

Going towards a 'perfect' life

A qualitative study on urban middle-class young married women's experiences and prospects on marriage life in China

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Abstract

The self-evident contradictory governance ideology of the Chinese Communist Party leads to urban-born young middle-class Chinese women struggling between seeking one's own path with the discourse of 'individualism' under the neoliberal market economy and conforming to the traditional role in the family of patriarchal culture. This is reflected in the increasing prominent phenomena of getting married later (after age 25). The aim of the thesis is to shed light on how *suzhi* (roughly translated as qualities a person possess) discourse being central to party-state governance ideology affects young urban middle-class Chinese women's decision on marriage and prospects on marriage life with *critical discursive psychology analysis*. The analysis showed that although these young women construct their decision and prospects as individual choices, the dominant interpretative repertoires identified in their narratives are in fact, aligned with the norm constructed in relation to *suzhi* discourse, indicating the governance ideology have impact on them in a subtle way. The resistance towards *suzhi* discourse shown through 'troubled' subject positions and ideology dilemma is not much but illuminate on their tendency to gloss over the self-reflection.

Keywords: Urban middle-class young women, Marriage, *Suzhi*, Governance ideology, China, Critical discursive psychology, Interpretative repertoires

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Abbreviations

ACWF: All-China Women's Federation

CCP: Chinese Communist Party

CDP: Critical Discursive Psychology analysis

DP: Discursive Psychology analysis

1. Introduction

The topic of the thesis revolves around urban young middle-class Chinese women who choose to be married ‘early’ before age 25, against the trend of ‘getting married later’ in China (Yicai News 2021).

Norms are social entities which are available for active manipulation and construction (Bakken 2000). In contemporary Chinese society led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), constructing norms through propaganda is common for Chinese party-state to serve its political agenda.

Being central to contemporary China governance and society, the ideology of *suzhi* was constructed as ‘quality’ one should possess to be better self and live a better life. Reference to *suzhi* justifies social and political hierarchies of all sorts. In popular usage, the notion of "lacking quality" is used to look down upon rural migrants, litterbugs, the short, the nearsighted and the poorly dressed, separating them from the well-educated, the urban residents, the well-dressed (Kipnis 2006). People of ‘high’ *suzhi* being constructed as deserving more income, power and status than those of ‘low’ *suzhi* (Kipnis 2006). As stated above, norms were constructed by party-state related to *suzhi* discourse, with particular emphasis on family planning associated to one’s marriage life, which will be explained later.

In this thesis, I invite these young women to talk about their past experiences and future perception on marriage life. By using critical discourse psychology analysis, I aim to illuminate the interaction between these young women’s subjectivities concerned with marriage and state’s ideological governance by looking at how interpretative repertoires, subject positions and ideology dilemma they draw on are related to the *suzhi* discourse.

This study is based on semi-structured online interviews conducted between October and November 2021, with 9 young newly married middle-class women born and raised in Shanghai aged before 25.

This thesis finds its motivation from my life experience as a middle-class Chinese young woman living in one of the most developed cities of China, Shanghai. Having the privilege to study abroad in Sweden, I found women's study, which was something I never laid my eyes on before as a subject, truly raised my awareness of building the understanding of women from a broader perspective, not just from my daily experience. Later, the offline lecture and campus life were closed in Sweden due to the spread of COVID-19 virus in 2021. Feeling a little bit mentally isolated from the world at home, I spoke a lot with my Chinese friends online, knowing that in my life circle it is not unusual for young women around my age (born between 1996-1997) getting married already. At the same time, incidents surrounding gender discrimination emerged along with other social issues during the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 in China. the contribution of female health workers is heavily absent from media while male medical workers are constantly occupying the news headline (Cao 2022). Feminism became a nation-wide heat topic in 2020, and some Chinese media even called 2020 as 'the first year of the era of feminism' (Jiemian News 2021).

The more I reflected on the hard situation women are facing in China, the more I was curious and determined to study those urban young middle-class women who chose to get into marriage early in life. These experiences planted the seeds which eventually led me to write this thesis.

1.1 Background

To get a better understanding of the group of young urban middle-class women being studied here, the social-political aspect of the background they grew up in, which put them in a better social position than most Chinese young women, needs to be discussed.

1.1.1 Born under the One-Child policy in urban China

Proposed in mid-1978, announced in early 1979 and widely implemented by the Chinese Communist Party in 1980, the one-child policy imposed the quota of having only one child “on each family/couple of Han ethnicity or of urban residency” (Liu, Y. 2016, p. 152; Greenhalgh 2005). It ended on 29 September 2015.

Compared to the resistance of one-child policy in the rural area, it received huge success in the urban area. The one-child policy not only limited the fertility rate in the urban area, but also shifted the Chinese cultural preference of having big family to a smaller family (Liu, Y. 2016, p. 152). Argued by Fong (2002), the one-child policy changed individual urban families’ investment plans for their children significantly, from big families prioritizing their resources on their sons to small families educating their only child regardless of the child’s sex, increasing the opportunities in education for urban girls and greatly influenced women’s career choice. Thus, along with the higher education expansion after the college entrance exam being restored in 1977 (Liu, Y. 2016, p. 154), as the only kid in the family with lack of competition, many young urban women successfully received higher education and obtained a bachelor’s degree or above like those interviewed for this thesis.

Moreover, with the economic reform prioritizing urban development, the rural-urban divide has been long existing in China. People born in the city with hukou (household registration) can enjoy many things that can’t be attained by rural residents such as: better education and better healthcare (Lu and Chen 2004). Thus, a social hierarchy, which continues to separate the urban privileged and the rural poor from the start of

their lives, is created, affecting their job opportunities and marriage prospects (Xie, K. 2021, p. 7).

Growing up in this background, it is safe to say those young middle-class urban women are privileged, getting to enjoy much more resources and life opportunities than their former generation and the rural residents. Growing up with parents' full attended care and the opportunities to study abroad, I myself as a member of them feel privileged as well.

“With great power comes great responsibility”, the luck those young women enjoyed comes with significant expectation from their family and society as well. In the family, parent's excessive attention being put on those only-daughter means “strict discipline, multiple demands and high expectations”(Xie, K. 2021, p. 45). The study of Liu Fengshu (2006) on parental gendered expectations of the only-child in the nuclear Chinese family shows to be perceived as successful, the only-daughters are expected to “integrate both masculine and feminine characteristics, combine both inner and outer beauty, and perform both expressive and instrumental functions” (Liu, F. 2006 p. 501), while the only-sons are mostly only expected to improve their talent. Thus, being instilled as norm through young age, these women are very conscious of individualism and have strong longing for personal success. (Liu, F. 2008; Xie, K. 2021, p. 253) Outside the family, the party-state has its own plan for these well-educated women as well. Together with the one-child policy, the Chinese party-state began attempting to take full advantage of the neoliberal market economy with economic reform in the 1980s, however, political liberalism was not a choice (Yan, Y. 2010). Thus, the process of individualization in China is limited with the boundaries set by the party-state. (Yan, Y. 2009)

One boundary specifically is in relation to Chinese state's emphasis on revitalizing the traditional Confucianism moral value on the family for the better of country, just like the old Chinese saying goes: the peace of the world can only achieved by establishing the family and governing the country (*zhi guo, qi jia, pin tian xia*, 治国齐家治国平天下). The idealized married heterosexual family created by state is argued to be a mixed idea combining "Confucian 'filial piety' and 'harmony', westernized idea of love and romance, and the Party's belief in scientific development", aiming to "erect the family as moral exemplified and harmonies social conflicts" (Xie, K. 2021, p. 52). Confucianism is one of the most influential philosophies in Chinese history shaping the patriarchal society of China. It has great impact on women's social status (Chang, S. 2020, p. 5). In ancient time, women were forced to devoted her life to the family only by obeying to female chastity codes such as 'the three obedience and the four virtues' (*san cong si de*, 三从四德), obeying to her father, husband and son; practicing the virtues of physical charm, fidelity, propriety in speech, and efficiency in needlework (Chang, S. 2020, pp. 5-6). Thus, women's role within the family was stressed again under such political framework.

Demographic and population research has emphasized on an unavoidable consequence of the one-child policy producing a generation of excess males, for the Chinese patriarchal culture prefers males and therefore a lot of girls were aborted (Liu, Y. 2016, p. 153). The unskewed sex ration result and the successful implementation in urban area of the One-Child Policy undoubtedly contributed in a major way to lower fertility rates and delayed marriage in the Chinese context. However, with reproduction remaining women's primary contribution to the family (Xie, K. 2021, p.114), the blame mainly being put on these urban well-educated women by the state. The term *shengnü* (leftover women, 剩女) is commonly found in news media, spreading the 'fact' of urban well-educated women having overly high standard for marriage and staying single in their late twenties, which increase the phenomenon of the late marriage (Hong Fincher

2014).

1.1.2 Born as urban middle class under xiaokang culture

All my participants' parents are already members of the urban middle class. They heavily invested in their daughters' education, making these young women not only being the daughters of middle-class families, but also having higher educational credentials to be qualified for the jobs which keep them in middle class status (Lin and Sun 2010, p. 238).

First, the middle class in China has its own traits which need to be discussed. After *gaige kaifang* (reform and opening up, 改革开放) in 1978, China's large-scale social transformation led to the emergence of the middle class (Xiao and Chen 2010, p. 93). Transforming from a redistribution system to a market system changed the structure of the Chinese middle class because of the rebuilt interest structure. At the same time, marketization, tax reform and housing reform also helped grow the members of the middle class to a certain extent (Xiao and Chen 2010, p. 93). Many scholars find income to be an inaccurate indicator of middle-class membership and miscalculate the size of the middle class (Chen, J. 2004; Wang and Davis 2010; Chunling, L. 2010, p.154). However, Chinese sociologists developed their framework of middle-class study with a bias of emphasis on income and consumption for the government's preference of the term "middle-income group" over "middle class" (Hsiao 2010, p.251). In the West, the middle class has always been considered to take part in the socio-political movement toward democratic rule and in the public decision-making process (Chen and Lu 2006). This is not the same when it comes to Chinese middle class. The initial rise of the middle class in China has taken advantage of the changing political economy from three major resources: "the transfer of previously held political power, market exchange, and personal social networking" (Hsiao 2010, p. 255). Being benefited from the market economy reform, they tend to be "more less politically independent and more socially

conservative for fear of political oppression and economic suppression (Hsiao 2010, p. 258).

The Depoliticization of class to held the party-state's legitimacy within the neoliberal economic reform leads to the self-evident contradictions, and was masked by the governing ideology named *xiaokang* culture (moderately well-off, 小康), with middle class being the representation. *Xiaokang* culture, based on the Confucian notion of *zhongyong* (the golden mean), goes together with Communist *Datong* idealism (Hanlong 2010, p. 127). The cultural appeal of *Datong* is one of the fundamental reasons for Chinese people's acceptance towards communism and the socialist system. "*Datong* in its classic traditional sense is an ideal society, where everything belongs to the public and everyone shares social resources and wealth. It is a harmonious society in which the world is fair" (Hanlong 2010, p.111). *Xiaokang*, takes the idea of communism in *Datong*, devotees to the state's respect towards private rights with economic reform. *Xiaokang* aims to address economic disparities and push forward the modernization process by disconnecting individuals from the socialist economy and welfare system, and inspiring people to actively participate in the market economy to be self-reliant. With the Communist *Datong* idealism, the sense of self under market economy is tightly associated with consumption by this party-state-managed individualization. "Consumption is about embodiment, embodying a new self. At the heart of this embodiment is desire" (Xie, K. 2021, p. 50). Furthermore, some unique expectations were set on the middle class such as "upholding certain positive social values" and "serving as the buffer and mediator between rich and poor, between top and bottom" to promote stability (Hsiao 2010, p. 250), to create a harmonious society with no political passion harming the ruling of party-state.

In the literature review section, how *suzhi* is specifically manifested in the background of One-Child policy and *xiaokang* culture will be explained in detail.

1.1.3 Dilemma of urban middle-class young Chinese women

From the discussion above, now we have a broader picture of the social-political background these urban middle-class young women grew up in.

Being born in the middle-class family characterized by *xiaokang* culture under the one-child policy, these well-educated urban young women possessed the identity of consumerism and lack of class consciousness. They assert their individual freedom in consumption freedom and are motivated by having a middle-class lifestyle.

Mixing neoliberal modernity and traditional patriarchal culture, the governing ideology adopted by the state creates a complex dynamic, leading to the contradiction of urban-born young middle-class women under the one-child policy.

As concluded by Schaffer and Song (2007):

Women in China have had to confront a powerful array of patriarchal traditions, ancient and modern, that include the enduring Confucian belief systems and more recent Communist ideologies, compound by the demands of a new market economy and the influx of Western Knowledge systems -a profusion of 'isms (Schaffer and Song 2007, p.18)

They are struggling between seeking one's own path with the new discourse of 'individualism' under the neoliberal market economy and conforming to the traditional role in the family of patriarchal culture reinforced by the state. The high but contradictory expectations from their parents as mentioned before also make them struggle. According to the previous study, the contradiction results in a lot of women choosing to pursue professional careers and postpone marriage (Xie, K. 2021).

This is reflected in the phenomenon of 'getting married later' being more prominent in 2020:

According to the official marriage report of China 2021(Yicai News 2021), from 2013 to 2020, the number of registered marriages in China continued to decline from a record high of 13.47 million to 8.13 million, with a 12.2% decline in 2020. The phenomenon of ‘getting married later’ is prominent: More people choose to get married between 25 to 29 years old instead of between 20 to 24 years old. From 2005 to 2019, the number of 20 to 24 years old who registered for marriages (including remarriages) decreased from 47.0% to 19.7%, the number of 25 to 29 years old who registered increased from 34.3% to 34.6%. The more economically developed the region, the more pronounced the decline in marriage rates. Shanghai, Zhejiang, and Shandong rank the top three in the bottom of regions with the lowest marriage rate in the country.

As the static above shows the young women in my life circle getting married before 25 is against the trend of ‘getting married later’, this leads to my interest on conduct. Study focusing on the young married women (married before 25) born and raised in Shanghai.

1.2 Research questions

Given the contradictory situation women need to face in contemporary China, this thesis asks the question of the interaction between these young newly married women’s subjectivities on marriage and state’s governance ideology.

The research questions are formulated as follows:

1. How does ideology of *suzhi* discourse which is central to party-state governance ideology affect young urban middle-class Chinese women’s decision on marriage and prospect on marriage life.

The sub-questions draw upon the analytical framework of the study, *critical discursive psychology* (CDP) and its three key concepts, and are formulated as follow:

2. How does norm constructed in relation to *suzhi* discourse influence their dominant interpretative repertoires ?

3. How resistance to *suzhi* discourse can be shown through the *ideology dilemma* and different *subject positions* adopted by them.

1.3 Significance and academic contribution

When it comes to the study of Chinese young married women, a large amount of existing research is dedicated to rural women and rural migrant women who are undergoing severe social and economic conditions that need attention (Shen, Y. 2016; Tu and Lou 2017; Zhang, J. 2010). However, there is not much written about middle-class young Chinese women. Through looking into the marriage experience of these well-educated, privileged young women in contemporary urban China, I might have the possibility to give prominence to the topic related to Chinese women that haven't been touched upon before.

Also, with people choosing to get married between 25 to 29 years old significantly exceeded those who chose to get married between 20 to 24 years old, stated that research subjects I studied in this thesis, who choose to get married before 25, are the relatively small group of urban middle-class young women. Therefore, I hope to shed some light on this small group of people and contribute as a more recent finding to the broad literature of women's study in contemporary China.

1.4 Outline of the thesis

The thesis is organized into six chapters. The background of the thesis is clarified in the introductory chapter. In the following chapter, literature review on the relation of Chinese nation and Chinese women, as well as the ideology of *suzhi* in the background of this study are presented. The third chapter presents and discusses the theoretical analytical framework CDP and the concept of *suzhi* is conceptualized. In the fourth

chapter, the research design and the methodological approach of the thesis are explained. The fifth chapter presents the research finding and analysis. Lastly, the thesis is concluded in the sixth chapter.

2.Literature review

In the background, I have explained how the contradictory governance ideology of the party-state has led to the inner contradiction of urban middle-class young women in China. Since the research question is about how the ideology of *suzhi* discourse which is central to party-state governance ideology affect young urban middle-class Chinese women. In the following literature review I would like to discuss the impact of the state's governance ideology on women in China from a historical perspective to explain how my study conducted in Chinese society nowadays can help enrich it. Furthermore, how *suzhi* is specifically manifested in the background of this study will be explained in detail.

2.1 The history of being women in China

Historically, instead of *nüxing* the compound word *Funü* had been taking over as a preferred collective noun “ in mainstream Confucian regulative gender theory projects” (Barlow 2004, p. 37) to refer to female person.

In the writing of a celebrated government official in mid-eighteenth century, Cheng Hongmou talked about the different term being used to describe generic Women, “Before [women] are married [they] are *nü*/female/daughters; when [they] get married they are *fu* or wives; and when[they] give birth to children,[they] are *mu* or mothers” (Barlow 2004, p. 42).

It is obvious to notice that Women’s universal qualities do not appear in the context. All these terms positioned women in relation to differential family(*jia* ,家) positions (Barlow 2004, p. 42), and this leads to Cheng’s argument of the things disciplined *funü* should take responsibility of to guarantee the coherence of human culture embedded in

hierarchical relations, such as “filial caretaking, service to parents, moral instruction of children” (Barlow 2004, p. 43).

With the Qing Dynasty abandoning the civil service examination system in 1905, “a modern, post-Confucian, professionalized intellectual” (Barlow 2004, p. 49) found that “the appropriation of foreign signs into the new, domestic, urban mass media” (Barlow 2004, p. 49) was helpful to replace the old-fashioned elites and their opinions. The group of people who craved new social formation called themselves *zhishi fenzi*, or Chinese intellectual under Maoist inscription, and the group constituted itself as a “colonized elite” (Barlow 2004, p. 49). By means of importing neologism such as ‘science’ and ‘democracy’ from more civilized countries in the world and giving them new meanings, these nationalist *zhishi fenzi* got to start the modernization of China (Barlow 2004, p. 49).

It was the May Fourth Movement led by those intellectuals in early twenty centuries, women’s movement happened in the history of China for the first time.

The term *nüxing*, literally meaning female sex, was introduced by *zhishifenzi* during the 1920s. Although there was no evidence that women used this term to describe themselves, it was regarded as “a discursive sign and a subject position in the larger frames of anti-Confucian discourse” (Barlow 2004, p. 52). With the help of European humanism and scientific sex theory, women finally started to be seen as subject outside their family (Barlow 2004, p. 54). Although nationalist government questioned the unequal right between men and women such as female chastity code, education and arranged marriage. However, Chinese women only become *nüxing* when the debate about “female passivity, biological inferiority, intellectual inability, sexuality, and social absence” (Barlow 2004, p. 54), indicating the only purpose of *nüxing* is to highlight man’s superiority.

Therefore, the women's movement in this period can only be seen as the byproduct of nationalist' goal of making China stronger. Women's liberation was used to challenge the mainstream of Confucianism by bringing in the new culture.

Nüxing caught the attention of Xiang Jingyu, a theorist from Chinese Communist Party in the early 1920s. Taking inspiration from international Marxism, she classified *nüxing* as a product of "bourgeois preoccupations" while making *funü* re-enter as an alternative name for women as a collectivity the same way sexed *nüxing* had and help set the tone of communist theorizing for years (Barlow 2004, p. 54). This time, under the statist construction of Maoism, *funü* has different meaning and purpose from before. "While the catachresis of *nüxing* testified to the sex binary's importance in what became a tidal wave of theoretical work and translation, the communist *funü* situated its subject of women in social production as much as in family reproduction." (Barlow 2004, p. 55). This began when the communist Party's fugitive state projects in the late 1930s due to the Communist Party abandoned territory under military pressure from the Japanese Imperial Army (Barlow 2004, p. 56). For the sake of motivating women into anti-Japanese struggle and social revolution, *funü* was recreated as "a mediating third element between the modern state and the modern Chinese family" and being made into political practice (Barlow 2004, p. 56). "The ideological ideal was at healthy, semiliterate women of eighteen to thirty-five years old... was expected to act out of self-interest (*benshen liyi* , 本身利益) for personal rights (*quanli*, 权力), 'representing' herself through grassroots mass organizational work" (Barlow 2004, p. 57). That self-interest, however, had first to be implemented via the actions of recruiting, educating, nurturing and mobilizing in "the organizational sphere of the Party" (*dang di zuzhi fanwei*, 党的组织范围) through election (*xuanju*, 选举), mobilization (*dongyuan*, 动员) and other organizational (*zuzhi*, 组织) practices, tying itself with the state constantly (Barlow 2004, p. 57).

After 1943 the CCP's party turning to the transformation of the family itself, a new framing of politicized family were required in order to re-introduce women into family (Barlow 2004, p. 58). With the reconstituted language such as "asking men to begin to take family responsibilities as seriously as women did", "the Maoist interpenetration of state and family made the body of women a field of the state" (Barlow 2004, p. 58). There is no doubt that Chinese women attained more economic freedom after the communist revolution liberating them from feudal society (Zheng, J. 2016, p. 6). In 1950s, the modern socialist family (*jiating*, 家庭) was entwined with Maoist nation (*guojia*, 国家) in the sense of assuming the prosperity of the family is in direct relation to the prosperity of the nation, empowering home-oriented women to step out their homes to adapt new social roles alongside men with political and financial support (Barlow 2004, p. 59). The post Mao or Deng Xiaoping economic reforms aimed to transform the economic reforms after Mao era aimed to change the relationship of the citizens into "the means of production, systems of commodity distribution and consumption, and popular culture and social life" (Barlow 2004, p. 62).

Later in 1980s, questions of women's social and sexual subjectivity have become heated as the post-Mao state trying to reestablish mass organizations named All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), similar to the previous one *Fulian* which was used to "subordinate and dominate all inscriptions of womanhood in official discourse" (Barlow 2004, p. 59) in 1949. ACFW tried to reassert its claim to represent the nation's women in post-Mao era, when the power of political consensus tying women to the state was dying, by repositioning a Maoist revolutionary, claiming that Chinese Communist Party had awarded liberation to Chinese women by fully mobilized them into productive labor (Barlow 2004, pp.257-258).

Seeing through the goal of the Federation is to get China's women citizens ready to participate in the state common will as *funü*, "an increasingly sexualized, consumer-

oriented, retheorized” (Barlow 2004, p. 62), *nixing* was brought back as a hallmark trope of 1980s feminism along with personal standing (*ren 'ge*, 人格), and social roles (*jiaose*, 角色) (Barlow 2004, p. 261). At the same time, having benefited from the rapid economic growth after economic reform in 1978, Chinese women began to enjoy more economic freedom, as well as more likely to show their diverse views and needs in public discourse (Wang, Z. 1998).

What can be found here is the dynamic relationships between women’s liberation and the country. From the nationalist government to the CCP, the history of women’s liberation and promoting gender equality are along with the purpose of contributing to the betterment of the Chinese nation and shaping women’s subjectivities with ideologies contributed to the country. Just like the shifting use of different terms referring to women to position women at the place as state wish, the governance of ideology still exists today. One of the party-state governance ideologies extremely relevant to the construction of women’s subjectivity nowadays is the ideology of *suzhi*.

2.2 *Suzhi* discourse

Often translated as ‘quality’, The term *suzhi* is hard to pin down and no one single English term fully explains the nuances of *suzhi* (Kipnis 2006, p.295). The idea of *suzhi* refers to ‘the innate and nurtured physical, psychological, intellectual, moral and ideological qualities of human bodies and their conduct’ (Jacka 2009, p. 524).

Suzhi justifies social and political hierarchies by coding individual bodies with different values which are shaped under the influence of state ideology, combining both the ideology of Confucianism and Chinese Marxism (Xie, K. 2021, p. 47). In other words, *suzhi* is a broad ideology including everything the party-state needs to back up its political agenda including both liberal and authoritarian discourse, which is usually

derived from Confucianism and Chinese Marxism which can be easily understood and accepted by Chinese people.

With the political agenda of modernization, the country managed to incorporate market economy as neoliberal elements into an authoritarian system by adopting a path towards “socialism with Chinese characteristics”, arguing that material production should be prioritized to realize socialism after 1980 (Zheng, J. 2016, p. 14). The deployment of *suzhi* discourse became central to China’s dynamics of neoliberal governance with this state-manipulated economy, with those of ‘high *suzhi*’ gaining more income, power and status than those of ‘low’ *suzhi* (Kipnis 2006, p.295).

Thus, for people who long for improvement in China, following the ideology of high ‘*suzhi*’ is implanted in their mind deeply.

Following how *suzhi* discourse stays relevant to the society our interviewees grew up and live in will be discussed.

2.2.1 Suzhi in xiaokang culture

Suzhi backs up the state-promoted *xiaokang* culture, which is mentioned in the background, by picturing the high ‘*suzhi*’ embodied by middle class people basing on consumption with economic achievement and cultural superiority with higher education, as perfectly explained by Xie(2021):

...the state-sponsored discourse of the middle class grew out of and has been associated with the idea of *suzhi*...and the various goods and services, such as cars, clothing, and holidays have been advertised as being beneficial to increasing *suzhi*. *Suzhi* has become a description of the ‘minute social distinctions defining a person of quality in practices of consumption and the incitement of a middle class desire for social mobility’ (Xie,K. 2021, p. 50)

By positioning consumption as a high '*suzhi*' to have, *xiaokang* culture encourages people to actively take part in economic activities.

2.2.2 *Suzhi in the one-child policy*

Another example of the ideology of *suzhi* being adopted is in relation to birth control policy in China.

Along with the economic reform, the one-child policy was introduced by the nation in 1979 as the only solution to the rapidly growing population which was sabotaging the nation's modernization that time (Greenhalgh 2003, p.165). However, as an extreme intervention of the state in family planning, this policy has profound effects on women's roles in family and society. On one level, being used to control women's fertility choices, the One-Child policy is argued to violate women's basic human rights (Liu, Y 2016, p.153). On another level, contrary to Chinese officials' claim to promote gender, it tends to reinforce women's traditional roles as household laborers and reproducers, reinforcing the patriarchal family system (Chow and Berheide, 1994). Except from economic and administrative incentives for families to obey the rule and heavy penalties for families having more than one child (Xie, K. 2021, p. 120; Greenhalgh 2001), it is important for the state to come up with an ideology to help the promotion of birth control policies as well. The result is raising *renkou suzhi* (population quality, 人口素质) is placed at the ideological center in its policy making (Kipnis 2006, p. 305). As captured in the deployment of eugenics in Chinese: the slogan *yousheng youyu* (superior birth and superior education, 优生优育), the raising of the *renkou suzhi* through both genetic counseling and education is upheld (Kipnis 2006, p. 300).

During 1990s, the years in which our participants were born, *suzhi* entering more popular genres from official and academic publication. Popular magazines for parents

provide suggestion on cultivating the *suzhi* of their children (Kipnis 2006, p.302), in another word, cultivating their children to become competent in ‘physical, psychological, intellectual, moral and ideological qualities’(Jacka 2009, p. 524)

In conclusion, the *suzhi* has significant influence on shaping Chinese people's ideology of better self, especially for the urban middle-class young women like my interviewees who were raised up following the ideology of high ‘*suzhi*’ population.

By looking at how does ideology of *suzhi* discourse affect young urban middle-class Chinese women’s decision on marriage and future perception on marriage life, we are able to see the dynamics between the state and young Chinese women. As Rofel (1999) concluded in *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China after Socialism*, gender in China is about more than just men and women but has much to do with the state and the nation, together with the socialism and capitalism it embraced.

3. Conceptualization and Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I am going to briefly explain the choice of studying Chinese women outside the normative conceptions of sexual and gendered life, but in a broader context of the society with gender scholar Judith Butler's work, then proceed to the chosen theoretical analytical framework of critical discursive psychology, and lastly present the discussion of the concept of *suzhi* utilized in this thesis.

3.1 *Undoing gender* and Judith Butler

Psychology has a long history when it comes to producing theories about sex and gender with its traditional research approach of psychology: “quantitative measurement combined with experimental, quasi-experimental, correlation, and/or longitudinal research design” (Donaghue 2018, p. 128). With various research being conducted with this traditional research, what lying under is the consensus of the “assumed” existence (and importance) of sex/gender as a natural and obvious category” (Donaghue 2018, p. 128).

In *Undoing gender*, Judith Butler (2004) argues the importance of undoing the restrictively conceptions of sexual and gendered life to undo a prior conception on what construct a women/men and lay emphasis on social norms taking part in one's construction of self, which in this thesis is party-state's governance ideology:

What does gender want? To speak in this way may seem strange, but it becomes less so when we realize that the social norms that constitute our existence carry desires that do not originate with our individual personhood. This matter is made more complex by the fact that the viability of our individual personhood is fundamentally dependent on these social norms. (Butler 2004, p. 2)

Argued by Butler, gender is a product of embedded social actions. Apart from the gendered norm, there are more general norm involved in constructing Chinese women. Thus, i choose to study Chinese women outside the normative conceptions of sexual and gendered life, but in a broader context of the Chinese society, and the critical discursive psychology is a perfect tool as explained in the following section.

3.2 Theoretical tool of analysis: critical discursive psychology

For discursive psychologists, there are no attached meaning to the category of sex/gender and they seek to find out the construction of sex/gender as concepts in people's day-to-day interaction, looking at how they are being used, instead of carrying out quantitative research to prove what quality shape the concept of sex/gender and how they might affect people's past and future (Donaghue 2018, p. 129).

This thesis aims to gain some understanding of urban young married Chinese women' from their subjective experiences and their perceptions on marriage life, critical discursive psychology (CDP) can serve as a suitable theoretical tool of analysis.

CDP is to analyze discourse within psychology, and a form of discursive psychology analysis (DP). Language is placed at the center place in discursive psychology to see how knowledge is actively constituted (Wiggins 2017).

I found CDP be a perfect one for following reasons:

1.CDP is less concerned about capturing the detail of intonations and the sequential features of the talk (Wiggins 2017, p. 48). As a form of discourse analysis is concerned with psychological issues, but it does not try to 'get inside' people's minds or attempt to understand their intentions (Wiggins 2017, pp. 45-49).It provides more open place and flexibility to the analysis than DP which applied better to the broad topic as this thesis tries to look into.

2.CDP put its emphasis on a little bit more on social practices than psychological states for what people say and text are influenced by their social interaction rather than their thought (Wiggins 2017, p. 49).

This means the accent of CDP is placed on the productive capacity of discourse, structuring both subjective experience and our sense of who we are under the impact of social and cultural context (Edley 2001, p. 191). In other words, not only opinion on a certain topic is shown in the discourse, but participants' ideology of the world is also reflected as well, giving us a way to look into the topic from a broader cultural or social perspective.

3.CDP comes from interpretivist epistemological positioning and constructionist ontological positioning, which is suitable for my thesis and will be explained in next chapter.

Edley (2001) conducts his studies on masculinity using CPD and argues that CPD realizes there is a lexicon or repertoire of terms provided by the history while constructing an object or event. This is called interpretative repertoires. Some constructions and formulation are easier to say than others and became interpretative repertoires because some ways of understands the world can be culturally dominant (Edley 2001, p. 190).Another two concepts used in CDP are ideological dilemmas and subject position. Ideological dilemmas represent the situation of people moving between contradictory ideology while talking (Seymour-Smith 2017). Being flexible and relational, subject positions represent the different identities people adopt during conversation (Seymour-Smith 2017, p.115).

More explanation regarding how these three concepts can be used as analytical tools will be presented in the next chapter.

3.3 Conceptualization of *suzhi*

As mentioned in the former Chapter *suzhi* (quality) is a vague and broad term including all the qualities people should possess for the party-state to sustain its ideal ruling. In other words, a high *suzhi* people is highly aligned to party-state political agenda. Here, the conceptualization of *suzhi* is mainly taken from Kipnis's work (2006). Along with my understanding on how it is relevant in Chinese society nowadays, I conceptualized the *suzhi* for this thesis as followed.

There are three area where *suzhi* discourse was highlighted in modern China ,which is eugenics and self-cultivation and nationalism (Kipnis 2006, p. 305)

Chinese deployment of *eugenics*,“youshengyouyu(优生优育) (superior birth and superior education)” is the first and most major basis of contemporary *suzhi* discourse. The *suzhi* discourse in relation to eugenics is termed as Renkou *suzhi* (the quality of population)as mentioned before. Raising the quality of population is to advocate the socialist population policy demanding superior genetic counselling, advances in the education system and proper moral education. In other words, women who followed state's instruction of childbearing and motherhood in physical ,educational and moral aspects can be seen as the high '*suzhi*' ones.

Self-cultivation rooted in Confucian and Chinese Marxism is the second major basis of the *suzhi* discourse. This part of *suzhi* is aligned with the purpose of shaping the intellectual aspect of people. The way it being reflected in the modern China is the core socialist value, which have been organized into three level: “prosperity, democracy, civility and harmony at the national level; freedom ,equality, justice, and rule of law as

societal values; patriotism, dedication, Integrity and geniality as citizens' concerns"(Gow 2017, p. 99),in which:

The role of the citizens as defined by the Core Socialist values as well as the relationship between citizens and the state follows this Confucian, relational logic: citizens are not "born" but "become" by virtue of their contribution to the teleological modernization project formulated by the CCP. (Gow 2017, p. 105)

Those teleological modernization project formulated by the CCP are rooted in Confucian and Chinese Marxism since these traditional philosophies passed from generation to generation as norm have great influence on convincing Chinese people (Gow 2017).For example, the *xiaokang* culture originated from Chinese Marxism and the idealized married heterosexual family rooted in Confucian 'filial piety' mentioned before are all part of teleological modernization projects (Gow 2017).What a citizen should concern, to be specific, to become a citizen with high '*suzhi*', one should cultivate themselves to be responsible and pay contribution to the nation and society, dedicating themselves to the realization of an ideal nation (Gow 2017, p.106) by taking part in those modernization projects.

Nationalism is the third major basis of *suzhi* discourse. In official assessments of *suzhi*, evaluations of patriotism, which are considered to be equivalent, are central in official assessments of *suzhi* (Kipnis 2006, p.311). It is still highly relevant today, which is mentioned in the core socialist values.

In sum, the quality one need to have to be considered as high '*suzhi*' in the context of thesis is in connection with:

- 1.The role of women in reproduction is especially highlighted through superior birth and superior education of their children.

2. Dedicating oneself to modernization projects which contribute to the economic development (*xiaokang* culture, which shaped the identity of middle class in China) and uphold the harmony of the country (through family harmony).

3. Being respectful to the nation and the CCP leadership.

Mostly used in official and academic publications, *Suzhi* is not a common word people use when talking about their daily life, but the grouped ideologies behind can be found in people's understanding of their life. Through looking at how interpretative repertoires, briefly understood as common sense, adopted by these urban young married women are aligned with *suzhi*, the interaction of state's governance ideology and them can be indicated, which will be explained in the following chapter.

4. Methodological Approach

In this chapter, the discussion of chosen research design, the study's ontological and epistemological positioning, methods of data collection being adopted, the analytical methods, and the thesis' limitations, reflexivity and positionality, and ethical consideration will be presented.

The choice of research design and research methods is crucial for conducting any study. Before starting to explain my thinking process of designing this research, I would like to talk about first thing troubled me about this research project. After finally stop trying to identify myself a feminist because of the constant feeling of not knowing enough and not having a self-consistent framework when it comes to approaching any female/gender topic, I looked back on my original thoughts of wishing to speak as someone who grows up outside Western culture since my political horizons and sensibilities are mostly shaped by Chinese culture. I believed there is certain perspective can only be provided by people like me as an insider .At the same time, I was also aware the question in my head that inspired me at the beginning was very much affected by the feminism in the context of Western World with the assumption of those young women might take up the social expectation at a comparatively early age, so i want to find an approach which leave certain openness to the research. Thus, this leads to some methods and research designs appearing to be more favorable than others.

Since the focus of the study aim to gather some in-depth understanding of Chinese young women's experiences of their life as someone who chose to get married at early age. Qualitative research is more suitable than quantitative one for its striving for the depth of understanding (Patton 2002). I will explain more with the Ontological and epistemological positioning in coming section.

4.1 Ontological and epistemological positioning

The ontological and epistemological positioning of the different research strategies have a huge impact on the type of research being carried out.

Quantitative research emphasizes a deductive approach to the relationship between theory and research, focusing on testing the theory. It often incorporates natural science model, positivism particularly, and embodies a view of social reality as an external, objective reality. In contrast, qualitative research entails an inductive approach between theory and research, focusing on generating the theory. It often placed accent on how social world being interpreted by individual and embodies a view of social reality as something constantly changing with individuals' creation (Bryman 2016, p. 33).

As mentioned before, the nature of striving for the depth of understanding in qualitative research lies in its features of interpretivist epistemological positioning and constructionist ontological positioning, which is in line with I need for this research.

The constructionist ontological positioning implies that reality are outcomes of the interactions between individuals, rather than just stay separated from those taking part the construction as objectivism in quantitative research believes. With constructionist ontological positioning, reality can be reconstructed and reshaped with young women's experience of life instead of just being something still, and thus the access to the understanding of these young women's perception is provided (Bryman 2016, pp. 33, 375).

While the constructionist ontological positioning provides access to the understanding, The interpretivist epistemological positioning is what built the depth of the understanding. Since its stress is on the social world through the examination of the interpretation of the world by the participants. The depth of understanding obtained from the study relied on the depth of interpretation of collected data. However, it is

crucial to know these findings originated from interpretation and cannot be seen as the ultimate truth of the research question. (Bryman 2016, pp. 375).

4.2 Research design and qualitative inquiry

I started to look up different qualitative inquiries. Although some qualitative researchers usually do not identify the approach, they are using to conduct qualitative research, there are some five approaches considered widely used: narrative research, phenomenological research, grounded theory research, ethnographic research and case study research (Creswell and Poth 2018, p. 67). Initially, I came to believe that justifying this research as grounded theory would be more suitable since grounded theory accept both deductive and inductive logic while accessing the field. This means grounded theory did not necessarily ask researchers to conduct research without the influence from previous knowledge, but to enhance understanding, and usually provide a more 'substantive' than a formal theory (Charmaz 2003), which for me provides as much openness as possible to the research. However, I quickly came to realize that grounded theory usually requires interviews with 20 to 60 individuals (Creswell and Poth 2018, p. 105) which is way more work than I can complete within the given time of this thesis.

Then I had my eyes on phenomenological approach. The feature of "the intentionality of consciousness" is one of the four philosophical perspectives in phenomenology (Creswell and Poth 2018, p. 75), making phenomenological approach is well suited for questions needing to describe the essence of a lived phenomenon which are often emotional and deep. However, this seemly promising approach was later also denied by myself for its refusal of the subjective-objective perspective (Creswell and Poth 2018, p. 76), since I find it hard for me to put aside my own experience completely for the purpose of focusing on the experiences of the participants. But what phenomenological approach inspired me a psychology might be better since I aim to

look at the mindset behind those young women and how society might help to shape these ideas. After looking up different approaches concerning psychological issues, I chose the critical discursive psychology (CDP).

While pondering the proper research approach for my thesis, I started to realize what recurring in my thought process is the intention of providing some interesting perspective or illuminate some new concerns about Chinese middle-classed young women. I did not look forward to offering a solution or promoting any change to empower women. This in turn led to the final choice of *snowballing sampling*, *semi-structured interviews* and *critical discursive psychology analysis*. The next three sections will give a more detailed reasoning of the different choices.

4.3 Snowballing sampling as qualitative data collection

Since this research is qualitative in nature, this study chooses to use one of the purposive sampling techniques: snowballing sampling.

“Snowball sampling is a technique in which the researcher initially samples a small group of people relevant to the research questions, and these sampled participants propose other participants who have had the experience or characteristics relevant to the research and so on” (Bryman 2016, p. 415). People with similar life track have the tendency to know or even get close with each other because they have similar life experience to share. Since getting married before 25 is not so common among young women in Shanghai, snowball sampling provided a feasible way to gather potential participants through personal networks.

Nine participants were chosen to conduct the interview based on the following criteria for sampling: young women aged between 20 to 25, married, university-educated, born and raised in middle-class families in Shanghai. As reported by a 2018 study, over 5

million households in Shanghai could be considered middle-class families, making up 91% of the total registered households of the city (Li, C. 2021). Being one of the most economically developed cities and the largest city in China, it is convenient to find the participants that fit the criteria of my sample selection.

Starting from two close friends of mine, I reached my goal of interviewing 9 young women by the end of my snowball sampling, giving this research sufficient data to identify interpretive repertoires, ideological dilemmas, and subject positions in the data. Almost all my participants are 25 years old. All have obtained a bachelor's degree, with two having master's degree in reading. Between October and November 2021, I carried out my one-to-one interview through online meeting software Zoom.

Since I was exploring my participants' personal life experience and opinions, I chose one-to-one interview. In the Chinese context, people can be reluctant to sharing their personal experience in public and have the tendency to withdraw different views on sensitive topics like feminism to avoid standing out in the group. One-to-one interviews provided a relatively safe environment for my participants to express their attitudes. Also, these interviewees were all introduced by close friends or family relatives through snowball sampling. They are relatively more open to me than complete strangers. I also recorded all the interview with their permission, not just for my data analysis, also helping me to reflect and keep track with the improvements along the process.

4.4 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews typically refer to the type of interview where interviewers are able to change the sequences of questions with an interview guide in the general form and have the freedom to ask further questions if any significant replies are provided by the interviewees (Bryman 2016, p.201). In other words, what semi-structured interviews are more interested in is the interviewees' point of view.

The semi-structured have its positive influence on this study lie in the ability to gather data for in-depth understanding. With the chosen research question associated with women's private life, the situation of not comfortable answering certain question is expected. The high degree of reciprocity of semi-structured allows these questions to be brought back again during the interview, allowing women's voices to be heard and in their own words, which is prominent in gender study (Bryman 2016, p. 488).

4.5 Analytical tool: Critical discursive psychology analytical concepts

After collecting data using semi-structured interviews, critical discursive psychology comes to picking up repertoires of terms being used shaped by social settings or context. CDP has both a theoretical and methodological aspect with three key analytical concepts: interpretative repertoires, ideology dilemma and subject positions (Wiggins 2017). They are all chosen as analytic tools for this thesis because they are highly suitable for main research questions.

4.5.1 CDP analytical tools

There is no certain guide to be a young married woman. But their identity as a young married women exists as a set of discursive practices inform the way they speak, feel and think. The identity of a young married women is not something free to construct and often time is built collectively. This can be understood through the conversation, as they are usually "made up of a patch work of quotations from various interpretative repertoires" (Edley 2001, p.198).

Interpretive repertoires are defined as "a lexicon or register of terms and metaphors draw upon to characterize and evaluate actions and events", "a broad unit that makes sense of social life" (Potter and Wetherell 1987, p.138). They are recognizable patterns as people discuss, argue and evaluate issues and events. When people are asked to talk

about a particular topic, they usually do not come up with a personal idea as original but “create” it by extracting from the history already known, and that is how similar patterns among different voices are developed. Serving as “building blocks of conversations” (Edley 2001, p. 198), interpretive repertoires are part of community's common sense, for the fact that they are established over time, and it can be so normative and more culturally dominant than others (Wiggins, 2017).

Identifying interpretative repertoires needs experience developed with practice but being familiar with the data and repeated reading of transcripts are very useful to spot similar lines or arguments are being made by different participants.

Another concept concerned with the impact of social surroundings on discourse is *ideological dilemmas*. Ideology here is defined as “the common sense of society, which appears natural, inevitable and unquestioned” (Seymour-Smith 2017, p. 114). The conceptual focus of Ideologies here is not on what fixed ideologies are intellectually, but on the composition of ideologies, named lived ideologies. However, these lived ideologies often face dilemmas of being inconsistent, fragmented, and contradictory (Edley 2001, p. 203). Both *interpretative repertoires* and *ideological dilemmas* view discourses as ways of talking about objects and events constructed by beliefs, values and practices of a given society or culture. What separates them from each other is *ideological dilemmas* place it accent on the different interpretative repertoires of the same social object. These different interpretative repertoires are dilemmas in the sense of being developed from opposing positions in an unfolding, historical, argumentative exchange, rather than naturally and independently constructed (Edley 2001, p. 204). Ideological dilemmas provide researchers a window to investigate the dilemmatic qualities shaping people's ordinary life.

Ideological dilemmas can be identified with different linguistic tools. “Factual reports” and “descriptions work” often used as seemingly neutral and true facts to serve the

speaker's own interests (Widding and Farooqi 2016, p. 5). Sometimes the extreme way of justifying or defending ideas, opinions, and actions can be simply referring to what (supposedly) everyone knows to be true (Pomerantz 1986).

The third concept is named *subject positions*. Constituted and reconstituted through discourse, one's identity is "flexible, contextual, relational, situated, and inflected by power relations" (Seymour-Smith 2017, p.116). Subject positions refer to various ways of how people position themselves through interpretative repertoires, or, the ways their self is shaped and negotiated in social interaction. (Seymour-Smith 2017, p.115). The power relations between different positions created inconsistency. When some positions are opposed to dominant positions that are constructed from those socially and culturally dominant interpretative repertoires as 'norms', they become *troubled subject positions* (Staunaes 2003, p. 104). Their 'troubles' comes in relation to what is considered as normativity in various types of interactions and specific orderings of power in everyday living life (Staunaes 2003, p. 104). Those *troubled subject positions* are talked about as questioned, criticized, while untroubled, dominant ones are talked about as normal and righteous (Wetherell 1998). People found them in troubled subject positions in the face of contradictions and resistances. One way it being manifested is the possibility for people to talk about themselves in an untroubled manner as an ordinary and normal person when being a part of the dominant norm in a specific context, without feeling the urge to explain their position or actions (Widding and Farooqi 2016, p. 5). In many cases, speakers' references to their own free will and choice is one significant linguistic trait can be found to legitimize their words while being in troubled subject positions (Widding and Farooqi 2016, p. 5).

Two aspects are taken in all three concepts. With interpretative repertoires, both their local deployment, and their broader social implications, should be observed. For ideological dilemmas, both dilemmatic nature of common sense being used for

rhetorical purpose, and their wider cultural significance should be looked at. As for subject positions, both accomplishments of the positions they took within the local context, and the broader ideological context of these different positions should be investigated as well (Edley 2001, p.217)

As mentioned before, the focus of CDP is to conduct an in-depth analysis. Although the sample is relatively small and the analysis is limited, the emphasized consideration on broader social context and discourse within CDP analytical tools can be practical to extend the findings to bigger groups of people with similar characteristics in Chinese society.

4.5.2 Conducting CDP

As concluded by Seymour-Smith, “systematic analysis of the interactional context in which accounts are produced, attention to variability across accounts, and a consideration of the construction of discourse need to be examined” (Seymour-Smith 2017, p. 30).

I choose to follow the steps provided by Seymour-Smith as well: Start by mapping out the interpretative repertoires and then moving on to outline the subject positions since that is the more intricate part of the work. Then Ideological dilemmas can be identified with the contradictory repertoires and subject positions participants undertake (Seymour-Smith 2017, p. 30). Through looking at how interpretative repertoires (briefly understood as common sense), ideological dilemmas and troubled subject positions adopted by these urban young married women are aligned with *suzhi*, the interaction of state’s governance ideology and their perspective on marriage life can be indicated.

4.6 Limitations, reflexivity and positionality, and ethical consideration

Being aware of the insufficiency of the study is important. Through reflecting on the limitations, reflexivity and positionality, and ethical consideration can shed light on the issues that might occur, and precaution can be taken to minimize the possibility of happening. First, I will briefly talk about the general limitations, then move on the reflexivity and author's positionality, and to ethical considerations and lastly.

4.6.1 General limitations

For me the first limitation for the thesis is language. Although having experienced two-years' study in Sweden, I still cannot say I am fluent in English.

All interviews were conducted in Chinese, and the data were transcribed into Chinese immediately. Only when being quoted in the thesis, interview transcriptions were translated into English. As a Chinese person, some phrases and words in Chinese are difficult to translate into English, and this could also lead to some knowledge and concepts being lost. Therefore, I need to have self-awareness regarding the choice of word to prevent misinterpretation and give detailed explanation of the word if there is potential lost in translation.

4.6.2 Reflexivity and Positionality

“Consensual research is possible when different identities are understood and accepted, not assuming that there is equality across all researcher and research participants involved” (Sultana 2007, p.382). It is crucial in social science research to keep a relatively balanced power dynamics while conducting interviews.

Me and my participants have things in common in terms of age, gender, the environment we grew up in, which gave me advantages to build connection and form understanding of their world because they feel comfortable to share their life stories. However, I am aware that my position can be a challenging issue in this research. I am

aware that a researcher needs to be sensitive about his or her own cultural, political, and social background and context (Bryman 2016, p. 388). Differences still exist and the knowledge of the social world is a matter of interpretation.

One significant bias can be: my position as a student studying feminism in Western country will have an impact on the research, as feminism is traditionally considered as a sensitive topic in China, the level of understanding toward the topic among interviewees can vary and it could affect my understanding of participants' personal worlds with preconception. Also, the awareness of possible biases is especially strong when it comes to some participants i had close friendships with, which gives me the possibility to interpret my prior impressions on them. Apart from self-reflection, I attempted to minimize by sticking to the information given within interviews only. Thus, constant reflection on one's positioning while analyzing data is important.

4.6.3 Ethical consideration

First, the thesis is following the ethical guidelines from the Swedish Research Council (2017). Consent was obtained from the interviewees, and confidentiality and protection of anonymity is assured.

Considering the comfort of participants, I asked them in which way they feel comfortable. Therefore, interviews were carried out through online meeting software Zoom and every interview lasted no more than one hour and a half (Ghillham, 2005). Also, to humanize the interview relationship and have better potential for getting quality data, i intentionally tried to create a friendly environment for conversation by having some small talk with them before conducting the official interview. Still, some of my participants can be cautious with certain questions, giving me short "official" answers without revealing too much information. As a researcher, I knew that the interpretation over the subject's statements is usually under the control of interviewer (Brinkmann

and Kvale 2015, pp. 37-38). I kept that in mind during the process of analysis and promised to share my research findings with them after I finish the thesis.

5. Empirical Findings and Analysis

In this chapter, I will begin by going through what common accounts emerge from their experience of marriage decision and perception on the future, then I will go in depth with the analysis of the relation between their dominant interpretative repertoires and *suzhi* discourse.

5.1 Empirical findings

Inspired by the discursive psychologists who was influenced by insights from conversation analysis, I choose to favor the “naturally occurring” data to examine the way that how *suzhi* is made relevant by the participants themselves with discussion on their marriage, their future expectation rather than beginning with preconceived research questions on *suzhi* (Potter and Hepburn, 2005; Seymour-Smith 2017), except for the discussion of *individualism* and *feminism* in the end.

After asking the question of their educational background and job. The first question asked is ‘why choose to get married at this age?’ and then I proceeded to ask them to share their dating experience and their relationship with in-law family. The one common account emerged is they all present getting married as an independent choice of themselves without external influence. This can almost be found in every topic being discussed throughout the interviews. Most of them construct the experience of meeting their husbands as a natural process and romantic one. The feeling of knowing each other well with the test of time and the compatibility between them and their husband is what makes them decide to get into marriage. The nice relationship with their in-law family, showing the marriage is a successful bond between two families, is considered as a bonus come with the marriage they chose, not something they actively seek for. When being asked if there are any expectation being put on them and their perception of the future marriage life, the answer almost all revolved with their own choice of living a certain lifestyle. Especially when it comes to the discussion of expectations from their

parents, all interviewees stress although they enjoy harmony relationship with their parents, they are the ones having control on their own life.

Another common account emerged is the bright future of marriage life. As newly married young women, almost all interviewees have positive prospects on their future life. Haven't experienced marriage life for too long, they do not feel much difference between the life before and after marriage. The dilemma of work-family balance shared by a lot of other young urban middle-class women as mentioned in background does not seem to bother them as well. They express confidence in handling both their career and marriage life with support from their husband and family. The only things they show a little bit concern about is childbearing, for the physical risks come with it.

At the same time, none of my interviewees, mentioned *suzhi* discourse and any kind of account in relation to the nation.

Even though these young women present strong emphasis on self during the interview, the dominant interpretative repertoires indicated from their narratives in fact stay aligned with the *suzhi* discourse, stating these young women are following the party-state ideology unconsciously, which cause troubled subject positions as well. In the end of interview, I asked them to talk about their understanding on individualism. Not to my surprise, all of them considered individualism as an important quality one should have in modern days, however, they soon found themselves facing the ideology dilemma.

In order to give a better representation of how *suzhi* discourse affects these young women on their marriage decision and life, I will go in depth of what interpretative repertoires are found and how they form relation with *suzhi* discourse in the next three sections.

5.2 Empirical analysis: interpretative repertoire aligned with *suzhi* discourse

During the interview, the overwhelmingly presented interpretative repertoires are aligned with the ideology of high *suzhi*.

5.2.1 interpretative repertoires aligned with eugenics aspects of *suzhi* discourse

As discussed before, the role of women in reproduction is especially highlighted through superior birth and superior education of their children. When it comes to her role of reproductivity, a woman who follows the nation's advice in terms of birth control, pregnancy care, and childbearing can be seen as 'high' *suzhi* (Zhu, J. 2010).

Since all my participants are newly married and only one of them is pregnant, not much about pregnancy care is discussed. However, the interpretative repertoires deployed 'normalized age range of crucial tasks for women' indicate their choice of marriage is aligned with the plan for superior birth in following "best reproductive age" of childbearing provided by state, which suggested the best reproductive age for women is from 23 to 30 (Baidu 2014).

On other hand, the interpretative repertoires deployed "ideal family with two children" is aligned to the most recent birth control policy Two-Child. To increase the low fertility rate and deal with an aging population and imbalanced sex ratio, the Chinese government officially replaced One-child Policy with two-child policy, which allows Chinese couples to have two children, in October 2015 (Peng 2020). The implementation of the policy began on January 1, 2016 (Peng 2020, p. 792).

The detailed discussion of first interpretative repertoire is shown as followed. When being asked why getting married at their age at the very beginning of interview, a variety of responses are generated. However, some highly regular patterns of talk can

be found the linguistic traces. Following are some quotations from the first part of the interview:

Respondent 1: I think we have known each other for enough time, nine years, we met when we were in high school.

Respondent 2: I didn't think much about the timing, I think while I was in university its a little bit too early, but now i have a stable job and it's time to move on to the next stage of my life, which is getting married.

Respondent 3: I didn't really think about specific reason of getting married at my age...probably now I have worked a while, and having a stable relation with him, I think it's time to get married, so we got married, nothing complicated happen

Respondent 4: We have known each other for a pretty short period of time...We worked in the same middle school...We have dated for less than one year, but i feel very compatible with him, we almost never fight with each other, it is different from what I experienced in the past...

Respondent 5: ...it's mostly because of my husband, he is seven years older than me, it is his proper time to get married and i am not against marriage so we decided to get married.

Respondent 6: ... I feel like we have reached the state...we have known each other for more than five years and it is natural to let parents meet with each other...

Respondent 7: When I was in grade three in high school, or maybe it was the time when I entered college, I already started to think about finding a boyfriend who can stay with me until getting married, and that's what happened with him...

Respondent 8: Honestly, I didn't expect to get married that quick. We have met each other only for one year. When we were dating, I thought about getting married maybe one or two years later, so it is a little bit quick for us to get married...we talked to our parents, and they are very happy about us too...

Respondent 9: I met with my husband on a trip to Africa after graduating from high school...We have been together for more than six years now and we got married this year. I think we really get along with each other and it's time to get married. It's pretty normal.

In the quotations above, it becomes clear that there are two patterns of talking about the reason they got married:

In one, no specific reason related to age is stressed in their answer. Instead of started talking about their perception on the age, most of them choose to answer the question by sharing different reasons and experience attributed to the decision of marriage, which indicates when hearing the question "why do you get married at this age?", the emphasis was put on the reason of getting married instead of "at this age". The linguistic traits in relation to the concept of age, or in other words, the concept of timing, can be found most is "it's time to get married", and a sense of "normal" by respondents. Respondent 6 said she feels like "reaching a state" of getting married, which is similar to "it's time to get married". Although Respondent 8 said "I did not expect to get married this quick", it is regarding the time period she dated her husband, not to her age as well. The fact they didn't feel like to explain about the age even though being specifically asked in the question indicated that they took getting married before 25 as a part of the common sense. It also shows that they didn't realize the age they choose to get married is already considered relatively young compared to the result of social research i mentioned as background at very beginning.

Another common pattern can be detected is marriage is constructed as a must-experienced step in their life. The most obvious linguistic trait is in respondent 2's description of getting married as a move to "the next stage of life". Moreover, in the quotation of respondent 7, finding a suitable match for marriage is an important task so she planned it early while still in college. In other respondents' quotations, words such

as “nothing complicated” and “normal” are used to describe their decision of marriage, indicating the decision itself was not made with any kind of struggle mentally, but quite easily when finding the right person, as marriage is meant to be accomplished.

With my interview going on, all my interviewees expressed their intention of having children. Following is some quotation from the interview:

Respondent 1: ... I haven't really thought about when to have children and how many children I want to have, but I will have children for sure...I think maybe in two or three years I will have children.

Respondent 6: I haven't thought about that for now, but i mean, since i am already married, I will have children for sure...probably two

The linguistic traces and discussion which emerged here show the common pattern of children bearing within marriage life are considered as norm. Although motherhood is a serious topic in one's life, both respondents felt like there was no need to dig behind the reason of childbearing, indicating that motherhood is understood as inseparable part of being a married woman. This further indicates their plan for marriage is constructed together with the plan of motherhood.

Combining above three common patterns emerged through the interview, we can see the interpretative repertoire deployed “a normalized age range of crucial life tasks for women”. As an old Chinese saying goes, *san shi er li* (When a man reached the age of thirty, he established family and career, 三十而立), each time has its own task need to be fulfilled. According to the previous research, the significant tasks and timeline of Chinese middle class women's life in modern days can be generally divided as: focusing on study as a student and accomplished higher education, finding a stable job

and getting married before 27, and ideally giving birth before 30 but no later than 35 (Xie, K. 2021, p.130).

The combination of these three patterns can be found distinctly in the conversation with respondent2, who was pregnant for 8 months the time interview is conducted. She talked about her experience with pregnancy. Both she and her husband hasn't finished their study for master's degree in Australia and their study plan got delay for one year because of the Covid -19 pandemic so they brought up the plan of childbearing forward:

Interviewer: who brought up the plan of childbearing first?

Respondent 2: Me, of course me. I want to say something, it is not like we are already at the perfect timing of getting married, it is more of...i want the kids so we got married first. I mean because our two families get along relatively well, and I am stuck here in Shanghai. With this one-year gap I think it is a good time to do so. All my peers are getting their degree this year, I am already late. If I waited until I got my master's degree and then job hunting, I might only be able to have children at around 29,30. That is too late for me. I planned to have two children.

She felt behind schedule compared to her peers so strongly that she brought up the plan of childbearing first so she can manage to finish all three life tasks: higher education, stable job and marriage, childbearing before the deadline of 30.

This interpretative repertoire, however, in core reflected the age range Chinese women's life course stay in consistent with states population policy, which masked by the ideology of promoting the *suzhi* of population with superior birth, in other word, give birth at "the best reproductive age of 23 to 30", as the party-state suggested (Baidu 2014). This is further proven in the coined term '*shengnü*'.

The coined term '*shengnü*' is used by the state-supported women organization ACWF to describe urban professional unmarried women over the age of 27 with advanced degrees (Xie, K. 2021, p. 122; Feldshuh 2018, p.39). With Chinese Marxism perspective on women taken as the theoretical foundation of the Chinese communist state ideology and the political discourse, the state support women's organizations the ACWF and their research activities and have control over them at the same time, to construct women's research as official agency and make sure state have the authority to speak for women's interests and concern (Chow, Zhang and Wang 2004, p. 174). The word put the blame of low fertility on women for have overly high expectation for marriage, categorized those women into not having '*suzhi*'. The normalization and routinization of gender stigma troubled a lot of young urban middle-class women age over 27 often feel pressured to explain why they haven't married yet (Hong Fincher, 2014; Xie, K. 2021) and is evidenced by my respondents' relaxed attitude towards age.

At the same time, five of interviewees more specifically stated wish to have two children in the future, while being asked why, some offer quotation as followed:

Respondent 1: ...i want to have two kids so they can keep each other company. I think this is a very ideal structure.

Respondent 2: This is pretty ideal right? One can be with my husband, one can be with me.

The pattern of constructing having kids of two in relation to an ideal family structure appears in those young women's perceptions of future, indicating they unconsciously followed the *suzhi* discourse by following birth control policy.

5.2.2 Interpretative repertoires aligned with the modernization projects

The third and fourth interpretative repertoire is named “practicing filial piety” and “living a *xiaokang* lifestyle”. These two interpretative repertoires are highly aligned with *suzhi* discourse concerned with dedicating self to the modernization projects: constructing the harmony family with traditional filial piety and living in a *xiaokang* middle-class lifestyle.

Filial piety (xiao 孝) specifies moral norms that encompass material and emotional aspects of the parent–child relationship, indicated child’s duty to support and succeed the parent (Bedford and Yeh 2019). The absence of a reliable social welfare system in China, together with a fast-ageing population, adult children are expected to support their parents in their old age (Pettier 2020, p. 7). To solve the social problems created by its previous demographic policies and the modernization of the nation, Filial Piety being the core pillar of Confucian ethics, was promoted by government as the traditional virtues to judge one’s *suzhi* and was written in the assessment criterion of ‘idealized married heterosexual family’ as a moral exemplifier (Gow 2017; Xie, K. 2021, p. 137) to build family harmony. Promoting filial piety as *suzhi* helps the Chinese government to plant the value of collectivity and promote political agenda by tapping into people’s sentiment, making the goal of the nation aligned to the parents’ wishes. In other words, children practicing filial piety through expression of gratitude and emotional commitment as well as material support to comply with parent’s wishes such as children’s marriage, benefit the modernization of the nation at the same time.

One place the pattern of *interpretative repertoire deployed* “practicing filial piety” can be found is the marriage being constructed as emotional commitment to their parents. Linguistic traces related to this account emerged when discussing if they think they will meet somebody else perfect for marriage. All of them said they feel very lucky to be with their husband, the ‘luck’ is constructed in comparison to the difficulty they would

have faced if they didn't meet someone suitable during student's period. Some give the detailed explanation of the things they concerned:

Respondent 2: ...I prefer to be with someone I met while still in school compared to someone I meet after stepping into the society. Because it took very long time to meet someone, establish trust and affection between you two and then to the stage of getting married. It is such long period of time with a lot of efforts...After you step into society there are so many things that need to be done, which make it even harder to make time to get through that process... your parents probably will need to go Shanghai's People's Park if you can't find someone by yourself. I don't want to make them worried about it.

Respondent 7: personally, I feel like after entering the society, for example, now that I have worked for a while, it feels like the people you meet in life is not easy to build a deep relationship with. I feel like the people you met while being a student is simpler to have a bond with...so I don't feel like to find somebody to married after stepping into society, I feel a little bit passive with doing so...but then it will become a family matter. My parents will worry for sure if I am not able to find someone by myself

The hardship of finding compatible other half is common in urban cities of China. This probably can be best exemplified by the phenomenon of multiplied “marriage corners” (xiangqin jiao 相亲角) in urban parks of cities all over China, in which Shanghai's People's Park being mentioned by respondent 2 is considered the most famous one.

Apart from the concern related to themselves, their parents' potential anxiety over their marriage is considered as well, which indicates the discourse of marriage is constructed not just a personal decision, but family business by our interviewee.

In China, with the expectation of having child supporting their life in old age rooted in the tradition of practicing filial piety, a marriage is considered a social contract both child and parent should benefit from. This thus leads to parents actively participating in their children's marriage affair, which give birth to these 'marriage corners' for matchmaking activities (Pettier 2020, p.2). Solving the matter of marriage by oneself was constructed as taking the burden off parent's shoulders, indicating indebtedness of children felt for the practice of filial piety through emotional commitment.

Another place the pattern can be also found during the interview, all the respondents mentioned their marriage is under the approval of both family as the quotation:

Respondent 4: my mom knew that I haven't been in relationship for very long time, so she wanted to meet them, turns out they got along with each other well ...Although I do have some thoughts of getting married with him, but I am not so sure about it...i think I settled my mind on marriage after both parents of us meeting each other for sure.

Parents' approval is often considered as the last box that needs to be ticked before the final decision of marriage of these young women, which also shows their emotional commitment to their parents.

The patterns of *interpretative repertoire deployed "living a xiaokang lifestyle"* emerged most when having the conversation on perception of future marriage life and their understanding of work-life balance.

Suzhi justifies social and political hierarchies of all sorts. In popular usage, *suzhi* categorized those urban middle class to high *suzhi* while the rural migrants with 'low' *suzhi* (Kipnis 2006, p.296). As discussed before, the ideology of *xiaokang* culture constructed by the party-state aims to help the modernization of the nation through reducing social inequality and encouraging a massive middle class.

The middle class in China encouraged by *xiaokang* culture refers to those who enjoy moderately well-off life with stable mid-level incomes, and thus have the financial capability to afford private houses and cars, education and holidays, as defined by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (Zhang, Y. 2016).

Thus, a mass aspiration to become middle class with emphasis on economic security has emerged with the ideology of *xiaokang* culture, placing emphasis on consumerism. (Xie, K. 2021, p. 50). The wish to become middle class which has high *suzhi* in China is intertwined with the wish to embody *xiaokang* culture.

While being asked about their ideal life, most interviewees expressed they were looking forward to sustaining a middle-class lifestyle after marriage:

Respondent 5 I think it will make me really sad in long term if live in a worse condition after marriage... For example, my parents bought me new house which is in pretty nice location... i wish the the house me and my husband buy in the future will be better than this one, or at least on the same level.

Some linguistic traits found in following quotations contribute to their more detailed understanding of middle-class lifestyle

Respondent3: I hope i will be able to live a life with enough money, so i don't need to work anymore. I will keep a dogs and travel whenever and wherever i wished to.

Respondent 5: The lifestyle I enjoyed is to have the ability to buy whatever I want, but it is not in as sense I need to buy luxury things. Take dining as an example, me and my husband we enjoy those small diners with average cost being 50 yuan per person as much as we enjoy expensive Michelin restaurant with average cost being 1000 yuan per person if the food has good taste... When it comes to work, I wish to do the job with

better economic benefit. I really don't like those jobs which require working overtime and come with too much duty.

The linguistic traits in quotations above show the lifestyle enjoyed and wished by the interviewee is one based on the financial capability to consume the things they like such as food and holiday. At the same time, word such as “enough”, “economical benefit” indicates this kind of lifestyle is constructed with work-life balance: the lifestyle doesn't require the highest standard, but a moderate one that can be achieved relatively easily, so they are not fully occupied by work and have time and energy to enjoy. This kind of lifestyle is aligned with the idea of moderately well-off life in *xiaokang* culture.

5.2.3 Interpretative repertoire aligned with being respectful to the CCP leadership

During the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 in China, incidents surrounding gender discrimination emerged and draw a lot of attention from the public. According to the National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China, there are 28,000 female health care workers on duty during the pandemic, which accounted for two-thirds of the total number of health care workers (BBC News 2020b). However, the contribution of female health workers is heavily absent from the media while male medical workers are constantly occupying the news headline (BBC News 2020b). Furthermore, incidents such as female nurses from Gansu Province being forced to have their hair shaved off so they could wear protective gear better and female workers' inaccessibility towards sanitary products, proper-fitting protective clothing shows their basic needs are ignored (BBC News 2020a).

At the same time, the heated debate on China's "Punchline Queen" Yang Li also took place. Performing as a stand-up comedian, she addresses controversial gender issues in front of a national audience of millions by pointing out Chinese men being overly

confident(BBC news 2021a).Even though she did not say it out loud, but the statement pointed to the uneven social status of women and men rooted in the patriarchal culture of China, which arouse a wide-range discussion .Under the influence of these events, ‘Feminism ’ became a hot word in 2020.

In this social context, to look at these urban middle-class young women’s political consciousness, I asked them to talk about their understanding on ‘feminism’.

There are two common translations of the English term ‘feminism’ in Chinese, “Feminism as *nüquan zhuyi* (women’s rights or powerism) connotes the stereotype of a man-hating he-woman hungry for power...Feminism as *nüxing zhuyi* (female or feminine-ism), in turn, appears far less threatening” (Ko and Wang, 2007, p.1). Thus, the word i choose for ‘Chinese feminism’ while interviewing is *nüxingzhuyi* (female or feminine-ism).

Under the influence fourth wave feminism characterized by its appearance in online conversation and network, the discuss of feminism can reach more women with the number of women using digital spaces is increasing (Munro, 2013), all my interviewees have encounter with feminism topic on social media.

The *interpretative repertoire deployed ‘political indifference’* can be detected during the discussion, evidenced by following linguistic traits:

One respondent refers the concerning for feminism topic as “personal preference” as followed:

Respondent 9: I don’t have much thought on it, i think it is personal preference, just like other social topic, I myself don't have much interest in this.

One respondent associated ‘feminism’ with a negative influence on life as followed:

Respondent 7: I saw the discussion on social media, but i mean, when you look at the comment section, you will find so much negativity. Then you started to feel like this society is really unsavable, so I prefer not to look at it.

One respondent has a little bit more knowledge on gender topic stated as followed:

Respondent 1: when a social event take place, it feels ...a little biased if we only look from a feminism perspective.

She then further explained it with the incident of sexual harassment in Chinese e-commerce firm Alibaba. A former female employee of Alibaba went public with her allegation accusing her superiors and client of sexually assaulting her. Alibaba being one of the most well-known firms not just in China, but in the world, a lot of discussion thus was aroused on social media highlighting the harassment faced by women in the workplace in China (BBC News 2021b).

Respondent 1: What about the truth...? nobody knows what happened exactly, nobody knows the relationship between that woman and her superior, but now all the public care about is women's right in the workplace...

The way she constructed what matters to a social issue indicate her feeling the need to deprive political aspects of a incidents, showing respondent is indifferent to the political discussion.

5.3 Empirical analysis: Troubled subject positions

This part of the analysis will investigate how the interviewees resist these dominant interpretative repertoires aligned with *suzhi* in different contexts and choose to take up 'troubled' subject positions.

'Troubled' subject positions as explained before are constructed as "inappropriate, destabilized, difficult" in relation to what is considered as norm or preferred (Staunaes 2003, p. 104). The interpretative repertoires aligned with *suzhi* discourse is dominant as they share their perception on marriage life, however, 'troubled' subject positions emerged as well.

One place the 'troubled' subject positions emerge is concerned with the interpretative repertoires "practicing filial piety".

As discussed before, finding the husband by oneself and get married early was constructed by many interviewees from the subject positions of not making their parents worried as their children, which is aligned with the norm of "practicing filial piety". However, while talking about raising the child, some felt the need to resist their former subject positions and take up a 'troubled' one, because they feel like it is impossible to raise their kids and enjoy their life at the same time without their parents, as one interviewee described:

Interviewer: Are you planning to raise your kid by yourselves?

Respondent9: Actually, my parents have already moved to the neighbor very close to us. It's hard to imagine not having help from them and just raising the kid by ourselves (in the future) ...we need to work and after we come home there is housework that needs to be done as well ... you know, it is pretty common nowadays, grandparents raising their grandkids.

In the previous interview, respondent9 talked about getting married is the decision she felt like could help taking the burden off her parents' shoulder when it comes to taking care of her, a move she considered to be the practice of filial piety. Yet, asking elderly parents to help raising the kids means asking them to spend effort taking care of others

again (even though their parents might very much willing to do so) contradict the practice of filial piety and her former subject positions as well. The resistance makes her feel the urge to explain her position through stating she and her husband being too busy and the action of “grandparents raising their grandkids” being “pretty common”, which is one way ‘troubled’ subject positions being manifested (Widding and Farooqi 2016, p. 5).

5.4 Empirical analysis: Ideology Dilemma of “Individualism”

The following section of the analysis deals with interpretative repertoires of the ideology dilemma emerged during the interview, not necessarily one aligned with the *suzhi* discourse.

Ideological dilemmas place the emphasis on the different interpretative repertoires being developed from opposing positions of the same social object (Edley 2001, p. 204).

During the discussion of individualism, most of interviewee stated this is a quality they value, and one should possess, however at the same time they found it is hard to claim themselves as an independent woman, the ideology dilemma surfaced with the example followed:

Interviewer: Do you consider yourself as an independent woman?

Respondent 1: This is hard...i think my mind is independent...I have my own thinking on my life....but i think being independent women is not just being independent from your husband, but also being independent from your parent, so maybe i am not, because if you cut me out of my parents, I think it is hard to live by myself...but also in a sense your mind can't be completely independent, it's not closed, when you exchange idea with others your mind fluid as well.

There are several things that can be noted from this. First, her narrative of self being independent on thinking again reinforce that she acknowledges and reproduces the lived ideology of “one should be independent”. However, the argument rumbles on because although the independence is valued, when gender aspect being emphasized with the term “independent women”, she found her position as married women is contrary to the ideology, in which independence was understood as something outside marriage and family, aligning to the ideology of “individualism” in western context, which is “manifested via women’s participation in the labor force, declining rates of marriage, lower fertility, and men’s diminishing responsibility for women and children”(Chen 2020, p. 191). As a married woman, she proposed a ‘solution’ to this ideological dilemma, which questioned the existence of ‘true’ independence by adopting the opposing narrative, stating there is no true independence of mind as well.

Under the influence of global capitalism, Chinese party-state ended the Maoist egalitarian era of “communism” and shifted towards a neoliberal market to maximize the benefits of a market economy (Yan 2010). This neoliberal modernity brought up the new discourse of “individualism” from western culture for women. However, ‘family’ promoted as traditional culture to evaluate one’s *suzhi* by the party state has a great impact on them as well.

The ideology dilemmas above reflect the self-evident contradictory governing ideology have its impact on our interviewees as well, but they are inclined to convince themselves to not question it.

The findings and analysis in the chapter will be concluded in the next chapter.

6. Conclusion

The research subject of this study is a group of young urban middle-class Chinese women who chose to get married at a relatively early age, against the trend of ‘late marriage’ in China. Unlike what shown in the background of research on urban middle-class women in China, my interviewees did not show resistance between marriage and self-realization from career. However, the sense of individualism is reflected in the way they construct marriage decision and perception of future. For them, marriage is an active and independent choice for a better future constructed with love and luck.

Now let’s get back to main research question: How does ideology of *suzhi* discourse which is central to party-state governance ideology affect young urban middle-class Chinese women’s decision on marriage and prospect on marriage life?

With the help of CDP, both the local deployment and broader social implications of their narratives were observed with their dominant interpretative repertoires. Findings show that the ‘free mind’ of these newly married young women can mostly be seen as choosing to be blind to the influence of state’s governance ideology *suzhi*. Most interpretative repertoires identified from the interviewees when they are trying to make sense and explain their choice of marriage and perception of life can be found aligned to the *suzhi* discourse, stating party-state’s governance ideology have a great impact on their life choice in an unnoticeable way. Even though not much resistance towards *suzhi* discourse was found, the tendency of glossing over self-reflection is detected. While being confronted with ideology dilemmas between pursuing what one long for and following the ‘perfectly planned’ life path, they chose to gloss over the resistance. Also, the troubled subject position they were forced to take on while talking about future in detail such as raising the kid, indicating they did not think much about the complexity might occur in the marriage life. The overly positive prospects on marriage life without

enough reflection on self indicates the 'early' marriage they choose to get into are highly possible is just following the norm constructed by the party-state ideology.

Within the current broader literature on women's studies in China, this group of seemingly privileged women who lives a 'carefree' life are never the focus since they are not those who are undergoing severe social and economic conditions that need attention. However, I think this thesis has shed some light on the underlying dilemma these 'lucky' urban middle-class young women might face in the future. As discussed in the literature review, no matter positioning themselves in the family or outside the family, the life focus of Chinese women in the past are very much influenced by state's governance ideology. The finding of this study shows those middle-class young married women might confuse the party-state's governance ideology as individual choice, meaning the influence of state's governance ideology is still prominent. From my own experience, even though nowadays pursuing lifestyle with material possessions is still very much culturally dominant in China, there are more and more young people starting to pursue the meaning of life outside the realm of material consumption and moving to find a life path truly serve themselves. I have the reason to feel concern what will happen if they realize the life path they took is not much of an independent choice, not the one they truly want.

As I stated before, this thesis study does not aim to speak the truth of all Chinese young women, but I truly hope it serve the purpose of illuminating on this small group of young Chinese women and contribute as a more recent finding to the broad literature of women's study in contemporary China.

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Appendices

Appendix I – Table 1. Interview respondents and sample

Respondents	Age	Educational background	Profession	Interview length	Date of the interview
Respondent 1	25	Bachelor's degree	Middle school teacher	1h 10min	06.10.2021
Respondent 2	25	Bachelor's degree	Enrolled postgraduate	40 min	24.10.2021
Respondent 3	25	Bachelor's degree	Accountant	39 min	21.10.2021
Respondent 4	23	Bachelor's degree	High school teacher	50 min	22.10.2021
Respondent 5	24	Bachelor's degree	Enrolled postgraduate	56 min	25.10.2021
Respondent 6	25	Bachelor's degree	Primary school teacher	47 min	25.10.2021
Respondent 7	25	Bachelor's degree	Digital marketing	51min	28.10.2021
Respondent 8	25	Bachelor's degree	Civil servant	38 min	07.10.2021
Respondent 9	25	Bachelor's degree	Primary school teacher	55 min	30.10.2021

Appendix II – Interview Guide

Themes:

- a. Background: Education and job
- b. Marriage decision and experience
- c. Career
- d. Perception of future
- e. Individualism
- f. Feminism

Interview questions:

a. Background

1. Can you please tell me about your education background and your job?
2. When did you get married?

b. Marriage decision and experience

1. Why do you choose to get married at this age?
2. Can you please tell me briefly about your story with your husband?
3. What do you value most on your husband?
4. Have you ever imagined meeting someone else compatible for marriage?
5. How is your relationship with your in-law family?
6. Do you know other friends who get married at young age as well? What do you think of their experience?

c. Career

1. What is your view on love, family, and career?
2. What is your plan for career?

d. Perception of future

1. What is your ideal life?
2. Do you feel that your ideal life is achievable?
3. Do you feel any anxiety over the future?
4. Do you think there is any expectations being put on you by you husband, your parents, or other people?
5. Do you consider these expectations as reasonable?

e. Individualism

1. What is your view on individualism?
2. Do you consider yourself as an independent woman?

f. Feminism

1. Have you ever heard about feminism?
2. What is your though on the discussion revolved around feminism?