." This expectation of higher income for men than for women reflects the continuation of traditional gender role perceptions in marriage. Men are seen as the financial backbone and primary breadwinners of the family, while women are more often associated with caregiving for the family and children. Therefore, female interviewees have certain expectations for the future partner's income, hoping that the partner can provide financial support and take on the family's economic responsibilities. The roots of this perception may be traced back to traditional family structures and gender division of labor. This also implies that despite the improvement in women's status, the influence of traditional beliefs still persists. The general trend of men having higher incomes than women remains. According to *the 2023 Report on the Current Status of Women in the Chinese Workplace*, the average monthly salary for women in 2023 was 8,689 yuan, while the average monthly salary for men was 9,942 yuan. In 2019, the average monthly salary for women was 7,245 yuan, while the average monthly salary

for men was 9,467 yuan. From the data, it can be seen that women's salaries have indeed increased significantly in recent years, but there is still a gap compared to the average wages of men. The objective fact may also explain why women expect their partner's income to be higher than their own when choosing a partner.

Extended family members

Family, as the cornerstone and pillar of marriage, also plays a very important role in marital decisions. There are many definitions of family, but here we simplify it to mean a three-person family composed of parents and blood-related children. Chinese people attach great importance to blood relations, which is also related to traditional Chinese beliefs. There are many factors influencing marital decisions related to family, but here we will focus on discussing family values and relationships among family members, without delving too much into the overall economic situation of the family. When interviewees mention family, most of them are discussing family values, and some interviewees want to understand the relationships among family members to judge the state of married life.

Most interviewees expressed that gaining recognition from the other party's family members is extremely important to them. They believe that without this recognition from the family, married life would be very difficult. However, if they are accepted by the other party's family members, family relationships after marriage will be more harmonious, and the marriage will be more stable. Family members will support each other, contributing to a more enduring marriage. Interviewee Yang said,

“I think building a good relationship with the other party's parents is crucial for ensuring happiness in married life. At least when the other party marries their daughter to you, they won't

worry about your character. When I married my wife, I brought many gifts to her parents. They were very happy to receive the gifts and said they were reassured to marry their daughter to me.”

The practice of giving gifts is often a strategy to establish a closer relationship with the other party's parents. Moreover, in China, there is a custom where the bride's parents collect a certain amount of money from the man when their daughter gets married, which is called "bride price." On one hand, they believe that this allows them to assess whether the groom is willing to spend money on their daughter. On the other hand, they also hope to receive this money to protect their daughter from being mistreated after marriage. In case the other party treats their daughter poorly and they choose to divorce, the bride's family will have this money as insurance, providing security for her future life. According to the answers of some female interviewees, the bride price is approximately 90,000 RMB, which is roughly equivalent to the earnings of the male for nine months.

Men generally agree with the practice of giving bride price to the bride's parents, but they do not explicitly state how much should be given. Initially, this monetary gift was regarded as a token of appreciation, belonging to the traditional custom of marriage and was considered a bride price, used to compensate for the loss of labor from the bride's family. However, nowadays, the “compensatory function and subsidy function of the bride price have gradually disappeared, and most of what remains are bare-faced utility and exploitation.” (Wu Tianhui 2016) This is because many brides' parents forcibly demand high bride prices and make it one of the conditions for marriage. This has led many people to delay marriage or remain unmarried because they cannot afford such exorbitant bride prices. It also causes concern for marriage among some people. However, this phenomenon is more common in rural areas, and people in urban areas generally do not make excessive demands for bride prices. On one hand, more people living in urban areas have received higher education, and they view the act of demanding bride price as selling

daughters, and they typically do not make demands for bride prices. On the other hand, women living in major cities have higher economic status, and their families are less dependent on their daughters, so they are usually not affected by their daughters' marriages.

Giving the bride's family a dowry is actually a form of two-way communication. The groom's side can also assess the situation of the bride's family from this aspect. Some interviewees believe that observing the bride's family can provide a better understanding of the individual. The influence of the original family on the individual is very significant. Interviewee Guan said: "Usually, he is like his parents, so when you communicate with the other party's parents, you can actually judge whether your understanding of the other party is correct. This is also an important part of choosing a partner." In sociology, the influence of parents on their children is referred to as intergenerational transmission, which denotes the social phenomenon of passing on psychological traits, relevant abilities, and behaviors from one generation to the next (Chi & Yu, 2011). Traditional values exhibit a strong intergenerational transmission effect (Pariante & Orr, 2010). This implies that children's values often resemble those of their parents.

However, within intergenerational transmission, parents' own values typically form the basis of their children's values, yet children, influenced by various factors, will exercise their agency based on their parents' values to further develop their own unique set of values (Schönplflug, 2001). This suggests that children's values may not align entirely with those of their parents and are often influenced by societal factors affecting themselves. Therefore, communicating and spending time with the partner's parents are important for the interviewees in deciding whether to marry. Interviewees hope to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their partner and their partner's family. Apart from wanting to understand their partner better, interviewees also have certain expectations of their partner's family. Interviewee Luo said, "I

hope to get along with my partner's parents, at least we should respect each other. I've seen many cases where the relationship between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is not handled well, and their married life is very painful. I don't want to encounter such a situation." This requirement for their partner's parents also emerges in some of the conversations with the interviewees, as they hope for mutual respect between themselves and their partner's parents. They have character requirements for being calm and kind. This is similar to the requirements interviewees have for their partners, with a high emphasis on emotional needs. Interestingly, almost none of the interviewees have economic requirements for their partner's parents. This contradicts traditional values, as traditional marriage views consider marriage to be a matter between two families, placing greater importance on both families' conditions. Whereas, nowadays, people are more concerned about the individual conditions of both parties, and the requirements for families have decreased. This is consistent with the earlier discussed shift in marriage values, where the importance of the family in marriage has diminished.

Section 3: Fertility

As I mentioned at the beginning, in traditional Chinese marriage beliefs, childbirth and marriage are closely linked. Having children after marriage has become the norm for most Chinese people. However, in recent years, the birth rate has continued to decline. According to data released by the National Bureau of Statistics, China's birth rate decreased from 1.36% in 2016 to 0.639% in 2023. Meanwhile, the mortality rate in 2023 was 0.787%, resulting in a natural population growth rate of -0.148%. This phenomenon of population decline is referred to as the second demographic transition, which, at the micro-level, entails the weakening of the family structure, transitioning from the "family asset mode" to the "individual family mode" (Van de Kaa & Lesthaeghe, 1986). Through the interview process, I discovered that respondents' views on childbirth have deviated from traditional norms, as marriage is no longer strongly associated with childbirth. Additionally, the responsibility of raising children is now more shared between both partners, rather than solely the responsibility of their parents. This has led many individuals to have economic requirements for themselves and their partners before considering childbirth. The increasing education levels of women have also raised the opportunity cost of childbirth, especially in major urban areas. Alongside the improvement in quality of life comes an increase in the cost of raising children. These factors collectively influence the birth rate, leading many individuals to delay or forgo childbirth. In the following sections, I will discuss childbirth beliefs and economic factors separately, analyzing how they each impact the birth rate.

Fertility view

In Section 1, we learned that there have been significant changes in Chinese attitudes towards marriage, and similarly, there have been significant changes in childbirth beliefs. With economic development and social progress, an increasing number of young people are reexamining the meaning and responsibility of childbirth. In the past, having children was considered an important task for perpetuating the family line and continuing the family lineage.

Women's role in marriage was primarily seen as giving birth and taking care of household chores. However, now, childbirth is no longer seen as a necessary part of life, and children are not the sole linchpin of family relationships (Wang, Hu & Zhang, 2023). The rise in education levels has also led more people to recognize women's rights, and women are no longer treated as mere tools for childbirth, having greater control over their reproductive rights. The purpose of having children has shifted from meeting the needs of the family to meeting personal desires. In this context, people are more concerned about their own quality of life, and the purpose of having children often revolves around self-fulfillment.

Among the 11 interviewees, 9 of them expressed their acceptance of having children without getting married. The other two stated that they personally would still prefer to get married before having children, but they accepted the decision of others to have children without getting married. Interviewee Pan mentioned, "I can accept having children without getting married. In the past, I might have been concerned about the household registration issues for the child. With the new policy in place, children can now be registered without the need for marriage." The new policy refers to the allowance for registering children born out of wedlock without providing the parents' marriage certificate. Before this policy change, children born out of wedlock couldn't be registered, which meant they wouldn't have proper identification documents and would face difficulties in attending school or finding formal employment when they grew up. To register their children, many people would choose to get married first and then divorce. The new policy has facilitated the registration process for children and ensured equal rights for children born out of wedlock and those born within marriage. This signifies the state's recognition and differentiation between childbirth and marriage by modifying policies.

Many interviewees, when asked about their preferences regarding the number of children, almost all expressed a desire to have only one child. This indicates that the one-child policy has had a profound impact on the interviewees. Historically, policy interventions have shaped the dynamics of Chinese families. The strict one-child policy in China, which was adjusted too late, is another important reason for the low birth rate (Wang Wenlong 2023). The one-child policy, in effect from 1979 until its end in 2016, lasted for 37 years, covering almost the entire contemporary young population and their parents, resulting in the majority of interviewees preferring to have only one child. The one-child policy has had a lasting impact on the gender composition of the marriage market (Zheng 2020). In contrast to this study, the interviewees did not show a clear preference for the gender of their children, with some preferences being solely based on personal preferences. Interviewee Pan said, “I definitely want a little girl, girls are so cute. After all, I am a man, and I prefer girls a little more.” Under the influence of Confucian traditional thought, China exhibits a strong preference for males in most families, prioritizing the birth of sons over daughters. This preference primarily stems from three factors: lineage continuity, eldercare, and providing labor for family. Consequently, this has resulted in gender imbalance (Liu Keping & Liang Lixia 2023). The fact that respondents show no significant preference for gender may indicate a shift in traditional attitudes towards offspring gender preference. Women can also achieve economic parity with men through higher education, thereby contributing to the support of their parents. Respondent Guan stated,

“Girls tend to be more attentive to their parents. When you get old, you'll find that daughters are the ones who worry about you, care for you, and make sure you're not bored. But boys, they usually don't even call their parents unless there's something specific.”

Women, compared to men, may be more attuned to their parents' emotional needs, which could be a key factor in breaking down gender disparities. As people focus more on their own

feelings, emotional fulfillment often becomes something that men may not easily provide. In 2016, the one-child policy was changed to a two-child policy, and in 2021, the policy was further adjusted to encourage the birth of three or more children. These policies have yet to fully demonstrate their impact on marriage trends. Only one interviewee expressed a desire to have one boy and one girl, as they felt that having two children would prevent loneliness.

When asked about the purpose of having children, the responses from the interviewees varied. Generally, they can be categorized into four types: children bring personal happiness, children serve as a bond to enhance marital bliss, entering into another stage of life after marriage, and meeting the expectations of parents. The first two categories focus on the quality of marriage, hoping that children will add joy to life. Respondent Jie said, “I hope to have a child to accompany me, someone I can play with. Although children can be noisy at times, when they grow up, I can take them to amusement parks and such, which I also enjoy.” The latter two categories are responses to societal pressures. Respondent Guo said,

“As I get older, there will definitely be people urging me to have children. Especially my parents, they've already been pushing me to find a boyfriend. It's annoying, but there's nothing I can do. You can't really escape from it, after all, they're your parents. I might end up compromising.”

Nearly half of the interviewees currently have no plans for childbirth. I believe this is mainly due to the relatively young age of the interviewees. Most of them are unmarried, and premarital pregnancy is not yet the mainstream model in China. Therefore, many people have not carefully considered issues related to childbirth. Among the four married interviewees, Interviewee Yang and Interviewee Bao each have a son, while the other two have not yet given birth and have no plans to have children. Regarding this, Interviewee Dou mentioned, “When it comes to having a child, I worry it will affect my figure. I'm still afraid when I think about it now.” Other female interviewees also expressed similar concerns, believing that having children

would negatively impact their physique. Female physique, as part of their appearance, has become one of the factors considered during childbirth. The potential deterioration of physique due to childbirth may affect their confidence and social acceptance. This implies that women have a more complete understanding of their self-worth, emphasizing women's autonomy in decision-making. As Wang Wenlong explained in the context of low fertility rates, “The improvement of women's socio-economic status and the enhancement of autonomy are among the intrinsic factors leading to low fertility rates.”(Wang 2024) Economic status also plays a significant role in influencing childbirth decisions. In the next chapter, I will provide a more detailed analysis of economic factors.

Cost of childrearing

The cost of childbirth has been identified as the primary economic reason for the rapid decline in China's fertility rate in recent decades (Pan Yunhua & Chen Bo, 2011). This cost includes both the expenses of giving birth and the costs associated with raising children. The expenditure involved in childbirth is often relatively low compared to the costs of raising children. Especially in urban areas, the cost of childcare includes higher living expenses, education fees, and housing rents. The cost of raising children, as one of the significant economic factors influencing the willingness of childbearing-aged individuals to have children, has become an important factor limiting the reproductive decisions of couples of childbearing age (Blake, 1977). Many people, when faced with high childcare costs, often choose to delay childbirth or not have children at all. This phenomenon is particularly evident in conversations with the interviewees.

Almost all of the interviewees, when faced with the question of whether to have children, mentioned economic considerations in their responses. They believe that without good economic conditions, they would not consider having children. Money has become a prerequisite for childbirth, almost becoming a decisive requirement in reproductive decision-making.

Interviewee Dou said, “There are different ways to raise children in poverty and wealth. But I definitely want to have money before considering having children. I don't want to lower my quality of life after having children.” Interviewee Chen 's emphasis on the quality of life reflects the interviewees' preference for investing more money in themselves to ensure their quality of life, indicating that the interviewees lean towards personal needs rather than the traditional notion of family interests. Interviewee Yang said:

“I didn't realize how expensive it would be to have children before. I know children's expenses are high, but this expense exceeded my expectations. I don't even know where my child will go to school in two years. I don't have Shenzhen household registration, and neither does my child. He can only go to private kindergartens, which will cost a lot of money. If I had known it would cost so much money, I would have waited another two years to save some money before having another child.”

Non-local household registration restricts Interviewee Yang's child's choice of school. This forces him to spend more money to educate his child. The inequality of educational resources also means that families who immigrate to Shenzhen but do not have Shenzhen household registration need to spend more money to obtain a relatively good education.

However, this is not something that most families can afford. Interviewee Yang's relatively high income allows his child to have better educational resources, but the expenditure on education also becomes a burden for him. According to the *China Childbearing Cost Report 2024 Edition* raising a child from birth to the age of 17 (high school graduation without entering university) requires 530,000 yuan, about 5.9 times China's per capita GDP. Based on the current average annual income of 90,000 yuan, it would take approximately six years of income without

spending on basic necessities to raise a child to the age of 17. Ma Chunhua (2018), using data from the 2014 China Family Panel Studies, pointed out that the cost of raising children in urban areas is much higher than in rural areas, implying that it may take longer to accumulate income in cities to meet the economic demands of child-rearing.

Nonetheless, even so, Interviewee Yang did not consider sending his child back to the countryside for schooling or lowering educational standards, also due to the demand for education quality. Families are more willing to invest more resources in the upbringing of their children to avoid letting them fall behind at the starting line. However, due to the irreversibility of the investment in child rearing, families will bear significant long-term losses (Liu Shuang, Shang Chengguo, 2013). Long-term high investment with uncertain returns has also become one of the factors hindering reproductive decisions. The investment nature of having children does not seem to be as prominent. Only a small number of interviewees expressed the purpose of having children for their own care in old age, while more emphasized emotional satisfaction.

In addition to the direct costs of child-rearing, indirect costs also play a significant role in reproductive decision-making. But, there are no detailed statistics on this calculation, so we will only discuss the potential indirect costs and their impact on reproductive decisions. When it comes to indirect costs, the most affected group is women. Women incur the highest time costs during childbirth and are also the most affected when raising children later on. Traditionally, raising children has been considered the mother's responsibility, implying that women leave the workforce after childbirth to become full-time mothers, responsible for household chores and childcare. This family model is relatively unpopular nowadays, and one significant reason is that a single male income often cannot meet the family's expenses, especially after having children. Interviewee Pan said:

"Both men and women should take care of the children, but women may have to bear more. Unless I am very wealthy, I would consider having the woman quit her job to take care of the children. If I don't have that much money, I might not consider it. Maybe I still rely on parents to take care of the children."

The current situation of Interviewees Bao and Yang's families is that both parents work, and the children are mostly cared for by the parents. This approach may become the mainstream family model in urban China. However, the situation where parents take care of children may not apply to all families who have migrated to Shenzhen, as most migrants come to Shenzhen to work alone and cannot bring their parents along. If the responsibility of taking care of children falls on both men and women, they may need to consider making sacrifices in their careers, resulting in limited income. In addition, some interviewees are more inclined to take care of their children themselves. Interviewee Guan said,

"Most people may consider hiring someone, but teaching children, I don't think it's something you can hire someone to do. It's okay to hire a tutor for tutoring, but I think educating children is more about their values, cognition, and so on. I think these are the most important aspects of education that children should receive."

The emphasis on education by the interviewees lies not only in raising children but also in how to cultivate an excellent child. For this reason, they are even willing to take personal responsibility for educating their children to ensure their values are correct. As women's income increases, the required indirect costs also increase relatively, adding to people's hesitancy when facing the decision to have children.

Although there are protections for women in Chinese labor laws, such as maternity leave, childbirth subsidies, and childcare leave, these protections are not well implemented in reality. Instead, they have become provisions for gender discrimination within companies. According to the *Special Provisions on Labor Protection for Female Employees*, women are entitled to 98 days of maternity leave with regular wages paid by the company during the leave. This has led

many companies to prefer hiring men without leave entitlements over women. Women often need to exert more effort to have the same opportunities as men (Zhen Jinghui, 2015). These policies, which seem to support women in childbirth, have instead made women more reluctant to have children. Many women explicitly express their unwillingness to have children when entering companies to avoid being discriminated against in hiring processes. Moreover, China lacks childcare subsidies, with some cities providing subsidies for second and third children but none for the first child. This subsidy approach is unreasonable, especially considering that the amounts provided are minimal compared to the cost of childcare. The high cost of childcare and the lack of childcare policy subsidies both contribute to the decline in birth rates.

Conclusions

As the second most populous country in the world, China has been experiencing a continuous decline in its birth rate, leading to even negative population growth. This trend has raised concerns about China's population structure and social development. Some scholars believe that the decline in birth rate is closely related to delayed marriage among young people (Yao Xiaobing, Cao Heping, Wang Xiaoyong, 2022). Guo Zhigang and Tian Siyu argue that delayed marriage has significantly contributed to the decline in fertility rates, perhaps even being the most important factor behind it. In my study, I did not analyze the causal relationship between delayed marriage and declining fertility rates, but instead sought to understand the reasons for these phenomena through other aspects.

Through interviews, I attempted to understand the attitudes of today's young people towards marriage and childbirth. From a micro perspective, I analyzed individuals' attitudes towards marriage and childbirth. Combining a macro perspective, I incorporated factors such as the economic situation and policies of Chinese cities into the analysis. At the same time, I used the second demographic transition as a theoretical basis to analyze changes in family structure. Using a life-course perspective, I unfolded individual lives over time within the context of social, historical, and cultural influences. I divided marriage into three parts: cohabitation, marriage, and childbirth. For many people, cohabitation is a form of partnership before marriage. In the lifecourse framework, cohabitation can be seen as a transition, marking the transition from the single stage to the stage of establishing a long-term partner relationship. Cohabitation typically occurs in the early stages of an individual's life-cycle, often during adolescence or young adulthood. Marriage, on the other hand, marks the entry into the family stage, which is also an important transition in the life-cycle. Marriage usually occurs in the middle stage of the

life-cycle. At this stage, individuals typically consider factors such as their economic stability, career development, personal values, and relationship with their partner. Childbirth occurs after marriage or long-term cohabitation, marking the entry into the stage of family life and parenting responsibilities.

By using the lifecourse framework to divide life into different stages, we can better reveal patterns, changes, and influencing factors in individual lives. However, due to limitations in sample size, this study cannot represent the current situation in China. In the future, a combination of questionnaire surveys and interviews can be used to expand the sample size. More detailed data can be used to compare the extent of the transition. Additionally, a larger sample size can better summarize specificities, as attitudes towards marriage are influenced by various factors and often vary, making it difficult to categorize differences.

For cohabitation, most people have already accepted this lifestyle, and some have taken action. However, the cohabitation described by the interviewees is almost always premarital cohabitation with the intention of marriage, serving as a trial marriage. There hasn't been a trend where cohabitation replaces marriage as a way of life for those who choose not to marry. The main reason is that the majority of Chinese people still aspire to marry, seeing cohabitation merely as a tool rather than an alternative form of marriage. Compared to traditional beliefs, attitudes towards cohabitation and marriage are more open, especially among women who often prioritize their own needs and emotional fulfillment in such situations, demonstrating greater autonomy. Additionally, the development of social media has influenced attitudes towards marriage. Negative marriage stories and social phenomena frequently appear on social media, causing some individuals to feel fear and anxiety about marriage, contributing to the phenomenon of delayed marriage.

When making marriage decisions, economic conditions are no longer the sole influencing factor; love and family have also become important considerations. In the survey, discussions about the types of love revealed varying expectations among individuals, ranging from passionate love to friendship love and pragmatic love. Economically, factors such as income level, property ownership, and dowry have varying degrees of impact on marriage decisions. In terms of family factors, the importance placed on family acceptance and family relationships also highlights the significance of family in marriage decisions. Ultimately, the goal of evaluating factors that influence marriage decisions is to pursue stable and long-lasting relationships while valuing both personal emotional needs and economic independence.

Childbearing is no longer seen as an inevitable part of life but increasingly as a personal choice. The rise in awareness of women's rights and the emphasis on individual quality of life have led to a shift in attitudes towards childbearing. However, this shift has also brought about increased indirect costs, particularly in urban areas where the cost of raising children is higher, perhaps contributing to many people choosing to delay childbirth or remain childless. In response, China should consider making appropriate policy adjustments, but at the same time, it needs to consider whether workplace subsidies for women may have the opposite effect on gender equality. Welfare policies for childcare may be a relatively secure assistance strategy.

In conclusion, I have found that China's current situation largely aligns with the characteristics of the Second Demographic Transition, particularly the emphasis on smaller families rather than traditional large families. People are increasingly inclined towards pursuing individual lifestyles and exercising their rights to make independent choices about childbearing. Interestingly, this shift in mindset is an extension of traditional beliefs. The collision between traditional beliefs and modern individualistic tendencies has led to a unique Chinese marriage

concept, which is distinct from that of other countries. The fundamental reason for this is the long-standing influence of China's unique traditional culture on people's morals, values, and worldviews, which still constrain them when facing a new value system, preventing them from completely breaking free. While respondents may accept phenomena such as unmarried pregnancies and remaining single, they are still constrained by societal pressures and personal beliefs when it comes to taking action, preventing themselves from engaging in such behaviors. Changes in mindset often precede changes in social behavior and practices. When people's attitudes shift, their actions often adjust accordingly. China's current situation reflects a shift in attitudes, with corresponding changes in behavior, albeit lagging behind the shift in mindset. The two mutually influence each other, and in the future, we may see more people opting for childfree or unmarried lifestyles, or choosing cohabitation as an alternative to marriage for long-term relationships. Researching gender differences in the future is also highly worthwhile, as often the shift in these attitudes initially appears in women, with men's responses being relatively slower. Differential research can be conducted to observe the extent of this transformation, thereby gaining a better understanding of the situation in China. Furthermore, conducting more in-depth studies on the differences in attitudes among different age groups can help to understand the interaction between macro and micro perspectives.

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