Coping with China's Demographic Reality: How China's younger generation of men deal with China's demographic reality and its effects on marriage and Chinese masculinity

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction

Finding your better half can be challenging for anyone, but for Chinese men, finding a partner has become a precarious struggle as there are approximately 30 million more men than women of 24-40 years old in China (Sun 2021, 140). In the following years, this surplus will continue to increase and by 2030 there could be 40 or 50 million more men than women (Wang 2021, 2). This means that there is an enormous group of men that will not find a partner, at least not through the traditional path. Scholars call this problem a "marriage squeeze" (Bulte, Heerink and Zhang 2011; Han and Zhao 2017; Wang 2021). It might not sound insurmountable, but in a culture that has valued marriage and the rather predetermined path towards it for centuries, it can have far-reaching implications.

A skewed gender ratio is not the only problem that China is facing, as its population is also declining and ageing (Cai 2013, 392; Zang and Zhao 2017, 47). This situation has caught the attention of newspapers[1] and scholars: how did this demographic reality arise? The reason is multifaceted; due to the patriarchal norms and values that belong to Confucianism, there has been a preference for sons that is deeply rooted in the Chinese culture (Zang and Zhao 2017, 142). When this preference was combined with the controversial one-child policy in 1979, it resulted in female infanticide, abandonment and adoption. When ultrasound machines became available, sex-selective behaviour through abortion became very common (Cai 2014, 61; Fong 2002, 1098-1101). As a result, 118.1 boys were born for every 100 girls there in 2010 (Cai 2014, 60). Moreover, the one-child policy caused a sharp decline in China's fertility rate, which has caused the population to decline (Zang and Zhao 2017, 176).

This demographic reality is a big concern for the Chinese government, who now finds itself in a predicament. They abolished the one-child policy in 2015 and have been encouraging young couples to get together, get married and to have multiple children. However, Chinese citizens have become accustomed to one-child families and the costs of living are rising, especially in the cities (Zang and Zhao 2017, 175; Cai 2014, 64). Therefore, the fertility rate has not increased as much. Consequently, the government is still watching the love lives and family formation of young citizens closely (Sun 2021, 140).

[1] Newspapers from different countries have covered China's demographic reality, see:
(1) https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/world/too-many-men/
(2) https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20220531-why-chinas-population-is-shrinking
(3) https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/17/chinas-birthrate-falls-to-61-year-low-despite-moves-to-stave-off-demographic-crisis
(4) https://www.ft.com/content/008ea78a-8bc1-4954-b283-700608d3dc6c
(5) https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/2190995/chinas-population-could-halve-within-next-45-years-new-study-warns
(6) https://nos.nl/artikel/2380264-bevolkingsgroei-china-afgenomen-land-telt-1-41-miljard-mensen

Young people's precarious quest for love is thus something that receives a lot of attention from the government. What complicates the search for a suitable partner, is that in China, hypergamy is common, which means that men and women are divided into four levels: A, B, C, and D. Then, a level A man tends to favour a level B woman, a level B man tends to favour a level C woman, and a level C man tends to favour a level D woman. The rest are the high-quality level A women and low-quality level D men with poor conditions in all aspects (Han and Zhao 2021, 2). In China, this means that there is a group of highly educated, successful women in China's urban areas that has difficulties finding a partner and an enormous group of men with a low level of education and financial resources that mostly live in the rural areas.

These "leftover" men and women have been the topic of numerous scholarly articles and even books (To 2013; Wei and Sun 2014; Yingchun 2015; Sun 2021; Attané 2018). The derogatory term "leftover women" refers to women over the age of 27 with a high level of education and a successful career. In the media, these women are stigmatized and portrayed as picky, selfish and a social problem (Zang and Zhao 2017, 6). Scholars have abundantly written about these women and their representations in the media. Although there are a lot more "leftover men" than women, "leftover men" have received less scholarly attention (Ong, Yang, and Zhang 2019, 1). The existing literature focuses on "leftover men" with the lowest social status, thus those in China's rural areas with little to no education and income.

Interesting to consider when discussing China's marriage market, is the influence of the economic reforms. Besides the one-child policy, China implemented other drastic reorganizations in 1979, namely the economic reforms. This meant, that after decades of being a self-isolated socialist economy, China entered the global arena to become a market-driven economy. This instigated a rather capitalist attitude and replaced the collectivistic socialist norms and values. Consumerism found its way to Chinese society, which also influenced the marriage market (Wei and Zhang 2016, 880; Chen 2017, 99). Since the economic reforms, the reconstruction of masculinity has been a hot topic in China and the importance of economic power has become closely tied to masculinity (Xiao 2011, 611).

Today, we can clearly see the far-reaching implications of China's one-child policy, the preference for sons and the rapid transition into a market-driven, capitalist economy and the influence it has on China's marriage market. Researchers are already examining the issues. But because most of the literature focuses on men and women that already have the label "leftover" and are thus in the highest and lowest levels of education and income, this thesis aims to shed light on how China's younger generation of middle to high-class men deal with this demographic reality and its consequences. This thesis examines their attitude towards marriage and its corresponding traditions, Chinese masculinity and the marriage squeeze. Based on this data, I will draw conclusions about how the demographic reality influences their own decisions in life and how they make sense of it. In order

to achieve this, the structure of my thesis will be as follows. Firstly, my literature review will give a detailed explanation of how China's demographic reality has come about. Additionally, marriage in China, the so-called marriage squeeze and masculinity and modernity will be discussed. Secondly, my methodology will give insight into how and why I conducted in-depth interviews with eight male Chinese exchange students in the Netherlands. In my findings section, I will discuss how my interviewees perceive marriage as an institution, the traditional path towards marriage and how they feel about China's marriage squeeze. Furthermore, their perception of "leftover" men and women and Chinese masculinity will be considered. In the conclusion, I will briefly summarize my findings and show how my data fills a gap in existing literature by answering my research question: "How does China's younger generation of men that fall into the B or C category, thus middle to high-class men, perceive China's demographic reality and deal with its consequences?".

2. Literature review

In order to research how China's younger generation of men experience China's demographic reality and deals with its consequences, it is interesting to consider how such a demographic situation arises, how it influences China's marriage market and what role globalisation plays in this. These topics will therefore be discussed in my literature review.

2.1 Demographic reality

According to Cai (2014), countries with an extreme sex imbalance have three features in common: a strong preference for sons, rapid decline of fertility and increased availability of sex selection technology (Cai 2014, 61). In China's case, there, first of all, is a strong preference for sons due to the patriarchal system that the Chinese society has adhered to for centuries due to Confucianism. The family system in China has always been patrilocal and patrilineal, meaning that the woman moves into the man's house after marriage, the family name follows the patriarchal line and also the inheritance practices favour sons (Cai 2014, 61).

Due to China's patriarchal system, sons enjoy sociocultural, economic and religious benefits, which has contributed to son preference becoming deeply embedded in society (Zang and Zhao 2017, 142). Historically, continuing the family name is considered as essential in Confucianism, which is why having a male descendant is very important. Moreover, family property is also passed on to sons traditionally. Especially in China's rural areas where the social security system is weak as there is no pension, parents count on their children to provide old-age support. In order to ensure this financial security for when they cannot work anymore, parents favour sons as they enjoy economic and sociocultural benefits (Zang and Zhao 2017, 142). The sociocultural and economic benefits that sons

enjoy compared to girls in urban areas, among other things, stem from decline in state-owned enterprises in the 1980s, which caused gender inequality in the workplace (Bauer et al. 1992, 362). Before the economic reforms in 1979, the government interfered in the hiring process of companies and actively sought to involve women in the workforce. The arrival of private enterprises meant discrimination of Chinese women in the working environment, as companies are not willing to pay for services such as maternity leave and child care. Furthermore, women are mostly responsible for the household duties which makes it difficult for them to work overtime, and they have to stay home if their child is sick (Bauer et al. 1992, 364). This discrimination is still present, which is evident in the gender gap in labour force participation and the pay gap (Human Rights Watch 2018, 2). Men reap the benefits of this and enjoy economic independence more easily and quickly than women. For some families, the economic benefits that sons enjoy are necessary to survive which makes them determined to have a son. This is again especially true in China's rural areas (Cai 2014, 65; Zang and Zhao 2017, 142). Because of the preference and need for sons, sex-biased selective behaviour such as female infanticide and abandonment has been common in China for centuries (Cai 2014, 61).

Secondly, the one-child policy that China introduced in 1979 is often mentioned in relation to China's skewed gender ratio (Cai 2014, 64; Zang and Zhao 2017, 142-143; Ong, Yang and Zhang 2019, 1). According to the one-child policy, Chinese urban citizens were not allowed to have more than one child. There were several exceptions, as parents were allowed to have a second child when the first child was disabled or sometimes when both of the parents were an only child themselves. Additionally, an exception was made for the people in China's rural areas; from the mid-1980s people were allowed to have a second child after five years, but only if their first child was a girl. People from ethnic minorities and thus not Han Chinese were allowed to have two, three, four or an unlimited amount of children (Bulte, Heerink and Zhang 2011, 25; Zang and Zhao 2017, 3). From 1970 to 1990, the one-child policy caused China's fertility rates to drop from approximately six births to two and in the year 2000 the total fertility rate in China was 1.22 children per woman (Zang and Zhao 2017, 3). The preference and need for sons, however, did not decline and this resulted in even more female infanticide, abortion through sex selection, abandonment and unregistered daughters (Fong 2002, 1098-1101).

Thirdly, modern foetal sex-detection technologies, such as the ultrasound B machine, became available in China around 1980. This made it easier and less painful to practice sex-selective behaviour (Cai 2014, 66). Moreover, abortion is socially and culturally accepted in China and between 1971 and 2011, 336 million abortions were performed (Cai 2014, 64).

The preference for sons, the one-child policy and the modern foetal sex-detection technologies have not only caused for a skewed gender ratio in China but have also contributed to a population decline and an ageing population (Cai 2013, 392; Zang and Zhao 2017, 47). This is a concern for the government, as there will not be enough people to further the economic development that is needed

to provide for all Chinese citizens. As a consequence, the romantic prospects of Chinese young adults are under scrutiny. This is evident in an edict that was issued by three Chinese government departments in September 2017, in which is emphasized how the love lives of young people and social stability are connected (Sun 2021, 140).

In order to encourage young couples to have multiple children, Chinese citizens are allowed to have more than one child since 2015. However, after decades of family planning, one-child families have become the norm in China, especially among urban families (Zang and Zhao 2017, 175). Moreover, the costs of living are rising, in specific the costs of educating children. According to a Shanghai 2019 Academy of Social Sciences report, families with a low income spend over 70% of their earnings on the child (Qiu and Munroe, 2021; Cai 2014, 64). This makes having multiple children unaffordable for many young couples. Moreover, the costs of raising children can be a source of anxiety and stress as China's social security system is underdeveloped and a financial or social safety net is absent (Zang and Zhao 2017, 47). This is interesting information to consider, as this thesis aims to research whether China's younger generation of men is aware of these problems and how they deal with them.

2.2 Marriage in China

The important role that marriage fulfils in the Chinese society, adds pressure to the already precarious matter of finding a suitable partner (Cai 2014 81; Attané 2018, 1). Historically, practically all Chinese women were married by the age of 30, the marriage age of men varied and not all of them were married. Men without financial resources were not able to get married, because the man had to pay for the bride upon marriage as she was moving into his household according to the aforementioned patrilineal and patrilocal system. Historically, the financial situation of men thus played an important role. The marriage was usually arranged by the parents of the bride and the groom based on family backgrounds and love or romance was not a prerequisite (Zang and Zhao 2017, 4).

Research shows that although these matters have changed, China's historical marriage practices might still influence the marriage traditions in society nowadays. First of all, data from 2000 and 2005 shows that only 2% of Chinese women in the age cohort 30-34 years old remains single, compared to 10% of Chinese men (Jones and Gubhaju 2009, 239-243). Additionally, there are not many alternatives to marriage as non-marital cohabitation is very rare and staying single means having no status (Li et al. 2010, 680). This shows that marriage is still an important and universal institution in Chinese society that can determine one's social status.

Secondly, Chinese parents might not arrange marriages anymore, but the scene of desperate

parents at so-called marriage markets[2] in public parks is a popular one. On these marriage markets, parents from all across China gather in public parks to display photographs of their single sons and daughters, accompanied by their economic attributes. By doing this, parents anxiously hope to find a match for their child. Newspapers and scholars have abundantly written about China's most popular marriage market in the People's Park in Shanghai (To 2013; Ji 2015; CNN 2013; South China Morning Post 2020). As the age at first marriage has increased for both Chinese men and women, especially in urban areas, parents are worried their offspring might not find a partner (Gaetano 2014, 125). Therefore, they take matters into their own hands and try to find a suitable candidate that they will propose as a partner to their son or daughter (Ji 2015, 1057). Getting married is expected by the Chinese society and parents puts pressure on Chinese youngsters to find a partner (Attané 2018, 2; Zang and Zhao 2017, 6; Han and Zhao 2021, 3). This partner then also has to be approved by the parents and relatives of the Chinese singleton in question, which is perceived as an important affair (Zang and Zhao 2017, 165).

Furthermore, marriage is the first step in family formation and the continuation of the family line is a duty that weighs on the shoulders of young Chinese men (Li et al. 2010, 680). This exemplifies how parents still play an important role in their children's process of finding a partner, and how this in turn can put pressure on single young adults in China.

Finally, the sentiment that marriage is still a moral duty that is bound to happen, preferably with a partner that meets all the standards, is exemplified by the results of several studies. A study from 2006 shows that unlike American young adults, Chinese youngsters do not value fairy-tale love stories as much and results of another study demonstrate that young Chinese give less value to mutual attraction and sociability than young adults from other countries (Zang and Zhao 2017, 5). It is very likely that Chinese young adults still feel pressure from their parents, the state and society to follow the traditional path of marriage with a partner that is suitable for them according to the 'rules' of hypergamy.

Chinese society adheres to clearly indicated, socially accepted marriage norms. Hypergamy is one of these norms and is common due to China's traditional patriarchal culture (Wei and Zhang 2016, 878). This means that men tend to marry women that are "lower" than they are in terms of education, age, social status and salary and the other way around. As Han and Zhao (2021) explain: "[…] men and women are divided into four levels: A, B, C, and D. Then, a level A man is assigned to a level B woman, a level B man is assigned to a level C woman, and a level C man is assigned to a level D woman. The rest are the high-quality level A women and low-quality level D men with poor conditions in all aspects".

[2] A video by the BBC was made about a marriage market in Chengdu, which gives an impression of what marriage markets in China look like: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vxs__FsgGdc.

This means that a large part of the "surplus men" or "leftover men" (剩男 *sheng nan*) have enjoyed little to no education and are living in rural areas or are rural migrant workers in the big cities. Most of the "leftover women" live in urban areas and are highly educated (Han and Zhao 2021, 2; Sun 2021, 150). This complicates the search of the large number of "surplus men" for a partner and to make matters worse, there is a lot of competition among men as women have a wide choice of potential partners (Attané 2018, 2). Consequently, D-category men are generally not single by choice, whereas A-category women are (Sun 2021, 141). This is what scholars call a "marriage squeeze" and explain this as "an imbalance between the numbers of males and females, which results in people of the majority sex having difficulty in marrying according to the socially accepted marriage norms" (Zang and Zhao 2017, 142). On the other hand, the choice of partner can also be made because of practical reasons, which is mostly applicable to women. When one does not have the financial resources to survive, marrying a wealthy partner can be a pragmatic choice, rather than merely following the behaviour of peers (Zang and Zhao 2017, 164). This information is interesting to consider, when researching how China's younger generation of men perceive and follow these patterns.

2.3 "Leftover men and women"

The aforementioned single A-category women have been labelled "leftover women" (剩女 *sheng nü*). This derogatory term is used to describe highly educated women above the age of 27, usually living in urban areas. These women have difficulties finding a partner, as men do not prefer marrying a partner with a higher education or income than themselves (Zang and Zhao 2017, 6). These "leftover women" have been the topic in international news coverage and the subject of research in many articles and books (To 2013; Wei and Sun 2014; Yingchun 2015; Feldshuh 2014). Even though there are a many fewer "leftover women" than there are "surplus men", they have received a lot more scholarly attention (Ong, Yang, and Zhang 2019, 1). In the media, "leftover women" are portrayed as picky and selfish and singlehood and high education among women is stigmatized. This is creating anxiety among young women and puts pressure on them to find a partner and get married early (Gaetano 2014, 124-126; Zang and Zhao 2017, 6).

Existing literature about "leftover men" focuses on the aforementioned D-category men, other nicknames for these men are "bare branches" (光棍 *guang gun*) or "lonely souls" (孤独的灵魂 *gudu de linghun)* (Sun 2021, 150-151). In China, these are mostly men that live in rural areas or have moved from rural areas to the city to work in factories and are migrant workers. Sun (2021), for example, interviewed Chinese rural migrant workers about their love life or absence thereof and argues that "[…] during the decades of economic reform, the transformation of family structure and changing expectations and practices surrounding courtship, marriage, and conjugal intimacy, presented real

challenges to the patriarchal system" (Sun 2021, 142).

Several scholars have started to depict what life as a single man in rural China is like. A study by Li et al. (2010) reveals that single men in rural China feel a lot of pressure from family members and society to get married (Li et al. 2010, 690). Marriage is important as it will continue the family line but it is also necessary in order to have sexual activity. In China's urban areas, premarital sex is more common than in rural China, where an official monogamous marriage is an essential prerequisite for sexual activity. This means that singlehood, which is permanent for some men, can become a source of sexual and emotional dissatisfaction and frustration (Li et al. 2010, 681). In another study on single men in rural China, Attané (2018) concludes that "at least two in three respondents, regardless of age, find the lack of affection as well as the absence of a child and sexual relations extremely difficult to bear […]" (Attané 2018, 3).

According to Li et al. (2010), single rural men in China have enjoyed little education and earn a lot less than married men. The single men are of the opinion that their low income and low level of education are the key reasons for their singlehood. Moreover, the correlation between poverty and singlehood is often mentioned in research and seems to be especially true in rural China, where marriage is very costly for men, especially in the more traditional rural areas (Li et al. 2010, 687).

The lack of sexual activity and affection combined with the impossibility to continue the family line has driven people to marry trafficked brides from nearby countries such as North-Korea. This happens especially in rural areas where there are a lot of D-category men that cannot afford to marry a Chinese woman. For these poor, under educated and sometimes disabled men, purchasing a trafficked woman is the most cost-effective choice (Kim et al. 2009, 161-162). After the trafficked women are purchased, they often become victims of abuse, violence, sexual exploitation or are used as slaves (Kim et al. 2009, 164-165). China's marriage squeeze is thus indirectly creating an environment in which criminal activity in China's borderlands thrives. North-Korean women sometimes also cross the border by themselves to get married to a Chinese man, hoping to free themselves from the dictatorship of Kim Jong-un. According to Pacheco (2022), these women are aware of the risks but still agree to be trafficked and sold into marriage (Pacheco 2022, 311).

When it comes to studies on Chinese young adults in higher education, research by Eklund and Attané showed how these young adults saw marrying early as a way to enlarge the chance to find a partner. They argue that in marriages at young ages, the expectations of men's wealth and status are less emphasized on. Eklund and Attané argue that "a 'moral panic' of being 'left over' fuels the notion that it is better to 'grab the opportunity'" (Zang and Zhao 2017, 162). It can be concluded that D-category men and A-category women suffer most from China's marriage squeeze. Higher educated young adults were aware of the marriage squeeze and made choices based on it at the time of Eklund and Attané's research.

2.4 Chinese masculinity

With a surplus of approximately 30 million, not all men in China will find a partner through the traditional path. This can bring about competition among this demographic group. They are very aware of their position on the social ladder and where they are on this ladder compared to other men. This competition and pragmatic way of viewing one's social status is also fuelled by consumerism in China, which is a by-product of the rapid transition of China's socialist economy into a market-driven economy (Wei and Zhang 2016, 880; Xiao 2011, 611).

In 1979, China introduced its economic reforms and entered the global arena after decades of self-isolation. The reforms entailed that there were less state companies and an increase of private international companies (Bauer et al. 1992, 362). Since these reforms, the discussion on Chinese masculinity has been lively. Numerous male Chinese intellectuals and writers have criticized the earlier socialist regime for foregrounding women's autonomy and emasculating men by subjecting them to the state. Since then, the notion of post-reform masculinity has been focused on men's capability to "make money and generate economic power" (Xiao 2011, 611).

The marketization of China's economy has had an impact on the personal lives of Chinese citizens in various ways. First of all, the individualistic capitalist notion "to get rich is glorious" replaced the collectivistic socialist concepts that used to be the norm in China (Wei and Zhang 2016, 880). The disappearance of wealth that used to be provided by the state has resulted in an increasing discrepancy between the rich and the poor. Secondly, discrimination of women in the work environment increased, making them more vulnerable financially. This precariousness has increased women's tendency to favour men with better prospects, which means that the economic reforms have put an emphasis on hypergamy. Finally, the reforms have led to strong economic pressure and consumer aspirations (Wei and Zhang 2016, 880; Chen 2017, 99). This has led to consumerism in the marriage market, which in turn has influenced the terms by which Chinese masculinity is determined.

The media plays a central role in shaping Chinese masculinity. In China, the media industry is under the authority of SAPPRFT (State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television) and thus serves as an "institutional apparatus of representation" (Luo 2017, 195). Reality TV has become extremely popular over the past decade and dating shows such as *If You Are The One* (*Fei Cheng Wu Rao* 非诚勿扰)[3] attracted over 50 million viewers at its peak (Luo 2017, 195). In each episode of the show, which is based on the British dating show *Take Me Out*, five male bachelors are presented to 24 female participants. Based on the bachelor's introduction of himself, his answers to

[3] For an impression of the show *If You Are The One*, I refer you to a YouTube playlist with several clips and episodes that I created: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9SVf-zUo_TY&list=PLLFnvU-OtaCvo3CJAM2RKuxFui6b98LTe

the questions of the female participants, a video of his everyday life the women can decide whether they think the bachelor is a match for them by using the light on their desk (Chen 2017, 96).

If You Are The One has been analysed by several scholars within gender studies (Luo and Sun 2014; Luo 2017; Feldshuh 2017; Chen 2017). Luo (2017) has analysed the program to study masculinity in China and argues that in *If You Are The One* regressive gender norms are naturalized and hegemonic masculine ideals are maintained (Luo 2017, 191-195). By analysing 24 episodes of the show, he detects various characteristics that male bachelors need to possess in order to be perceived as attractive. First of all, the most attractive bachelors are tall, wealthy and handsome. They have a successful career and can provide for themselves and their partner. In one episode, the tall and handsome Mr. Xu works as a chief executive officer is praised by the female participants that battle to be chosen as his match. He then explains how he wants his match to become a housewife and asks who would give up her career for him. Multiple women respond to this question and say that they would gladly give up their career for 'Mr. Right' (Luo 2017, 201-202). The young adults that watch the show can interpret these interactions as if it is the norm and think that being able to provide for a woman is needed in order to be perceived as attractive.

Exposing the consumerism in China's marriage market, Luo argues that in *If You Are The One,* masculinities are evaluated in terms of use and exchange value (Luo 2017, 201). This is evident in an example of one episode, in which the single Mr. Cai tells the female participants that he is looking for a "financially reliable woman" on whom he can depend. After expressing this unusual wish, several women react very critically. A female participant that works as a freelance writer says: "You said you would develop a strong body for me. Well, I could have paid ten yuan to hire a much stronger labourer, whom I easily find everywhere." A female college professor adds: "Your biggest selling point is your young age. You should woo a fifty-year-old woman and would probably be successful if you would happen to resemble her first love. But you would have to take some marketing courses to achieve your goal" (Luo 2017, 200-201). These reactions very clearly show that the qualities of men are evaluated in terms of use and exchange value. The remark about Mr. Cai having to take marketing courses, shows that the women in the show expect him to sell himself as a product. This form of interaction can influence the self-perception of young Chinese men and make them perceive themselves as a product that is only evaluated by its looks, income and success. Therefore, this information needs to be considered when researching how my interviewees evaluate and experience Chinese masculinity.

The consumerism that came forth from the capitalist notions produced by the economic reforms has influenced the way in which masculinity is evaluated. In a country where there is already tension on the marriage market due to a population decline and a surplus of men, consumerism further fuels the pressure on young adults. Existing literature mostly focuses on the group of A-category women, and to a lesser extent on D-category men. These are the groups that

suffer most from China's marriage squeeze and population decline. This brought me to my research question: How does China's younger generation of men that fall into the B or C category, thus middle to high-class men, perceive China's demographic reality and deal with its consequences?

In my literature review, I have first discussed the reasons behind China's demographic reality. Then, I constructed the social and cultural norms and values surrounding marriage and described the traditional and predetermined path towards marriage according to existing literature. This is interesting to consider, as it demonstrates the social norms and values that Chinese young adults and their peers and parents grew up with. Furthermore, I reviewed existing literature about China's "leftover" men and women and their place in society, as I aim to analyse how my interviewees perceive "leftover" men and women and whether this influences their decisions in life. Finally, I discussed how Chinese masculinity is evaluated in the Chinese society, which enables me to research if and how my interviewees deal with this.

3. Methodology

For my research, I conducted eight in-depth, semi-structured interviews with male Chinese students in the Netherlands in order to gather qualitative data. Existing literature about the effects of China's demographic reality on the marriage market and the process of finding a partner mostly focuses on the A-category women and, to a lesser extent, on D-category men that often already have the label "leftover", as they have surpassed the socially accepted age to get married. Therefore, I decided to focus on men from other categories, aiming for B- and C-category men, that are still in their twenties and study in the Netherlands. Although this might not be the most logical group to research when looking into this topic, I am, however, convinced that this group deserves more academic attention. Moreover, practical reasons such as time and the scope of this research have influenced this decision. The fact that Chinese D-category men often live in China's rural areas, makes it difficult for me to reach out to them. Additionally, there is no budget and time to travel to China and the Coronavirus would have further complicated this. In short, even though it might not be the most logical research sample, I chose to interview Chinese men in the Netherlands primarily to provide a different perspective on the topic of China's marriage squeeze, but also out of practical reasons.

In order to find interviewees, I used the snowballing method by asking acquainted fellow students whether they knew any male Chinese students at Leiden University. This has led to four interviews. Additionally, I looked through Facebook groups such as International Community Leiden and sent a message to several male Chinese members of these groups containing a brief introduction of myself and my research and asked them whether they would be willing to participate in an interview. This led to two interviews. I approached my seventh interviewee in the University library and asked

him if he was willing to do an interview after I explained my research project. After our interview, he offered to send a message about my research in a WeChat group with Chinese exchange students in Leiden, which is how I came into contact with my eighth interviewee. I asked the interviewees whether they would prefer to do the interview online or in real life and all of them expressed their preference for an interview in real life. I met six interviewees in the cafeterias of two locations of Leiden University and I met two interviewees at coffee cafes in Leiden.

Before starting the interview, I explained how I would ensure the interviewees' anonymity and asked whether I could record the interview. All the interviewees gave me permission to record the audio of the interviews, which made it possible for me to transcribe the interviews and thus thoroughly analyse their answers. After I finished my questions, I usually had a chat with the interviewee about the topic of my research and other related themes. These conversations were also recorded and used in my thesis, the length of the recordings ranged from 40 to 70 minutes. All the interviews were conducted in English, as my level of Mandarin is not sufficient to conduct long interviews with follow-up questions. This would thus have reduced the quality of my data. Moreover, my interviewees all spoke English clearly and freely which made it unnecessary to consider conducting the interviews in Mandarin.

My interview questions (see Appendix) were derived from my literature review and I divided them into several sections. First of all, I asked for some background information of the interviewees to be able to make connections, for example based on age or the area of their hometown. Secondly, we spoke about marriage in China. This enabled me to see how my interviewees and their friends and family perceive marriage. Thirdly, we discussed other expectations that society might have from young men in China and how my interviewees experience this. Furthermore, we discussed the characteristics of the ideal partner, which helped me to understand how my interviewees deal with hypergamy. Finally, I asked questions about China's 'marriage squeeze' and "leftover men and women".

In order to make the interview feel more like a natural conversation, I chose for semi-structured interviews, which gave me the possibility to ask follow-up questions and to shift some questions during the interview. Furthermore, I brought some snacks for the interviewees and also had an informal conversation with them prior to the interview about Leiden or their study, for example. As the topic of marriage and relationships can be perceived as rather personal, I believe it was important to create an informal atmosphere in which the interviewees felt safe to express their opinion. When the interviews were finished, most of the interviewees kept chatting with me, sometimes for twenty minutes. Some of them also asked me questions, for example about what I find attractive in men or how matters such as abortion or adoption for gay couples works in the Netherlands. This shows my interviewees felt comfortable to answer my questions and ask me questions as well. I am of the opinion that my efforts to create rapport have enhanced the quality of my data on this personal and sensitive

topic.

As is the case in most research projects, there may be certain research limitations in my thesis that should be considered. Firstly, the scope of this research is relatively small due to time constraints. Therefore, the results cannot be considered representative for China's entire younger generation of middle to high-class men. Furthermore, the interviews were conducted in person, which can increase the chance of social desirability bias. This means that my interviewees might have given answers based on what they thought is socially accepted. Finally, a cultural bias needs to be considered due to the cultural differences between me and my interviewees. During my data collection and analysis, I have made an effort to take into account these limitations.

4. Findings

In this chapter I will present my findings, in the first subchapter I will discuss the demographic background of my interviewees. Secondly, I will discuss how my interviewees perceive marriage as an institution and what role their parents, society and peers play in this. In the third subchapter, I will demonstrate what my interviewees are looking for in their future partners. Thereafter, the role of wealth and its ties to masculinity will be analysed. In the final chapter, I will discuss my interviewees' attitude towards "leftover men and women" and their awareness of China's demographic reality. Some quotations in the findings section have been amended for readability.

4.1 Demographic Background

In order to determine what characteristics of my interviewees are important to consider when analysing my data, I will review the demographic background of my interviewees, which is also summarized in table 1.

	Name *	**Age**	**Relationship**	**Sexual orientation**	**Siblings**	**Study in Leiden**	**Hometown**
1	Ruoxuan	23	No	Heterosexual	One little sister	MA Statistics	Guangdong
2	Muyang	25	No	Heterosexual	None	BA Anthropology	Near Shanghai
3	Zhipeng	24	No	Heterosexual	None	MA Astronomy	Beijing
4	Yongle	23	No	Homosexual	None	MA Middle Eastern Studies	Chengdu
5	Yichen	22	No	Heterosexual	None	MA Asian Studies	Chengde
6	Haoyu	27	No	Homosexual	None	PhD Dermatology	Wuhan
7	Yuxuan	25	No	Bisexual	None	MA Mathematics	Zhuhai
8	Zimo	28	Yes	Heterosexual	None	PhD MRI Physics	Chengdu

Table 1 - Demographic information of the interviewees *Names have been changed in order to ensure anonymity

Seven of my interviewees are single and one of them lives together with his Chinese girlfriend. Five of my interviewees are heterosexual, one self-defined as bisexual and two as homosexual. All but one of my interviewees are an only child, when I asked them if they had siblings all of them mentioned that most people of their generation do not have siblings due to China's one-child policy. This shows that my interviewees are aware of the effects of the one-child policy and how their lives are also influenced by this. Furthermore, it is important to consider that all of my interviewees live in Leiden and some of them have also lived in other Western countries. This means that they have been exposed to different cultures which can change their world view, compared to China's younger generation of men that have not travelled. Moreover, all of my interviewees study at a university, which means they have enjoyed higher education. Finally, my interviewees come from urban areas in China. During the interviews, most interviewees have explained to me that they perceive the people from China's rural areas as more conservative or traditional and people from urban areas as open-minded and more modern. They thus consider themselves as the rather open-minded and modern part of China's younger generation of men. Words they used to describe themselves compared to more traditional Chinese people were "more liberal", "more individualist" and "more academic".

4.2 Marriage in China

Although Chinese people are increasingly getting married later, marriage is still considered extremely important and it is nearly universal in China (Han and Zhao 2021, 16; Jones and Gubhaju 2009, 239-243). Analysing how my interviewees perceive marriage as an institution and the role it plays in their lives, is the first step in drawing up the social framework in which Chinese young adults have to manoeuvre.

When I asked my interviewees whether marriage is considered important in Chinese society, all of them immediately answered that it is very important. Their answers made it clear that getting married is expected by Chinese society, it feels like a "pre-existing mandatory thing you have to do" and it is considered to be one of the most important things, together with giving birth and having a nice job. For most of my interviewees, these expectations did not only come from society, but also from their parents and extended family. All but one of my interviewees told me that their parents also view marriage as something important and they want their children to get married. Some of my interviewees told me that their parents are very open-minded and did not really pressure them yet to get married or have a relationship. Others told me that their parents encouraged them to start dating. They, for example, asked their sons about when they will have a girlfriend or when they were planning to start dating. Other parents used more subtle methods to express their wish for a daughter-in-law. Muyang told me that his mother thinks he should start a relationship which she sometimes slyly makes clear, he said: "for example, I say like the house rent is too high and she will say: Then move in with a

girlfriend and share the house rent". Several interviewees explained to me how their extended family subtly mentioned to them that it is time to find a girlfriend and to get married. One interviewee indicated that he feels most pressure from his peers and himself. Despite these expectations, most of my interviewees were not sure if they want to get married in the future, only two of them were sure. Ruoxuan was of the opinion that marriage is a natural thing in the course of one's life and that it is normal. He said "I am not in the weird group who does not want to get married" which exemplifies the judgement that people that do not want to get married might have to endure. It can be concluded that my interviewees feel that marriage is something that is expected of them by the Chinese society, their parents, extended family and peers. Most of them experience how their parents encourage them to start dating for the purpose of getting married. Sometimes their parents do not even say this directly, but marriage still feels like a "pre-existing mandatory thing" one has to do. However, this does not seem to be a decisive factor, as some of them are not sure about whether they will get married in the future.

Most of my interviewees mentioned that there were pronounced moments in life when one should start dating, think about marriage or have children. Haoyu perfectly summarized a certain pattern that Chinese young adults have to follow, that other interviewees also mentioned:

> "Actually when I was doing my bachelor degree that's the time when everybody else is already having a like girlfriend or boyfriend, and then they started to question me: When are you planning to find someone, to start dating? I mean, you're not not allowed to do that, but they don't recommend you to do that in high school that's a cultural thing. But then you're in university, this is the time you feel free and do stuff and then they start to, every time when we FaceTime, ask me this question, like what do you meet someone and when do you plan to date someone? So they really kind of set the path; at a certain age you're supposed to date, at a certain age it's maybe the best time to get married and at a certain age this is best time to have a child."

It seems like there are clearly demarcated points in the lives of Chinese young adults for certain activities such as dating and getting married. According to multiple interviewees, dating was discouraged when they were in high school but as soon as they entered university, their parents started to encourage them to find a girl and get into a relationship. Two interviewees of 24 and 25 years old said that their parents thought this was not a good age for them to have a relationship or to get married, and that they had to focus on their study. Ruoxuan of 23 mentioned that his parents want him to get into a relationship as soon as possible. It is clear that parents are closely involved in the love lives of their offspring, and they are the ones that determine when the time is right to start dating and

when to think about marriage and children.

Besides their parents, there are other people around my interviewees that point out what is a suitable age for certain stages in life. When Yuxuan was doing his bachelor degree, he went back to revisit his high school where he spoke to his old math teacher. Yuxuan told him that he wanted to obtain a PhD, after which the teacher started to count his age and said: "Wow, it would be quite striking, because after you completed your PhD you would be over 30 or 35". According to my interviewee, this is a very common conversation to be had in China, as it is considered strange if you do not have a family, a child and a formal job at the age of 30. When I asked him how he felt about this conversation, Yuxuan told me he would have found this extremely normal when he was in high school, but now he looks back at the conversation as uncomfortable and would want to "fight back in the conversation". This story exemplifies how in China, it is considered normal to question someone's ambitions and point out that there is a traditional path in life that one should adhere to. My interviewees' attitude towards the conversation also shows he wants to move away from this traditional path and is willing to fight for his ambitions in life, towards a more modern life path that focuses on his own aspirations.

When I asked my interviewees whether they felt pressure to get married, three interviewees said they felt pressure from their parents and their peers in daily life. Three other interviewees said that they do not feel pressure right now, but two of them said that if they would still be single at a certain age, their parents would definitely pressure them. Zhipeng explained that he wanted to get married because "if I don't want to, my parents will still pressure me to get married". This shows how some of my interviewees experience the pressure of their parents; it makes marriage inevitable. Two of my interviewees, Yongle and Haoyu, self-define as homosexual and have come out to at least one of their parents. Therefore, their parents do not pressure them about marriage anymore, but their extended family that does not know about their coming out, does pressure them. Both Yongle and Haoyu explained that they also feel pressure from society, they both said that "[…] for example if you find a job, you enter the workspace. There are always going to be people that ask you: Are you single or not, do you have a girlfriend or not and if you don't, do you want me to recommend something for you?". Yongle would even consider marrying a lesbian woman in China, this is something more homosexuals and lesbians in China do (Zang and Zhao 2017, 166), in order to avoid social pressure. He explained to me: "If I finally choose to go to some institution in China to work, I will face this kind of social pressure. People will ask me my marriage situation and also will ask me to bring out my partner and have a gathering with them, so yeah it's very hard". It is clear that half of my interviewees feel that it is inevitable to get married in China, due to constant pressure of family members and society. When deciding not to get married in China, one needs to be prepared and willing to face a lot of criticism, endure constant questioning about one's marital status and ward off match making attempts by others.

For the ones that cannot handle this, the easiest way seems to be to get married, even if you are not in love or cannot legally marry a person of the sex you are attracted to.

4.3 The right partner

Even though it seems my interviewees still feel that marriage is expected by society, they seem to take more agency in the way they want their marriage to transpire, compared to older generations. My interviewees namely showed me their awareness of how marriages can fail if they are not based on love and how this is something they want to prevent from happening. This is evident in several stories that my interviewees told me about cousins that rushed into marriage, just because it was the right age to get married. Yongle told me "I don't feel like my cousin really loved my brother-in-law, it's only because it's age for her to get married". Zhipeng explained how his uncle and aunt arranged a partner for their daughter:

> "[…] that's better than my cousin's generation, because her parents, they, basically like a wingman, got them together based on the family situations and the income and all sorts of stuff. Then they got together but after marriage they figured out that they are not for each other, it's horrible and that's why they got divorced."

My interviewees seemed to take from these stories that they would not like to marry someone that they do not love and appreciate. Ruoxuan for example wondered "if you cannot find someone that fits well, why do you get married? It just makes some damage for each other". All of my interviewees expressed they value love and mutual connections more than the compatibility of family situations. Some also mentioned how they will first find someone they have a mutual connection with and after that, their parents' approval will have to come instead of the other way around. Also Zhipeng and Yichen mentioned that connection and love is more important than age, looks and the financial situation. It seems that my interviewees want to take the lead and decide for themselves who is a suitable partner for them, instead of their parents or society. A shift towards love marriages and away from arranged marriages or at least marriages with a lot of parental interference, can thus be observed among my interviewees. This is remarkable, as they also experience a lot of pressure about marriage from peers, parents and society and still seem to be willing to protest against this pressure to find someone they love and thus fight for their own happiness.

As discussed in the literature review, hypergamy is common in China which means that men tend to marry a woman that is 'lower' than them in terms of age, education level and salary and the other way around (Han and Zhao 2021, 2; Sun 2021, 150). In order to find out how my interviewees navigate within this pattern, I discussed the characteristics of their ideal partner with them. When I asked them

about the perfect age, job, nationality and income of their future partner, none of my interviewees had specific wishes. They explained to me that they were very flexible in this regard and that the personality of their future partner was the most important factor. Most of my interviewees did express their wish for a woman that is independent and has a job. Zhipeng explained: “I will prefer a more independent woman. I think my parents too, they will also prefer if the girl has a career rather than just be really dependent on me”. My interviewees did not care too much about any of the other details, and only one of my interviewees said that he would feel pressure if his partner would earn more than him. From this can be concluded that my interviewees are of the opinion that love and mutual connection are more important than the social and economic features of their future partner. This can be perceived as a process of modernization in which my interviewees are trying to step out of the ‘rules of hypergamy’. However, when considering the impact of China’s marriage squeeze, it could also be that my interviewees have lowered their expectations or demands in order to increase their chances to find a partner.

4.4 Masculinity and money

My interviewees made it clear that they do not have many demands for their future partner. In this subchapter I will discuss what my interviewees feel that society, their parents and their future partner expect from them in order to be a suitable partner. Throughout the interviews, it became clear that capital and financial stability play a big role in the lives of my interviewees and that it is also closely tied to their love lives. When I asked my interviewees what they think Chinese girls find attractive, Muyang gave the following answer:

> “Rich, rich that’s the first choice. Then, higher status because in China you are not only a financial partner but also social status, you are the alpha. Maybe tall and strong but not that into it, they are more about money, everything is about money. But I think the masculinity thing is not really for me, it’s kind of stupid for me, see I have earrings.”

Although Muyang did not feel the need to meet these standards of masculinity, he definitely had a clear idea of the general notion of masculinity in China, just like most of the other interviewees. When I asked my interviewees whether it is considered important that a man is rich, most of my interviewees said that it is an important factor. Yongle said: “Of course, rich, money matters much more than the appearance in China” and Ruoxuan said that it is not an essential factor but a very important one, he told me that if a man is handsome and rich, he is perfect. From this can be concluded that my interviewees think that being rich and successful is considered attractive in China, it seems to enlarge your chance to find a partner. On the other hand, some of my interviewees also disapprove of this, they do not like this way of evaluating masculinity. Some of them told me they think this is attitude

is changing among their generation.

Apparently, having little financial resources can also negatively influence your chances to find a partner or to start a relationship. Yichen said that “a proportion of people will find it is important [that a man is rich], they will find that if you don’t have substantial foundation, then your relationship is built on nothing”. It was clear that my interviewees felt that their wealth can be of importance to their future partner. During my interviews, all my interviewees except for one, mentioned that one needs a house and a car in order to get married. This seems to be a goal to work towards in the lives of Chinese young adults. Several interviewees told me they feel pressure to keep up with their peers as they “already have a decent job with good salary and a house and a car”. They feel “left behind” and want to “catch up” with their peers. According to Yichen, “generally speaking you can say that there is some kind of competition, everyone is trying to be more wealthy or to have a car, a house, in Beijing and Shanghai”. Without a house and a car you cannot attract a girl, is what Ruoxuan explained to me. When one has finally bought a house and a car and found a partner, the girl’s parents usually need to approve the house and car, according to my interviewees. Yongle explained that “you have to give dowries to the girl’s family if you want to marry her and always the female family will ask for a lot of dowries including apartment, cars”. It is clear that my interviewees feel that there is this notion that men need to provide a house and a car for his future partner, which her parents then have to approve of. As Ruoxuan’s comment already exemplified, this can create the feeling of being part of a race in which the person who is the first to reach this goal, has the largest chance to find a partner. Yichen, however, after our interview explained to me that he had come up with what he called a “violent conclusion” which entailed that people should not raise their child in metropolitan cities like Shanghai and Beijing. He said that it is “inhuman to some extent” and some of his friends that grew up in these metropolitan cities already started thinking about having to buy a house and a car when they turned twenty. Yichen cannot understand this, he told me he thinks to himself: “Where is your life? Where is your personal life? Where is your ambition, your interest? You are just absorbed in some kind of circle you cannot escape”. Yichen also told me that he had no worries about financial resources himself, as his parents are very wealthy. This can be a factor that enables him to think about the bigger picture, as it is clearly an issue that he has given thought to.

According to the majority of my interviewees, the reason that “leftover men” in the rural areas of China are single, is due to their low level of education and their lack of income. For wealthy “leftover men”, it is always possible to find a partner; Ruoxuan and Zhipeng think they are just picky or waiting for the perfect connection. Most of my interviewees mentioned that there is little judgement on wealthy “leftover men”, Yichen gave an example to explain this to me.

> "If you are scientist with breakthrough in a very important domain, then even if you are single in your 50 years old no one will care. Everyone will think you are a hero, you're a great person, everyone will respect you. If you have nothing to do with that, if you are a loser in your whichever respect we can think, career, parents, friends, every aspect you are a loser, then we will think that it is kind of related with […] a result that you have not find a girl or a wife in your forty years old."

From this can be gathered that my interviewees feel that when single men in China have a very successful career, there is little judgement from society. It is also clear that society looks down on single men with little education and a low income. Masculinity seems to be closely tied to success and financial resources in the eyes of my interviewees.

There are also other reasons that contribute to the big role that money plays in the lives of my interviewees. Housing prices and the expenses of getting married and raising children are very high. This is something that all of my interviewees mentioned and that they and their friends sometimes worry about. Muyang told me that he has to "work for three lives to get a house" and Zhipeng said that nowadays people are spending a lot of money on their children. Additionally, it is common in China to take care of one's parents financially when they are retired, as there is a weak social security system. Moreover, China's ageing population will further challenge this already weak system (Zang and Zhao 2017, 47; 181-183). When I asked my interviewees whether they would have to provide financially for their parents when they have retired, all except one of them said yes. Because their parents have raised them, my interviewees feel that they have to provide for their parents when they cannot do this themselves. Yongle explained to me that it can be a source of stress for him:

> "My grandparents have four to five children and basically all of these children are trying to help with their parents, with their everyday life, and give them money to make ends meet. But it's not the case for our generation, because for example my parents have only one child, me, and then I have to think about how to make financially ends meet. […] I will myself take care of them when they are ageing, so there must be some financial pressure of course. I think it's quite common among the generation of mine."

When I asked my interviewees whether they will consider this task when they are going to apply for a job, most of them said they would. Haoyu, who is currently doing a PhD in dermatology, told me science is not really his passion. His passion is music but this is something he cannot pursue, he told me casually, as if this was something that did not need explaining. When I asked Ruoxuan if he would rather have a job with a high salary that he does not like that much, or a job he really enjoys with less pay, he answered "if I'm single I would prefer to do the job I like, but if I am married I would prefer the job with

a higher salary". This shows how my interviewees take their future financial responsibilities into account when looking for a job. Most of them feel responsible for paying for their parents and children, but they also have the biggest chance of finding a partner when they are well-educated and have a nice job. This is something that they sometimes seem to put before their own happiness.

4.5 Marriage squeeze

Most of my interviewees showed that they are aware of the demographic reality that China is facing and how this is a major point of concern for the government. Already in the beginning of the interview, Muyang noted that the Chinese government wants people to have more children. He said: "for me it feels like anger, like you are managed like animals, you are like a farm". Also Zhipeng, Haoyu, Zimo and Yongle noticed how the government is using propaganda to encourage its citizens to get married and have children. Zhipeng told me he thought "the government is quite worried about not enough people are getting married and giving birth to children in general, because there are more and more older people in the country and they want to keep the economy afloat, to increase, like in the past. So they encourage people to have more children now". According to him, one way that the government communicates this message is through the media. From this can be concluded that my interviewees are conscious of the fact that the government wants Chinese young adults to get married and ideally have more than one child. This can be a source of pressure and stress for my interviewees, as there is another party besides their parents, family and society that expects them to get married.

They are also aware of the gender imbalance in China and most of them mentioned reasons such as the preference for sons, the one-child policy and sex selective abortions. Some of my interviewees felt very angry and frustrated with the government because of these matters. The so-called marriage squeeze that this gender imbalance has resulted in and the "leftover men and women" that are stigmatized are also noted by my interviewees. Most of them said that "leftover women" are judged more critically and harsher than "leftover men". Haoyu told me a story about an experience he had.

> "When I was with my uncles or aunties or just friends from my parents, they would talk about literally a child, female, doing a PhD degree, let's say 28 years old, still single. They were so worried: "Oh my god, what is she going to do?" I mean, she had a doctoral degree that's not even a good thing, and I was just like, well what's wrong with that? I mean what's wrong with them pursuing their personal values?"

Most of my interviewees were of the opinion that such double standards are unfair and they wondered why there is so little attention for "leftover men" as there are actually men more men than women that will stay single. Furthermore, they were of the opinion that the term is derogatory, and most of them expressed sympathy towards "leftover women". Some of my interviewees also saw this unequal

treatment among their own generation. Muyang said that there are "different standards for males and females" and Zhipeng told me a story about one of his female roommates in Beijing:

> "[…] for my parents' group they always like to ask their children to focus on their study this age, before you're 25 I guess. But for girls, I think they might start to get worried earlier, […] I don't know if it's a cultural thing or sexism or other stuff, but yeah.. Because I used to be roommates with a girl, the landlord, not even her mom, started to trying to find her a boyfriend after she graduated from college, it's probably like you have to hurry sort of thing."

It is clear that my interviewees feel there is more pressure on "leftover women" but also on women of their own age. This shows their awareness of pressure on their generation from society and the government. Moreover, they disapprove of these double standards which means that they have given thought to the situation and might be willing and able to change this situation for future generations.

When I asked my interviewees if they are ever afraid to be "leftover", some of them said that they are scared of this scenario sometimes. Others said that it was not the time to worry about it yet as they were still busy studying. Also one of my interviewees that self-defines as homosexual told me that he is afraid of staying single. Some of them also told me about their friends in China who are afraid that they will stay single. This shows how becoming "leftover", is a scenario that is noted by my interviewees and their friends. Sometimes my interviewees fear this scenario even though they are enjoying a high level of education. It can thus be a source of anxiety and stress in the lives of my interviewees, that already face a lot of difficulties when it comes to finding a partner.

5. Conclusion

Although China has entered the global arena and has undergone a rapid process of modernization and globalization, my analysis of eight interviews suggests that some traditions surrounding marriage seem to remain the same. All of my interviewees agreed that marriage is considered a very important institution in Chinese society, it is something that is expected of every Chinese citizen. Most of them feel pressure to get married from parents, extended family, peers and society. For half of my interviewees, this pressure is substantial to the degree that refusing marriage is impossible in their eyes. Furthermore, there seem to be clearly demarcated moments in the lives of my interviewees for when they are expected to start dating, get married, have children and find a job. My data suggests that parents play the biggest role in defining these moments. Experiences from my interviewees have exemplified that if they deviate from these moments, there will be people that remind them of this, sometimes in a very unsubtle way. This can be a source of pressure for Chinese young adults like my

interviewees and can withhold them from pursuing their own ambitions.

On the other hand, my data suggests that my interviewees are taking control of their futures in different ways. Historically, most marriages were arranged by parents and were based on the compatibility of the family background. This has changed a lot throughout the years, but a lot of Chinese parents are still of the opinion that family background is important and they interfere in the love life of their offspring. My interviewees showed me how they take these arranged marriages as an example of how they do not want their marriage to be. They see this method of matchmaking as traditional and inefficient and want to find a partner with whom they have a mutual connection. This could indicate that young adults from my interviewees' generation are frontrunners in this sociological transition from arranged marriages to love marriages. They are willing to put up with the pressure from their parents, peers and society until they have found a suitable partner according to their own guidelines. They want to satisfy the expectations of their parents by getting married, but on their own terms.

When looking at how my interviewees perceive China's demographic reality, it first becomes clear that my interviewees are well aware of the ageing and declining population and the reasons behind this. Most of them are also aware that the government wants them to get married and have children; they know what is expected from them. But most of them disapprove of the way the government is handling this. For some of my interviewees, it is a source of frustration and anger. In addition, the "leftover" men and women that suffer most from China's skewed gender ratio are known by my interviewees. Most of them told me that there are different standards for men and women in China, and also noticed this among their own generation.

When I discussed with my eight interviewees how "leftover men" are perceived by Chinese society, they told me that there is a difference between wealthy and successful "leftover men" and poor and unsuccessful "leftover men". The latter will be criticized by society for being single, whereas the successful "leftover men" will not. Moreover, financial stability and wealth seemed to be important factors in determining masculinity in China. Strikingly, all of my interviewees mentioned how one needs a house and a car in order to attract a girl. This seems to be part of the predetermined path towards marriage to which Chinese society adheres. Although most of my interviewees disapproved of this pragmatic way of evaluating masculinity, they also expressed that the salary of a job is important to them when they apply for a job in the future. Moreover, two of my interviewees are doing a PhD and most of the others were also considering obtaining a PhD in the near future. Most of them want to do a PhD in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). In China, job opportunities and salaries are higher for people that have graduated in these fields of study than for people in social sciences (Kong 2017, 100). This can suggest that despite their disapproval of evaluating masculinity based on economic power, they feel pressure and competition to obtain a high level of education in

order to buy a house and a car, which seems to resemble financial stability and is the first step towards finding a partner and getting married. The contradictory answers of my interviewees might indicate that it is very difficult for them to stray from the traditional path towards marriage. Some of my interviewees have told me they are sometimes afraid that they will stay single forever and most of them mentioned stories about peers that are also worried about this. This suggests that it is a common topic among the generation of my interviewees which can cause stress and anxiety. This can lead to believe that China's skewed gender ratio enlarges the pressure on and competition among China's younger generation of middle to high-class men like my interviewees, and withholds them from stepping out of the traditional path towards marriage that Chinese society adheres to.

Chinas ageing population brings forth another reason why young adults, like my interviewees, feel pressure to become financially stable. Due to China's weak social security system, the elderly do not have financial security when they retire and their children are often expected to take on this responsibility. All but one of my interviewees are an only child due to the family planning policies that China implemented in 1979, which means that they have to shoulder this burden alone. Most of my interviewees told me they are worried about this and it is something they consider when looking for a job. Furthermore, the living costs in China's urban areas are rising, which was mentioned by all of my interviewees. If they want to start a family in the future, they have to pay tuition fees for their children, which means their salary needs to suffice. This implies that problems consequent to China's demographic reality intensify the pressure that China's younger generation of men feels to become financially stable.

My research suggests that a way to make the search for a partner less stressful, might be to lower one's expectations. All of my interviewees told me they do not have any demands for their future partner in terms of age, nationality, occupation, salary, or looks. Existing literature argues how hypergamy is common in China and explains this as men marrying women that are lower than them in all these aspects. My interviewees, however, barely showed the desire to follow this pattern. This could suggest that my interviewees have lowered their expectations and demands, in order to enlarge their chance of finding a partner. Hypergamy does still seem to work the other way around, as my interviewees feel that Chinese women value wealthy and financially stable men. Chinese women now have more choice due to the skewed gender ratio, which might reinforce this effect.

As the scope of this research was rather small, this data only represents a small part of China's younger generation of middle to high-class men. It is also important to consider that all the interviewees live in the Netherlands, and have thus been exposed to different cultures. Additionally, all of them study at a university, which means they have enjoyed a high level of education. Consequently, the opinions of young Chinese men that have not been abroad and have enjoyed a lower level of education are not covered. Furthermore, the possibility of social desirability bias should be

taken into account. Although I have tried my best to create a neutral and open atmosphere, there is a possibility that my interviewees have adjusted their answers to what they thought was socially desirable.

Despite these limitations, my research indicates the importance of researching China's generation of younger middle to high-class men. They might not be "leftover" yet, but their lives are heavily influenced by China's demographic reality. Although my interviewees take more agency in the process of finding a partner, the skewed gender ratio is still withholding my interviewees from stepping away from the traditional path towards marriage. It seems that not following the traditional path is too risky in a country where there is a skewed gender ratio and marriage is an important institution. Due to the other responsibilities that weigh on the shoulders of my interviewees as singleton children, they experience a lot of financial pressure. My research suggests that if the Chinese government wants their citizens to get married and have children more quickly, measures need to be taken in order to release the pressure on China's younger generation of men. I suggest more research needs to be done on China's younger generation of middle to high-class men, as they are willing to fight the pressure of their parents and society, but the stakes are simply too high for most of them.

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7. Appendix

Background of the interviewee

- What is your age?
- Where in China are you from?
- Where do you live in the Netherlands?
- Are you currently in a relationship? (Just to have it on paper, I have checked in advance whether the interviewees are single)
- What is your current occupation?
- Do you have any siblings?

Marriage in China

- Do you think that in Chinese society, marriage is important? Why?
- What do your parents think about marriage?
    - Do your parents think it is important for you to get married?
    - (If they have siblings: do your parents find it equally important that your brother/sister gets married? Why (not)?)
- Do your friends find it important to get married? Why?
- Do you want to get married? Why?
    - At what age would you ideally want to be married? Why? What do your parents think about this?
- Do you feel like it is your duty to get married?
- Do you sometimes feel pressure to get married? Why/from who?

'Duties' of Chinese men

- Why did you decide to study?
    - What kind of job would you like to have in the future? Why?
    - Is income important for you when looking for a job? Why?
- Would you like to have children in the future? Why?
    - How many children would you like to have? Why?
    - Would you like to have children in order to continue your family name? Why?
    - Did your parents ever talk with you about this?
- Do you feel that when you find a girl you have to provide for her financially? Why?
- Do you feel that when your parents are old you have to provide for them financially? Why?

'Marriage squeeze'

- Did you know that there are approximately 30 million more men in China than women? What do you think about this?
- In what ways do you notice this in your life? (rent a date, dating shows, meals for single people)
    - Do you ever talk about the marriage squeeze with your parents? What do they say?
    - Do you ever talk about the marriage squeeze with your friends? What do they say?
- Do you feel competition among your friends to find a partner? Can you explain?

The ideal partner

- How would you describe your dream woman?

    - What would be her ideal age? Why?
    - Where would she be from? Why?
    - What would be her ideal occupation? Why?
    - Would you marry a woman with a higher income than yours?
    - Would you marry a woman that is older than you?
- Would your parents agree?
- Is it important for you to really be in love with your partner? Why?
- What do you think Chinese girls are looking for in a man? Why?
    - Do you think they find your income important? Why?
    - Do you think they find your looks important? Why?
    - Do you think they find your job/career important? Why?
- Are you sometimes afraid you might not find a partner? Why?

"Leftover men and women"

- What do you think Chinese people in general think of 'leftover women' 剩女?
    - What do you think about 'leftover women' 剩女?
- What do you think Chinese people in general think of 'leftover men'?
    - What do you think about 'leftover men'?
    - What do you think about their social status?
    - Why do you think they are leftover? (Because of their looks, career, money? Or because there are too many men?)
- Do you have anything to add?