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## **The Puzzle of China's Leftover Women**

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*Abstract:* The aim of this thesis is to identify the roots of the leftover women phenomenon in order to understand why it has appeared. In particular, we examine why the leftover women are having difficulties in finding a husband in the Chinese marriage market. Additionally, we establish whether the leftover women phenomenon may be a consequence of the increasing patriarchal norms in China. Through an in-depth and qualitative case study, we have conducted 15 interviews with highly educated, unmarried women in their mid-late twenties, in Shanghai and Beijing during April 2016. Subsequently, relying on a deductive approach, four themes have emerged from our participant's narratives: 1) Modern versus Traditional; 2) Increasing Standards; 3) Paradox Oversupply Men versus Undersupply Women; 4) Economic and Marital Independence. The most recurring feature in all themes was the increasing patriarchal norms that clashed with the modern values of leftover women. Therefore, our findings reveal, that the leftover women's modern lifestyle get dominated by the increasing traditional values of the Chinese society. Even more, we present a trickle-down effect of the phenomenon, starting from the implementation of the one-child policy, and ending with the leftover women. All in all, the apparent feature of increasing patriarchal norms suggest that the leftover women phenomenon results from a resurgence of gender inequality.

*Key words:* Leftover Women, One-child Policy, Gender Imbalance, Gender Inequality, Patriarchal Norms, China

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# 1 Opening Chapter

*This opening chapter introduces the topic of the leftover women phenomenon, highlighting the objective and relevance of the thesis. A motivation, methodological approach, limitations and thesis outline follow.*

## 1.1 Introduction

After more than three decades of gradual economic reforms, China has positioned itself as the world's fastest growing economy. With a current Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of 10,35 trillion USD and a GDP annual growth rate averaging 9,85 percent from 1989 to 2016 (World Bank, 2016). China's phenomenal development path, transforming itself from a backward developing country to an acknowledged superpower has fascinated economists as well as scholars from all corners of the world. China's extraordinary economic achievements can essentially be explained by the radical policy measures that were implemented by the Chinese government in the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s (Schramm, 2011).

One of the most severe policy measures implemented by the Chinese government during the economic reforms was the one-child policy. Executed in 1979, the one-child policy was set out to regulate, hence to control China's rapidly growing population. Since its implementation it has successfully achieved its goal of decreasing the size of China's population through decreasing fertility rates (China Profile, 2015). The last decade alone, the one-child policy has hindered approximately 250 to 300 million births (Hesketh et al., 2005).

However, one of the main consequences of the one-child policy has been the huge reduction of China's female population. Subsequently China is experiencing an extremely high sex ratio at birth. In 2014, the sex ratio at birth was 116 male births to every 100 females, compared to the global sex ratio at births of 107 male birth to every 100 females (World Factbook, 2015). As a result, the country is going through a demographic crisis. The one-child policy is one of the reasons why China has one of the highest gender

imbalance rates in the world. Currently, Chinese men outnumber women by approximately 33 million (Radio Free Asia, 2015).

Previous academic literature states that when there is a gender imbalance, and a larger supply of men in relation to women, the women privilege from larger dyadic power<sup>1</sup> as they are in higher demand (South and Trent, 1988). However, a survey conducted in 2012 by China's largest matchmaking site Jiayuan.com, showed that 32 percent of the Chinese single women struggle to find a partner (Jiayuan, 2012). Given the large surplus of Chinese men on the marriage market, this has become a much-debated puzzle (Wang, 2003). In line with this, it has been debated this could be due to growing patriarchal norms in China (Fincher, 2014).

In recent years, China's state-led media have published numerous editorials, arguing how young Chinese women have standards that are too great, and only concentrate on acquiring the 'three highs: high education, professional status and income' (Economist, 2014). In 2011 Xinhua News Agency stated "*The tragedy is they don't realise that as women age they are worth less and less, so by the time they get their MA or PhD, they are already old, like yellowed pearls*", (Business Insider, 2013). Subsequently, women that are urban, educated, 25 years of age or older, and are still unmarried have been stigmatised as 'leftover' women or 'shengnü (Chinese 剩女)'. Many scholars have described this as a burden on women: to desert their dreams and hard work pursuing higher education and a career to instead concentrate on finding a spouse to marry before they get too old for the Chinese marriage market (Fincher, 2014).

Fascinated by this current phenomenon we want to understand why the leftover women have appeared. Furthermore, we intend to find out why well-educated, urban women in their mid-late twenties struggle to find a spouse even though there is surplus of men in China. Finally, we aim to find out if the 'leftover women phenomenon' is a consequence of the growing patriarchal norms in China. Hence, we intend to find out if the leftover women are a sign of a resurgence of gender inequality in China. In order to understand the

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<sup>1</sup> Dyadic power is the power to choose what happens in a relationship. For example, if there is a high masculine sex ratio, the women that are in short supply should gain a greater ability (dyadic power) to decide the conditions of the relationship (South and Trent, 1988).

root of this phenomenon, we see it of great importance to begin our research with the implementation of the one-child policy. Resulting in a surplus of men, it was one of the most severe triggers of the gender imbalance. This has created a puzzle: as well-educated women remain unmarried due to difficulties finding a spouse, the so called ‘leftover women’.

## 1.2 Motivation

Why are Chinese women unable to find a suitable husband even though there is a surplus of men? Our motivation lies in understanding this paradox. Therefore, we analyse the phenomenon of the leftover women in greater detail and hope to contribute to the current debate on the topic. Additionally, this topic is extremely up-to-date as many popular magazines and newspapers such as, *The Economist*, *BBC News*, *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* have started investigating the phenomenon of leftover women. Even further, videos of leftover women can be found on *YouTube*.

Furthermore, the leftover women phenomenon is an important topic for economic historians. In China, the one-child policy and the prevalent son-preference has biased its population towards male children, which has created a gender imbalance. Despite this bias, Chinese women are starting to have an increasingly important role in the economy. Recently, several reports have highlighted how Chinese well-educated, urban women are gaining increasing consumer power, due to their economic independence. Gender inequality plays a crucial role when it comes to economic stability, and if women do not achieve their full economic potential, the global economy suffers. If China continues to ignore this economic potential of leftover women, it can have immense consequences for China’s long-term economic growth (Atsmon et al., 2012). Subsequently, this is one of the reasons for why we have chosen the well-educated, unmarried, Chinese urban women in our sample.

Moreover, there is a limited amount of academic papers which focus on the vibrant leftover phenomenon, and the consequences that can be drawn from it. Therefore, we see an opportunity in contributing and filling the gap in existing literature on the leftover women in China and its impact in regards to China’s future.

### 1.3 Objective and Research Question

The aim of this thesis is to identify the roots of the leftover women phenomenon in order to understand why it has appeared as well as to examine why the leftover women are having difficulties in finding a husband in the Chinese marriage market. Additionally, we establish if the leftover women phenomenon is a consequence of the increasing patriarchal norms in China. Through an in-depth and qualitative case study of the leftover women we reach a better understanding, and provide a potential explanation of whether highly educated, unmarried women in their mid-late twenties are a sign of a resurgence of gender inequality in China.

In order to understand this phenomenon, we see it of great significance to highlight the one-child policy in this context. Previous research has found this severe policy to be a major cause of China's current skewed sex ratio. Subsequently, it is important to understand the background when analysing a specific phenomenon. By doing so, this research unfolds a trickle-down effect. It starts with the one-child policy, continues with changing gender roles in China and finishes off with thematic analysis of the leftover women. The following research question(s) have been developed to guide the study, including an overall research question and supporting sub-questions.

#### **Is the leftover women phenomenon an indication for resurgence of gender inequality in urban China?**

- Why has the leftover women phenomenon appeared?
- Why are the leftover women facing a disadvantage in the marriage market?
- Are the leftover women a consequence of the increasing patriarchal norms in China?

### 1.4 Methodological Approach

The research is based on fieldwork, that was conducted in April 2016. We chose Shanghai and Beijing as our selected sites, where we conducted 15 interviews with well-educated,

unmarried women, ages ranging from 25 to 35. Therefore, this research is founded on a qualitative method, as this is the most suitable approach to answer our research questions. Moreover, we decided to use a deductive approach, as we want our chosen theories to guide our research. Even though we use a deductive approach, we hope to offer new theoretical elements within the phenomenon of the leftover women.

There is only a limited amount of qualitative studies on the paradox of why Chinese women have a disadvantage in the marriage market even though there is a surplus of men. Therefore, we contribute with our qualitative study to the puzzle of leftover women. Furthermore, we show a trickle-down effect of the leftover women phenomenon, through this effect four themes emerged from our participant's narratives: 1) Modern versus Traditional; 2) Increasing Standards; 3) Paradox Oversupply Men versus Undersupply Women; 4) Economic and Marital Independence. We have contextualized these themes by examining why the phenomenon of the leftover women have appeared and why they are facing a disadvantage in the marriage market, and if this is because of the growing patriarchal norms in China.

## 1.5 Limitations

In this study, we have had to take several limitations into consideration. One limitation is the age range, as it only consists of individuals between the ages of 25 to 35. Therefore, we see it of great importance to state how our thesis only focuses on the leftover women that are in this age span. Another limitation is that we only have 15 respondents from the urban cities of Shanghai and Beijing. Therefore, our small sample size limits the possibility of generalising the papers findings and results of the leftover women phenomenon, and if the leftover women are an indication for the resurgence of gender inequality in China.

Furthermore, due to time and financial constraints other urban cities in China are left out of the data collection, which limits the geographical scope of the study. Moreover, a further extension to this study could have been to examine the leftover women's situation in regards to gender inequality in the labour market, however, this is beyond the scope of this paper. All these choices have been made deliberately as we are aiming at acquiring an in-depth understanding of the leftover women in this specific age span. Moreover, we believe

by making these choices, it helps us to answer our research questions and fulfil the objective of the thesis.

## 1.6 Thesis Outline

This research is structured in the following way: In section two, a detailed background of whether the implementation of the one-child policy led to a resurgence of gender inequality in China is presented. Section three presents our literature review consisting of previous studies and the theoretical framework, which guides the analysis of this research. Section four describes our methodology. Our empirical analyses, which is the major part of our thesis is displayed in section five. Finally, section six summarises our findings.

## 2 Background

*This section gives a detailed background, whether the implementation of the one-child policy led to a resurgence of gender inequality in China. This is done by looking at the origins of the gender imbalance and whether the kick-off, of the economic reforms and the one-child policy led to the rise of the leftover women.*

### 2.1 Implementation of the One-child Policy

People in China died due to famine, long before Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution, as throughout its history, the Chinese have had to deal with feeding a rapidly growing population (Xiaofei, 2012). In the 18<sup>th</sup> century alone, China doubled its population from 150 to 300 million (Li, 1982).

According to Li (1982) China had to overcome several obstacles in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Natural catastrophes, internal revolts and foreign invasions contributed to the destruction of the peaceful environment. By the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it became apparent that famines were not only created by natural causes, but also due to the political intervention. At this time, China's leaders recognized famines as a threat worthy of opposing (Li, 1982). In the early 1950s, a suggestion was made to reduce the population growth by approving a law on contraception and abortion. The proposal failed due to political upheaval and was followed by the biggest famine ever seen in world history (The Guardian, 2013).

Furthermore, during the time of Mao Zedong, China was hit once again by one of the most severe famines ever seen in the world. From 1958 to 1962, millions of people starved to death (Dikoetter, 2010). This evidence of incapacity and the anxiety of facing the Malthusian disaster<sup>2</sup>, led to a change of course by the Chinese government (Malthus, 1798).

From this, the so called "late, long, few" campaign was initialized in the middle of the 1970s as a family planning programme by the state, in order to promote later childbearing, longer spacing in between giving birth and for couples fewer children (Green, 1988). This campaign was highly contradictive to Mao Zedong's encouragement during the 1950s to

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<sup>2</sup> Malthusian disaster: the outgrowing of its own food supply, which reduced the population's capability to sustain food for themselves (Malthus, 1798).

have as many children as possible to defend China against his perceived Third World War. The “late, long, few” state promotion reduced the total fertility rate from around 5,9 in 1970 to 2,7 in 1979 (Hesketh and Zhu, 1997).

Even though this was already a major reduction in the number of children born to each woman, the consequences of the baby boom during Mao Zedong’s times overhauled, as the reproductive years had started. By 1979, two-thirds of the Chinese population were under the age of thirty (Hesketh and Zhu, 1997). Moreover, Deng Xiaoping, who became Mao Zedong’s successor, was not yet satisfied with this decline and was worried about the increasing population. Deng Xiaoping was convinced a reduction of the population growth was essential to his economic reform programme (Zhu, 2003).

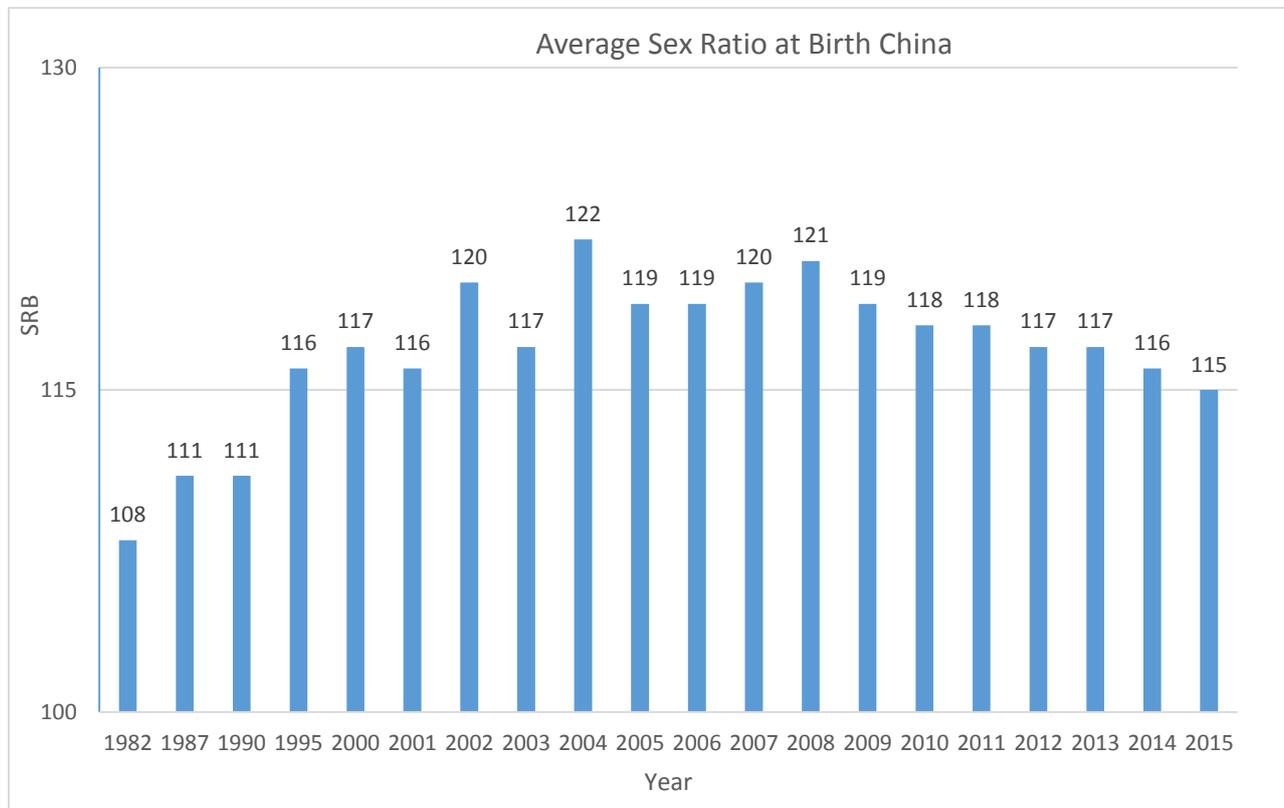
Implemented in 1979, the one-child policy aimed at granting the government a strict control over population growth and family planning (Jacka, 2007). Specifically, its purpose was to further decrease the fertility rate, and balance out the expanding population. Therefore, it can be seen that Deng Xiaoping, announced the one-child policy with the intention to improve living standards after decades of economic stagnation (Hesketh, Zhou and Wang, 2015).

It was China’s history of famine which caused the state’s institutionalization of strict population control measures (Xiaofei, 2012). China’s one-child policy restricted most urban couples to one child, and rural couples to two children, provided the first born was a girl (Lu, 2013). The policy was successful, as reached its goal as China's authorities assert it hindered around 250 to 300 million births during the last decade alone. This had a large impact on China’s economic and societal development (Hesketh et al., 2005).

The one-child policy has impacted several spheres of society (Potts, 2006). One specific consequence, that has gained wide attention, is the gender imbalance. This is further discussed in the following section.

## 2.2 China's Current Gender Imbalance

The one-child policy has severely impacted China's sex ratio at birth, and recently has received wide attention by the Chinese government and international scholars. As depicted in Figure 1, the ratio of male-to-female births has increased dramatically throughout the last years until 2010, when it started to stagnate. The sex ratio at birth ranges from 108 in 1982 to a peak 122 in the year 2004.



*Figure 1: China's Average Sex Ratio at Birth. Data Source: United Nations (Source: <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/sconcerns/popsize/size2.htm#DYB>)*

It can be seen the family planning policy of China has contributed to its having one of the highest gender imbalance rates in the world. While the latest estimates for the sex ratio at birth have started to decrease, a surplus of men still exists, which is expected to continue exceedingly into the future (Zhou et al., 2011; Jin, 2016).

According to Hesketh and Zhu (1997), the gender imbalance could be due to several factors. These being not reporting female births or adoptions, female infanticide, as well as sex selective abortions. While these factors contribute to the imbalanced sex ratio at birth, the

relative contributions of each are not known. Nonetheless, these factors combined with the long embedded culture of son preference in China, explain the difference in the sex ratio at birth.

While the family planning policy had been imposed by the Chinese government, the government did not want to take on the responsibilities of abandonment and murder of female babies and further abortions as a state intervention (Eklund, 2011; Hesketh et al., 2005).

Therefore, the one-child policy has contributed to a strongly skewed sex ratio where men outnumber women. The next section gives an overview of whether China is experiencing an increasing gender inequality, with the growing number of men in society. Subsequently, we analyse if this has led to a disadvantageous role for women in China.

## 2.3 Transitioning from Gender Equality to Inequality in China

*‘Women hold up half of the sky’ - Mao Zedong, 1950 (Maurer-Fazio et al., 1999).*

In his quote, Mao Zedong pointed out the importance of women and how they contribute to the development of China’s society. Before his era, Chinese women were extremely suppressed (Maurer-Fazio et al., 1999). Mao Zedong with the support of the Chinese Communist Party gave Chinese women the same legal status as men (Zuckerman et al., 2000). The first marriage law was enacted in 1950, which gave females the opportunity to register a marriage and required that both parties involved to agree to the arrangement. This greatly contrasted the traditional arranged marriage, in which women were forbidden to divorce their husband (Fincher, 2014).

Moreover, in 1954 China enacted legitimate protection for women, and guaranteed women and men equal rights (Wu, 2009). These measures include the policy of equality of *‘access to employment, equal pay, compulsory education, political participation, property,*

*marriage and health*' (Zuckerman et al., 2000:1). According to Fincher (2014), by the end of the 1970s, over 90 percent of working age women in Chinese cities were employed.

One of the major reasons to Mao Zedong's and the Communist party's commitment to gender equality was, that by mass mobilization of its people, it would strengthen the nation's productivity. A second marriage law was authorized in 1980, which granted women with the ability to get divorced (Fincher, 2014). However, even though the Chinese state imposed equal rights to women and men during this period, they failed to '*transform the underlying gender relations as women continued to take care of childcare, housework and cooking*' (Fincher, 2014:13). Subsequently, the failure of transforming the underlying gender relations became more apparent during China's transition from a socialist-planned economy to a market-planned economy (World Bank, 2002).

Similarly, Jieyu (2007) states that the economic transformation has been one of the major reasons for the drop of women's employment in China. More specifically, during the 1990s, China went through a stage where in which it tried to reorganise its national economy. During this time, the State-Owned Enterprises fired several millions of workers, whereby women were fired at a much higher level in relation to men. Additionally, women were rehired later on at a much lower level than men while facing a 'women return to home movement'. This movement centred on pressuring women to quit their jobs in order to make room for men during this period of rising unemployment (Tong, 2008).

During the transition, gender inequality started to emerge as a substantial economic and social problem. One of the major explanations behind this, could be that China has an extremely established influence of Confucian cultural patterns, in addition to traditional patriarchal philosophy. Consequently, China's transition of traditional viewpoints and expectations of gender roles has come to be a lengthy and challenging procedure (World Bank, 2002).

## 2.4 Contemporary China and Gender Inequality

In 2015, the World Economic Forum published their latest Global Gender Gap Report, along with the Global Gender Gap Index, which measures gender equality. The 2015 report included 145 major and emerging economies, with China in the 91<sup>st</sup> place (Global Gender Gap Report, 2015). A major reason for China's low rank is due to its highly skewed sex ratio (World Economic Forum, 2014). The World Bank data estimations show China's sex ratio at birth is first in the world (World Factbook, 2015).

Moreover, according to recent data published by Euromonitor (2014) China is experiencing one of the worst gender income inequality rates in the Asia Pacific region. According to Euromonitor '*the gender inequality is persistent in the region because it is rooted not only in culture and tradition but also in legal difference in the treatment of men and women*' (Euromonitor, 2014). In contemporary China, women are facing obstacles in terms of equal access to education and employment opportunities. Additionally, they are also hindered by various existing laws, such as hindering ownership of their property, accessing credit as well as acquiring employment (Euromonitor, 2014).

## 2.5 The Rise of Leftover Women

From the market reform era to today, China has seen a gradual reappearance of traditional attitudes towards gender roles. A survey conducted by 'All-China Women's Federation and China's National Bureau of Statistics' showed that the number of Chinese men and women who believe in the traditional gender split and saying '*men belong in public, women belong inside*' (in Chinese: 男主外, 女主内) has increased by 8 percentage points, and 4 percentage points respectively in the past 10 years, to 61,6 percent of men and 54,8 percent of women (New York Times, 2013).

The resurgence of beliefs in traditional gender roles has become even more apparent since 2007, especially in regards to patriarchy features<sup>3</sup>. This is due to growing scepticism of unmarried, educated and career-minded women. Even though both men and women in

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<sup>3</sup>The features, where men hold the power in a society (Malti-Douglas, 2007).

China face pressure to get married by Chinese society, the women that remain unmarried at 25 years or older are shamed by the Chinese state-led media. The Chinese government uses its media to advocate its demographic objectives in terms of encouraging marriage, planning the size of population and economic stability. Furthermore, it is also well-educated, unmarried women in their mid-late twenties, who are stigmatised as leftover women. According to Fincher (2014), the state-led media campaign of leftover women has led to numerous highly educated women to leave employment in order to marry due to fear of becoming too old to find a husband.

The advising logic of leftover women is that they should be married by a specific age in China. If women remain unmarried, they are considered as leftover. On the other hand, single men, in their mid-late twenties are rarely referred to as 'leftover men'; a term that does exist. This in turn, indicates Chinese society is prejudiced and discourteous to women whom have chosen a more modern lifestyle compared to the traditional lifestyle instead of being a homemaker and mother. (To, 2013; Wang, 2011; Yang, 2011). Subsequently, the phenomena of leftover women display the gendered society<sup>4</sup> (Lake, 2012; Fincher, 2014).

With the kick-off the economic reforms and the implementation of the one-child policy, gender inequality started to re-emerge in China. What's more, the one-child policy increased the gender imbalance gap, which has led to a higher amount of men in relation to women. A possible explanation to the growing patriarchal norms that we have pointed out, may be due to the increasing population of Chinese men. Therefore, we want to further investigate if the growing patriarchal norms are connected to the upsurge of leftover women, which we analyse in the empirical part of the study.

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<sup>4</sup> A society where gender roles are clearly assigned to individuals. For example, women in the role of the housewife and men becomes the breadwinner (Kimmel, 2000).

## 3 Literature Review

*This chapter gives an overview of previous studies contributing to debate of one-child policy in connection to gender imbalance and inequality in China. This is followed by the theoretical framework, which presents relevant theories used for the analysis in this thesis.*

### 3.1 Previous Studies

Previous studies have found the one-child policy was a leading factor to China's extraordinary gender imbalance. In turn, the gender imbalance has impacted one specific group. This group is the Chinese urban and well-educated women. More specifically, the gender imbalance has had implications for this group of women in the Chinese marriage market. Through previous research we have also found that these women are experiencing gender discrimination in the marriage market. In the following section we present relevant scholars such as Bulet et al., (2011), Fincher (2014), To (2013), Hesketh et al. (2005), Qian (2012) and Chu (2011), who addressed the factors that led to the rise of the leftover women and the difficulties they face.

#### 3.1.1 The One-child Policy and its Effect on China's Gender Imbalance

The one-child policy and China are so deeply connected; one cannot imagine China's economic success without this specific policy. According to Howden and Zhou (2014) the Chinese government promoted economic incentives to ensure their demographic goals. In terms of reducing their population growth, this was done by restricting 91,5 percent of the population to having only one child per couple. In agreement with this, Hesketh et al. (2005), who are one of the biggest contributors to the debate. They find that one of the biggest consequences of this policy is the distorted sex ratio, which has passively hindered the birth of millions of girls.

Bulet et al. (2011), examine to a great extent the one-child policy and its contribution to the skewed sex ratio, as well as how the cultural son-preference mind-set led to the imbalanced gender gap. The mystery of over 40 million missing girls in China incited Bulet

et al. (2011), to analyse the causation by conducting a novel estimation strategy for an econometric analysis. In accordance with Bulet et al. (2011), Smolin (2010) and Goodkind (2011) also found evidence that the implementation of the family planning policy was responsible for child-underreporting, sex selective abortions as well as the missing girls in China.

Hence, Bulet et al. (2011) findings highlight the existence of the relationship between China's one-child policy and its gender gap. Besides Bulet et al. (2011), Hesketh et al. (2005), Greenhalgh (2003) and Basu and Jong (2006) state that this limitation combined with the long tradition of son-preference in China, this outcome was foreseen. In addition, Chu (2001) argues that the one-child policy urged Chinese couples to put a lot of effort in predicting their baby's sex, which passively promoted gender-specific abortion technology.

Bulet et al. (2011), found in the period from 1981 to 2000 the one-child policy was accounted for the absence of around 15 to 20 million women. These numbers explain between 38 to 48 percent female deficiency during this period while the other half being explained by the cultural son-preference. Additionally, Bulet et al. (2011), identified that the one-child policy was responsible for around 50 percent of the gender gap, even before prenatal sex selective technology was accessible. Even more, Howden and Zhou (2014), and Hesketh et al. (2005), confirm that the family planning policy led to unintended demographic changes in China and have caused this distorted gender sex ratio, it is then apparent that the family planning policy greatly contributed to the present gender imbalance in China.

### 3.1.2 The Consequence of China's Gender Imbalance

The connection between the family planning policy and the gender imbalance was clarified in the previous section. Thus, it has been argued by Hesketh et al. (2005), Fincher (2014), and Powell (2015) how the skewed sex ratio has become a threat towards China's economic stability. Consequently, these authors amongst others have further focused on what consequences the gender imbalance had on China, which is further described in this section.

A recent report by Asia's Catastrophic Gender Imbalance (2011), emphasized that China's gender imbalance had a huge impact on the marriage market. In accordance with this, Hesketh et al. (2005) found with such a great surplus of men, many men are unable to find a wife. According to Powell's (2015) research, the demographic imbalance has resulted in a marriage squeeze, with women getting married at a much older age than before. His findings, point out that the gender gap has led to a more dynamic type of women, where the women's average age to get married was over 30 years old, in urban areas like Shanghai.

On the other hand, according to Ji (2015) and Fincher (2014), who both conducted qualitative interviews on the leftover women, explain the gender imbalance has changed the traditional marriage market, and created a new movement against women whom fall out of customary patterns of women being married by their early twenties. Consequently, Fincher (2014) reports that Chinese women have to face discrimination for being physically mature and successful while being castigated as leftover women.

According to Powell (2015), the gender gap has doubled the divorce rate in 10 years, from 1 percent in 2003, to 2,57 in 2013, this is quite a low rate in comparison to international standards. However, he finds that in Chinese urban areas, where women are becoming more economically independent, and have demographically more choices, divorce rates are around 30 percent. Consequently, Fincher (2014) and Powell (2015) are in agreement that the gender gap is also a trend for increasing empowering women in urban areas who break through traditional values and norms.

Wei and Zhang's (2009) quantitative research, highlight the higher household savings rates are another consequence of the gender imbalance. Moreover, Powell (2015), claims that not only does this have a huge impact on the global economy, but Chinese individuals have higher saving rates in regions with a highly distorted sex ratio. Consequently, women have started to ensure financial stability for themselves before they enter the marriage market (Ji, 2015; Asia's Catastrophic Gender Imbalance, 2011).

According to the 2011 Asia's Catastrophic Gender Imbalance Report, the Chinese Government's reaction to the high sex imbalance are to enact campaigns and enforce laws which aim to change the population's mind-set in order to prevent sex-selective abortions. However, Powell (2015) points out, the government sees the empowerment of Chinese

women in regards to marriage and divorce as a moral scandal, and desires to curb this new mentality.

### 3.1.3 Gender Inequality for Well-educated, Urban Women in Marriage

Gender inequality in marriage for highly educated, urban Chinese women is a topic that has recently gained attention from popular magazines. However, there are only a few academic scholars that have addressed the phenomenon of leftover women. To (2013), Ji (2015) and Fincher (2014) are one of the few scholars that have looked at the leftover women by doing a qualitative study. Furthermore, there are similar studies investigating features of the phenomenon. However, the majority of academics have done a more general quantitative research on gendered patterns of marriage in China. For instance, Qian (2012), examines the asymmetry in the Chinese marriage market using a log-linear model. According to him, as well as scholars such as Zhu (2012) and Tran (2013), men tend to marry younger women who are less educated than themselves, and women tend to marry older men, with a higher education than themselves. This is accordance with To (2013) findings, who emphasises this is due to men being intimidated by women's successful educational background and career.

Furthermore, Qian's (2012) findings are in accordance with a recent report published by Magistad (2013) on well-educated women's difficulties to find a spouse:

*" There is an opinion that A quality guys will find B quality women, B quality guys will find C quality women, and C quality men will find D quality women. ... The people left are A quality women and D quality men. So if you are a leftover woman, you are A quality. "*  
Huang Yuanyuan, (Magistad, 2013)

In line with this statement, Qian (2012) identified that a gap exists for leftover women on the marriage market, due to the fact that highly educated men (A quality men) in older ages have an easier time in finding a partner to marry. To (2013) results point out that, the gender inequality in the marriage market for well-educated urban women in China lies in the discrimination of being stigmatized as being leftover women. While Fincher (2014) and

Qian (2012) describe, this derogatory term as the image of an unattractive woman to marry, as her high education level is related to her high career accomplishments and thus fails to fulfil the role of being a great spouse and mother. In accordance with this, To (2013), Wang (2011) and Yang (2011) claim that the term 'leftover women' signifies Chinese society's biased view of the more modern and dynamic lifestyle choice of women. Wang (2011) further describes, the Chinese society's biased view of the leftover women to be a result of the still prevalent patriarchal system.

However, Yang (2011) and To (2013) give another reason why there has been a rise of leftover women in China, this is due to the increasing standards of well-educated women towards their future partners. In agreement to this Jiutinxugu (2012) states, the higher the level of education and income a woman in China has, the higher criteria and expectations they have of their future partner.

Therefore, previous research has only analysed the features of the phenomenon, and rarely looked specifically at the phenomenon and its root. Hence, we intend to contribute to the existing literature by examining the phenomenon of leftover women, namely well-educated urban women. This is done by analysing the leftover women's difficulties in the Chinese marriage market. Furthermore, we aim at finding whether they are facing these difficulties, possibly because of growing patriarchal norms in China. In this, we hope to contribute to this topic by finding out, if the leftover women have emerged as a consequence of the reappearing gender inequality. Additionally, we have found through previous research, there are most quantitative studies on this topic. Therefore, we are able to further contribute to this issue by having one of the few qualitative studies there is on this topic. Even more, we contribute to previous studies while showing the phenomenon's root and the trickle-down effect, from the implementation of the one-child policy to the leftover women.

## 3.2 Theoretical Framework

### 3.2.1 Relevant Concepts

The following two concepts are relevant descriptions for the further analysis of this research, as conducting research on the leftover women, as a feature of gender inequality it is important to define what gender is as well as the term leftover women.

#### 3.2.1.1 The Definition of Gender

In this paper, we have decided to use the definition by Judith Lorber (2010), who defines gender as:

*Gender: “A social status, a legal designation, and a personal identity. Through the social processes of gendering, gender division and their accompanying norms and role expectations are built into the major social institution of society, such as the economy, the family, the state, culture, religion, and the law- the gendered social order. Woman and man, girl and boy are used when referring to gender” – Judith Lorber (2010; 15).*

Moreover, within feminist literature, there is a wide agreement in a distinction between the definition of sex and gender. De Beauvoir (1953:267) for example, stated that “*One is not born, but rather becomes a woman...it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature... which is described as a feminine*”. In accordance with this statement sex is biological, whilst gender has been shaped by culture and society.

Therefore, we use this definition of gender throughout our paper in order to understand how each society has its own set of culture and values, and how this creates and influences a man and woman’s role within society. The definition of gender is applied in our analysis to get a better understanding of the leftover women and the linkage to the resurgence of gender inequality in China.

### 3.2.1.2 The Term Leftover Women

‘Leftover Women’ is an offensive term coined by the All-China Women’s Federation. The term brands women, who remain unmarried at the age of 25 or older. The expression of leftover women puts pressure on unmarried Chinese females in their mid-late twenties and beyond to find a spouse. If they fail to get married past the age of 25 they are considered ‘leftover’. Similar to the term leftover women, there also exist the term ‘leftover men’, which stigmatises their male counterparts. However, the term ‘leftover men’ is not used to the same extent as the leftover women, the latter often being targeted in Chinese advertisements (Fincher, 2014).

We have decided to apply the above stated description of the leftover women term in our analysis. We do this in order to determine whether leftover women have increased, and perhaps high standards of their future husbands, or if China’s old patriarchal system has facilitated the phenomenon of leftover women by making-up, accusing and criticising the women for being too selective. This has the hopes of finding the underlying factors that have created the phenomenon of leftover women, and if this term is an example of existing gender inequality for highly educated, unmarried women in the Chinese society.

### 3.2.2 Confucianism and Gender

Confucianism is the basis of traditional Chinese culture and ideology, going back to the Xia, Shang, and Zhou Dynasties. It has dominated China for more than 2000 years and even though, the country has gone through a rapid socioeconomic development in recent decades, cultural values and customs from Confucianism are still prevalent and influence Chinese people today (Ji, 2015). In order to understand the Chinese cultural mind-set, it is important to understand the ideology of Confucianism.

Confucianism promotes the harmony of society, which is a society that gives their citizens diverse status and roles. The harmony of society is created by a social hierarchy, which promotes proper and appropriate behaviour that is in accordance with Confucianism values. Granrose (2007) claims that the society is set up in a hierarchical way, when the head of the family (man) is at the top and the youngest female family member in the bottom. It is

extremely important that a woman behaves properly in Confucian traditions, which stipulate the following the doctrine of ‘three obedience’. These include;

- I. *A woman’s duty is to obey her father before marriage.*
- II. *A woman’s duty is to obey her husband after marriage.*
- III. *A woman’s duty is to obey her son after her husband’s death.*

- Granrose (2007:10).

Guisso (1982) argued, that traditions within Confucianism endorse the interdependency of men and women. Nevertheless, men and women are allotted influence in diverse areas within society, with men influencing the exterior world, and women influencing the domestic world. This is in accordance with the old Chinese saying ‘*nanzhuwai, nüzhunei*’ (in Chinese: 男主外, 女主内), which translates into English as ‘*men belong in public, women belong at home*’ (Fincher, 2014). In a similar vein, Chan et al (2011) argue how Confucianism favours men before women, as men are given greater privileges, status and role in society whilst women are given suppressed role of being a homemaker and mother. Hence, Kinias and Kim (2011) state how the Chinese culture influenced by Confucianism has stressed the importance of the harmonious maintenance of social hierarchy, instead of gender equality.

Authors such as West and Zimmerman (1987), Berkowitz et al., (2010), Pulerwitz and Barker (2008), point out how we live in a gendered society, where society and culture creates gender roles. These roles give an ideal or appropriate code of conduct for the specific gender. Moreover, Murphy et al. (2011) state, how China has a strong and prevalent preference for sons, which is socially and culturally shaped by Confucianism.

To summarise, all societies have their own social and cultural settings with their own gender norms, which indicate the ideal behaviour for men and women. Having said this, the tradition of Confucianism has most likely affected the way people think and act in China, especially in concerns to women’s role and status in society. Therefore, we intend to analyse if Confucianism is still prevalent in the leftover women’s lives and whether traditional values influences their decisions in finding a partner.

### 3.2.3 Dyadic Power and Structural Power

Numerous authors have addressed what implications can arise from a skewed sex ratio. For example, Guttentag and Secord (1983) applied a sociocultural approach towards analysing a society's sex ratio. The authors argued, that a society with an imbalanced sex ratio has a larger effect on dyadic power<sup>5</sup>, in social relations between women and men. In greater detail, when the sex ratio is skewed, the undersupplied sex is not as reliant on their partners in comparison to the sex that is in oversupply. This can be explained by their assumption that the sex that is in shortage can choose more freely who they want to form a relationship with. Therefore, the sex that is in short supply has a greater dyadic power in comparison to the sex that is in oversupply.

In a similar vein, South and Trent (1988) argued that a society which has a high masculine sex ratio (oversupply of men compared to women) would benefit the women. This is because the women experience a greater level of dyadic power. Subsequently, the women are able to pick or choose more freely amongst the oversupply of men in order to get the best alternative relationship. Moreover, McElroy and Horney (1983), and South and Lloyd (1995) state, that a society with a high masculine sex ratio result in women being able to use their superior position on the marriage market as a form of power when bargaining with their partner.

However, according to Guttentag and Secord (1983) the women's ability to use their dyadic power to gain greater independence is limited due to the men's structural power. The men can use their structural power to limit and alter the women's potential use of dyadic power. For example, men use their structural power to control women when they are in short supply, *'In this situation, women are encouraged to be mothers and homemakers, to marry young, and to be virgins at marriage. In such societies, the importance of stable marriages are stressed. Hence, homemaking is emphasized and the pursuit of educational or career goals is discouraged'* (O'Brien, 1991:102). Subsequently, when the women are in short supply, they are limited by male structural power through patriarchal norms.

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<sup>5</sup> Dyadic power is the power to choose what happens in a relationship. For example, if there is a high masculine sex ratio, the women that are in short supply should gain a greater ability (dyadic power) to decide the conditions of the relationship (South and Trent, 1988).

In accordance with the above mentioned, we apply the theory of dyadic power and structural power to the case of the highly educated, unmarried Chinese women. We do this, in order to investigate and analyse if the leftover women are experiencing an increased dyadic power or are being overtaken by the Chinese men's structural power.

### 3.2.4 Social Exchange Theory

Blau (1964), one of the founders of social exchange theory, focused on analysing the process of social exchange, which was based on the principle of reciprocity. More specifically, he claimed that people are attracted by the rewards they can get from a relationship. Thus, during the process of social exchange, a person shows their own abilities in order to generate rewards and attract other people, who are able and willing to exchange their abilities. As a result, there exists competition in this social exchange process. Nonetheless, the people who have more resources are given a higher position for social exchange within society, and the opposite goes for the ones that have an inferior position (Ritzer, 1996).

Additionally, marriage activities can be considered as the process of exchange. For instance, when couples get married, they exchange their personal interests and educational background. When individuals seek a partner in marriage, they often look for a person who has equal or higher exchange abilities than oneself, such as a higher salary, greater family social status, as well as equal or better careers. Having said this, the case of China's skewed sex imbalance has impacted the Chinese marriage market. It has led to complications in finding the equal or right marriage partner based on each and everyone's own preferred preference (Wang, 2012b).

Therefore, we aim at analysing the leftover women in the China's marriage market in order to grasp, if they are looking for a partner based on their preferences. More specifically, whether these women are looking for a partner with equal exchange abilities or if they are looking for a partner with higher exchange abilities. In turn, this theory guides the analysis in order to explain the leftover women's disadvantage in the marriage pool.

### 3.2.5 Marriage Squeeze

Marriage squeeze describes the demographic imbalance, where the amount of possible grooms outnumber the amount of possible brides or vice versa. This means, that there is no equal number of brides and grooms, and somebody is squeezed out of the marriage market, as not all individuals have the chance to marry. China's marriage squeeze can be mainly explained by its imbalanced sex ratio. Due to the increasing high sex ratio in China, the relationship between supply and demand in the marriage market is skewed (Huang, 2014). Additionally, Zhu (2012) claims there are also a few other reasons for the rise of the marriage squeeze. It can also be explained by the strong preference for sons, combined with the formation of the one child policy. Thus, the marriage squeeze in China is part of the explanation as to why there currently exists a vast amount of Chinese singles.

A term relevant to the marriage squeeze is 'hypo gamy', which refers to marrying a person of lower social status. Hypo gamy is a common and acceptable way for men in China to marry (Tran, 2013). Hence, Chinese men tend to marry women less educated than them, as they are more comfortable with having a higher status than their spouse (Qian, 2012). Moreover, To (2013) claims that this could be due to China's prevalent conservative and patriarchal society.

Furthermore, according to Qian (2012) the well-practised way for Chinese women to get married is hyper gamy, a situation where the woman marries up. Consequently, hypo, - and hyper gamy lead to an asymmetric marriage market in China. Wherefore, as depicted in Figure 2 (Marriage squeeze in China) the common practise of hypo, - and hyper gamy tends to squeeze out two categories of individuals, which are low status males (D-quality) and high status females (A-quality), as Tran (2013) and Qian (2012) describe.

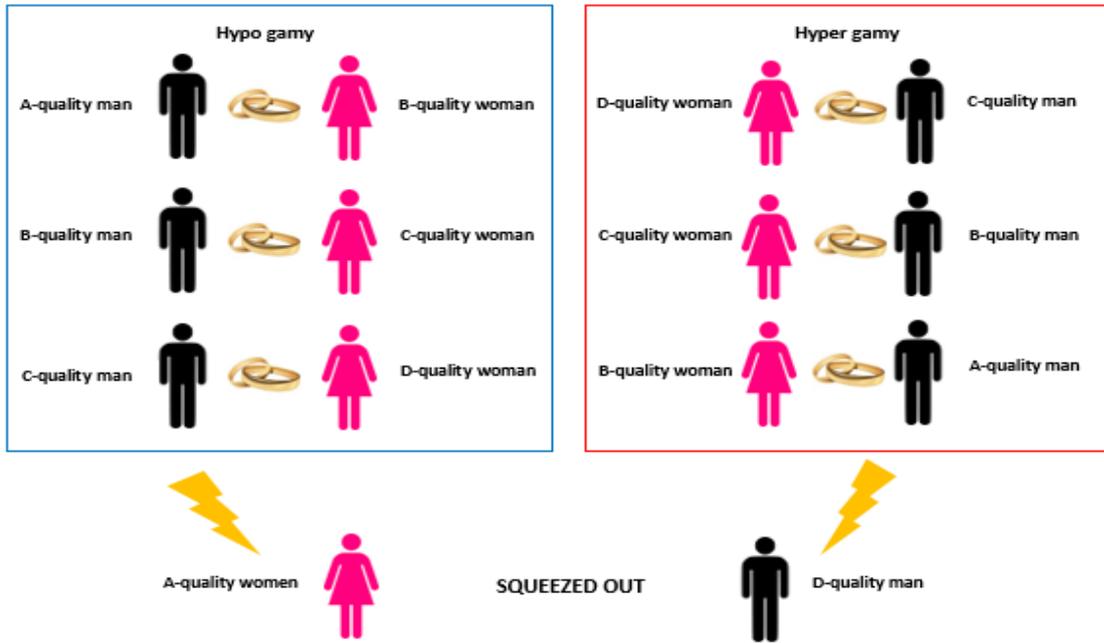


Figure 2: Marriage squeeze in China

Jones (2007) states that the shortage in the marriage pool for higher-status women is triggered by an undersupply of educated like-minded men in terms of egalitarian gender-role expectations. Similarly, Shu (2004) claims that well-educated individuals usually embrace egalitarian gender attitudes, but that the educational effect is stronger for women than for men. The male-superior norms that exist in China are the reason for refusing professional women in the marriage market (To, 2013).

Therefore, in order to address the issue of the marriage squeeze, we are focusing on the perspective of well educated women living in the modern Chinese cities of Shanghai and Beijing. This has the hopes of getting a better understanding of the marriage squeeze and its implication, in order to grasp if these women are experiencing gender discrimination by the men.

### 3.2.6 Classic Economic Theory of Marriage

Individual choice is founded upon Becker's (1981) economic model of marriage. Within the marriage market, an individual makes a rational choice, and only marries if the utility from marriage surpasses the utility from continuing to be single. Moreover, Becker claimed

that the marriage gains can be greater, if women exchange their non-market qualities with men's earning power. This is because men usually have a comparative advantage in the labour market, whilst women have a comparative advantage in domestic work.

This advocates Becker's (1981) argument of sex-role specialisation in marriage. The sex-role specialisation is when the husband takes on the breadwinner role, and the wife the homemaker role. Nonetheless, when women gain greater economic independence, the sex-role specialisation is not as important and marriage can be seen as less beneficial. Consequently, when the role of women and men are interchangeable or equal, the economic incentives lead to a decline in marriage. In sum, Becker's (1981) classic economic theory on marriage implies that the attractiveness and advantageousness of marriage decreases for the women who have a better economic status.

In accordance with the above mentioned, we want to find out if Becker's classic economic theory of marriage also applies to the Chinese society. More specifically, if it is true that marriage becomes less beneficial and attractive for Chinese women who acquire greater economic independence.

## 4 Methodology

*This chapter presents a detailed description of the process of how this study was conducted.*

### 4.1 Introduction Methodology

This study is based on fieldwork conducted in the two urban cities of Shanghai and Beijing in China during April 2016. We had the opportunity to conduct fieldwork in China due to a coordinated field trip with our Master's program to Fudan University in Shanghai. Therefore, this case study is derived from a qualitative framework in data collection, sampling and analysis.

### 4.2 Research Strategy

Qualitative research helps to identify a target group's range of behaviour and the perceptions that drive it with reference to specific topics or problems (Bryman, 2001). Bryman describes it as the following: "*Qualitative research is a research strategy that usually emphasises words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data.*", (Bryman, 2001:264). Therefore, we have chosen to apply the qualitative research method for our study as we aim to understand the phenomena of the leftover women, and why this occurrence has appeared and if it further can be seen as an example of China's resurgence of gender inequality.

Moreover, according to Bogdan and Taylor (1984) the qualitative approach is a suitable method for giving a voice to something and helps when interpreting culturally or historically substantial phenomena. Subsequently, the qualitative research is helpful to detect not very obvious features, hidden meanings, implied connotations and unheard voices.

Even more, Gubrium and Holstein (1997) pointed out different pillars in qualitative research that are important features to our study. One of the features is the naturalism that aims to understand social reality in its own footings. Further to 'see things as they really

are' helps to get valuable descriptions of individuals and groups in interaction in their natural settings. Hence, we see it of great importance to capture the feature naturalism in our research method, as we want to get an in-depth knowledge of how this phenomenon appeared and which consequences it has brought. Additionally, qualitative strategy is suitable for giving a voice to women, which fits well together with our research area of leftover women, for further information see Appendix 4.

### 4.3 Epistemological Consideration

Whilst quantitative research often positions itself in a positivist epistemology, qualitative is positioned in an interpretivist epistemology. The interpretivist epistemology emphasises the researcher to understand the subjective meaning of social action. More specifically, the researcher tries to understand the social world through examining the interpretation of the world through its participants (Bryman, 2008). By using an interpretivist approach to our research, it helps us to answer our research questions, as well as to interpret and gain a wide understanding of the leftover women's perspective through their answers.

Moreover, Lundahl and Skärvard (2009) state the importance of conducting research in a committed and compassionate manner. In our case, this consists of thorough and well-conducted interviews. By doing so, we aim at acquiring 'credible knowledge'. According to Lundahl and Skärvard (2009), 'credible knowledge' can arise through emotions in the interviews, which can result in significant features for our study. In addition, it is extremely important for us as researchers to have in-depth knowledge of our topic in order to fully understand the whole context, which in our case are the leftover women phenomenon.

### 4.4 Deductive Approach

For our research, we have decided to use a deductive approach towards scrutinising the relationship between theory and research. The reason for choosing a deductive approach is because we want our chosen theories to guide our research, and we are also aiming at achieving our results based on our theoretical framework (Bryman, 2008). This helps us to investigate our research question(s) and how our chosen theories match with our empirical data consisting of 15 interviews. Nonetheless, even though we are using a deductive

approach we have the hopes of coming towards and inductive conclusion, where we can offer new theoretical elements within the phenomenon of the leftover women and the resurgence of gender inequality in China.

## 4.5 Research Design

In this research, we are aiming for a detailed and intensive examination of a single case. Bryman (2001:48-77) states that *“a case study is concerned with the complexity and particular nature of the case in question...the emphasis trend to be upon an intensive examination of the setting”*. Hence, we are studying the complexity of the phenomenon the leftover women in order to find out if this case is in connection with a resurgence of gender inequality in China. The setting that we are exploring consists of well-educated, unmarried women in their mid-late twenties living in urban areas, who face discrimination in the marriage market. Analysing these women in their natural environment helps us to obtain a better understanding of the phenomenon.

Furthermore, according to Yin (2004), a case study approach allows us to retain the holistic and meaningful features of real-life events in order to recognize complex social phenomena. Therefore, the case study method is in our opinion the suitable way to analyse this complex phenomena of the leftover women to understand how and why this happened the further consequences of this issue.

## 4.6 Data Collection

For our research, we are using both primary and secondary data. The secondary data consist of earlier research on the topic, which serves as the background, research overview and literature review in our thesis. The secondary data consists of scholarly articles, as well as relevant academic books we have mostly gathered from the Lund university platform LUBsearch.

The primary data consists of 15 interviews, which compromise the empirical part of our study. We conducted the interviews in April 2016, using the purposive sampling technique,

which is further explained in section '4.9.2 Sampling'. This technique made it easier for us to approach this sensitive topic of the leftover women, who are under a lot of pressure in their social environment. We found the highly educated, unmarried women in their mid-late twenties living in urban areas that were willing to share their stories, through connections that had been established during the time one of the researchers had been living in China.

Furthermore, the already existing contacts knew other female individuals. Subsequently, the referrals of friends helped to establish further research candidates to interview. Finally, we recruited our interviewees through WeChat (Chinese social network app with over 400 million users). As WeChat works through numerous friend circles, it became a crucial outlet to make contacts and engage with half of our interview participants.

## 4.7 Selecting site: Shanghai and Beijing

We chose Shanghai and Beijing as our selected sites for this study. This was possible during a field trip in cooperation with Lund University. Therefore, several of our interviews were conducted in Shanghai. Moreover, we decided to do interviews in China's capital Beijing.

The reason for choosing these two selection sites was firstly because Beijing had a population of 21 million in 2014 and is the capital city of China (National Bureau of Statistics, 2015). According to the World Population Review (2016) it is the second largest city in China with one of the biggest GDP per capita in the country. Therefore, the city attracts many young talents, who want to promote their education and career. Moreover, Beijing also supports gender equality through platforms such as the World Conference on Women's Equality and the Beijing Platform for Action (UN Women, 2016).

Furthermore, Shanghai is one of the most developed Chinese cities. The modern city located in the Yangtze Delta Region is the largest in China and one of the largest in the world. It boasts a population of over 24 million in 2014 according to the National Bureau of Statistics (2015). The city is known to be one of the most significant financial centres in the world, and therefore attracts well educated people from all around the country

(Shanghai, 2016). Shanghai was one of the first cities to open up internationally under the economic reforms, and is the most westernized city in Mainland China, and it is described as one of the most equalized in gender roles (Nie and Wyman, 2005; Da, 2004). For these reasons we saw it fitting to conduct our interviews in Shanghai and Beijing.

## 4.8 Thematic Data Analysis

The thematic analysis is an often used method in qualitative research, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), it helps *'identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, frequently it goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic.'*, (Braun and Clarke, 2006:79). Thematic analysis allows a theoretically flexible approach to evaluate qualitative data. Furthermore, according to Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis can be applied to situations, as for in case it helps us analyse *'the way in which events, realities, meanings, experiences and so on are the effect of a range of discourses operating within society'*, (Braun and Clarke, 2006:81).

We applied a deductive thematic approach to identify our themes. Therefore, we have chosen a predetermined framework to analyse the data. With this approach we use the already identified theories on the data to examine it. Moreover, to build a theme for the data we used the following instructions: *'A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set.'*, (Braun and Clarke, 2006:82).

Nevertheless, we decided on the thematic approach, because it is suitable to our research question. According to Holloway and Todres (2003), it is important to find a method that is appropriate to the research question. Additionally, they point out to be aware of the 'methodolatry' (Holloway and Todres, 2003:347) trap, where researchers tend to intensely follow the method instead of the topic or the research question. Hence, we aim to emphasis on finding similarities or clashes of the interview answers with already existing concepts and ideas.

Therefore, we have built four themes according to the thematic approach, which are depicted in Figure 3.

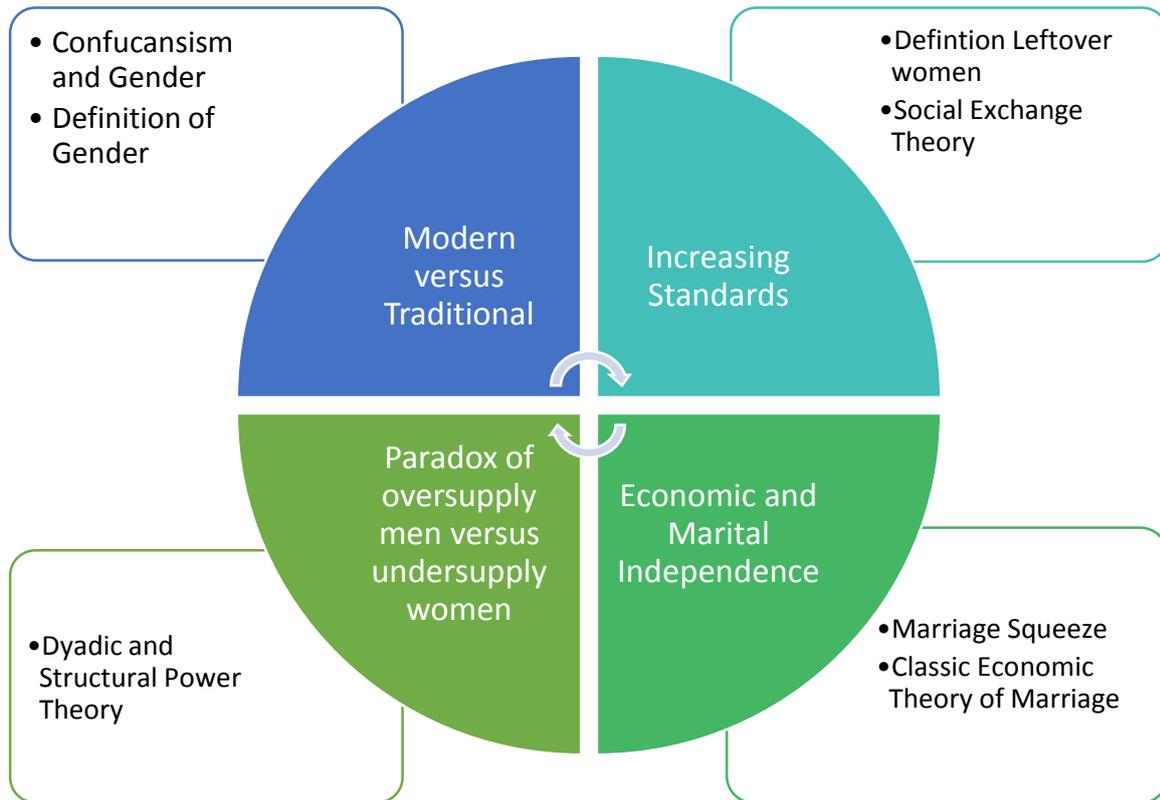


Figure 3: Construction of Themes

## 4.9 Interview Technique

For the interviews we used an interview guide (see Appendix 2) to arrange each session. Moreover, the interview guide included questions about the participant's experience as well as their current personal situation and their perspective on the marriage market.

We adjusted the interview guide after we had conducted our pilot interview and found new valuable features regarding the topic. We offered to do the interviews either in English or Chinese<sup>6</sup>, but all of the participants chose English. All interviewees had an extraordinary English proficiency, and felt comfortable communicating this way.

<sup>6</sup> As one of the researchers knows Chinese.

Due to the varying responses from each participant, follow-up questions also varied between interviews. For instance, once we had noted that several interviewees pointed out the significance of a similar family background for their partner choice, we asked more questions linked to that issue.

Additionally, we have conducted all interviews together, so we would not miss any details therein. Notes were taken, and audio was recorded to be later transcribed after the session. This qualitative interviewing practice offers rich and detailed answers. We found, the nature of the in-depth interviewing laid the initial framework of our relationship with and exploration of ideas with the individuals being studied. By having long conversations with participants, we were able to understand the interviewees with more ‘depth, detail, vividness and nuance’ (Cargan, 2007; 112).

#### 4.9.1 Interview Format

We have chosen to conduct semi-structured interviews. According to Bryman (2001), the advantage of this structure of interviewing is, that the interviewees are given the opportunity to express their own views more openly without being limited by the questions. This semi-structured interview is a two-way communication, which means the interviewee is also able to ask questions in return. By using this type of interview format, our research has the potential to compare and find connections between previous research and the interviewee’s answers.

The semi-structured interview allows a flexible interview process (Bryman, 2001). Even more, this structure helps the interviewee to open up about his/her personal perspective and gives the interviewed participant room for specific topics that are of interest for him/herself. Therefore, the semi-structured interview format was suitable for asking the participants questions.

The interviews took between 60 to 90 minutes, and usually started with some small talk so we could get to know one another, before conducting the interview. This was important to

create a more comfortable environment, as we were later talking about topics, often viewed as sensitive in their lives.<sup>7</sup>

Subsequently, we see it of great advantage using this interview format, to give our participants the freedom to express their own perspective on the phenomena. Furthermore, it was important for us to get a keen understanding of the leftover women and be able to collect reliable, comparable qualitative data.

## 4.9.2 Sampling

For this research we have decided to use a non-probability sampling technique, referred to as purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is beneficial when the researcher does not aim to attain results, which is used to generalise the whole population. In addition, non-probability sampling is applied when the researcher wants to choose a sample of subjects from a population. There are numerous limitations of non-probability sampling such as; the biased nature of choosing the sample. Non-probability sampling also has its advantages, such as being useful if the researcher(s) have a limited amount of time and resources (Etikan et al., 2016).

By having a purposive sampling technique, the research(s) can make a deliberate choice of participants. The deliberate choice is done by looking and seeking for participants with particular characteristics. Bernard (2002) state that the researcher(s) decide what needs to be identified for the study, and thereafter seeks the individuals who are keen and helpful in providing information through their own personal knowledge and experience. Therefore, the main idea of purposive sampling is to focus on individuals with specific characteristics who are able to contribute to the research. The logic and power in purposive sampling lie in '*selecting information-rich cases for studying in-depth*' (Patton, 1990:169).

Thus, the interviewees in this study represent 15 individual interviews with Chinese women that are considered and fit into the category leftover women. The participants are of ages

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<sup>7</sup> With one participant we even spent over three hours talking.

spanning between 25-35 years. The specific characteristics we have been searching for through our purposive sampling is of Chinese women that are:

- 25 years of age or older
- Living in an urban area
- Well educated
- Unmarried

By looking for individuals with these specific characteristics, we believe these participants are able to assist with our research. Moreover, as we examining the leftover women phenomenon and the resurgence of gender inequality in China, we have found that this specific sample helps us interpret and understand the leftover women, and gender inequality in greater detail in order to answer our research question(s) and fulfil the aim of our research.

The Table 1, displays the characteristics of our interviewees. Further detailed information of the participants can be found in Appendix 1.

<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>N = 15</b>
<b>Age</b>	
25-27	6
28-31	6
32-35	3
<b>Education</b>	
Bachelor's or associate degree	6
Master's degree	8
Doctoral degree	1
Ever had overseas education/work experience	4
<b>Urban areas</b>	
Native of Beijing	7
Native of Shanghai	6
Urban but not from Shanghai or Beijing	2

*Table 1: Characteristics of Interviewees*

## 4.10 Trustworthiness

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), and Guba and Lincoln (1994), qualitative research cannot be assessed through reliability and validity like quantitative research. Instead, two alternative criteria should be used, namely trustworthiness and authenticity. Moreover, trustworthiness is built up on four criteria these being; credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Firstly, if a research wants to meet the requirements of credibility, it must be carried out in accordance to the standards of good practice, and that the research is in accordance to the participant's answers. Besides this, the participants must also confirm that the research is understood correctly through their social world. Secondly, the transferability judges if the results of the study can be used in the same context at another point of time or also in other circumstances. This can be problematic for qualitative studies as it usually deals with a limited, small and specific group. Thirdly, the dependability is judged through the research's work process. The researcher is able to meet the dependability requirements, once reviewed, and thereafter, determine if the research's results are justifiable. Finally, confirmability is assessed on doing research in good faith, and not allowing the researcher's theoretical-positioning to influence the study (Bryman, 2008).

Throughout our study, we have dealt with these four criteria of trustworthiness. Since we are two women researching on gender inequality, we both have our own view and experience on the topic. Therefore, we most admittedly have a subjective view on gender inequality, and it is extremely important that we do not let our own perceptions influence the direction or outcome of the research. We have ensured this through having carefully constructed interviews where we ask open-ended questions, which in turn does not let our perception influence the interviewee's answers.

We have also strengthened the trustworthiness through conducting our interviews in a calm and unbiased environment. This was done to create a relaxed atmosphere, where the interviewee does not feel uncomfortable. By having this type of environment, we have acquired truthful answers (Bryman, 2008). Subsequently, we also made sure that we had organised and detailed interview material. In order to arrive at high quality data, we

prepared questions beforehand with a pilot interview. By doing this, we ensured that we had relevant questions to our interview sessions.

#### 4.11 Source Criticism

Lundahl and Skärvard (2009) state, the importance of being critical towards the chosen sources, as sources can be deficient by being subjective or even incomplete in their nature. Therefore, it has been crucial for us to critically evaluate all our sources. In concerns to our secondary sources, we have critically reviewed; the authors, the article's name, when the research was conducted, publishing date and whether the articles have been published in reliable academic journals. Subsequently, this reduces the risk of insufficient and untrustworthy sources. Nonetheless, for this paper we, have mostly used articles of a scholarly nature and used reliable searching platforms such as LUBsearch ensuring the majority of our secondary sources meet the above-mentioned criteria.

We have also revised towards our primary sources, which in our case consist of 15 interviews. The reason for revising, is there exists a risk that the interviewees might answer the stated question in a specific way that they think the interviewer wants the questions be answered (Lundahl and Skärvard, 2009). This can create a false perception of the actual reality, which could have devastating consequences for a qualitative study. Thus, we have considered this closely and have decided to conduct our interviews in a relaxed, unbiased environment. We have also considered this issue by asking open-ended questions, which invites the interviewee to describe their own perception without our influence and subjectivity.

It should be of note that being enrolled in one of the distinguished universities in northern Europe may have helped us win some of the interviewees' trust, as quite a few female individuals knew very well about Lund University. However, it could also be the case that our conversations may have been biased assuming the interviewee had tried to impress us with what they believe to be modern or Western views, only to truly believe and practice contrasting ideologies.

## 4.12 Ethical Consideration

In qualitative research several ethical issues can arise. We have found it extremely important to consider our subjective view of the topic of leftover women and gender inequality. The main reason to be aware of this is that our subjective view could affect the interviewee's answer and lead to insufficient empirical data (Bryman, 2008). Thus, we have addressed this issue by including a detailed interview guide with suitable questions.

Another ethical consideration to understand is, we might experience resistance by the interviewee's as some respondents might not want to share too personal or sensitive information about their current situation. Besides this, in order to protect our participants, we gave them fictitious names. We also decided to include a consent form (see Appendix 3), which the interviewees signed before each interview. The consent form proved to be helpful as we had the opportunity to describe our research, make the interviewees aware of the nature of the research, inform them of their rights, including anonymity and confidentiality, as well if we were able to tape record them during the interviews (Bryman, 2008).

A final issue is the concept of power, which is a central aspect to keep in mind when conducting interviews. In interviews, there is a possibility that the power imbalance between the researcher and respondents, more specifically, the power imbalance can be found at two levels; 1) Real differences (for example money and education) and 2) perceived (this being inferior or superior). These can be hard to overcome during the interviews; however, we carefully considered these power imbalances and identified the power dimensions by creating a comfortable environment and choosing what to wear, what environment the interviews should be conducted and how to speak as well as our body language (Banks and Scheyvens, 2003).

## 5 Data Analysis and Discussion of Results

*In this section we analyse our collected data and present our findings in four different themes: Modern versus Traditional, Paradox of Oversupply Men versus Undersupply Women, Increasing Standards, Economic and Marital Independence.*

### 5.1 Introduction to Analysis

The starting point of this research is that in recent years, single, urban and highly educated women that remain unmarried at the age of 25 or over in China have been progressively criticised and stigmatised as leftover women. This can be seen as a paradox, as these women are the ones faced with difficulties in finding a suitable husband, in spite of the surplus of approximately 33 million unwed men in the country (Radio Free Asia, 2015). In this analysis, we want to unravel the dynamics underlying these leftover women's marriage decisions. We believe that it is extremely important to examine, hence understand the disadvantage and struggles these women are faced with when it comes to marriage formation. Since, China has undergone a rapid transformation from a traditional society towards becoming increasingly modern it is of essence to understand if this transition is connected to why these women are regarded as 'leftover'.

### 5.2 Modern versus Traditional

In this part of the analysis, we intend to understand the disadvantages and struggles the leftover women are faced with in China's marriage market. In addition, we want to investigate if this has anything to do with the country's rapid modernization. Specifically, we intend to investigate if going from a society with traditional thinking towards a more modern type of thinking, has caused these women to forego marriage much later than they did before.

Previous scholars stated how together with the rapid economic reforms and modernization, China sees a reappearance of patriarchal Confucian traditions in recent years. Confucianism emphasises the harmonious maintenance of social hierarchy, where the citizens within a society are given diverse status and roles in order to behave appropriately in accordance with the Confucian code of conduct. In turn, women and men are assigned

different roles. Whereby, the women are valued in society for their roles of being a homemaker and mother (Fincher 2014; Granrose, 2007; Kinias and Kim, 2011).

During our interviews, we wanted to search for this type of Confucianism thinking and whether it was prevalent in the leftover women's lives. During our interviews we found this type of traditional thinking in terms of following Confucianism values and activities such as being obedient to their parents, has greatly impacted their lifestyles. This was especially apparent in regards to feeling pressure of getting married.

The majority of our 15 participants, reported feeling parental pressure to get married. This became clear when we asked our respondents whether they had a partner, and if not, if they felt pressure to get married. This seems to be coming from their parents and relatives, who believe it is that a woman's duty is to take care of the domestic world. In China, this includes getting married and becoming an obedient wife. This recurring feature of the interviews is in accordance with Guisso's (1982) assumptions of Confucian traditions.

The narrative of the 27-year-old Journalist Anna, showed how important it is for her parents that she gets married, and how they constantly interfere in her love life;

*“My parents and relatives started pressuring me already when I started college, since then it has only gotten worse, during Chinese New Years when I meet my whole family it is horrible. My relatives always ask why I don't have a husband, especially since my cousin who is much younger is already married... My parents always say that I should hurry up because I am not getting any younger.”*

In a similar vein, the 25-year-old Master Student in Physics, Daisy stated that;

*“I don't have a boyfriend, and my mum and dad are really stressed about this[pause] last year was the first time I had to go on a blind date that was set up by my parents, they thought he would be a good match for me but we did not have much in common, I only want to make them happy and calm.”*

Subsequently, the pressure from the parents was apparent throughout 14 out of our 15 interviews, which in turn could be connected to Confucianist thought. However, one

exception stated she did not feel pressure to get married as her parents were divorced and did not want her to stress about marrying too early. Moreover, many of the respondents seemed to accept the fact that this pressure was a natural part of being a Chinese woman, just as Daisy 25-years-old, who accepted to go on blind dates only to comfort their parents, which can be derived from a gendered society.

Almost all of our respondents described feeling pressured to get married, as it was a natural thing that every Chinese unmarried woman above the age of 25 had to go through. Consequently, they did not recognise this process could be linked to Confucianism. Hence, this coincides with the description of the gendered social order (Berkowitz et al., 2010; Pulerwitz and Barker, 2008). Therefore, Amanda the 29-year-old Sales Accountant stated;

*“My parents give me big pressure to find a husband. My relatives too [pause] I think that we women are faced with a lot of pressure to get married, as it is a type of traditional thinking that women should get married before the age of 25 in China.”*

Similarly, the 27-year-old Market Analyst Miranda reported;

*“I think we (women) are faced with a lot of pressure in today’s China, not only from our relatives but also from the media as they are putting pressure on us (women) to get married by a certain age. Like there is this commercial about skin products, the product would make your skin look younger and beautiful, you should use it to quickly find a partner before becoming leftover... My friends and I are very upset about the leftover women adverts which can be seen everywhere today.”*

Accordingly, Fincher (2014) states how along with China’s modernization, the country is also seeing a resurgence of patriarchal Confucianism thinking. This could explain both Amanda’s and Miranda’s answers in regards to women’s pressure to get married. The leftover women campaign, which has been actively promoted by the Chinese state-owned media, together with our participant’s parents seem to be putting pressure on the leftover women to fulfil their Confucianist role.

It seems the focus is on the harmonious maintenance of social hierarchy, where each individual is given a role in society and shall act accordingly to it. In particular, the daughter should be obedient to her parents and fulfil her role in society by respecting their wishes. It can be argued, this is in contradiction to a society promoting gender equality, as the women are burdened by their parents in fulfilling their duty of being an only daughter, and therefore not being able to pursue their independent dreams (Chan et al., 2011; Granrose, 2007).

Another, recurring feature from the interviewees' answers was the fact that even though they felt pressure to get married, they were not ready to give up their education and career only to please their parents' wishes. This was the case for 13 out of our 15 respondents, for example the 34-year-old Tina, who has a PHD in Anthropology and is now working as a Researcher describes:

*“Even though, I feel a lot of pressure from my family and relatives in finding a partner, I first want to establish my career and be able to take care of myself and pursue my dreams.”*

However, a good example for pursuing her dreams and not respecting her parent's wishes, was the 30-year-old Accountant Wendy, who stated:

*“I don't think I am a traditional Chinese woman, I have my own career and make my own money, I actually don't care for a man at the moment.”*

Consequently, it was apparent throughout the interviews how the majority of our participants emphasised how important their career was for them. One could argue how this contrasted to Confucian traditions, as these women were not compliant in their parents' wishes and were neglecting China's social hierarchy as a whole. Instead, these women seem to be adopting more of a modern type of stance when it comes to marriage formation.

Moreover, several of our respondents reported that they were not in a hurry to get married and were not interested in marrying just anyone. Instead, these women were actually looking for that special someone, as for example the 29-year-old Master student Linda stated;

*“Honestly, whatever if my parents are stressed about me (to get a husband) [pause] ...  
this is my life, I only want to find love.”*

In a similar manner, the 26-year-old Master Student Micky explained:

*“I know that my parents pressure me in finding a partner because they care for me, and I also want to get married someday, but for me it is really important to find a guy that I am happy to marry and not just marrying because that is what a woman in my age should do.”*

Once again, the interviewees point out their fight against the traditional values of their parents, as these women have adapted a more dynamic, modern type of thinking or view on their role in society. This is in accordance with Ji (2015), who claims, well-educated Chinese women are adopting a more independent lifestyle than they have been in the past.

Interviews with these highly educated women from Shanghai and Beijing made it apparent that they are not consistent with the old traditional Chinese values, when it comes to marriage. These women are not ready to give up their dreams, nor are they willing to put their careers on hold in order to be married by a certain age. Another prevalent feature throughout the interviews was the respondents would not let their parents pressure and expectations ruin their dream of finding the right partner to marry.

On one hand, by taking on these modern values, these women have decided to concentrate on their education and career in order to be able to support themselves. On the other hand, these women have not fully left out traditional values of Confucianism. This was apparent throughout the interviewees answers, when they stated how they only went on blind dates to comfort, hence be obedient to their parents' wishes and requirements.

To conclude, China has undergone a rapid transition from a socialist-planned economy, which was heavily influenced by the traditional values of Confucianism towards a market-planned economy, which instead promotes more modern and liberal values. In turn, this transformation has created a unusual environment for the leftover women. Consequently, the women are stuck in between modern, dynamic views and traditional values. Therefore,

their independent lifestyle with an individualistic approach towards marriage continues to clash with the traditional expectations of their parents.

However, most of the interviewees agreed to their parents' wishes to get married, but pointed out how important their own opinion in regards to marriage was to be valued. Additionally, our participants do not want to entrench themselves under someone else's expectations. Subsequently, we've come to the conclusion that the leftover women are a product of the clash between *modern versus traditional*. Moreover, the interviewees answers unfolded the current gendered society they live in. This became apparent as they have to fulfil certain expectations of being a woman, such as feeling pressure to get married by a certain age. Therefore, the leftover women are faced with gender discrimination, in particular because of the older generations' traditional Confucianist thinking.

### 5.3 Increasing Standards

In this section we examine if the leftover women have increasing standards in relation to their partner choice. We are going to look into the mystery, whether the leftover women are too picky when finding a partner or if it is the derogatory term of leftover that has singularised them of being too selective. Are the highly educated women only attracted to more powerful men than themselves to get a social status upgrade? Would they marry someone with a lower status?

According to Blau's (1964) social exchange theory, partner choice is based on the principle of reciprocity. Therefore, individuals are attracted to the rewards they can get out of a relationship. Hence, individuals aim for someone equally or with higher abilities. Even more, in the process of social exchange, individuals show off their own abilities to attract better counterparts.

In addition, marriage activities are also included in this exchange process, where the theory claims individuals get married to upgrade their own social status (Wang, 2012b; Ritzer, 1996). The term of the leftover women fits in well with this theory, as they are being blamed of their lifestyle of being too selective in their partner choice and therefore waiting too long to get married (To, 2013; Jiutinxugu, 2012). The social exchange theory and the

leftover women tend to look at the selectivity in partner choice, and assume that individuals are very picky when it comes to a future partner.

However, we found out that most of the interviewed women are looking for someone that has equal qualities as themselves. They would like a partner to share their values and mentality with. All of the women had very down-to-earth requirements for their partner choice. For example, Esther, 25 years old, who has a Bachelor of Communication and Journalism and is currently working as a Personal Assistant, knows exactly what she is looking for in a man:

*" For me the personality is important, that you are on the same page. That he is interesting and has a good education, but it does not necessarily need to be the same level of education."*

Esther's statement, along with most of our participants, went against Jiutinxugu (2012)'s idea that the more successful a woman in China is, the higher criteria she has on her partner. Furthermore, Sara, who is 27 years old, has a Bachelor in Arts and is a successful entrepreneur. One could assume that a young, educated and profitable individual like her, could have high expectations of her partner. Nevertheless, Sara is modest in her requirements of her partner choice:

*"I prefer someone that has more to offer than money. Someone that brings excitement to my life, who is willing to try new things. So the personality is very important and that he shares the same values."*

Most of the interviewees pointed out that a similar educational and family background is very important to them when it comes to partner choice. So did Anna, who is 27 years old, working as a Journalist and living in a shared apartment:

*" Actually I do not mind about salary, housing, but it is important that we have similar educational and family background, experiences and hobbies."*

The tendency to require a similar family background is embedded deep in the Chinese culture, as once you start dating someone, one starts dating the family as well (Xie, 2013).

Moreover, Wang (2012b) claims that individuals often look for a partner with equal or better family background. This is in line with Anna, as well as other participants' opinion, who emphasised the importance of family background in their partner choice.

Furthermore, To, (2013), Wang, (2011) and Yang, (2011) claim that leftover women have increasing standards in their partner choice. However, a recurring feature in our interviews was that the women had equal demands when selecting a partner. These findings contrast the above mentioned scholars. In addition, we found through analysing the data that our participants' standards are high, as they are highly educated individuals looking for a man with similar qualities. For example, Daisy, who is 25 years old and in her last year of Masters in Physics, believes in an egalitarian choice of men:

*” I believe that characteristics are extremely important when searching for a partner. It is important to have things in common, there is a good Chinese saying that says; similar (family) backgrounds leads to a good marriage.”*

All in all, our participants did not tend to be very picky when it comes to their partner choice. They were all looking for a partner to be on the same intellectual level and share their values and experiences. None of the interviewees had expectations of their future spouse to be better educated or having a higher social status which is not in accordance with Yang (2011), who claimed leftover women had increasing demands. Additionally, Carry, 33 years old, lives alone and is working as an HR Consultant, pointed out that a social status of a partner does not matter at all:

*“Like I said earlier I am looking for a partner that can share the same values and thinking with me, be open-minded and have fun with. I just want somebody that is interesting and is on the same page with me, if that is someone with a lower social status, that is fine with me. I think the only one who would have a problem with me having a better income or better status, is the men. They are so stuck in the traditional thinking that they miss out on a lot of good opportunities ... (laughing) ...I am not interested in a better social status through a man. I can perfectly achieve that by myself with hard work.”*

To summarise, most of the interviewed women answered that, they were looking for someone with similar characteristics such as: equal values, hobbies, educational and family background. Therefore, the social exchange theory proves to be useful in explaining the leftover women's partner preferences. This is because the social exchange theory claims that individuals look for partners, with equal exchange abilities, which is precisely what our interviewees were searching for. However, the social exchange theory also states that individuals look for people with higher exchange abilities such as higher salary or family power. This proved not to be in accordance with our respondents' answers, as they were not interested in partners with these type of characteristics.

To conclude, the leftover women, who can also be referred to as A-quality women, are looking for A-quality counterparts (Qian, 2012). This explains why the majority of our participants were looking for equal partners. However, leftover women are blamed of being too selective and having too high standards when choosing a spouse (To, 2013). This is because the government-owned media has stigmatized leftover women to these characteristics, which they are using as a reason for why they remain unmarried. Nevertheless, we found out that leftover women, have equal standards in their selection of men. Subsequently, most of the women we interviewed were not being too selective, as they had modest requirements to find a partner.

However, we can conclude that the leftover women do have 'high standards' in terms of Chinese 'normal standards' as these women are A-quality individuals, looking for A-quality men. Nonetheless, this does not make our interviewees pickier than anyone else, as this is in accordance to the social exchange theory, which states that everyone, regardless of social status seeks a person with equal exchange abilities.

## 5.4 Paradox of Oversupply of Men versus Undersupply of Women

In this section, we analyse why leftover women have problems to find a suitable partner even though there is a surplus of men in China. According to the dyadic and structural power theory, a society with a high sex ratio should benefit the sex that is in shortage and give them a higher dyadic power (Guttentag and Secord, 1983). However, the leftover

women phenomenon goes against this assumption, as they are not able to use their dyadic power because they have trouble finding a spouse.

Therefore, we want to understand why these women are not able to use their dyadic power and if they are limited by the men's structural power. Additionally, the dyadic power describes, due to the imbalanced sex ratio in China, the women, who is the sex in undersupply should be able to pick more freely with whom they want to partner up with (South and Trent, 1988). Therefore, the women with their high dyadic power should have an advantage in the Chinese marriage market. Moreover, the theory of dyadic and structural power is used, in order to find out if well-educated urban women can choose their partner freely or rather being neglected because of being stigmatized to leftover women.

Consequently, we were interested to see if our participants were able to choose partners freely or if they had a disadvantage in the marriage pool, because of being stigmatised to leftover woman. Most of our interviewees experienced that they could select their partners freely, however at the same time they pointed out how limited they felt in their choice, when picking a partner. The 33-year-old HR Consultant Carry expressed her dyadic power by replying:

*"Of course I can choose whomever I want to be my partner... The market is very limited though. You know, I have the freedom to pick a partner that I like and share the same values with me... I know I get pressure from my parents to get married, but even they want me to have someone I am happy with and can share the same interests. So yeah, I think I can choose freely but in regards to my standards the market is very tight."*

Similarly, the 34-year-old Researcher Tina stated:

*"The choices of men are limited, especially in my age"*

Tina and Carry emphasised how their choices in men are limited and so did the rest of the asked women in our interviews. Our findings go against the theory of South and Trent (1988) that the women should have the upper hand when choosing a partner, due to the masculine skewed sex ratio in China. However, none of the respondents expressed having an advantage in the marriage pool. According to Sara, 27 years old, Entrepreneur:

*"I think I can choose freely, but I feel social activities in China are not very developed. There are not many places a woman has to meet men or find new friends."*

Sara's answer emphasized once again how hard it is to find a partner. Therefore, in order to understand why Sara and our other participants seem to be limited in their partner choice, we asked our interviewees why this was the case. In connection to this, we found a recurring feature throughout the interviews, which pointed out the patriarchal thinking of Chinese men. The 35-year-old, Life Coach Cindy told us a story about a disappointing experience for her:

*"There was this one time, when I went out with my friends for dinner. I was getting drinks at the bar, where it was very crowded... So suddenly I spilled my drink on this guy who was also squeezed at the bar. Lucky he laughed about it and invited me for a new drink. We had a long conversation afterwards and laughed over funny stories... At one point, he started asking me what I do for a living. When I told him, I had my own successful business he became silent. He stood up, thanked me for the nice conversation and went away. Never saw him again."*

Her story indicates a man using his structural power, as he left the room when he found out about her successful career. This is a good example for O'Briens' (1991) argument, where men use their structural power to control the women, when they are in undersupply. Moreover, women are discouraged to pursue a successful career. Teresa, who is 30 years old and has her own business also picked up on this feature, with her rather disappointing experience on a date:

*"I told my date I would never become a housewife and stay at home mum, because it would never satisfy me... He started laughing and said something like: 'So I should be the one cooking and taking care of the kids?'...I was so upset about this (traditional view)."*

Teresa's and Cindy's experience coincide with the majority of the interviewees, who have had to face similar experiences where men have used their structural power through

patriarchal thinking. Moreover, this in accordance with O'Brien's (1991) statement that men use their structural power by encouraging women to be caretakers while being sceptical to career-minded women. In agreement to O'Brien's (1991) assumptions, the 26-year-old Master Student Micky described that women are only complete if they take a role in the domestic world:

*“People only see the family situation of women, not what they have achieved career wise, if you are old, not married or do not have a child you are not good enough for anyone.”*

To summarise, the majority of our interviewees, stated that they could pick whomever they wanted. However, later on in the interviews it became clear how the leftover women were neglected by the men through their patriarchal views, which clashes with our participants' modern views. Therefore, the leftover women are not able to use their dyadic power because they are overthrown by the men's structural power which are apparent through their traditional views. We come to the conclusion that the leftover women phenomenon is a paradox in itself. This is because the leftover women, who are in undersupply should give them an advantage in the marriage market. Nevertheless, our respondents did not experience this advantage, as instead they were being limited by the men. However, this is in accordance to Guttentag and Secord (1983), who claim that the men's higher hierarchical status (which is the sex in oversupply), gives them an advantage over the women in the marriage market.

## 5.5 Economic and Marital Independence

With this theme, we intend to analyse whether well-educated women may not find marriage attractive or beneficial because of their increasing economic independence (Becker, 1981). Furthermore, we intend to find out if the leftover women decouple from their sex-role specialisation (domestic role) because of their greater economic status gained through successful career achievements. Additionally, we intend to investigate, whether women with a high economic status tend to hyper gamy or if there might be a tendency to hypo gamy (Huang, 2014).

Most of the interviewees did not see an advantage in marriage. The majority of these women stressed their economic independence and how proud they were on their educational and career achievements. Sara, 27 years old, emphasized that marriage is not important to her and she felt very comfortable in her current situation:

*" Traditionally in China you settle down. But marriage does not mean that much anymore, it is just a piece of paper...I am not really into marriage. I can perfectly supply myself financially, and mentally supply myself...By the age of 35 I will get a sperm donor and have a baby."*

The oldest participant in our interviews, named Cindy, expressed her opinion about marriage in the following way:

*"I worked very hard to get where I am right now. I invested a lot in my education and my own business. I do not need a man to define myself... I like having my own apartment and own establishment... I do not need marriage...I like being independent and not being someone else's wife."*

This is a great example of Becker's (1981) assumption, as our participants tend to choose their economic independence over marriage. The women did not seem to care much about getting married anymore, once they were able to supply themselves financially. Carry, who is 33 years old, pointed out she does not see an advantage in getting married:

*"I do want to marry because it could be beneficial for me, I do not need more money. I do not think that marriage could be a big advantage for me...the only thing how marriage could help would be to me more accepted by the society. So the only advantage would be to get a better acceptance, that people recognize you more."*

Even though, Carry did not see an advantage of becoming a wife she was aware of the fact it would help her to be more accepted within the Chinese society. Nonetheless, it became apparent throughout the interviews that our respondents, which have now taken on a breadwinner role, do not need a man to financially support themselves. Therefore, the leftover women do not see the advantage of getting married. Subsequently, most of the

women in our interviews picked up on Becker's (1981) assumption that women decouple from their sex-role specialization when achieving greater economic independence.

Furthermore, a reappearing feeling in our interviews was that the leftover women found it very difficult to find a future spouse. This can be linked to China's long-standing tradition of hyper gamy. Subsequently, in recent years there has been increasing amount of literature on the fact that the older and more accomplished a woman gets, the more limited her dating pool becomes (Tran, 2013; To, 2013; Huang, 2014; Zhu, 2012). The majority of our interviewees were aware of this issue, for example, Susan, who is 31 years old, working as a Real Estate Account Manager described:

*“Older men can always get a younger woman, whilst the older women cannot go for younger men... obviously there exists some type of discrimination.”*

Similarly, Gabriela, who is 28 years old and working as Project Assistant, unknowingly expressed her opinion on hyper, -hypo gamy:

*“The difference between men and women is that women are more conscious, they want to marry up, men might on the other hand go with someone that is less high up, they will marry down.”*

Therefore, through our interviews it became clear how the leftover women were well aware of the fact that men tend to marry down and the women usually try to marry up. Consequently, our participants were complaining about the limited choices in the marriage pool. Literally, the leftover women recognised the trends that hyper, - and hypo gamy have created, which has led to a lack of eligible egalitarian minded man. This in turn has squeezed them out of the marriage market (To, 2013). In accordance with this, a survey published in 2012 by Jiangu showed that women born in the 1970s to 80s, with a high education and higher salaries had the hardest time in finding a husband, which was also reflected by our interviewees' opinion.

Moreover, according to Brookings-Tsinghuas Center the number of singles has significantly increased the last three decades. In 1982, just 5 percent of Chinese urban women were single in their mid-late twenties and this number has increased to 27 percent

today. There has also been a rising number of singles in the age group 30 to 40. Consequently, this is most likely an effect of more educated and career-minded women delaying and forgoing marriage (Wang, 2012a).

Due to the fact that hyper- and hypo gamy are still commonly practised in China, a female marriage squeeze has been created. Highly educated women get left out of the marriage market and become leftover women. Therefore, the phenomenon of leftover women has partly appeared due to this squeeze in the marriage market (Qian, 2012; Huang, 2014). Even more, men feel uncomfortable with goal driven career women, because they tend to marry down and choose females with a lower social status (To, 2013). As a consequence, this discrimination towards the higher status women pushes them out of marriage pool and explains the rising number of leftover women.

In accordance with our interviews, the leftover women are experiencing a resurgence of gender inequality in China. This phenomenon becomes more apparent with the growing marriage squeeze, and these women have to face discrimination of being driven in regards to their career. Even though, the marriage pool is limited, and it is becoming increasingly hard to find a husband, the leftover women do not see the advantage of getting married anymore due to their increasing economic stability (Becker, 1981). This is in contrast to the well-practiced hyper gamy in China's urban areas.

## 6 Conclusion

*The final section presents the findings of our research, and gives suggestions for future research.*

### 6.1 Concluding Remarks

The objective of this research, was through a qualitative strategy, to identify the root of the leftover phenomenon in order to understand why they have appeared, why they are facing a disadvantage in the marriage market and if this is due to growing patriarchal norms in China.

The leftover women phenomenon has appeared because of the trickle-down effect (see Appendix 5), starting from the implementation of the one-child policy, and ending with the leftover women. The effect reveals how the one-child policy created a skewed sex ratio, that resulted in China's gender imbalance and consequently its gender inequality. This trigger unfolded the four themes, which explains why the leftover women have appeared and face a disadvantage in the marriage market. This effect is one of the major contributions of this study.

Through conducting our interviews and analysing our data, we have come to several conclusions. Firstly, the theme 'Modern versus Traditional' findings points out how the leftover women are stuck in between modern views and traditional values. Due to China's economic transformation, the leftover women are fighting against a generation of patriarchal parents. The leftover women have appeared because on one hand, they want to fulfil their Confucianist role of being an obedient daughter, but on the other hand, they do not want to give up their individualistic lifestyle and approach towards marriage. This became apparent when our participants stressed the importance of their careers and finding a partner within their preferences.

Secondly, the findings of the theme 'Increasing Standards' showed how the leftover women were not too picky when choosing a partner, it was actually the term, "leftover women" that has singularized our participants of being too selective. Hence, this has created a derogatory and unequal situation for leftover women within society. Not only

are these highly educated and successful women categorised into the term leftover women, but their active choice of focusing on building a career and not a family is being frowned upon.

Thirdly, the theme 'Paradox of Oversupply of Men versus Undersupply of Women' emphasised the leftover women paradox. The leftover women, who are in undersupply in the Chinese marriage pool should have an advantage within the surplus of men. However, our results showed that our interviewees were being limited by the men's structural power through their traditional views, which in turn suppressed the women's dyadic power and resulted in a disadvantage for the leftover women in the marriage market.

Fourthly, the theme 'Economic and Marital Independence' pointed out that the leftover women have appeared because they are being squeezed out of the marriage market. The disadvantage of leftover women in the marriage market is explained by the commonly practiced hyper-, - and hypo-gamy in Chinese urban areas, where women with a high status get left out of the marriage market, as the men are intimidated by leftover women and marry down. Moreover, the leftover women did not see an advantage in getting married, as they were economically independent. Even more, our interviewees had decoupled from their housewife role and instead taken on the breadwinner role.

The most recurring feature in all themes was the increase of patriarchal norms that clashed with the modern values of leftover women, this was either apparent through: traditional parental thinking, where the leftover women's modern views clashed with the traditional values of their parents; men's not existing egalitarian view towards marriage, which collides with the independent individualistic and modern approach of the leftover women; the marriage squeeze, where high status women got left out, because of their career focused lifestyle; leftover women's choice to stay out of the marriage pool, because of their modern economic independence versus the society's traditional picture of marriage.

Therefore, our findings contribute to the topic by the fact that, the leftover women's modern lifestyle gets dominated by these increasing traditional values of the Chinese society. All in all, the apparent features of increasing patriarchal norms have shown that the leftover women phenomenon is an indication of a resurgence of gender inequality, in

terms of the expectations of leftover women and their domestic responsibilities, in urban China.

Subsequently, gender inequality plays a crucial role when it comes to economic stability. If China continues to ignore this economic potential of leftover women, it can have immense consequences for China's long-term economic growth. However, we are well aware of the fact that our findings cannot be generalized, due to our small sample of 15 women, we only give a minor contribution of the phenomenon.

## 6.2 Future Research

The phenomenon of the leftover women is therefore just as complex and of a complex nature as the country itself. Hence, we suggest future research on this phenomenon, to detect what further consequences the leftover women could have on China. Even more, it would be interesting to do a comparative case study and analyse the differences and similarities of the leftover women and leftover men, or doing a single case study on the men's perspective. Additionally, due to our limited age range and number of participants, we suggest to conduct another analysis of leftover women with a bigger sample and explore, whether some women are at higher risk of being leftover due to specific jobs or education. Finally, because of only looking at Shanghai and Beijing, we recommend future research by conducting a multiple case study on the leftover women in other urban cities in China in order to examine the differences within the geographical scope. Taking all of this into account a more generalized perspective on this phenomenon would be possible.

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## 8 Appendices

### Appendix 1: Information about interviewees

No.	Interviewee	Year of Birth	Age	Education	Occupation	Current status
1	Tina	1982	34	PHD Anthropology	Working as a Researcher	Single, lives alone
2	Daisy	1991	25	Last years of Masters in Physics	Master Student	Single, living in a student dorm
3	Micky	1990	26	Last year of Master Language and Literature	Master Student	Single, living in a student dorm
4	Anna	1989	27	Master in English literature	Journalist	Single, lives in shared apartment
5	Teresa	1986	30	Bachelor in Journalism	Entrepreneur, has two own businesses	Has a boyfriend, lives alone
6	Gabriela	1988	28	Master in Supply Management	Project Assistant	Single, lives alone
7	Esther	1990	25	Bachelor in Communication and Journalism	Personal Assistant	Complicated relationship, lives alone
8	Sara	1989	27	Bachelor of Arts	Entrepreneur, Business Owner	Single, lives alone
9	Amanda	1987	29	Bachelor in English	Sales Accountant	Single, lives alone
10	Susan	1985	31	Master in Business Administration	Real Estate Accountant Manager	Single, lives alone
11	Cindy	1981	35	Masters in Anthropology	Life Coach/Entrepreneur	Single, lives alone
12	Wendy	1986	30	Bachelor in Mathematics	Accountant	Single, lives in shared housing
13	Linda	1987	29	Master in Economics	Master Student	Single, lives in a student dorm
14	Miranda	1988	27	Bachelor in Finance	Market Analyst	Single, lives in shared housing
15	Carry	1983	33	Master in Human Resources	HR Consultant	Single, lives alone

## Appendix 2: Interview Guide

(Note: The Interview guide and the questions has been adapted to the four themes after the data collection and analysis, in order to make is easier to follow the themes.)

Theme		Questions	Sub-questions
Modernity vs Traditional	1	How is your living situation?	Do you have your own apartment? Are you renting with friends or parents/partners?
	2	What is important for you?	What are your ambitions?
	3	Do you have a boyfriend?  Do you feel pressure from your parents in finding a partner?	If yes, how is the relationship?  If yes, is it embedded in the Chinese culture to feel pressure from the parents?
	4	Are you eager to get married at the moment?	
	5	Do you think it is the same pressure for men to get married as it is for women?	
	6	What do you think about the old Confucianism thinking?	Do you follow the traditions?
	7	What is the relationship to your father and mother?	Do they support you in your decisions?
	8	What values did your parents teach you? During your upbringing have Confucianism values played a crucial role?	
	9	Have you heard about the saying 'men belong in public, women belong at home?' (Chinese: <i>nanzhuwai, nüzhunei</i> )	If yes? How does this make you feel? Do you feel that this is the case in China?
	10	What role do you think you as a woman have in the Chinese society? Do women have different role in society than men?	If yes, do you think this has to do with embedded traditional values?
	11	Have you been set-up on a lot of blind dates? Have you been to the marriage market?	If yes, who set you up? If yes, why?
Theme		Questions	Sub-questions
Increasing standards	1	Have you heard of the saying 'left-over women' (Chinese: <i>sheng nü</i> )?	If yes? How do you feel about this? Do you think you think this saying applies to you?
	2	Have you heard of the saying 'left-over warriors' or (Chinese: 'sheng-doushi')?	If yes? How does this make you feel? Do you think this saying applies to you?
	3	Do you think your lifestyle is well accepted in the Chinese society?	
	4	Do you think you have high standards when it comes to partner choice?	

Increasing standards	5	If you have a boyfriend/partner, how long have you been together? Do you have an intention of marrying this person?	After how many years would you marry your partner?
	6	If you do not have a boyfriend/partner, are you looking for a marital partner at the moment or often go dating?	
	7	If you are looking for someone to marry, what are the most important values he should have? Please put the following factors in order? 1. Income 2. Security (stability/provide food) 3. Education 4. Apartment	Why did you put these factors in this following order?
	8	What values are you looking for in a future husband?	
	9	Is a wealthy status of a men important for your partner choice?	Are you attracted to powerful men?
	10	Would you choose a partner that has a lower social status than you?	
<b>Theme</b>		<b>Questions</b>	<b>Sub-questions</b>
Paradox over oversupply of men vs undersupply of women	1	Do you think you can choose freely whomever you want for your future partner?	
	2	Have you ever felt rejection on a date or from a man you very interested in?	If yes, why do think was this the case?
	3	Do you feel neglected/left out by men because they know you are a leftover woman?	If yes. Why?
	4	Are you picky when choosing a partner?	
	5	In general, do you think males are pickier than women when it comes to choosing a partner?	If men, how are they pickier?
<b>Theme</b>		<b>Questions</b>	<b>Sub-questions</b>
Economic and marital independences	1	Do you think marriage has a high status in the Chinese society?	If yes? How do you feel about this?
	2	Is getting married important for you?	If yes? Why?
	3	Do you think marriage would be beneficial for you?	If yes. Why?
	4	Is financial stability important for you?	
	5	Do you think future husbands or men in general, are threatened by the fact that you are well educated or more successful?	
	6	If you had a boyfriend, why did the relationship end?	Did you or he break up?
	7	Do people accuse you if being too independent?	

### **Appendix 3: The Consent Form**

**Titel of the Project: The puzzle of China's leftover women**

**Purpose of Study: Is the leftover women phenomenon an indication for the resurgence of gender inequality in urban China?**

**Name of the Researchers: Katarina Elshult and Christina Hahn**

**Program: Lund University in International Economics with a Focus on China**

- I have been given enough information about this project
- It has been explained to me how the information I give will be used
- I agree to talk to the researchers about my experience
- I understand that I can leave at any time and do not have to answer all the questions if I do not want to
- I am happy for you to record what I say
- I give my permission for words to be used in a report but understand that my name will not be mentioned

Name of Participant.....

Date / Place .....

Signature of Participant .....

Signature of Researchers.....

## Appendix 4:

### Qualitative Strategy and Feminism

A further dimension of qualitative research is that it is by many researchers viewed as having a feminist sensitivity. Moreover, Bryman (2008) states that unlike quantitative research, which by many seen as incompatible with feminism, qualitative research is viewed as more suitable by being able to adjust to feminism's principle tenets. More specifically, qualitative research according to Bryman (2001) acknowledges, it allows;

- *Women's voice to be heard*
- *Exploitation to be reduced by giving as well as receiving in the course of fieldwork*
- *Women not to be treated as objects to be controlled by the researcher's technical procedure*
- *The emancipatory goals of feminism to be realised. - Bryman, (2001:286).*

Therefore, our choice of using a qualitative research strategy for our case study is further strengthened by its compatibility to adapt to feminism's principal tenets. Consequently, it fits well together with our research area of the leftover women in China, and whether this term is an example of China's resurgence of gender inequality.

## Appendix 5: The Trickle-down Effect

