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Marital Strategies and Elder Care Arrangements
Among Single Men in Rural China

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts

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MARITAL STRATEGIES AND ELDER CARE ARRANGEMENTS
AMONG SINGLE MEN IN RURAL CHINA

Thesis format: Monograph

By

Kun Zhang

Graduate Program in Sociology

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
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Abstract

In China, the distorted sex ratio at birth and its subsequent masculinization in the marriage market has raised significant concern. It is speculated that the large population of ‘surplus men’ will increase discordance within households and shift elder care burdens to local communities and the state. This thesis is based on a qualitative research conducted in Shannxi and Jiangsu Provinces of China in 2012. Based on 30 in-depth interviews with single men and their family members and narratives from many other locals, it examines single men’s spouse-seeking strategies; elder care arrangements among households with single men; and the relationship between labour migration and marriage. Employing the structuration approach and the life course perspective, I underscore how bachelorhood is situated in the broader structural parameters of the kinship, gender, and demographic contexts. I reveal how single men exercise agency to seek a spouse in a severely constrained marriage market and then provide evidence on their contribution to inter- and intra-generational transfers. Lastly, I argue that high rates of bachelorhood cannot be reduced to an outcome of the demographic female deficit; they are interrelated with other significant structural parameters.

Keywords: marriage, elder care support, singlehood, sex imbalance, rural China, agency, gender relations, labour migration.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

In this thesis I investigate China’s rapidly changing marriage market and its impact on men who have difficulties tying the knot and, in some cases, who will remain lifelong singles or bachelors. Male singlehood as a process and a status is the main focus of this study. Changes in marriage patterns and increases in male singlehood together may transform men’s attitudes towards marriage and singlehood. Another focus of this thesis is how China’s growing number of single men reconfigures inter-and intra-generational transfers. I pay special attention to elder care as a particularly illuminating nexus that captures the significance of the increase in older single men on family dynamics.

The Context

Three factors that contribute to the masculinization of a population are skewed sex ratio at birth in favour of males, high female mortality rates, and the sex composition of migration (Coale, 1991). In ancient China, excess female mortality in the form of discriminatory infanticide had been a prevalent practice among households (Walter, 1995). In contemporary China, increases in the sex ratio of males at birth and sex-segregated internal labour migration are two major causes that result in a surplus of males. In what follows, I will elaborate on these two causes, since they have underpinned the issue of the male marriage squeeze.

The problem of the ‘missing girls’ is manifested in the trend of the skewed sex ratio at birth (SRB), most notably in Asian countries, including China, Northwest India, Vietnam, and South Korea (Klasen and Wink, 2002). The cause of the progressive sex imbalance lies in the intensity of sex-selective abortion of female foetuses dating back to the 1980s in South Korea, India, and China; a similar trend occurred later in the early twenty-first century in Vietnam (Guilmoto, 2009). However, this gender-biased age structure is not expected to worsen. South Korea is a precedent that shows a clear and concrete decline in SRB, peaking in the early 1990s over other Asian countries and dramatically falling to a normal level by 2007 (Chung and Das Gupta, 2007). Rapid development and the increasing levels of urbanization and education have attributed to this decline in SRB.
In China, according to the 2005 census, the SRB has risen to an alarming 119 boys for every 100 girls born, which is much higher than the biological normal level of 104-106 (Das Gupta, 2010; Dyson, 2012). For China alone, among cohorts born between 1985 and 2005, it is estimated that there are 27 million more men than women (Das Gupta, 2010). China and India, the two most populous nations on earth, account for a large part of the ‘missing girls’ in the world population. However, recent research has captured an incipient turnaround toward a normalization of child sex ratios in the two countries. Das Gupta (2009:412) contends that “sex ratios in China and India are peaking at the national level and are beginning to decline in several sub-national areas, while rising at a slower pace in other areas.” While India had witnessed an earlier and sharper decline in most of its states between the 1980s and 1990s, a fall in the child sex ratio was documented in 24 percent of China’s population in 2000 (Das Gupta, 2009).

In essence, the traditional preference for sons is the root cause of the masculinization of populations in these Asians countries where patriarchal cultures dominate. The combined desire or obligation to have fewer children and to bear at least one son has led to what Das Gupta has called the ‘intensification of son preference’ (Das Gupta and Bhat, 1997). The trend of fertility decline intensifies the desire to have sons and, subsequently, narrows the space to have daughters, resulting in fewer daughters in a low parity (Das Gupta and Bhat, 1997). The spread of ultrasound technology in the mid-1980s made it possible for parents to learn the sex of the foetus and abort or abandon unwanted daughters. It largely heightened sex-selective abortion and increased the child sex ratio at birth. In the case of China, the government has implemented nationwide birth control polices since the early 1980s, aimed at decreasing the population for the sake of economic development. Individual reproductive rights were deprived, and the number of children was strictly controlled at fewer than two per household (Greenhalgh, 1994). Abortion, with the assistance of ultrasound methods, became a convenient means for parents to avoid unauthorized births and meet the targeted number of children. Consequently, the enforcement of this so-called ‘one-child policy’ had accelerated the decline of fertility and reinforced the ideology of son preference (Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005).

The social consequences of the ‘missing girls’ have been of great concern to researchers and policymakers. The direct demographic consequence is the unbalanced sex structure of the population, characterized by a surplus of men relative
to women in cohorts born with high sex ratios at birth. When these cohorts reach marriageable age, they will face a shortage of potential marriage partners. This is manifested as a ‘marriage squeeze,’ a phenomenon resulting from a shortage of marriageable individuals of one gender (women in this case) (Attané, 2006). Due to this sex imbalance, members of the other gender (men in this case) face a scarcity of potential spouses and are ‘squeezed’ by a demographic structure unfavourable to them when they are seeking a spouse.

The rising SRB is anticipated to drop with the rapid development of China and India; however, the ensuing social problems resulting from the accumulated numbers of ‘missing girls’ will not be resolved in this century. The number of ‘surplus men’ in China is projected to peak by 2050 (Das Gupta et al., 2010), and the Chinese government has promoted policy interventions to ease the potential problems posed by the surplus of males. Since the 2000s, a variety of programs and campaigns have been initiated to eliminate discrimination against girls and women and protect their rights with respect to education and work. Other than addressing women’s equal position in multiple social domains at the state level, however, as Greenhalgh (2013) suggests, there are no official policies targeted at ‘surplus men’ or rural bachelors to tackle this gender problem.

Another factor affecting the marriage market in China is internal migration. Sex-selective internal labour migration does not affect the national sex ratio of the total population of a country but, at the local level, it can distort the number of single men relative to the number of single women. For example, single migrant workers who are in male-concentrated industries (e.g., construction, manufacturing) may encounter difficulties finding partners in their workplace because women are typically working elsewhere in the light industries (e.g., textiles, garment). Consequently, paralleling the effects of the ‘marriage squeeze’, which is heightened in the rural areas, the rural to urban migration of the labour force creates spasmodic and localized impacts among peasant migrant workers in both sending and destination areas (Dyson, 2012).

Studies on the social impacts of the skewed sex ratio and male bachelorhood underscore the negative consequences on individual surplus men, their families, and the community. In rural China, some studies document how single men experience great stress, a profound sense of low self-esteem, loneliness, depression, and feelings of failure (Wei et al. 2008, Zhou et al. 2011). Many of them face obligations toward
aging parents, given the anticipated likelihood that they will not marry or continue the family line (Li and Li, 2008). They also tend to have poor physical and psychological well-being, compared to their married peers (Li and Li, 2008).

Some studies contend that ‘surplus men’ are very likely to access commercial sex. Zhang et al. (2009) reveal that 41 percent of rural bachelors suffer from an extreme lack of sexual activities. Tucker et al. (2005) project that the potentially risky sexual behaviour of bachelors will have an impact on HIV transmission; they would then have a bridging role in the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. An influential piece of work by Hudson and den Boer (2002, 2004) connects male bachelorhood to community violence and state security. These authors claim that bachelors’ inclination to anti-social behaviours, like aggression and violence, may represent a threat to the security of local communities and the state. Other studies focus on the impact of the sex imbalance on gender relations within households (Jiang et al., 2011; Pan, 2007) and marriage and sex structures in rural and urban regions (Cai and Lavely, 2003).

Another consequence of ‘surplus men’ in the near future is elder care support. In the context of family support as the predominant source of elder care for rural residents, the prospects of elder care for bachelors remain uncertain. Unlike their married peers who have spouses and children to establish safety nets for old care, bachelors have to face the dilemma of having no conjugal ties for support. Despite the fact that many bachelors can rely on their siblings and remote relatives, this form of assistance tends to be less concrete than the traditional intergenerational contracts between parents and children (Connidis, 2010). Older bachelors may find themselves in precarious situations if their caregivers stop providing support. A survey in Anhui province, conducted by Guo and Jin (2010), reveals that relying on the government serves as the ideal of elder care among bachelors (Guo and Jin, 2011; Jin et al., 2011). In terms of state-funded formal care, however, there are no specific programs that target bachelors. Rural bachelors are covered by the Social Assistance Programs and the Social Insurance Programs (Zhang et al. 2011); however, Das Gupta et al. (2010) argue that these social security programs have been weak, cover a small percentage of the population, and benefit the richer regions more. While the majority of ‘surplus men’ are poor, illiterate, and rural, many of them cannot access these social security programs. The future care of the projected excess 32 million men who will fail to marry is perhaps the most important issue to tackle by mid-century.
Overall, hypotheses concerning the negative and alarming social consequences of the existence of a ‘surplus male’ population are rarely substantiated with evidence and remain largely speculative (Greenhalgh, 2013; Zhou et al., 2011). Contributions to this topic remain diffuse and provisional (Dyson, 2012), largely due to the fact that the first cohort of ‘surplus men’ born after the 1980s just reached their early thirties in 2013, which is still a promising age to marry. It will take a long time before the full effects of this phenomenon can be observed. This thesis is motivated by the following two shortcomings in the current literature.

First, there remains a lack of empirical studies investigating single men and their family’s everyday lives at the ground level in both Chinese and non-Chinese scholarly work on China. Studies on single men tend to investigate single men as individuals and are mainly situated in psychological or social-psychological approaches. This thesis uses a family sociology approach and studies a group of single men in their family context. Our study, therefore, includes not only interviews with single men, but also interviews with their family members. I capture the perspectives of single men themselves and also the vision of single men’s close relatives (parents, siblings). This approach allows us to study (1) the experience of being a single male as a process and a status and (2) the experience of family members who have a single male in the family.

Second, past research is often stereotypical and research designs are fraught with prior social constructions casting single men as being vulnerable, desperate, and isolated from family and community. A comparative approach between single men and their married peers readily positions the former in the shadow of the latter, overlooking the diversity within the group of single men. Such negative stereotyping can serve to further ostracize single men. Negative consequences, such as violence, crime, and unrest, may become self-fulfilling prophecies. While most accounts paint a very negative picture of single men’s lives, we have limited knowledge of single men’s attitudes and perceptions of life. We must hear the voices of single men themselves, as well as their family members, to understand how the changing marriage market is reconfiguring family relations with respect to issues like elder care support. This serves as the impetus for this thesis.
Research Objectives

The research subjects of this study are never married single men in rural China who are beyond the upper limit of marriageable age of 28 years. In the eyes of the community members, they are socially constructed as men who have so little chance of getting married that they will remain single. These men, thus, differ sharply from younger single men, in their early 20s for instance, who are primarily considered to be in the pre-marital life stage. Situated in the context of the sex imbalance and internal labour migration that transforms the marriage market and makes marriage difficult for a large number of men, this thesis will investigate marital strategies of single men and their elder care arrangements for their parents and, later, for themselves. The following three sets of research questions will be addressed at the empirical level:

1) What are single men’s spouse-seeking experiences and strategies, and what is the role of their parents and siblings in this practice? What is the standing of single men in the rural marriage market? How do gender relations affect single men’s standing and marriage transactions?

2) What are the patterns of intergenerational transfers in households with single men? What are single men’s strategies for securing elder care support for themselves?

3) What is the relationship between labour migration and marriage/non-marriage? How does labour migration affect single men’s marriage ideologies and practices?

The research for this study is qualitative and was conducted in two provinces of rural China. A total of 100 in-depth interviews were collected to shed light on the above questions (see Chapter 4 for a description of the methodology).

Thesis Outline

This thesis begins with a discussion of the theoretical approaches that ground the conceptual foundation of this study (Chapter 2). I employ a structuration approach to build the framework of this study; then a gender analysis and the life course perspective are used to shed light on our empirical findings. Chapter 3 reviews scholarship on Chinese marriage and its rural marriage market, as well as mechanisms and characteristics of intergenerational transfers, so as to set the context
for my research on rural single men’s marriage, non-marriage, and family relations in aspects of elder care. In addition, I review studies on single men and their family ties in Chinese and English language literature, aiming to clarify the differential connotation and formation of single men in rural China and the West society. Chapter 4 discusses the use of qualitative methodologies by which the empirical evidence has been gathered. I explain, in detail, the fieldwork locations, interview participant’s characteristics, and the data collection process. Interview narratives and fieldwork notes are analyzed in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6. Chapter 5 emphasizes the spouse-seeking strategies of single men and the gender relations in the rural marriage market. I particularly address how the agency of seeking spouses is differentiated among single men of different birth cohorts. I further examine the relations between labour migration and marriage. Chapter 6 investigates elder care arrangements in households with single men. How single brothers and their married siblings designate care tasks for old parents is the focus of this chapter. I identify three modes of intergenerational transfers. Single men’s strategies for securing elder care for themselves in later life are discussed. Chapter 7 summarizes the research findings from the previous two chapters, by linking theoretical insights and empirical literature on this topic. Finally, I discuss the limitations of this study and potential empirical questions for future research.
Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

This chapter discusses the theoretical approaches that ground the conceptual foundation of this study. I draw upon an array of theories that shed light on single men’s agency in the course of looking for a spouse, and their family relations in the practice of elder care support, in order to provide analytical insight into the interaction between individual agency and structural forces. I begin by reviewing structuration theory and its reformulation, both of which facilitate the incorporation of historical, economic, and sociocultural contexts into understanding the complex relations between agents and social fabrics. I then shift the focus to meso-level theories to establish a tighter linkage between these insights and existing research findings. A gendered analysis is articulated to deepen the understanding of gender as an embedded structural force and to situate geographies of power in the examination of gender relations on the Chinese rural marriage market. Next, aiming at conceptualizing single men’s inter-and intra-generational relations, I employ the life course perspective to trace single men’s life course and its dynamics, especially as these are integrated with the institution of family. I then discuss how the ambivalence theory provides one of the most effective ways to dig into the complexity of family relations revolving around single men and the status of singlehood. I conclude by proposing an analytical framework for this study that integrates these theoretical approaches.

Agent and Structure

To frame my study, I first draw on Giddens’ structuration theory and Sewell’s reformulation of the theory. Given the circumscribed focus of this study, I do not review the totality of structuration theory and Sewell’s project of its reformulation. My aim in employing structuration theory is twofold: to provide specific theoretical guidelines for the empirical analysis of single men’s marriage strategies and the rural marriage market (Chapter 5); and, at the logical level, to uphold the analytical framework for this study, which will be explicated by the end of this chapter.
The Theory of Structuration

Exploring the relations between agents and structures, structuration theory goes beyond the conventional wisdom of dualistic approaches, in which a disproportionate emphasis is put on either impersonal forces (objectivism) or individual motives, actions, and interactions (subjectivism) (Stones, 2005). Giddens attempts to overcome the division between objectivism and subjectivism. His approach synthesizes the interrelationships of agents and structures and proposes a ‘duality of structure,’ which constitutes a defining feature of structuration theory (Giddens, 1979, 1984).

The concept of agency is fundamental to structuration theory. Here agency refers to people’s capability of doing things, rather than the intention people have in doing things (Giddens, 1984:9). Individual actors draw on their agency, including their knowledgeability of social structures, to initiate actions. Knowledgeability and its quality are thus central to the structuration process (Stones, 2005:25). Giddens believes that agents are well aware of their capability to draw upon their knowledge of structural context; they reflexively monitor their ongoing actions in order to achieve purposeful outcomes. In Giddens’ account agents are able to maintain a ‘theoretical understanding’ (1984:5) of the grounds of their activities. This ability is very much cherished by Giddens. He insists that agents are always able to act otherwise, to intervene in the world and make transformative changes (Giddens, 1984); even people in the most constrained or oppressive circumstances can achieve this potential.

Critics of this proposition of agents’ power and the subsequent consequences are in explicit discussion with Giddens’ work. Meštrović (1998) argues that Giddens has indulged in dangerous delusions regarding the extent to which reflexivity, communications, or consensus could guide societal development. Kilminster (1997:95) also suggests that “an overemphasis on the reflexivity of actors tilts the balance of structuration theory towards subjectivism.” I am in agreement with these critiques of Giddens’ overestimation of human agency. We should be more cautious about glossing over the differential social power of agents in relation to social practices and institutions, and the degree to which it is assumed that the structure is available and supportive. At the empirical level this is evident when limitations from the structure outstrip an agent’s ability to make changes.
Action results in both intended and unintended consequences. In Giddens’ account, an intentional act is conceptualized as one in which its perpetrator knows, or believes, it will have a particular quality or outcome and where such knowledge is utilized by the author of the act to achieve this quality or outcome (1984:10). ‘Unintended consequences’ are unforeseeable or unanticipated outcomes. Existing theoretical discussions of the relationship between an agents’ power and unintended consequences are engaged with to shed light on my empirical analysis of the nexus of labour migration and marriage in Chapter 5.

Merton (1963) proposes a functional analysis to demonstrate that unintentional consequences are not irrelevant to social activities. He contends that unintentional consequences are not only ‘by-products’ of regularized behavior; they are incorporated into the reconstruction of regularized behavior in the form of recursive social practices or activities. Giddens (1984:12) highlights that addressing the mechanisms of reproduction of institutionalized practices through unintentional doings helps to untangle the reproduction of the practice in question. For example, one ‘by-product’ of internal migration for work initiated in rural China is the exposure to higher chances of meeting potential partners at workplaces in the city. The ensuing coupling or marriage is what Giddens called an ‘unintentional consequence’ that generates regularized behavior among single migrant workers who are reflexive about the outcome of their action of migration.

Although action logically involves power in the form of transformative capacity and agents are able to deploy a range of casual powers (Giddens, 1984:14), it is worth mentioning that active actions do not stand for the totality of agency. Agency can range from the exercise of choice and the ability to work for change, to passive resistance and the failure of action (Palriwala and Uberoi, 2008). Passive and obscure actions can be a form of power, albeit in different strengths. A lack of resources and capital can restrict agency; some people ‘have no choice.’ Still, Giddens (1984) suggests that ‘having no choice’ is not to be equated with the absence of action, as argued by objectivism that extra-personal constraints operate overwhelmingly and leave no room for wielding individual agency. Even in the absence of objectively manifested consequences, exercising agency produces intrinsic power, no matter how subordinate an agent may be (Giddens, 1979).

According to Giddens, structure refers to “the structural properties that makes the binding of time-space in social systems possible” (1984:17). A social structure is
a meso and macro clusters of institutional, group or systemic properties and practices and their distributions, interrelations, and tendencies (Stones, 2005:5). The conception of the ‘duality of structure’ is a core proposition of structuration theory, and it provides a useful analytical tool to capture the complex relationship between human agency and structures. Structure is viewed as a ‘virtual order’ rather than as a social reality apart from the individual (Seidman, 2004:143). As Giddens (1979:69) puts it, “the structural properties of social systems are both the medium and the outcomes of agents’ practices”. Thus, Giddens treats agency and structure as simply different aspects of all social practices (Seidman, 2004). In other words, agents employ the structure as a bridge to reach out for their wants and desires; and the outcomes are social production of the very structure. The term ‘duality’ reveals the fact that structuration is a mutually constitutive process in that structures shape people’s practices, while at the same time, people’s practices constitute and reproduce structures (Sewell, 2005).

A Reformulation of Structuration Theory

Giddens’ concept of structure is critiqued and further developed by many theorists. Sewell (1992), among others, proposes a reformulation of structuration theory, which attempts to overcome the divide between semiotic and materialist visions of structure and understand how these are generated as well as the interaction between agent and structure (Sewell, 1992:03). He finds that although the structuration approach explains how social life is shaped into certain patterns, there remains insufficient attention to how these patterns are reconfigured to generate changing structural properties over time. In order to frame how change is generated in the process of social transformation, Sewell (1992:16) proposes five axioms – the multiplicity of structures, the transposability of schemas,¹ the unpredictability of resource accumulation, the polysemy of resources, and the intersection of structures – that profoundly enriches the connotation of structure and its continuing interaction patterns with people on the ground. Two of the five axioms, the multiplicity of structures and the intersection of structures, are of particular importance to the logical framework of this study.

¹ Schema is defined as generalizable or transposable procedures applied in the enactment of social life (Sewell, 1992:17). Sewell uses this concept to replace ‘rule’ in order to avoid ambiguous meanings.
The multiplicity of structures indicates that structures operate in different modalities and widely vary at diverse social levels (Sewell, 1992:16). Thus, structures are never homologous and they can exert both harmonious and conflicting influence over people. Social actors are able to employ distinct or incompatible rules to avail themselves to access and achieve autonomy. The intersection of structures, referring to the intersecting and overlapping features within structures, which take place in both the schema and the resource dimensions (Sewell, 1992:19). Intersection occurs between or among structures as these are generated and reproduced in a mutually affecting manner. It also occurs between the interaction of social actors and one or more structural forces. In other words, Sewell's intervention in structuration theory is derived from his attention to multiple subjects and multidimensional sources.

Giddens’ structuration theory and Sewell’s reformulation provide a critical means to explain how single men’s marriage difficulties are interconnected with structural forces at the meso and macro levels. Structuration theory enables me to understand ‘the duality of structure’ within the institution of marriage: how marriage norms enable some rural men to achieve marriage and create obstacles for others. Besides, it sheds light on how patrilocality, as a structure of legitimation of marriage, evolves differently in the two fieldwork sites this study considers. Sewell’s reformulation of this theory helps model the dynamics within and among structural properties. This approach enables me to capture some vital structural properties and how these, in their interactions, affect the social practice of single men and their family members.

Gender and Location

A Gender Analysis

The discussion of gender analysis from the perspective of feminism highlights the concept of gender and its distinction from sex. Sex is a simple dichotomous variable: male versus female (Pessar and Mahler, 2003:813), while gender goes beyond a fixed, binary, and biological category. It is a human invention that organizes our behavior and thoughts, and a human production that depends on everyone constantly ‘doing gender’ (Lorber, 1994; Pessar and Mahler, 2006; West and Zimmerman, 1987). Gender has always been one of the most pervasive forces constructing human interactions and social life (Lorber, 1994). Individuals are
exposed to and expected to learn gender norms in multiple life domains of family, work, education, and etc. Acquired gendered ideologies and practices are further incorporated into social institutions or organizations that are closely related to individual lives, including marriage, family, and religion. Given its interconnections with various social facets, social theorists have proposed that gender should be understood as a process, a set of social relations infused with power, and a structure (Connell, 2002; Donato et al., 2006; Lorber, 1994).

As a process, gender creates the social differences that define ‘men’ and ‘women’ (Lorber, 1994:115). Gender is a subjective and fluid process that is relational and performative (Donato et al., 2006). Actors in the society reflect their ideologies and behavior of gender by comparing themselves with others who are in a similar structuralized position (Burt, 1998); once the referring environment changes, actors’ behavior is subject to change. Thus, gendered patterns of interactions are constantly dynamic and reflective.

Gendered ideologies, like those that compose class and race, create hierarchical social divisions, constructing social stratification systems that privilege men at the expense of women. The ensuing gender inequality leads to differential access to resources and power within and among social groups. As Riley and McCarthy (2003:112) contend, what is most important in understanding gender inequality is how power is involved in female/male differences. By shaping a differential distribution of power, gender constructions create and maintain institutionalized social relationships that constitute the society as a whole. Thus, gender must be considered a structural property of societies, which requires an analysis of how structural factors configure and condition gender relations (Pessar and Mahler, 2003; Risman, 1998).

Recognizing gender as a process, a system of inequality, and a structure lays the foundation as well as expands the scope of gender analysis. This approach applies not only to institutions of family, but to a variety of social scales from the local and familial to the national and global (Donato et al., 2006:6). The influential conceptual framework of gendered geographies of power, proposed by Mahler and Pessar (2001, 2003), provides an exemplary approach for analyzing people’s gendered social agency, taking into account their own initiative as well as their positioning within multiple hierarchies of power operative within and across many terrains (818). Although this framework is particularly based on transnational contexts, it is
applicable to a wider context which is also shaped by the nexus of gender, power, and locations. For this study, this framework is instructive for analyzing the trade-off process and negotiation mechanism between a man and a woman in the marriage market; it provides a model for understanding gender relations in the rural marriage market.

According to Mahler and Pessar (2001, 2003), there are three building blocks in this framework. The first is ‘geographic scales,’ referring to the conceptions of the national, regional, provincial, district, and local realms of scales (Silvey, 2006). The notion of ‘scale’ “captures our understanding that gender operates simultaneously on multiple spatial and social scales across transnational terrains” (Mahler and Pessar, 2003:815). This proposition is compatible within domestic terrains as well. For instance, Chant’s, and, more recently, Silvey’s analysis has highlighted the scale of the household within which gender relations and hierarchies operate (Chant, 1998; Silvey, 2006). Men and women exercise different forms and degrees of agency given opportunities and constraints created within, between, and among contexts of scales (Mahler and Pessar, 2001).

The second element is ‘social location,’ referring to persons’ positions within interconnected power hierarchies created through socially stratifying factors such as historical, political, and kinship-based forces (2003:816). For the most part, individuals’ social location is subject to change over the life course because people tend to exert agency towards achieving a more advantageous location. Nonetheless, the dynamics of social location are bounded by ascribed or born social location, the intersection of gender, race, and ethnicity, and acquired social capital. Social locations are fluid and can be understood through an analysis of the process by which power hierarchies are generated and reproduced.

The third building block is a recognition of the importance of agency and its power as this emerges in different contexts. Agency is interconnected with social locations through the force of power. On one hand, social locations provide distinct resources that enable individuals to exercise agency with privileged power; on the other hand, the form and degree of agency is affected by this conferred power. This proposition is termed ‘power geometry’(Massey, 1994).

Another important dimension for this framework is the nature of social agency. Mahler and Pessar (2003), in particular, conceive of agency as a positive force and believe individual characteristics create decisive impacts for the outcomes
of different people dealing with the same social circumstances. A person whose agency is stimulated by his or her initiatives may be able to mobilize more resources and enjoy more positive outcomes. From my point of view, this perspective of agency reflects Giddens’ thesis on the defining features of social actors: knowledgeability and reflexivity (Giddens, 1979). According to him, actors are knowledgeable, reflexive, and skillful about what, how, and why certain social practices are performed by themselves. They employ the ‘situated knowledge’ generated from their everyday life and therefore are empowered to take initiatives in pursuing their goals.

However, for people who lack the necessary resources (due to poverty or other disadvantageous attributes) to generate the knowledge needed to exert agency, structural forces instead of individual characteristics are more likely to produce profound impacts. Accordingly, rather than focusing on one aspect of social agency, I will focus on both active and passive aspects. As I noted earlier, passive agency, such as resistances or avoidances, exhibits another side of agency that can be indirect and obscure. It is instructive to incorporate this form of agency into the framework of gendered geographies of power in the context of this research, because the direction of agency per se reveals to what extent individuals are confined to certain circumstances with a scarcity of available resources.

Situated within these observations, gender analysis underlines the role of gender as a fluid entity in producing and reinforcing differences, stratification systems, and social relations along the line of gender. The multi-scaled framework of gendered geographies of power further incorporates gender, power, and locations in a social arena, and shows how gender relations are generated from a hierarchical space which is itself shaped within and beyond established institutional and social structures. These two frameworks contribute to conceptualizing the institution of marriage, gender relations in the rural marriage market, and the exercise of agency of people from various social locations (Chapter 5). The discussion on the linkage between the theoretical perspectives and my empirical analyses is detailed below.

Empirical Analysis of Marriage Practices in Rural China

Marriage in rural China is a gendered production of patriarchal systems that empowers men over women. Manhood and masculinity are closely associated with being human being, while womanhood and femininity are regulated to the marginal
position of ‘others’ (Johnson, 2005:94). Marriage practices are mostly male-dominated and male-identified (Johnson, 2005). A woman is required to move to live with her husband’s family after marriage (patrilocality), and family lineage is carried along the husband’s line (patrilineality). These gendered marriage traditions shape conjugal and intergenerational ties within households. On the other hand, they also require men to provide marriage resources such as housing and bride price, which confers more bargaining power upon women and, consequently, reconfigures gender relations.

The concept of ‘social locations’ as a site of interconnected agency and power is useful in examining why rural single men are constrained by limited resources for marriage; this dimension of analysis is framed within the scale of the urban-rural marriage market. In order to take into account this intersection between the rural and urban marriage market, I will address how gendered power is stratified between women and men, and among rural men with distinct social locations, through the lens of marriage and labour migration. Furthermore, through a comparative approach, I consider the impact of historical transformations and changing marriage norms on the forms of agency among single men of various birth cohorts seeking spouses. I will argue that marriage autonomy is not only related to individual characteristics; it is also influenced by marriage ideologies and practices both historical and current.

A Life Course Perspective

The Life Course Perspective

The life course perspective is a theoretical orientation that synthesizes life patterns of individuals or groups, their social pathways, and their relations with historical and sociocultural factors (Connidis, 2010). I use the life course perspective to develop a theoretical understanding for my empirical analysis on elder care arrangements in households with single men, as well as the intentions of elder care of single men themselves (Chapter 6).

Four concepts constitute basic components in the life course and its dynamics: time, transitions, trajectories, and turning points (Connidis, 2010; Elder Jr. et al., 2003). Time is positioned at the heart of the life course approach. It operates at personal and socio-historical levels (Elder et al., 2003). In order to understand the mechanism of the current life patterns of an individual or a group of people, we need to look into individual life history and the social context of that history. Birth cohorts
distinguish people born in different historical times and who experience particular social changes within a given culture (Hutchison, 2010). Members of a birth cohort are exposed to distinct historical environments and social constructions of age expectations, informal sanctions, social timetables, etc. (Elder et al., 2003). Neugarten (1996) proposes an age-grade perspective to understand the social definitions of ‘age status,’ referring to “normative divisions and age norms of the life course” (Elder and Giele, 2009:5). This is in part because variations among age cohorts tend to be greater when an individual life is embedded in a society undergoing drastic transformations and rapid social changes. Moreover, it is likely that members of a same birth cohort experience varied pathways. This can be attributed to macro-level reasons, such as geography, and micro-level reasons, such as individual roles and personal attributes (Titma and Tuma, 1995).

Transitions are “the points along the life course trajectory when particular changes in situation occur” (Connidis, 2010:16), while trajectories are viewed in a long-term manner. Each trajectory is made up of a sequence of life events and transitions. Transitions take place over an extended time span and are embedded in trajectories (Elder, 1985). We experience transitions over the life course like graduating from school, starting a career, and getting married; roles and statuses during and after these transitions differ from those held in the prior life stage. Normative social norms establish an ‘appropriate’ timetable for ordinary transitions; social sanctions result if a certain transition, such as marriage, is postponed or does not occur over the life course. Thus, it is important to consider the duration between changes in state in relation the normative timeline, as it impacts personal biographies as well as an individual’s specific family dynamics.

The trend of a trajectory is not likely to be linear over the life course. For the most part, it is full of twists and turns. A turning point is “a point in the life course that represents a substantial change or discontinuity in direction; it serves as a lasting change and not just a temporary detour” (Rutter, 1996). Both life events and transitions can become turning points. Hareven (2000) generates five conditions under which a transition is likely to become a turning point. Of particular importance

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2A life event is “a significant occurrence involving a relatively abrupt change that may produce serious and long-lasting effects” (Hutchison, 2010:15). A life event is more stressed in its occurrence or the happening itself. Transitions appear after an occurrence of life event.
to this study is the consequences of a circumstance by which a transition does not occur according to social norms, and is therefore ‘off-time’ (2000: 56). For instance, a man who gets married after passing the socially defined marriageable age tends to acknowledge his late marriage as a turning point.

The four central themes of time, transition, trajectory, and turning point serve as a vehicle for understanding how people walk out their life course. However, it is not sufficient to discuss individual lives at the micro level, given that actors are embedded in and interact with institutional structural fabrics. Extra-personal elements play a role in shaping individuals’ lives. Life course researchers propose the three principles of interdependence to untangle the complex relationship between individuals and the society (Marshall and Mueller, 2003; Mayer, 2004).

The first principle is an interdependence “of the past, the present, and the future” (Heinz et al., 2009:16). Actors are able to reflectively monitor their motivations, actions, and outcomes (Giddens, 1984). They acquire knowledge about what and how to do things through past experiences of social relationships. In other words, current lives are built upon and shaped by past biographies, while simultaneously connected with future expectations. A future prospect on life drives people to exercise agency in pursuit of their goals. For example, on a competitive marriage market in favor of women, some men, who acknowledge themselves as less competitive, tend to improve current material conditions by dedicating themselves to work in order to secure marriage in the near future.

Interdependence among multiple life domains (Heinz et al., 2009) is the second principle. Over the life course, individuals engage in diverse aspects of social life such as education, work, family, and retirement (Heinz, 2001). The notion of ‘linked lives’ (Elder, 1985a) is central to the understanding of how life domains are inherently overlapped with one another and interlocked to trajectories of family members: One’s transitions and turning points can become focal conditions for significant others (Elder and Giele, 2009; Moen and Hernandez, 2009). Kahn and Antonucci (1980) use the term ‘social convoys’ to capture multifaceted dynamics in kin- and friendship networks. Relationships between two or more family members exist in a matrix of corporation, negotiations, contradictions and conflicts. The configuration of family relations is further related to structural social relations at the macro level.
Therefore, the third principle integrates micro-level individual lives, meso-level institutional contexts (e.g., family, work, and social networks), and macro-level structural properties (e.g., socio-economic conditions and demographic characteristics). The ‘loose coupling’ method (Elder and O’Rand, 1995) foregrounds the connection between agents and structures, acknowledging that while individuals practice within the boundary of conventional norms, sometimes their trajectory is off normative tracks (Elder and Giele, 2009; Wheaton & Gotlib, 1997). Individual acts may not reproduce structures, but can never escape them (Risman, 1998:28). Agency is exercised through the medium of structural properties and necessarily results from the very structure which it operates within. The notion of ‘agency within structure’ (Heinz et al., 2009) in the life course approach echoes the ‘duality of structures’ (Giddens, 1979), which, as discussed earlier, is an important structuration approach facilitating an understanding of the linkage between individual actions and structural forces.

The three principles’ contribution to the life course perspective is that they tap the implications of social relations on individual biographies at the meso- and macro-level. Individual lives are not only subjective experiences, but developed beyond the boundary of households. Applying the life course perspective to studies on inter- and intra-generational relations enjoys popularity among family researchers (Connidis, 2010).

Ambivalence Theory

Ambivalence theory (Connidis and McMullin, 2002a, 2002b; Lüscher and Pillemer, 1998) is widely used to capture the nature of family relations in interaction with the broader structural context. Sibling ties are important relations in the arrangement of elder care for parents, and they constitute an important source of support for single men’s later life. It is valuable to focus on ambivalence as a means of conceptualizing sibling relations.

Recent theorizing on sibling relations draws upon the life course perspective and the concept of ambivalence (Connidis, 2005). Past research has been dualistic, focusing on either solidary or conflictual aspects of family ties (Lüscher and Pillemer, 1998; Lüscher, 2004; Walker, 2002). Instead of vacillating between positive and negative assessments of family ties, ‘ambivalence’ is used to refer to the coexistence of both positive and negative sentiments within households (Connidis
and McMullin, 2002a, 2002b; Connidis, 2010). The term ‘ambivalence’ refers to “simultaneous or contradictory attitudes or feelings toward an object, person, or action” (Bedford and Avioli, 2009:128). There are two interconnected dimensions of ambivalence: psychological ambivalence and sociological ambivalence. Psychological ambivalence describes subjective emotions or feeling of contradictions, while sociological ambivalence involves “contradictions in social structures that lead to ambivalent feelings and attitudes” (Connidis, 2010). The origin of sociological ambivalence stems from institutional and structural elements that position individuals in a contradictory status or role. For example, in fulfilling filial obligations towards frail old parents, adult children may experience conflicts between nursing care and work. The normative cultural norm of filial piety causes ambivalent sentiments for adult children who act as both caregivers and breadwinners.

Identifying sociological ambivalence in sibling relations also addresses power differential based on age, race, gender, social class, and ethnicity (Bedford and Avioli, 2009), and how power differential complicates relationships among siblings. In the life course perspective, unequal access to resources and experiencing status transition (Willson, Shuey, and Elder, 2003) are two common causes of power differential. This is borne out by the empirical data this study analyzes: In the case of single men and their siblings, marital status and job characteristics often lead to material inequality, which largely shapes their roles in taking care of parents and contributing to family development.

Sibling ties are the most long-lasting of family ties (Connidis, 2010). Ambivalence theory sheds light on the complexity of sibling relations, and, moreover, how contradictions among family members are related to structural social relations. The incorporation of ambivalence into the life course perspective contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the interplay of solidarity and conflict, particularly for families in stages of mid and later life.

The Framework

I use Giddens’ structuration theory and its reformulation by Sewell to construct the analytical framework for this study. The concept of the ‘duality of structures’ serves to sensitize the entire research; in its application it makes evident the multiplicity and the intersection of structures at play and clarifies the complexity among multiple institutional and structural properties.
At the empirical level, there are two building blocks to address the theoretical implications of ground findings: gender analysis and the life course perspective. I use gender analysis to explore gender relations in the Chinese rural marriage market (Chapter 5); the life course perspective is applied to examine family relations in general and sibling ties in particular, focusing on how these shape the context of elder care arrangements for old parents and future plans for single brothers (Chapter 6).

All three levels of social organization are taken into account in the organization of this study’s framework: individual (micro level), familial (meso level), and structural (macro level). Throughout the analysis the study identifies key themes at respective level, incorporating theoretical discussions within, between, and among different social levels.

At the individual level, single men and their spouse-seeking experiences are the central focuses of the study. Rural single men for whom marriage and parenthood has been delayed experience a transition from temporary to stable singlehood, affecting this trajectory of their life course. It becomes less possible for some of the single men who participated in this study to anticipate marriage as they age, given that their present age (at the time of data collection) is already beyond normative age status for marriage. Over time, the long-standing duration of singlehood can shape single men’s subjective perceptions of their statuses and the importance of marriage; variations occur regarding strategies of seeking a suitable wife as well as their relations with family members. These variations are further influenced by the impact of birth cohorts on differing individual behaviors of seeking spouses.

The institution of family provides resources and support for single men who live a less independent life. Without the transition to marriage and its ensuing marital kin ties, single men are likely to turn to their family members and friends to seek help and support. The status of singlehood indicates a linked life with family members, especially with siblings who share a longer life span than parents. There are three elements of single men’s trajectories interrelated with the family: marriage difficulty as a life event (Chapter 5), elder care of old parents as a life domain (Chapter 6), and elder care of single men themselves as a future transition (Chapter 6). I will use the life course perspective and the concept of ambivalence to untangle inter-and intra-generational transfers in households with single men.
The empirical analysis produced by these approaches must be extended to the structural level to capture a holistic picture of the embeddedness of single men in social structures; in other words, to detect the relationship between agency and structure. I will integrate Sewell’s reformulation of the structuration theory to address how institutional and structural forces play a role in shaping the daily practices of single men and their family members. This study will thus address how structural properties operate at different levels and intersect with one another, generating combined impacts over the life course of single men. Based on interview data, there are three structural parameters at work in this study, including (1) the patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal kinship system as an institutional principle; (2) gender as a structural principle; and (3) the skewed sex ratio at birth as a structural property. A ‘principle’ differs from a ‘property.’ According to Giddens (1984), a ‘principle’ is one of the most deeply embedded properties, implicating in the reproduction of societal totalities. The first two parameters are denoted as ‘principles’ because they are underpinnings of the Chinese social relations, and they operate constantly across time and space. The third parameter represents a demographic force that exerts profound effects on the society. It is a ‘property’ because of its less fundamental role in shaping human practices.
Chapter 3: Literature Review

This chapter sets the context for my study of single men in the marriage market, and intergenerational transfers associated with this life event. I unpack the dynamics of key concepts as these are applicable to marriage, filial piety, and Chinese family relations, addressing how these institutions and associated cultural norms are changing over time. Situated in the context of rural China, I begin by introducing central features in Chinese marriage and a variety of traditional marriage strategies, and how the issue of bachelorhood is shaped by marriage norms and its related gendered practices. In doing so, I establish differentiations between the culturally-specific behaviors of rural single men in China and bachelors in the West. To this end, I first review English language literature on single persons and their family ties, then turn to Chinese language studies on rural single men’s wellbeing and their marriage strategies. Following this discussion, my focus shifts to strategies for elderly support, tracing the root of intergenerational transfers in Chinese families to the practice of filial piety. I examine how elder care arrangements and intergenerational transfers are reconfigured by the reformulation of filial piety in Contemporary China and address how these shifts produce changes in family relations. In the last section, I investigate the intersections of marriage, non-marriage, labour migration, and intergenerational transfers, discussing how the interrelationships of these factors affect single men’s lives.

Marriage and Non-marriage

Marriage in China

Universal and early female marriage is the most prominent feature of the traditional marriage system in China (Wolf and Huang, 1980). Despite dramatic political revolutions and institutional changes in the past century, these two features were well preserved, particularly in rural areas. The proportion of Chinese women who have not married by age 30 has remained consistent at one percent for the last three hundred years; in contrast, 15% of Western women have not married by this age (Lee and Feng, 1999:67). With small fluctuations in the past decades, the average age at first marriage for both men and women in rural Chinese areas remains below
24 years (Zhang, 2000), with men’s age at marriage slighter older than that of women’s.

The patrilocal, patriarchal, and patrilineal kinship system plays a central role in encouraging universal and early marriage (Bélanger and Hong, 2002). Historically, Das Gupta et al. (2010:1) assert that “China has nearly-universal marriage for women and a very competitive market for men.” The popularity of hypergamous marriage among women prevents a significant proportion of men in the lower socio-economic classes from ever marrying (Fan and Li, 2002). However, traditional marriage norms are not sufficient to lead to a gender-imbalanced marriage market. Discriminatory practice against females, such as infanticide in ancient dynasties and sex-selective abortion in Contemporary China, has intensified the magnitude of ‘missing females’ (Hudson and den Boer, 2004). The continuous discriminatory practices against women have led to the gender imbalance in the marriage market, resulting in a ‘marriage squeeze’ for men, and an increase of male singlehood among part of the population (see detailed explanation in Chapter 1).

Thereafter, it is noteworthy that bachelorhood is not a recently emergent phenomenon and has a historical foundation. Its cultural mechanism is different from Europe and other Western countries where bachelorhood is due to marriage avoidance (Lee and Feng, 1999). It has been more difficult for Chinese men than women to marry throughout history, and the situation becomes more acute with the continued rise in the sex ratio in today’s China.

Marriage is more than an interpersonal affair between husband and wife. It strengthens family lineages by reproducing offspring and expanding conjugal networks. The desire for marriage and children is particularly widespread and acute in Chinese society (Lee and Feng, 1999); however, when this desire is achieved, the result takes a variety of forms. In addition to the primary type of patrilocal marriage in which the bride lives with the groom’s family after marriage, a variation of uxorilocal marriage has developed in order to achieve the perpetuation of lineage and secure elder support. This form of marriage dictates the reversed post-marital arrangement, i.e., the groom lives with the bride’s family. The marrying-in husband should serve as a ‘male daughter-in-law’ and achieve consensus with the wife’s family on changing his surname, the duration of co-residence, and his filial obligations towards the wife’s parents (Li et al., 2004). There are two types of uxorilocal marriages, classified by motivations of the daughter’s households.
Preservative uxorilocal marriage is initiated by all-daughter families in order to continue family lineage and secure elder care. Institutional uxorilocal marriage is “dictated by non-demographic, mostly economic, considerations and occurs in families with at least one son” (Li, 2003:3): Usually families with a daughter and at least one son employ uxorilocality as a strategy to enhance household economies since the uxorilocal groom as male labour force may bring in more financial resources to the bride’s family (Pasternak, 1985).

Levirate and exchange marriages (Lee and Feng, 1999; Ding, 1998) are older forms of marriage still occasionally practiced among poor families in remote locations. In levirate marriage, “a man inherits his wife from a deceased older relative, such as his brother or his father” (Lee and Feng, 1999:78). Exchange marriage is old-fashioned and prevails in underdeveloped rural communities in Southwest and West China. It involves two poor, non-blood related households, both of which lack financial ability to marry their adult daughters/sons (Zhang, 2000). The rule of exchange marriage is that a son from family A marries a daughter from family B; at the same time, one of the son’s sisters from family A is married to one of the daughter’s brothers from family B. This strategy serves as a solution for marriage difficulties among impoverished families. It is also called ‘shoulder-pole marriage,’ referring to the reciprocal exchange of spouses between two households. While levirate marriage has been outlawed by Mainland China and Taiwan centuries ago (Wolf and Huang, 1980), exchange marriage continues as an occasional practice in poor rural communities.

These variations reflect the high desirability of marriage in Chinese society. People who are disadvantaged in the marriage market may seek alternatives strategies and generate innovative practices to achieve marriage. For the most part, whether one gets married is more important than how he or she is married. People who remain single beyond socially defined marriageable ages are likely to face informal sanctions against non-marriage. Singles are “targets of negative stereotyping, interpersonal rejection, and discrimination” (DePaulo and Morris, 2005:60), and they are assumed to possess a marginal and deviant status across the life course (Bidwell and Vander Mey, 2000; Chandler, 1991). They are portrayed in the dominant culture as isolated from family and social life (Keith, 2003). In terms of subjective feelings, singlehood may lead to low self-esteem and increasing psychological difficulties (Zhou et al., 2011).
**Single Men and Their Family Ties: The West and the East**

I now turn to Western scholarship that examines the association between singlehood and wellbeing, and characteristics of singles’ family ties, followed by a review of Chinese language literature discussing single men’s lives and family relations.

Negative perceptions of single men as pathetic, vulnerable, selfish, and irresponsible (Waehler, 1996) are shared between single men in rural China and bachelors in European countries and the United States of America. Single men across countries are subject to stereotypes of the cause for not getting married; they are stubborn, isolated, or too old for marriage. However, unlike Chinese rural single men, some bachelors in Western countries may enjoy positive stereotypes in regards to their personality and socio-economic status; they may be portrayed as “strong, independent, and self-determining” (Waehler, 1996:6). Despite apparent differences in respect to social demographic profiles and public perceptions between the two groups of single men, a number of similarities in association with family relations are shared among them.

Contradicting the perception of single men’s isolated status in their family, an increasing body of research has demonstrated the importance of family to them (Gubrium, 1975; Rubinstein, 1996; Ward, 1979). Never-married men and women maintain close relationships with their parents, siblings, and distant kin (Bengston et al., 1990). Connidis (1988) implies that sibling ties are viable sources of emotional and practical support. Siblings who live closer to their single brothers or sisters are more likely to provide support. Single women seem to remain the most active ties with siblings in contrast to their male counterparts (Connidis, 1988). However, Connidis (2010) reveals the existence of ambivalence in single people’s relationships with their family members who have partners and children.

What may differ from the Western context is some nephews or nieces’ stronger filial obligation towards single uncles in China, due to the collective orientation of Chinese rural families. In the case of single men in rural China, ties between rural single uncles and their nephews or nieces are bounded in order to provide elderly support. In addition, single persons are a viable, if moderate, source of support for elderly parents (Keith, 2003).

Gendered differences in the negotiation of social networks are well documented. Never-married women tend to interact more frequently with relatives
than do never-married men (Seccombe and Ishii-Kuntz, 1994). One study of older single persons in the United States of America reveals that older single women receive more help from family members, while older single men will more often resort to their friendship network (Barrett and Lynch, 1999). The generally higher education level of single people is conducive to enhancing their interactions and their access to social emotional support (Barett, 1999). Using their available resources, single people are able to create and enhance networks to satisfy their social needs. Indeed, being single may entail emotional risks, but not necessarily social isolation (Connidis, 2010).

While a sizable number of single people in the West volunteers to stay single, rural single men in China are mostly forced to do so, due to personal, institutional, or structural reasons. Chinese language literature depicts the relationship between single men and family members’ psychological well-being and the difficulties they encounter when seeking a wife (Li and Li, 2008; Wei et al. 2008). Individual and collective strategies of achieving marriage are reported.

Single men experience bachelorhood as a great stress. Studies indicate that most of them have a profound sense of low self-esteem, failure, loneliness, and depression (Wei et al., 2008; Zhou et al., 2011). These painful feelings are heightened by a sense of irredeemable obligations toward aging parents given their anticipated low likelihood of getting married and continuing family lines (Li and Li, 2008). But few of them take initiatives to seek professional help; further, psychological clinics are neither available nor accessible in most of the rural communities (Zhou et al., 2011). In the local community, Zhou et al. (2011:1425) suggest that single men experience marginalization, loneliness, and stigmatization. Some of them are portrayed as lazy, drunken, and pitiable.

Family members, especially parents, constantly worry about their single sons; many of them are engaged in seeking a potential daughter-in-law. Parents may feel looked down upon by locals and decrease social interaction with them (Wei et al., 2008). Jin and Guo (2011) find that the life quality of old parents of single sons tends to be poorer than that of married sons, given the fact that single sons are less capable of providing concrete financial and emotional support. However, single sons are perceived to be more filial than married sons due to their closer ties and mutual dependence with parents (Wei et al., 2008). In an article that describes the sibling relations of single men, Wei et al. (2008) indicate intense and inharmonious
relationships between single men and their siblings; however, they do not provide concrete evidence to justify this proposition. Whether gender has an impact on sibling relations remains under-researched. More rigorous examination is required to reveal the dynamics in intergenerational and sibling relations of single men.

Existing research describes several strategies bachelors employ to overcome barriers to achieving marriage, although it appears that as they grow older, men who remain single stop seeking and accept their lifelong status of bachelorhood. Single men who are migrant workers outside home villages are more economically capable of making money and deploy their resources to build new houses back home in anticipation of future marriage (Wei et al. 2008). Their investment in housing serves as a testimony to their ability to secure marriage, as it is an indispensable attribute for marriageability in the eyes of local women. In addition, single men endeavor to increase their possibility of marriage by entrusting their acquaintances or matchmakers to introduce suitable women to them (Li and Li, 2008). However, when considering the agency of single men striving to achieve marriage, it is important to note that the emotional and social pressures of singlehood also produce passive actions which affect their prospects: Behaviors such as insobriety, excessive smoking, and self-abuse are adopted by some men who are distressed about their singlehood (Li and Li, 2008).

In studies of single men in rural China, existing literature has inspired keen attention to the psychological wellbeing and marital strategies of single men in comparison to married men. However, there remains a lack of systematic examination with respect to how these marital strategies are associated with individual characteristics and family context. What is the form, nature, and direction of agency that single men exert to seek a wife? Are marital strategies differentiated among single men of different birth cohorts? How does the local marriage market produce effects on single men’s choices? Do parents play roles in assisting the search for a wife? These questions contribute to understanding how family ties and structural forces shape individual choices over one’s life course. As they are absent from existing literature, they will be addressed in this thesis.

Filial Piety, Intergenerational Transfers, and Family Relations

The nature and the mechanism of intergenerational transfers of resources varies across countries with different conceptions of family support. In China, and
most Asian countries with a Confucian cultural heritage, filial piety is a widely held and dominant cultural norm that idealizes the provision of support by children to their parents (Cowgill, 1986; Ng et al., 2002). It dictates that adult children, and especially sons, will assume the unconditional and constant elder care support responsibility for aging parents. This upward intergenerational transfer is considered a manifestation of filial piety (Cong and Silverstein, 2011). In contrast, while adult children in Western countries also hold filial obligations towards parents, it is not an unconditional dictate that children should help their parents in later life (Finch and Mason 1991). The amount of help provided by adult children to their parents depends on various attributes; Age, gender, ethnicity, labour force participation, and level of subscription to filial norms (Brummett et al. 2005, Connell and Gibson 1997, Ikkink et al. 1999, Gans and Silverstein 2006, Piper 2006, Rosenthal et al. 2007). In rural China, where people are more traditional and less exposed to modernization and intergenerational egalitarian ideology (Counts and Count, 1985), elder care support is essentially a mandatory and gendered practice derived from the cultural norm of filial piety.

Filial Piety: Past and Present

Three principles constitute the essence of filial piety in traditional China: support, obedience, and continuing the family line (Ikels, 2004:3). Given males’ superior status in patrilocally patrilineal societies, sons are identified as being expected to serve their parents over their lifetime (Wang, 2004:19). Firstly, in gratitude for their parents’ effort of raising and nurturing them as children, sons are obligated to provide all-around support for ageing parents. Food, clothing, and shelter are basic material offers; besides, adult children should maintain an emotional attachment by paying regular visits, and take good care of parents when they are sick. In other words, a filial son is one who provides the nourishment to his parents both materially and spiritually (Yan, 2003). In terms of living arrangements, maintaining a multi-generational complex household is regarded as the most desirable approach to serving parents (Wang, 2004). When parents pass away, sons perform decent funeral ceremonies and mourn for deceased parents for a rather long period of time. These rituals provide an occasion to display a son’s virtue to parents in public spaces.

Secondly, according to Confucian classics, filial piety is “supreme beyond any other social or political aspirations or obligations” (Wang, 2004:22). Adult
children should obey their parents’ orders and avoid fighting or quarreling with them. But this does not indicate blind submission. In fact, children are encouraged to correct parents when they make mistakes, an action which must be respectful and well-mannered. This interaction mostly occurs between a son and father, whose relationship is one of the central ties in family relations in traditional China. Parish and Whyte (1980) imply that this father-son dyad (Hsu, 1971) is characterized by deference from the son, and emotional distance from the father. The father is assumed to play the role of an authority and host of household, which is legitimized by the senior-and male-superior patriarchal hierarchy.

Thirdly, continuing the family line is regarded as the most crucial principle, as expressed in the Confucian teaching that “to have no posterity is the greatest unfilial act” (Thompson, 1996). The continuity of family line is symbolized by the birth of a male child that may legitimately take the surname of the family. Adult children who do not have offspring for some reason may face great pressure from their parents, the clan, and the community for failing to achieve this important aspect of filial piety.

The norms of filial piety, as well as elder care practices, have undergone dramatic changes since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. In order to legitimize its socialist regime, the state discouraged a range of filial piety beliefs and rituals (see, for example, Kutcher, 2006; Wang, 2004; Whyte, 1988). Besides, the popularity of early household division since 1949 has affected the extent to which immediate resources and support are provided within multigenerational households. Furthermore, economic reforms since 1979 have accelerated the speed of modernization and led to profound changes in familial values and interpersonal relations (see, for example, Goode, 1970; Ikels, 2004). Consequently, the status of senior members of households is declining while filial obligations become less restrictive. Unlike in traditional times, today’s elderly parents are less likely to gain automatic, absolute obedience and honor from their adult children (Ng et al., 2002:140).

This combination of political, economic, and sociocultural forces has produced changes in the core values, strengths, and forms of filial piety. In today’s rural China, official discourse places great emphasis on supporting elderly parents, while the principles of obedience and the production of descendants are overshadowed (Ikels, 2004). As Miller (2004:37) puts it, “filiality has been distilled
to its barest essence. It is about immediate needs and relationships.” Despite the fact that the force of filial piety as a traditional mechanism of elderly support is weakening, the intergenerational contract that now forms the core of filial piety remains an important component of everyday practice in rural and urban China. Recent research provides evidence for the robustness of the intergenerational contract: The level of co-residence remains high in China, Japan, and other Asian countries, suggesting the persistence of traditional family norms (Chen, 2005). As well, despite the separation of the households of parents and adult children, there remains a high prevalence of resource and care exchange between them (Croll, 2006).

Elder Care Arrangements

In rural China, elderly parents predominantly expect that their care will be provided by a son. Daughters, as well, have filial obligations upon marriage: After marrying into their husband’s family, they are obliged to shoulder elder care responsibilities not to parents, but to parents-in-law (Lin et al., 2006; Yang and Chhandler, 1992). In a patrilocal household, the family division of elderly support labour is a gendered arrangement following normative cultural expectations. The husband provides housing and financial support to parents, while his wife is in charge of hands-on care and household chores. When the husband has multiple brothers, their parents draw a written contract allocating family resources and filial responsibilities so as to guarantee equal task distribution among brothers (Miller, 2004). Similarly in Taiwan, Chu and Yu (2006) find that child-to-parent transfers tend to be higher when family assets are distributed completely. This finding provides evidence of the reciprocity of intergenerational contracts. However, family division contracts do not apply to multiple-daughter and/or only-son households. There are no specific requirements on the form and amount of support daughters should provide to their parents, although married daughters may contribute substantially when they live close to parents (Leung, 1997; Miller, 2004). In a word, support provided by daughters is out of affection, while support provided by sons is more out of responsibility.

Gender differences in care tasks are not exclusive in rural areas, but significant in urban China and many Western countries (Finch and Mason, 1991). Daughters are more likely than sons to engage in physical care and domestic work,
while sons are inclined to provide financial assistance and non-physical support (Martin-Matthews, 2007). However, the boundary of traditional gendered tasks is blurred in the context of modern women’s enhanced employment opportunities in urban China. Zhan (2005) implies that daughters in these contexts have increased their share of financial assistance to parents. Although no similar trend is documented in the elder care practices of rural women, researchers have called attention to rural women’s rising importance in their contributions to the wellbeing of parents-in-law. Cong and Silverstein’s (2005:599) fieldwork in rural Anhui found that depressive symptoms of old parents, mothers in particular, are reduced by assistance from daughters-in-law while increased when such support is from sons. Ironically, while husbands and sons hold the culturally legitimized positions in providing support to their parents, it is often wives and daughters who play crucial roles in practice.

In addition to the ways in which gender conditions elder care practices, living arrangements are important to determine the pattern of intergenerational transfers (Cartier, 1995). As a result of industrialization and modernization, the traditional living arrangement that consists of old parents, a married son, his wife and his children has undergone significant change. The reformulation of filial piety as a reciprocal child-parent contract, as well as members of younger generations’ inclination to greater conjugal independence, has altered the parent generation’s ideal of living arrangements (Greenhalgh, 1994). Co-residence with married son(s) has become a less preferred choice among older people (Ikels, 2004; Unger, 1993). Fieldwork and surveys in diverse rural communities in China reveals that an increasing number of aging parents prefer living alone (Jin et al., 2012). The reasons for this preference range from a desire to pursue greater freedom to the wish to limit burdens to children to avoiding familial conflicts; in other words, it entails both active and passive choices.

Moreover, it is worth mentioning that the preferences of living arrangement are nuanced and shift as elderly parents pass through different life stages. A comparative analysis of census data from 2000, 1990, and 1982 reveals that co-residence with children declined considerably among the younger elderly, but remained almost unchanged among the oldest respondents from 1990 to 2000 (Yi and Wang, 2003:105). Ethnographic fieldwork (1991-1999) in northeastern China also found that able-bodied parents prefer to live apart from their married sons; they
may be forced to co-residence when acute health care is required (Yan, 2003). This form of living arrangement reflects the changing intergenerational contract with children, and may indicate that as a result, parents entertain doubt and feel insecure about whether elder care from children can be guaranteed in their later life.

Except for the ideal of co-residence with a married or an elder son, there are two alternatives that have been widely reported in the past thirty years: living with the youngest son, and meal rotation. Parents living with the youngest son results from the practice of ‘serial division’ following the sequence of birth order among brothers (Cohen, 1992, 1998). Parents usually end up in living with the son who is the last one to marry as part of a stem family. This is often the youngest son, but, since younger sons can get married earlier than their older brothers, marriage order is an essential determinant of who lives with his parents. When a son is not anticipated to marry, it is unlikely that his parents will live separate from him (Zhang, 2004). This is why we see many single men co-reside with their parents in rural China.

The other form of living arrangement is meal rotation, referring to the practice that brothers take turns to provide food and/or residence to parents (Cohen, 1976). Due to geographic and cultural variations in Chinese rural communities, the popularity and practice of meal rotation varies from village to village. Some rural residents adopt it as an optimal way to maintain balanced and fair responsibilities among brothers (Jing, 2004), while others regard it as an unfilial practice that harms the elderly’s interests. Guo (1997) argues that meal rotation serves as a manifestation of the collapse of filial piety, rendering old people homeless and powerless. Yan (2003:189) further reveals that “filial piety is replaced by intergenerational reciprocity, which is evaluated by a rationally calculated principle of balanced exchange.”

**Facing the Decline of Filial Piety: Family Ties in Transformation**

In contemporary rural China, family and gender relations in households are reconfigured with the reformation of filial piety, and structural forces such as modernization and nuclearization of family; these shifts are evident in elder care arrangements. One of the biggest changes is the erosion of the patriarchal power of father over son, of husband over wife, and of mother-in-law over daughter-in-law (Zhang, 2004:162). Age- and gender-defined hierarchies have shifted away from the axis of traditional family ties. The inclination towards privileging conjugal ties is an
index that points to the declining status of the elderly, who used to be superior to other family members. The relationship between husband and wife now tends to be egalitarian. An increasing bilateral emphasis on kin ties leads to relatively equal relations between children and parents, and among sons and daughters (Goode, 1963; Whyte, 2004).

The decline in the status of the elderly has provoked chain effects and has altered the traditional family axis, especially in terms of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law ties, and of grandparents and grandchildren ties. This has been documented in several aspects. The level of reliance of old generations on younger generations tends remains high, particularly among rural and poor elders who lack adequate resources and who do not have access to state provision (Wang, 2004). And so, when an intergenerational conflicts or disputes occur, some elders adopt an attitude of self-restraint, lacking bargaining power over the young generations (Yang and Chhandler, 1992). In some cases elder parents may also receive unfilial treatment from adult children who do not recognize their anticipated filial obligations, and consequently lose their say in domestic decision-making.

In order to change their disadvantaged statuses, elders take steps to invest in intergenerational ties by contributing to the nuclear families of their sons. For most part, this takes the form of performing household chores and caring of grandchildren (Yan, 2003). Their engagement can be irreplaceable in double-income nuclear families where neither the wife nor the husband is available for such housework. This is significant in both rural and urban nuclear families. In rural areas, labour migration into cities leads to absence of the husband, or the couple. In the city, an increasing number of women are inclined to career development rather than to being a housewife. A study based on 1991 survey data found that the presence of grandparents in the household significantly reduces a mother's involvement in childcare (Chen et al., 2000:571).

It can be argued that mothers-in-law are changing position with daughters-in-law due to the former's higher contribution to sons' nuclear families (Yang and Chhandler, 1992). This proposition is particularly relevant to the emergence of skipped-generation households in rural China (Chen et al., 2011), in which grandmothers become primary caregivers for grandchildren. There remains a high level of structural and functional solidarity in grandparents-grandchildren relationships (Chen et al., 2011). Taking care of grandchildren does not only serve as
a bargaining strategy to maintain the elder’s position within households (Croll, 2006), it also reflects mutual care and reciprocal exchanges (Chen et al., 2011:12). The shifted domestic role of grandparents and the reciprocal relationship between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law illustrates “a clear divergence from the traditional practice of intergenerational exchange, towards a contemporary renegotiated intergenerational contract” (Croll, 2006).

Marriage, Labour Migration, and Intergenerational Transfers

I review three pairs of relations in this section: marriage and intergenerational transfers, labour migration and intergenerational transfers, and marriage and labour migration. Marriage constitutes a desired life prospect in most single men’s lives; labour migration is a common practice among single men and other rural residents; elder care of parents is an important life domain for single men. Therefore, a review of literature on the intersections of these three practices in the biographies of single men is useful for developing an understanding of patterns of elderly support as provided by single men, many of who are migrant workers.

Marriage and Intergenerational Transfers

There are two elements in the institution of marriage that affect the dynamics of intergenerational transfers: adult children’s marital status and marriage types. Marriage increases care resources and enlarges social networks for elder care. Daughters-in-law are an important source of practical and emotional support in rural households (Lee et al., 1994). Compared to adult single sons, married sons tend to provide more financial support to parents (Jin and Guo, 2011). Since single sons are more likely to co-reside with parents, they tend to provide more hands-on care and other practical support to parents (Jin et al., 2011).

The type of marriage a son enters into has significant effects on how elder care flows between the husband and wife’s families. There are generally two marriage types: patrilocal marriage, and uxorilocal marriage, as detailed in the first section. In contemporary China, elder care support to parents is not necessarily exclusive for husbands’ parents. A wife’s parents may receive a considerable amount of support from the couple. Li and his colleagues (Li et al., 2003) find that elderly support from patrilocally-married couples is inclined to the wife’s parents, while elderly support from uxorilocally-married couples is balanced on both sides. Plus,
uxorilocally-married couples tend to live with the wife’s family for a longer duration than that of patrilocally-married couples (Li et al., 2005:133). Thereafter, uxorilocally married couple are likely to contribute a longer and a wider range of support to elderly parents. Inversely, downward intergenerational support has an impact on the timing of marriage. In a village in Central China, Wang (2012) finds that in order to fulfill their responsibilities to support son’s marriageability, parents prepare for early marriages among sons. They prefer building wedding houses and preparing betrothal gifts while their sons are still quite young, making it possible for sons to marry as early as 22-23 years old.

Most of the existing literature on the relations between marriage and intergenerational transfers is written in Chinese. By comparing elder care patterns among married men and single men, the scholarship addresses how marital status can produce significant impacts on caregiving patterns. However, existing research has overlooked nuances within the households that include single men; little attention is given to how single men and their siblings perform filial obligations. An underlying assumption is that single men lack resources and the ability to generate strategies for managing family affairs (Wei et al., 2008:2). However, this does not serve as a justification of single men’s incapability of providing elder care support. Accordingly, this thesis explores patterns of caregiving in rural households with single men by underscoring the interaction among single men and their siblings.

Labour Migration and Intergenerational Transfers

Large-scale migration to the city for employment has been continuous for the past three decades. A 2004 survey showed that one fourth of the rural labour force, or 118 million rural residents, left their hometowns to seek jobs in cities in the eastern developed regions (Cong and Silverstein, 2011). Labour migration has profound effects on rural family dynamics, reducing average household size and changing living arrangements (Guo et al., 2009). In rural China, it has been common to observe grandparents taking full custody of their grandchildren, without the presence of parents. It is estimated that about 20% of elders in rural areas with high migration rates live in skipped-generation households (Silverstein et al., 2006). While the nuclearization of rural households seems to reduce the strength of intimate ties with older generations, the flow of labour migration offers them a strategic chance to cement their roles while maintaining family bonds.
It appears that migration results in higher incomes among migrant children compared to their non-migrant peers. It increases the level of economic support and decreases the level of practical support provided to elderly parents because it requires the absence of migrant children (Liu and Reilly, 2004; Jin et al., 2011). It argues that this lack of practical support is not likely to decrease the psychological wellbeing of the older parents left behind, as was anticipated (Silverstein et al., 2006), and that the positive impact of remittances may offset or outweigh negative influences on parents’ wellbeing (Wolff and Dimova, 2006). Cong and Silverstein (2008:22) further found that “the psychological benefits were most pronounced when financial support was accompanied by full-time provision of childcare to the offspring of migrant children, particularly of daughters.” The continued provision of emotional support is another factor which may explain why the lack of practical support provided by migrant children does not lead to a decline in their parents’ wellbeing. Despite working afar from their hometowns, most migrant children still play an active role in caregiving for their parents (Balock, 2000; Kuhn, 1999). Filial obligation is performed among migrant children over long distances. However, this description of a robust emotional tie between migrant children and their parents has been refuted by a sizable number of studies. It is reported that a large number of those elders with migrant children has increased senses of loss, loneliness, depression, and abandonment (Guo et al., 2009b:1089).

Marital status and gender also shape intergenerational transfers between migrant children and their parents. As mentioned earlier, single men, whether they have migrated or not, tend to provide less financial support than their married peers. However, taking the variable of migration into account, it is reported that migrant single men tend to send more remittances home than migrant married men (Jin et al., 2012). Moreover, intergenerational transfers differ between male and female migrant children. Guo et al. (2009b) found that only the out-migration of sons led to more monetary and emotional support among elders over time. This finding indicates that filial obligations are still gendered among children who are migrant workers.

While migrant children contribute to the economic improvement of family members back home, elder parents also invest time and money in their children to secure the success of migration. Migration serves as a catalyst for intergenerational transfers in rural households (Cong and Silverstein, 2011:94). With limited resources, parental investment is selective. Old parents strategically invest in children who will
reap the most gain from migration by providing start-up costs such as transportation and training fees (Liu and Reilly, 2004; Secondi, 1997). In many rural households, grandparents shoulder the task of taking care of grandchildren. It is suggested that the decision to take care of grandchildren is a strategic investment among grandparents that reinforces the expectation that their children will reciprocate (Cong and Silverstein, 2011:95). Be that as it may, given the lack of childcare institutions in rural areas, it is the only solution for the conflict between migrant work and child minding among rural migrant couples. Grandparents may treat it as a strategy to maintain the wellbeing of households.

What remains less researched is how migration affects the household roles of adult children with distinct job characteristics. Few studies treat the household as an analysis unit or incorporate non-migrant siblings’ roles into an understanding of collective contributions to elderly support. In a household with multiple children, some seek jobs outside home villages, while others stay for farm work and other local job opportunities. Who does what task largely depends on adult children’s job characteristics and available resources. Parents’ support also varies according to different needs among children. Bringing siblings into the picture helps us to understand how intergenerational flows are reconfigured in the conditions created by one or more siblings’ migration for work.

Marriage and Labour Migration

Rural labour migration has proliferated since the 1980s, producing profound impacts on the life experiences of migrant workers and their family dynamics. One of the biggest influences is on marriage practices, in aspects of individual marriage ideologies, conjugal relations, and the rural marriage market as an entirety (Tian, 2009). Prior to the tide of labour migration, the rural and urban marriage markets were segregated because of economic disparities and the institutional constraints of the household registration system (Fan, 1998, 2003). Rural marriage was characterized by endogamy within a radius of territories.

Significantly, labour migration has availed migrants of an enlarged social space and more opportunities to meet potential spouses outside their home villages (Fan and Li, 2002:624-625). Exogamy outside villages or across provinces has becomes one possible way to achieve marriage. A united marriage market across the rural-urban boundary is thus anticipated to emerge (Gan, 2007). However, this
proposition is contested. Some scholars argue that the enlarged rural marriage market is far from a boundary-free one (e.g., Cui, 2008; Tian, 2009), in which men and women of rural or urban origins move freely through marriage. Spatial hierarchy, economic differentials, and gender stratifications play important roles in dualizing this gender- and space- differentiated marriage market.

Marriage can be an intentional or unintentional outcome from labour migration, and male and female migrant workers are exposed to distinct scenarios. It is more readily possible for female migrant workers to achieve hypergamy by marrying into rather prosperous villages during or after labour migration (Fan and Huang, 1998; Davin, 1999, 2007). Recent studies indicate the prevalence of marriage migration as evidence of rural women’s active agency in achieving upward mobility through long-distance (often across provincial boundaries) marriages (Bossen, 2007; Davin, 2005, 2007; Zhang, 2009). Migration for the purpose of marriage has been the most efficient and socially acceptable means available to women to achieve improved social status (Palriwala and Uberoi, 2008:23-24). Both the flows and motives of marriage migration are intertwined with labour migration; women who migrate for work may preserve marriage as a secondary strategy of seeking a better life. Nevertheless, marriage migration does not necessarily guarantee that the hope of improved prospects will be realized; in particular, long-distance marriages are associated with several risks. A substantial body of literature has called attention to the vulnerability of women who are subject to adaptation issues, potential discrimination, and disconnection with natal family networks in their husbands’ family and in the community of destination (Bossen, 2007; Davin, 2005; Tan and Short 2004). Another issue to address is the ambiguous relationship between marriage migration and human trafficking. Alongside voluntary migration, marriage migration also entails forced marriage in which women are tricked into marriage with men who are sick, old, and disabled (Davin, 2005:72).

It appears, nonetheless, that many women who migrate for work return to their village to marry. Fan (2003:39) finds that “the opportunities for rural women to pursue migrant work are short-lived and temporary.” Labour migration serves as an ‘episode’ (Lee, 1995) in their trajectories of pursuing economic enhancement. However, based on 2000 survey data collected in Anhui and Sichuan, Robert et al. (2004) argue that the reality tends to be more complex. Marriage is not a determinant of ceasing wage work and returning to home villages. Many married women resume
seeking jobs outside of their hometowns both with and without their husbands or their children (2004:50). Addressing gender relations among circular migrant couples, Connelly et al. (2010) find that the effect of labour migration has mixed impacts on migrant women’s position in rural households. For example, while migration/return is strongly related to a lower rate of domestic violence, women’s empowerment in decision-making is reduced by migration/return (2010:35).

For rural migrant men, the nexus of marriage and labour migration exhibits both similarities and differences when their experiences are compared to those of their female counterparts. With the enlargement of the marriage market, the proportion of interprovincial marriages among migrant men is three times more than that among non-migrant men. Meanwhile, the number is six times greater when comparing migrant women to female non-migrant women (Jin et al., 2011:5). This comparison indicates that labour migration has greater impacts on women than men, providing quantitative evidence to support that female migrants are more likely to achieve marriage through migration. For both sexes, labour migration also postpones first marriage ages among migrants (Jin et al., 2011), which is believed to be beneficial to the ‘quality’ of the rural population (Cui, 2007).

One disadvantage against men brought about by labour migration is the massive outflows of unmarried women who migrate for work or marriage. The practice of hypergamy among rural women has made it difficult for men in the bottom social rung and those in poor locations to seek a wife at their marriage ages (Jia, 2008); neither are many of them confident about achieving marriage through labour migration. Labour migration also produces imbalanced sex ratios at sending communities when the proportion of the migrant population is feminized or masculinized. Therefore, along with outflows of female migrants and the potential female deficit, rural men who hold disadvantaged attributes are likely to be left out in the marriage market (Shi, 2006). For men who are more economically capable, permanent migration to desirable locations serves as a solution to this dilemma. Su (2011) finds that, in order to enhance personal attributes for marriage, many rural men in a village in Henan purchase apartments or houses in a prosperous neighboring county. As a result, they acquire urban citizenship and become ‘residents in the city,’ which is an attractive identity for unmarried women who wish for a better life through marriage. However, it has been rare to observe the practice of male marriage migration in other rural areas in China.
After reviewing how marriage and labour migration are intertwined on migrants’ trajectories, and their joint impacts on women and men respectively, I now turn to discuss the impact on households of migrants. According to 1995 Sichuan and Anhui interview records, spilt households, in which the husband does migrant work outside while the wife takes charge of domestic affairs, constituted the majority of the household types (69.1%) among migration families. What followed was skipped-generation households (26.2%) in which both the husband and the wife are absent for migrant work (Fan, 2003:40). The proportion indicates that the practice of labour migration encourages a gendered household division of labour within marriage (Judd, 2010). For a rural couple who both do migrant work outside, the wife is more likely to quit the urban labour market and return to the home village to fulfill a mother/wife’s role that is traditionally defined. Farm work, which used to be men’s work, is consequently feminized (Fan and Li, 2002). Judd (2010) terms this gendered household division of labour as a ‘family strategy’ that simultaneously optimizes household income on one hand, and fulfills caregiving tasks for the elderly and children on the other hand. Indeed, satisfying family needs associated with marriage, childbirth, and caregiving are extremely important reasons for return (Wang and Fan, 2006).

The status of geographic separation for couples in spilt households induces stresses and conflicts for marriages. Migrant men may engage in love affairs during their work in the city. Another increasing risk is the widowhood of young women whose husbands are involved in hazardous industries such as coal mining (Judd, 2010). All these elements contribute to the fragility of marriage. The emergence of neo-local marriage in the economic boomtown of Dongguan, South China presents a new marriage form for migrant couples. Zhang (2009) documented this phenomenon. Migrant couples settle their post-marriage residences in the city where they are employed. Zhang (2009) suggested that this recently emerged marriage form may redefine gender roles, intergenerational relations, and family life in the long run.

To conclude for this chapter, there are three shortcomings or gaps in existing literature on single men and their intergenerational transfers. First, past research is often stereotypical and research designs are fraught with prior social constructions casting single men as vulnerable, desperate, and isolated from family and community. A comparative approach between single men and their married peers
readily positions the former in the shadow of the later, overlooking the nuances within the group of single men. Such negative stereotyping can serve to further ostracize single men. Second, there remains a lack of empirical studies investigating single men and their family’s everyday life at the ground level in both Chinese and non-Chinese scholarly work. Studies on single men tend to investigate single men as individuals and are mainly situated in psychology or social-psychology approaches. In terms of elder care support, an underlying assumption about single men is that they are less capable of providing satisfactory support for their parents than their married peers. Little attention is given to the comparison between single men and their married siblings in designating elder care resources within households. Third, regarding intergenerational transfers in households with migrant sons and non-migrant sons, little research treats the household as an analysis unit or incorporates non-migrant sons’ roles in contributing to elderly support. It is important to understand how job characteristics and geographic proximity configure elder care arrangements among siblings.
Chapter 4: Methodology and Study Locations

This study is part of a larger project entitled “Demographic Shifts and Gender in Asia: ‘Scarce Women’ and ‘Surplus Men’.” The project is funded by SSHRC\(^3\) and led by Dr. Danièle Bélanger. The objective of the project is to examine social impacts of the female deficit in rural localities of three countries of Asia including China, India, and Vietnam. The project on China is in partnership with the Institute for Population and Development Studies (IPDS) affiliated with Xi’an Jiaotong University, China.

The Connotations of Singles

The term ‘single’ refers to the never married, in contrast to the ‘unmarried’ who are widowed, divorced, or separated (Connidis, 2010:93). People who remain single over socially defined marriageable ages are called ‘singles’, or in a gender perspective, ‘bachelors’ and ‘spinsters’. The dichotomy of voluntary and involuntary singles is often used to distinguish types of singlehood (Stein, 1981). For voluntary singles, being single is a choice based on individual will that precedes establishing sexual partnerships or getting married; involuntary singles are, on the other hand, mostly forced to remain single because of personal, familial, and social constraints or demands (e.g., having undesirable attributes for marriage, focusing on a career, etc.). The status of singlehood can be temporary or stable for both categories of singles (Connidis, 2010; Stein, 1998).

In addition, the transition of identity between voluntary and involuntary singles is bi-directional. Voluntary singles can shift into involuntary singlehood when, for example, they fail to find a suitable or ‘right’ partner for marriage after having postponed marriage for a long period of time. Likewise, involuntary singles can enter into a scenario of voluntary singlehood at a certain point in their life course (Connidis, 2010). For example, a middle-age involuntary single person who prioritizes taking care of sick parents may voluntarily stay single permanently. Therefore, it is important to view single status as a fluid concept, given the duration of and intentions of singlehood (Baumbusch, 2004). Given that, limitations exist in the dichotomy of voluntary and involuntary singles, which is frequently used in much

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of the literature on single studies. It is “limiting to assume that only those who choose to stay single act with agency in their lives” (Connidis, 2010:99). Indeed, involuntary singles do exercise other forms of agency in aspects of pursuing marriage, or staying single. These dynamics and nuances in agency are important dimensions and are addressed throughout this study.

A pro-marriage culture is dominant in China and many developed Western countries. The social constructions of singles are inclined to be negative in both Chinese and Western cultures. The ideology of marriage and family has legitimized the importance of coupling and forming families to advance populations and societies; hence, singles often suffer as victims of stereotypes and discrimination (Williams and Nida, 2005). They are portrayed as being physically unattractive, less responsible, economically disadvantaged, etc. (DePaulo and Morris, 2005). These perceptions of singles are applicable to single men in rural China, who are called guanggun by people in their communities and the wider society. Guanggun, literally meaning ‘bare branches’ or ‘bare sticks’ in English, refers to people who are forced to remain single due to reasons such as poverty, unemployment, or other disadvantageous individual attributes. They are usually “poor single men with no marriage prospects and no hope of producing sons” (Crow, 2010:72).

In Mandarin, the usage of guanggun is derogatory and implies that getting married will not be possible. In order to erase prejudicial connotation of the term guanggun and avoid ambiguity of single status within the term of ‘involuntary bachelors’, I use the terms ‘single men’ or ‘bachelors’ to refer to never married rural men who are beyond the practical marriageable age of 28 years. The boundaries of what constitutes ‘marriageable age’ vary with local contexts. In both study sites (and in most parts of rural China), men at the ages of 22-23 years are considered at the prime marriageable ages; those at the ages of 26-28 years should start worrying about their marriage prospects, yet enjoy relatively good odds of getting married; and those over 35-40 years may encounter difficulty in finding marriage partners and possibly transition from temporary to stable singlehood. In this research, I set the age boundary for single men to be married at 28 years. I also use the term ‘single sons’ interchangeably with ‘single men’ or ‘bachelors’, when emphasizing family ties to parents.

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4 The legal minimum marriageable age in Mainland China is 22 years old for men and 20 years old for women. Retrieved from: http://www.gov.cn/banshi/2005-05/25/content_847.htm
The Use of Qualitative Methodology

To pursue my research objectives, I employ a qualitative methodology. The *sine qua non* of qualitative methodology is a commitment to see the social world from the point of view of the actor (Bryman, 1984:77), compared to quantitative methodology, where questions and hypotheses are stated in propositional form and subjected to empirical tests to verify (or falsify) them (Guba and Lincoln, 1994:105-177). I have strived to ground the tenets of constructivism in my research design. According to Guba and Lincoln (1994:116), “the paradigm of constructivism implies that realities are socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature, and dependent for their form and content on the individual persons or groups holding the constructions.” Methodologically, the dialectical interaction (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2004) between the investigator and the object of investigation constructs a ‘field’ to contextualize individual constructions, which allows an understanding of people and their lives anchored in a localized social environment.

Specific to this research, qualitative methodology allows a micro-oriented examination of the behaviour and attitudes of single men both in the marriage market and in the domestic spheres. Single men who find it difficult to marry are subject to the ‘double-bind’ structure (Hsia, 2007). On one hand, they are potential threats to the community and state security (Hudson and den Boer, 2002); on the other hand, they are labeled as being ‘socially undesirable’, possibly physically/mentally disabled or morally inferior. Qualitative methodology is, thus, valuable for questioning the apparent realities made ‘natural’ and ‘obvious’ by dominant groups (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2004). It gives voice to marginalized single men to account for their own perspectives and experiences, which provides a panoramic view of their life realities. Another reason to employ a qualitative methodology is linked to the current literature gap. Substantial quantitative research exists on projecting the scale of the marriage squeeze and its potential effects in the marriage market and population structures (Attané and Barbieri, 2009; Davis et al., 1982; Pan, 2007), but empirical research rarely addresses issues around single men in China at the micro level. This study addresses marital strategies and elder care arrangements of single men.

In-depth interviewing was used as the major data collection method. It gathers descriptions of the interviewees’ lives with the intention of interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena (Kvale, 1983). It also provides thorough,
detailed, intensive life stories of participants by conducting one interview per respondent (Miller and Crabtree, 1999). Multi-dimensional messages, in the form of non-verbal signs, gestures, and facial expressions, emerged continuously during the interviews, which, in this research, serve as fieldwork notes to better understand individual narratives.

In this study, a multi-perspective approach was employed in conducting in-depth interviews. Unlike a classic qualitative research design where the narratives of the research subjects are the major focus, this research was intended to engage local people who live in the same communities as the single men. Besides single men themselves, we collected narratives of their family members, married men, ever-married single men, young unmarried men; married women, mothers-in-law of married women, and young unmarried women. This multi-perspective approach allows us to hear the voices of men and women of different generations regarding their knowledge of the rural marriage market by virtue of their personal gendered experiences, and, moreover, their perceptions of single men in the marriage market. By incorporating diverse perspectives, it allows for depth, richness, and vividness of subjective discourse, which are “not possible from the conceptual frameworks of dominant institutions” (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2004:67).

Three groups of in-depth interviews require further explanation: married men (some have encountered marriage difficulties), ever-married single men, and family members of single men. Firstly, conducting interviews with men who share common experiences with single men constitutes an important methodological aspect of this study. If we wish to explore the circumstances of non-marriage or singlehood, it is useful to study the life stories of men who were once considered disadvantaged in the marriage market. Many married men who ever encountered marriage difficulties made an effort to seek a spouse, a stage that may last for quite a long period of time, and ever-married single men may also experience longstanding singlehood that resembles the status of single men. Secondly, since households serve as a research unit, especially in the analysis of intra- and inter-generational relations, it was indisputable that the immediate family members of single men should be included, because “their narratives provide information on the simultaneous co-existence and opposition of harmony and conflict in inter-generational relations” (Lüscher and Pillemer, 1998:414). Divergent discourses from members of the same family were particularly useful in exploring dynamics of family relations.
Site Selection

We conducted fieldwork in the surrounding villages of two towns. Selecting two sites allows an explicit comparison of marriage and elder care-related cultural norms between two communities with distinct geographic landscapes and economic conditions. The administrative level of a town\(^5\) is higher than a village and lower than a county. As its landscape, economy, and social organizations are mostly rural, a town (particularly one in less developed regions) belongs to rural areas, rather than urban areas. I use pseudonyms for the two towns in order to protect the privacy of interview participants.

Baijia, a town located in Zhashui County, Shaanxi Province in Northwestern China, was selected as the first site (see Map 1.1) because of its high proportion of single men in some of its governed villages, according to the data retrieved from a 2009 survey that investigated the number and distributions of bachelors nationwide (Jin et al., 2010). The proportion of bachelors in Chang village\(^6\) of Baijia, for example, was 2.6 percent; whereas, the proportion of bachelors in 169 villages in West China was only 0.45 percent. The SRB (males to females) in the province of Shaanxi has been highly skewed for decades, rising from 109.13 in 1982\(^7\) to 115.68 in 2010\(^8\).

According to the 2000 Fifth National Census, the population sex ratio of Zhashui was as high as 121\(^9\). Although sex ratio data at the village or town level is not available, the skewed sex ratios at the county and provincial levels have been sufficient to justify the selection of Baijia for this study. Another pragmatic consideration for choosing Baijia was accessibility. Since one of the researchers in our interview team had a student who was born and raised in this town, we chose Baijia out of other eligible towns because he could work as a liaison to establish contact with informants and interview participants.

\(^5\) The administrative divisions of P.R.C. consist of five-level administrative units (from the highest to the lowest ranked): the province, prefecture, county, township/town, and village. Villages serve as fundamental organizational units for the rural population.

\(^6\) It is a pseudonym. Many interview participants who were single men came from this village.


For our second site, we chose Lijia, in Feng County, Xuzhou City, Jiangsu Province in Eastern China for three reasons: the skewed SRB, inflows of marriage migration, and accessibility. First, Xuzhou has a higher SRB of 126.79 in the 2000 Census, comparing to other cities in Jiangsu. Second, the influx of female marriage migrants from the 1980s to the 1990s was significant in North Jiangsu. According to Fan and Huang (1998), the proportion of female marriage migrants exceeded 80 percent of all female immigrants in Feng in 1990. This county also had significantly higher rates of interprovincial migrants and higher rates of female migrants than the rest of the province (Fan and Huang, 1998:242). By investigating the marriage migration experiences of non-local brides, we expected to expand our understanding of the nexus of marriage and migration at the macro-level. Lastly, a colleague in a

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university in Jiangsu was able to connect us with governmental officials in Xuzhou who granted us the permission to conduct fieldwork in Lijia.

Site Introduction

*Baijia: The First Fieldwork*

With the distances of 63.4 kilometers from Zhashui and 148 kilometers from the capital city of Xi’an (one of the economic centers of the province), Baijia is a close-ended town surrounded by mountains over altitudes of 2,000 meters. This town governs 21 administrative villages, scattered in valleys and on top of mountains. Due to the mountainous landscape, infrastructure such as transportation is underdeveloped. The center of the town is barely commercialized, with only one main road crossing through and countable stores providing basic needs such as retailing, clothing, and banking. Itinerant vendors come to the town every other week for livestock trading. The local economy relies on small-scale businesses such as iron mining and traditional medicine processing. It is ranked as one the most impoverished towns in Zhashui (see Table 1 for basic information).

Table 1. Characteristics of fieldwork sites.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Baijia&lt;sup&gt;11&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Lijia&lt;sup&gt;12&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of affiliated administrative villages</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewees’ origin of villages</td>
<td>4 villages out of 21</td>
<td>8 villages out of 31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total acres</td>
<td>198.2 km&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>119 km&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average elevation</td>
<td>885.5 m</td>
<td>43.5 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural products</td>
<td>Wheat, corn</td>
<td>Wheat, cotton, burdock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major industries</td>
<td>Traditional medicine, tobacco, mineral, fruit</td>
<td>Wood processing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>11</sup> Source of data: The People’s government of Zhashui County, [http://www.snzs.gov.cn/Index.html](http://www.snzs.gov.cn/Index.html)

Population mobility caused by labour and marriage migration is dynamic in the Baijia. Like other rural communities, capable male adults prefer working as migrant workers because there are more job opportunities and wages are higher. Some of them work in the neighbouring counties or cities, while some others have jobs that are long-distance or cross-provincial. According to the accountant (an informant) in one of the villages in the town, most of the able-bodied single men there are migrant workers as well.

Young female adults also work as migrant workers in cities, such as Zhashui, Xi’an, Shanghai, and Beijing. According to our informant, female migrants tend to move out of their hometown, get married, and settle down in places with better economic conditions. Men can meet their potential wives locally or at workplaces outside their home villages; however, it has been rare for migrant workers to bring in non-local brides because of poverty. Generally, there are more women ‘marrying-out’ than ‘marrying-in’. In a household, labour is divided so that men are generally in charge of the ‘outside’ while women are in charge of the ‘inside’. Usually husbands work in factories or construction sites non-locally, while wives stay at home in charge of housekeeping and take care of children and/or parents-in-law. Sometimes both the wife and husband work outside their home.

Patrilocal marriage, where the bride resides with her husband’s family after the wedding, is a predominant marriage pattern in China. Baijia is no exception. In an uxorilocal marriage, the groom moves out from his natal family and lives with the bride’s family. This type of post-marital living arrangement is less welcomed and even strongly resisted in many places in China. Not all men reject uxorilocality, however, because uxorilocal marriage serves as an alternative strategy for men whose disadvantageous attributes hinder their chances of marriage.

During the fieldwork, a relocation project launched by the local government was underway. Since 2009 the government has been encouraging villagers who live in the remote mountains to move down to the plain regions, in order to improve household living conditions and achieve collective development. According to the local standard, it costs 80,000 to 100,000 yuan (USD$12,900-$16,000) to build a house. Households that agree to be relocated pay only 30 percent of the fee (24,000 to 30,000 yuan, USD$3,900-$4,850), while the government sponsors the remainder. Unlike housing construction in cities, where professional construction teams are
demanded, in rural areas, adult sons and male relatives, who are likely construction workers themselves, usually build the houses. Stimulated by the project, some families seized the opportunity and called back their migrant sons to work as helpers, while some families were reluctant to move because of individual preference or economic difficulties. Raising money and building houses were important activities for families who were moving at the point of fieldwork. As a matter of fact, it increased local employment opportunities for some of our interviewees. To a great extent, this massive relocation allowed us to encounter more returned migrants, whose narratives enriched our knowledge on the nexus of marriage and migration.

*Lijia: The Second Fieldwork*

Lijia is adjacent to three provinces (Anhui, Henan, and Shandong) with similar cultures and customs. Positioned in a flood plain and only 10 kilometers from Feng, the town is densely populated with 100,000 people (by the end of 2008), almost nine times greater than the population of Baijia. Wood processing has been one of the most booming industries in the past three decades. There are 16 villages in this town specializing in techniques such as making painting frames and door frames. It brings along employment opportunities for the local labour force.

The Yangtze River Delta is located south of Jiangsu and is the center of advanced manufacturing and modern service industries in China. It attracts a labour force from across the nation. The development of North Jiangsu, where Lijia is located, is much less advanced than the South. The economic gap pulls a great amount of labour from surrounding villages in Lijia. Northeast and Central China are also favourable destinations for labour migration due to geographic proximity. 40 percent of the labour force in Lijia migrated for work in 2003. 13 Migrant workers primarily concentrate in the architecture, transportation, wood processing, and garment industries.

One important demographic characteristic of Lijia is the influx of female migrants from distant villages dating back to the 1980s and 1990s, with the peak being reached in 1984 and 1985. This population mobility (see details in the Site Selection section) was documented in the 2000 Fifth National Census, as well as in relevant academic articles (Fan and Huang, 1998; Huang, 2002; Tan et al., 1999).

The reason for the shortage of women in the 1980s has been unidentified, but it was probably related to the three years of famine (1959-1961), during which female infants were more likely to die from hunger than their male counterparts. The long-standing practices of son preference and sex-selective abortion contributed to a population with significantly more men than women, when this birth cohort reached marriageable ages 20 years later in the 1980s.

Non-local brides were, and are currently, called ‘barbarians’ or manzi in their local language, referring to people whose language is different and difficult to understand and whose habits and customs are distinct from the local culture. This word originated from the ancient Chinese Han who dominated Central China for centuries. They called ethnic minorities from the northern and southern regions manzi, an apparently derogatory name indicating the latter’s backward economy, distinct cultures, and less ‘civilized’ societies. Although local people deny any derogatory connotations, this word is still used by some dominant groups to refer to ‘inferior others.’

According to our local informants, the trajectory of non-local brides was from mountainous southwestern provinces, such as Sichuan, Guizhou and Yunnan, to relatively prosperous villages in this town. Some women came independently seeking a better life, while others were trafficked from afar, either voluntarily or involuntarily. Those who bought wives in this way were village men who found it difficult to marry locally due to their undesirable attributes. The practice of seeking and buying wives in less developed regions was well established throughout the 1980s and 1990s. A local saying – “go to Sichuan and bring in manzi” (Shang Sichuan, Dai manzi) – proved its popularity. This illegal practice of buying brides was strongly discouraged and further prohibited by the local government by the end of the 1980s, but the custom never disappeared until the late 1990s. This form of long-distance marriage reflected the ways in which single men tackled a shortage of marriageable women.

**Sample Description**

As elaborated earlier, in order to enrich our data on single men, we divided the interview participants into two categories: primary and secondary interviewees. Primary interviewees are single men and their immediate family members (e.g., parents, siblings, and siblings-in-law), and secondary interviewees are local villagers who could articulate their perceptions of single men or relate their understanding of a
variety of matchmaking, courtship, or marital experiences that manifest the rural marriage market in both the past and present. Narratives from both categories are important to the objectives of this research.

To obtain diverse perspectives, we purposefully stratified the sample from both categories according to gender and generation (see Table 2). We intended to include single men of different birth cohorts and from varied economic and employment backgrounds. We also hoped to match individual single men to their family members as much as possible. For the secondary group, we recruited males and females with different marital statuses. To be specific, the group was composed of married men, ever-married single men, young unmarried men, local married women and their parents-in-law, non-local brides (exclusive for Lijia), and young unmarried women.

In order to compare marriage-related characteristics in the two sites, each category consisted of an almost equal number of participants. During the fieldwork in Baijia, this goal was less attainable in the primary group. The samples from the two sites differed in two ways. First, in Lijia we included non-local brides (women who migrated from other provinces and got married in Lijia). Second, we interviewed a professional matchmaker who provided detailed information on the procedure of marital introduction. The recruitment process and the structure of the interview guide were kept consistent in the two towns.

In total, we interviewed 100 individuals in the two sites (see Table 2) following the interview guides. We also interviewed informants in both sites informally. In Baijia, we interviewed a cadre about the government’s view of single men and its policies on old age welfare; in Lijia, we conducted a focus-group discussion with local cadres about the population characteristics and the dynamics of the marriage market.
Table 2. Distribution of interviewees by category and location.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Baijia</th>
<th>Lijia</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Primary interviewees</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single men</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family members of single men</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Secondary interviewees</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married men</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ever-married single men</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young unmarried men</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local married women</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-local brides</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents-in-law of local married women</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young unmarried women</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matchmakers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cadres</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>(42)</td>
<td>(65)</td>
<td>(107)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the group of primary interviewees, we interviewed 18 single men and 12 family members of single men. Usually one family member in a household was recruited to tell the stories of single men and their household dynamics. The majority of family members were females and included mothers, sisters, and sisters-in-law. In seven cases, both the single men and their family members were interviewed. We did not acquire access to the single men in the rest of the five families due to their absence or unavailability (e.g., some had communication difficulties). However, in order to exhibit the diversity within the group, we counted the five cases of single men in calculating the total cases of single men (n=18+5=23). Table 3 exhibits single men’s profiles.

The average age of single men is 47 years. More than half of them reached the legal marriageable age of 22 between 1985 and 2000. In terms of health, 10 of them are healthy, while seven suffer from chronic diseases, like joint inflammation, waist pain, etc. A few are handicapped, either physically or mentally. On average,
each single man has three siblings – either brothers or sisters. More than half of the single men are the second children in households, and only three are the oldest sons.

I will elaborate on household living arrangements and job characteristics of single men since they are closely related to family caregiving. Co-residence with parents is a predominant practice in both sites – 16 out of 23 single men in this sample have this arrangement. The remaining seven bachelors live alone, since their parents were deceased. Almost half do not possess independent houses. Seven men inherited houses from their deceased parents, and three have their own houses built next to the homes of their parents or siblings. Two bachelors had their independent houses under construction during the fieldwork.

Job characteristics are particularly indicative of the duration of employment and geographic proximity to parents. The majority of single men we interviewed work as migrant workers, peasants, or a combination of both. According to the distance between workplace and hometown, I categorize these jobs into three types: local short-term worker and/or peasant, medium-term migrant worker within 30 km, and long-distance migrant worker over 150 km. No one traveled a distance between 30 km and 150 km.

Interviewees in the first category seek job opportunities locally and may take primary charge of farm work at the same time. They do not travel for work and have daily interpersonal contact with parents. Those in the second category do migrant work in municipal counties/cities or neighbouring cities and are able to return home every several months. Workers in the third category (n=7) do remote migrant work in cities, such as Shanghai and Xi’an, and only return home once or twice a year. While working they live alone or with workmates at workplace, e.g., temporary dormitories at construction sites, then co-reside with parents once they return home for the Spring Festival.
Table 3. Characteristics of single men (n=23).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age groups</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-45</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46-54</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56+</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year at the age of 22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before 1984</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985-2000</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After 2000</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health condition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthy</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronic diseases</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical disability</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental disability</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth order</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling composition*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average number of brothers</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average number of sisters</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average number of siblings</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living arrangement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-residence with parents</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solitary living</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent house</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On construction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local short-term worker and/or peasant</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium-term migrant worker within 30 km</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-distance migrant worker over 150 km</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Deceased siblings are not included.

In the group of male secondary interviewees, we interviewed 14 married men, 5 ever-married single men, and 3 young unmarried men. Because young unmarried
men had little in common with men who were currently or previously married, regarding issues like marital ideology for example, interviews with them were informal and followed no established interview guide.

The category of married men (Table 4) was intended to include some married men who ever encountered difficulties in seeking brides before marriage and some men in uxorilocal marriages. We recognized the former by their responses to questions about their experiences with marriage difficulties and by their age at marriage (usually above 28 years old). Married men who did not experience marriage difficulties (n=9) got married at an average age of 23.4 years, while those experiencing difficulties did not marry until 30.8 years, on average (n=4). Married men are involved in diverse occupations, such as peasant farmer, migrant worker, and self-employed business owner. In Baijia, we interviewed two uxorilocal married men and the mother-in-law of one of them (the other was divorced and classified as ever-married single). We gathered data on 37 uxorilocal grooms, either with direct interviews or from stories from other interviewees. We did not encounter any cases of uxorilocal marriage in Lijia.

Table 4. Characteristics of married men (n=14).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Average age at marriage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age groups</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-35</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-46</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46+</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>(37.5)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age at marriage</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-25(without difficulties)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>(23.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-35(with difficulties)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>(30.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Occupation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peasant</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migrant worker</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peasant + migrant worker</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Average age or average age at marriage.

14 Li Weidoing, one of the interviewers in the fieldwork, collected the number of uxorilocal marriages.
The group of ever-married single men (Table 5) experienced marriage dissolution due to divorce, desertion, or widowhood. Two of the men did not obtain official divorces, since their wives just ‘ran away’ because their husbands were unable to make money. All of the men in this category had at least one child. Three of them had custody, while the other two barely shared any connection with their children who resided with their mothers. Each of the men had been single for an average of 10 years, but the age at marriage and the duration of marriage varied a great deal.

Table 5. Characteristics of ever-married single men (n=5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Age (average)</th>
<th>Duration of marriage (years)</th>
<th>Duration of singlehood (years)</th>
<th>Number of children</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Widowed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All the young unmarried men (Table 6) were born in the late 1980s under the One-child Policy, a generation with fewer siblings than that of their parents. Two of them just returned from remote migrant work at the point of interview. The three unmarried men lived in central towns and led rather urbanized lifestyles, compared to their counterparts in the villages. They also shared a similar marriage ideology with urban residents. While most of their counterparts in villages married at a young age (approximately 22-23 years), none of the young unmarried men in our sample felt pressed to seek a wife, despite having parents who might be worried about them getting married.

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15 In rural China, the implementation of this policy differs from that in urban areas. Rural residents are permitted to have a second child if the first child is a girl. See details in Susan Greenhalgh (1994). Controlling Births and Bodies in Village China, American Ethnologist, 21(1), pp. 3-30.
Table 6. Characteristics of young unmarried men (n=3).*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Age (average)</th>
<th>Year of birth</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Long-distance migrant worker over 150 km</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Self-employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Self-employed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(24.3)

*The three cases are not classified into single men as in Table 2.3 because these young unmarried men have an urbanized marriage ideology and do not prefer early marriage.

The sample of female secondary interviewees consisted of 18 local married women, 11 parents-in-law of local married women, 11 young unmarried women, and 8 non-local brides.

Local married women (Table 7) got married at an average young age of 22.8 years. While half of the women live in patrilocal arrangements, the other half live with their husbands independently from parents-in-law. It was apparent that many husbands were absent because of migrant work in either of the living arrangements. Meanwhile, the majority of the married women stayed at home and took in charge of family affairs.

Table 7. Characteristics of local married women (n=18).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average age</td>
<td>(31.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age at marriage</td>
<td>(22.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living arrangement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only with parents-in-law, husband absence</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With husband and parents-in-law</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With husband and children</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only with children</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peasant + housewife</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housewife + small business owner</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migrant worker</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Parents-in-law of local married women (Table 8) were not necessarily paired with local married women that we interviewed. Among the 12 interviewees, there are 10 mothers-in-law and 2 fathers-in-law. Many mothers-in-law are capable of making a living for themselves. Living arrangements are diverse – residing alone, taking care of grandchildren with their partners, or living with a son’s nuclear family.

Table 8. Characteristics of parents-in-law of local married women (n=11).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average age</td>
<td>(61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with daughter-in-law</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother-in-law</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father-in-law</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living arrangement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alone or with partner</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With son's nuclear family</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With partner and grandchildren</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Young unmarried women (Table 9) were, on average, 19.3 years of age. Most of them have blue-collar jobs, i.e., in sales or hairdressing assistants. Over half of them are single and four of them are in relationships (at the point of interviews).

Table 9. Characteristics of unmarried women (n=11)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average age</td>
<td>(19.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue-collar worker</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migrant worker</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family business assistant</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In job-seeking</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a relationship</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Non-local brides (Table 10) were mostly in their forties. All the marriages of non-local brides are inter-provincial and crossed a distance of at least 300 km. Many of them came from remote provinces, such as Xinjiang, Liaoning, and Sichuan. They
came to Lijia through different channels, voluntarily or involuntarily. Among the three cases of marriage migration, two women met their partners when their husbands were doing migrant work in their hometowns; they moved to Lijia after marriage. The other one took initiative to migrate to Lijia for the purpose of marriage. Four non-local brides met their husbands while both parties were doing migrant work in the same location. The remaining non-local bride’s case is unique. After getting married in her hometown of Weinan, Shannxi, she suffered domestic violence from her father-in-law. She was rescued by her cousin, brought to Lijia, and then ‘sold’ to a man 10 years older than her for a bride price of about 1,000 yuan (USD$160).

Table 10. Characteristics of non-local brides (n=8).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29-45</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50+</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age</td>
<td>(42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance from place of origin to destination (km)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300-350</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>700-750</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1200+</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage type</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage migration</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage after labour migration</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercenary marriage</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interview Guide

We designed separate interview guides to target each type of interviewee (see Appendix A). Most of the questions were open-ended to encourage participants to tell their stories elaborately and expand on the richness of contexts, serving as a ‘grand tour’ (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2004:191). All the interview guides were devoted to covering themes of dating/courting strategies and marriage experiences, elder care arrangements for parents, domestic labour division, family relations, and networks and social integration. The data from the last theme (networks and social integration) were not used, since it was beyond the scope of the present analysis. The same interview guides were used in each location.
With the primary interviewees, we asked single men about their general physical and psychological wellbeing. We then asked them to elaborate on themes of spouse-seeking strategies, elder care arrangements for parents, and their own elder care plans. Questions about everyday interactions with parents or siblings that should implicitly reveal family relations were also addressed. For family members of single men, questions were expanded to delve into the individual matchmaking and marriage experiences of children and siblings, and the strategies used by parents to achieve marriages, especially for adult sons. Another important theme we investigated was the pressure that results when single sons fail to marry. Family members were asked about their strategies for helping older sons get married and their prospects for elder care.

For the secondary interviewees, themes of perceptions on single men and non-local brides (exclusive for Lijia) were covered for each type of interviewee. We asked about the interviewee’s knowledge of single men and non-local brides. We also asked how they and their fellow villagers perceive these two groups. Married men and women were asked about their marital experiences, conjugal and family life (particularly on decision-making process and domestic labour division), and care of parents or parents-in-law. In order to investigate gender relations, questions for mothers-in-law were closely linked to their daughters-in-law’s roles in family life. The interview guide for ever-married single men was a flexible mixture of questions from the interview guides for single men and married men. Lastly, we designed questions for young unmarried women on dating experiences and future expectations of conjugal relations.

With regard to non-local brides, we asked about motives and trajectories of marriage migration. We enquired about non-local brides’ relationships with their husband, and family members. Questions also addressed their integration process and social networks. We asked how they adapt to distinct habits and customs, and how they get along with local people in the place of destination.

Data Collection

Baijia

We conducted the first fieldwork in Baijia in 2012 from June 7 to June 10. The timing was purposely selected because we anticipated that more single and married male migrant workers would be returning for the local agricultural harvest
season. Although we acquired permissions from local authorities to interview villagers, we were not allowed to stay as long as we would have liked. Three interviewers (myself, a researcher, and an IPDS doctoral student) conducted in-depth interviews simultaneously. In total, 42 interviews, each averaging about 45 minutes, were conducted with a diverse sample of participants. The participants were concentrated in four villages in the town. Despite the short period of time the fieldwork was done, the quality of interviews is well guaranteed.

In the field, we encountered great difficulties in finding single men, although our informant told us that there would be many. Most of the single men, especially those in the thirties, were absent from their hometowns and working in other places at varied distances. It was unlikely that we could track them down in dispersed workplaces. Besides, many bachelors lived in remote mountains, who were difficult to reach due to lack of transportation. It might take several days to walk to their houses. Despite these obstacles, we made a concerted effort to interview seven single men who provided diversified life stories.

The accountant from one of the villages in Baijia worked with us as a liaison throughout the fieldwork. She assisted in identifying, contacting, and establishing trust with potential interviewees. In terms of language, all the interviewers spoke Mandarin Chinese, while local people spoke their dialect. People from younger generations responded in Mandarin Chinese. Three elderly interviewees in their sixties had difficulties in understanding our questions due to different pronunciations. We also had a hard time understanding their answers. In this case, a senior undergraduate who is a local resident in the town acted as an interpreter for interviewers. Prompts and probes were used to guide respondents into giving more details and deepening their narratives until no more significant insights emerged from interviews. Interviewers also observed closely and took notes on the respondents’ physical reactions to questions.

Lijia

The second fieldwork was conducted in Lijia in 2012 from August 27 to August 30. Despite the fact that research permission was acquired from the People’s government of the town, governmental officials were afraid that we might ask some ‘sensitive’ questions, i.e., questions on the practice of birth control, since the content of the interview guides involved family and marriage lives. In order to ensure that no
‘inappropriate’ questions were asked, an officer in the government sent three young cadres to accompany us at all the times when conducting interviews.

We were not planning to raise questions concerning birth control, and the cadres did not find our interviews problematic. The cadres accompanied us for the entire fieldwork period, but, after the first day of monitoring, their role changed from monitor to facilitator. Their presence did not interfere with the interviews; in fact, their presence helped us establish trust with interviewees. At the beginning of a typical interview, a cadre would make introductions, and, since local villagers knew these cadres very well, it did not take long for them to trust us and start telling their stories. The cadre did not talk during the interviews unless the interviewer asked for an interpretation or it was difficult to understand a respondent’s accent. The local dialect in Lijia was closer to Mandarin Chinese due to its geographic proximity to Beijing, so we encountered fewer difficulties in terms of language. We did, however, follow the same interview guideline as in Baijia.

We had another three cadres working at the village, town, and county levels. They assisted us by identifying and contacting potential participants in advance, as well as arranging transportation across villages. Their assistance saved us time and allowed us to concentrate on interviewing. We also conducted a focus-group discussion with them.

In Lijia, the interview team was expanded to include another doctoral student trained in the field of sociology as an interviewer. A total of four interviewers conducted 65 in-depth interviews with an average length of 52 minutes each. The participants were concentrated in eight villages in the town. Most individuals were willing to participate. Only one old mother declined because she was reluctant to expose her sons’ unpleasant matchmaking experiences. Two scheduled interviews were paraphrased by the participants’ relatives due to communication difficulties.

Despite assurances that we were researchers and would be using any gathered data for academic purposes only, some participants had misgivings about our identity or agenda, particularly when asked about the number of children they have. Some female participants became nervous and clarified immediately that they had never violated the one-child policy. Some asked if we were from the Family Birth Planning Commission, which is the governmental sector in charge of implementing population policies. Reactions in Lijia reflected a climate of a strict one-child policy; whereas, in
Baijia, the local population policy was less restrictive, so participants were less cautious.

**Ethical Considerations**

Social science projects often involve interpersonal interactions with participants, the process of which represents an intrusion into people’s lives. In-depth interviews may force participants to face aspects of themselves that they do not normally consider (Babbie, 2001:471). In our study, especially when interviewing single men, ethical issues needed careful formulation, particularly in terms of interview content (Shaw, 2008:470). This was the greatest risk to our study participants, and we were aware of this inevitable ethical issue prior to the fieldwork. Hence, we asked difficult questions in a less straightforward way to minimize potential harm. Interviewees might be negatively affected, for example, when questioned about their failed marital experiences. Also, we were made aware that low income was a shared attribute among single men; thus, we did not ask questions regarding income to avoid demeaning them. All interviewees gave informed consent (see Appendix B) and agreed that interviews could be audio recorded. When any evident emotional reaction was observed, the interviewer would pause until it was appropriate to resume. The interviewees could refuse to be audio-taped or answer any questions that made them uncomfortable.

Another important ethical consideration was confidentiality. Some taken-for-granted practices, such as the adoption of children through friends or relatives for example, may be considered illegal to us. There were three such cases in our study, but all of the participants discussed the adoptions. We assured anonymity to them and their real names were removed after the interview. The rules of anonymity and confidentiality were followed throughout all the interviews in both sites.

All the interviews were conducted in natural, everyday settings, such as participants’ homes and public spaces (e.g., grocery stores, construction sites). Material compensation was given to participants for their time. Towel and soap sets ($2 per set) were given to participants in Baijia, and participants in Lijia received shower gel sets ($3 per set).
Method of Analysis

All the interviews were transcribed in Mandarin and translated in English in their entirety after the fieldwork. The interviewers transcribed the interviews that were done by themselves, allowing them to recall participants’ non-verbal expressions and integrate them into the data analysis. We used the Nvivo software program to assist the organizing, indexing, and retrieving the narratives in Chinese. The data were then coded with theme or case nodes, and core concepts and main themes emerged from the dialogical texts.

Limitations of Methodology

Our ability to make extensive ethnographic observations is limited due to the relatively short time we had to do our fieldwork; however, given fieldwork conditions in rural China, this is the most appropriate approach. Our goal is not to document every aspect of single men’s lives, but to closely examine how singlehood affects family relations in aspects of elder support, and how marriage and migration are interwoven in the process. An average of 49 minutes of interviews and casual talks with local cadres ensured a set of reliable qualitative data to pursue our research objectives.

As mentioned earlier, another limitation was related to the selection effect of out-migration for work in determining who was available in the village to participate. In both sites, single men, especially those aged 28-35 years, were absent for work. Those who stayed at home were over 35-40 years of age, worked as peasant farmers and local workers, were physically disabled, or lacked the ability to work. Although we did encounter several men in their 30s who returned temporally, it was difficult for us to achieve a relatively balanced age distribution and diversification of occupations among participants. It is important to note that feasibility is always a prerequisite in research design. An ideal type of methodological inquiry is never compatible with the realities of the social world.
Chapter 5:  
Spouse-seeking Strategies and the Rural Marriage Market

This chapter describes the strategies used by single men in their search for a wife, their experiences, and their agency from different generations. I begin by outlining the characteristics of the rural marriage market, particularly some features of third-party introductions – one of the popular marital strategies used by rural residents. Further, I take a gender-sensitive perspective to explore rural men’s standing in the marriage market. Following this, I elaborate on the diverse strategies that single men use when seeking a potential wife and the involvement of their family members in the process. I then compare how uxorilocality as an alternative of marriage is accepted in the two fieldwork sites. I conclude by examining the relations between marriage and labour migration.

Disadvantaged Men and Segregated Space

Third-party Introductions

With the booming labour migration economy and the infusion of modern marriage ideologies, the rural marriage market has changed in recent decades. Arranged marriages have been outlawed, and young people now have much more autonomy regarding intimate relations and marriage. Romantic love, based on the free will of two parties, has become a well-established practice, especially among the younger generations. Parents do not interfere excessively with adult children’s date selections; however, third-party introductions for the purpose of marriage continue to exist among middle-aged singles and young adults who migrate for work to the cities. A popular practice is for rural migrants to seek their wives in their workplace in the city; however, a sizeable proportion seeks local spouses when they return home temporarily. They may prefer to do so, or they may have failed to find a spouse in the workplace. The most effective way of getting to know local women is through semi-arranged matchmaking – marital introductions by matchmakers or relatives. This is more prevalent in Lijia, where there is higher magnitude of labour migration and the demands of seeking local wives are greater, than in Baijia.

According to our informants in both towns, there are two types of people engaged in the local matchmaking practices. First, there are people who volunteer to
tie the knot (qian hongxian) because of their kindness. ‘Acquaintance society’ (Fei, 1992) features the constitution of the traditional Chinese rural communities in which children are primarily socialized in a close-knit circle of individuals very intimate to their family. The village where locals are born and raised leads a life of little interactions with the outside world. The organization of such villages stems from a lack of mobility and a strong attachment to native villages (Nee, 1994). This is a society without strangers, but full of acquaintances (Fei, 1992:41). Although today’s peasant society has become far more mobile, the way that one interacts with others from the same community remains unchanged, i.e., people first approach their acquaintances when dealing with personal or social affairs. When rural young men or women reach marriageable ages, their parents approach their acquaintances (e.g., relatives, close friends, neighbours, co-workers, and employers) to suggest potential spouses. The acquaintances engage in this practice on their own initiative as well. In some cases, parents of single adult children may avoid relatives as intermediaries, so as not to provoke unpleasantness or embarrassment between the parents and the relative if the match fails.

Professional matchmakers offer for-profit matchmaking services for singles. There are two matchmakers in Baijia and four in Lijia. They are middle-aged men or women, who are migrant workers, peasant farmers, or a combination of both. Matchmaking is a part-time job that supplements their income, but it is not a primary means of making a living because success rates fluctuate and earnings are unstable. According to our informants in Lijia, the starting price of one successful case is 1000 yuan (USD$161). The negotiation process between the bride and the groom’s family takes more than two weeks. Usually three or four couples are successfully matched after a year, and this brings a matchmaker an annual income of 3,000 to 4,000 yuan (USD$484-$645). The payment per case is not fixed, but varies according to the financial conditions and personal attributes of clients. Affluent families tend to pay as high as 5,000 to 10,000 yuan. ‘Hardcore’ clients, referring to the divorced, widowed, and single men over 40 years of age, have to pay more than the average amount (usually 4,000-5,000 yuan). Some extremely impoverished single men are, thus, reluctant to approach matchmakers due to the high cost. The peak time for matchmaking is during the Spring Festival when young male adults return home and want to meet local single women.
In the Marriage Market

In Baijia, housing and residential location are central considerations in matching. For rural residents, it is a tradition to have a brand new house prepared upon marriage. An ordinary new house is a two story concrete structure that costs about 80 to 100 thousand yuan (USD$12,900-$16,130), which is unaffordable for poor families. Being unable to provide a decent house for their partner is the key reason that men do not marry. Housing is so important that some families start saving money for their single sons when they are young. Some bachelors build new houses as a strategy to attract a potential wife.

Residential location is directly linked with housing. Encircled by mountains, Baijia has a scarce amount of land on which to build. It is not surprising to observe downward economic conditions along this spatial hierarchy: county, central town, plain areas in villages, valleys, and top of mountains. The level of men’s appeal decreases along this geographic line for women. People living at a high altitude or in remote mountains are the most disadvantaged in the marriage market. While women living in mountains may improve their socioeconomic status by marrying into favourable places with better transportation and economics, it is difficult for their male counterparts to do so. A man may choose to enter an uxorilocal marriage as an alternative if the location of his house (if he has one) is not attractive to a potential wife and her family. Men who are unable to afford housing at a more desirable location or are resistant to uxorilocality are likely to remain unmarried. The narrative of a young girl who was working in a barbershop in Zhashui, illustrates the importance of a house and its location in marriage. She said,

A new house is a universal request for marriage. You can buy or build a house in the County, or at the Town, or by the riverside, but never in a mountain. Girls are not willing to marry in mountains. Boys living in mountains have been marrying out like girls since years ago. My brother [her cousin] is in high school. His parents have bought him an apartment in the County. Anyway, he can continue his schooling to college. If not, the apartment is ready for marriage. He can get married at any time. But this phenomenon [of parents buying houses for sons] is not popular here. There are only 10 households doing this. Few people have ever thought of buying a house in the county. This is not a rich place. #114005 (young unmarried woman, aged 17)
Housing has been a decisive factor for the past 20 years. Household poverty affects the matchmaking opportunities of rural single men before, during, and after prime marriageable ages. When asked about the matchmaking experience of her single sons (39 and 41 years), a mother recalled,

We were too poor to build a house. This little house is what we have. People were reluctant to introduce for us. You need money and house to get married …… at that time [in the late 1980s] we were working as coolies on a construction team. This job merely brought us about 10 yuan per day, 5 from my younger son and 3 from me. You need 1000 yuan to build a house at that time …… there were three girls introduced to my younger son. When they came over, they never made a second visit once they saw our house. We were so poor then. It will not be like that if we have money and a [decent] house (start sobbing). #211111 (mother of a single son, aged 71)

The courtship experience of Jin, a 40-year-old man who got married in his thirties, illustrates the salient rural-urban gap of marital capital. He had been working in a printing house in Xi’an after graduating from a vocational school in 1994. He had been longing to marry an urban girl and settle down in the city. He said,

I had relationships with two girls both of whom asked me to buy a house in Xi’an. But it was not that easy to do. For one of the girls, I was in a relationship with her for three years but we broke up in the end. She required me to buy a house in Xi’an. #112005

Realizing that he could not afford a house in the capital city, he gave up hope of seeking a spouse outside and went back to his hometown in a rural area. However, it was not easy to bring a girlfriend to settle down in his hometown either. Jin revealed, with a tone of helplessness, that “they [urban girls] are not willing to come over because they regard us as shanliren” (a derogatory term used to refer to people who live in backward mountains). Due to a scarcity of economic capital, rural men suffer from discrimination. While women from both rural and urban areas have bargaining power, there is little room for rural men to negotiate better terms for themselves. Sometimes they are introduced to women with poorer attributes.
Lu, a 49-year-old single man with a net annual income of 4,000-5,000 yuan finds it difficult to find a suitable woman. Last year, his sister introduced him to a woman from a neighbouring village. But he rejected her, saying,

Her family wanted me to move to live with them after marriage I was unwilling to go because their condition was worse. To reach there, you have to walk for at least 20 miles and climb over a mountain. #111007

Wang is a 39-year-old man whose right leg was slightly handicapped following childhood polio. He does farm work at home and takes care of his aging parents. His family used to be well off but became poorer when the parents had health problems. Wang was introduced to three women, but two of them were mentally handicapped and unable to take care of themselves. Wang was not content with this situation:

In my case, if I marry a dumb woman, when I get old, does she take care of me or I take care of her? #211001

Prior to economic reforms, the urban and rural regions had long been segregated and running on distinct trails. With the swarms of labour migration in the 1980s, population mobility, economic transactions, and the institutional revolution disrupted the dual societies between the urban and rural, and increased chances for peasants to work in non-agricultural sectors in the city. However, this rapid change has led to higher regional disparities and income inequality between rural and urban residents. Meanwhile, the geographic boundary for marriage in rural China expanded from territorial endogamy (marriage within home village or several neighboring villages) to relatively frequent marital transactions with urban areas. The most evident trend was rural women’s hypergamous marriages into other prosperous villages or cities. However, the flow of migration for marriage is limited to women, and unidirectionally from sending to receiving places, providing more opportunities for rural women, rather than their male counterparts, to achieve upward mobility.

The stories of Jin, Lu, and Wang provide testimony to the embeddedness of ‘gendered geographies of power’ (Mahler and Pessar, 2001) in interpersonal matchmaking and inter-regional marriage transaction. Through the patriarchal
systems of marriage, women are conferred with gendered power to negotiate material benefits by treating new house ownership and suitable residential location after marriage as indispensable requirements of marriage. If they are not satisfied with the local marriage market, they are able to achieve upward mobility through marriage migration. By contrast, single men, who are of low social status with little marital capital, are less capable of competing with urban men and have difficulty with the gender-biased structure of the marriage market. Rural men, particularly bachelors, are engaged in a segregated space characterized by a scarcity of women, not an integrated rural-urban marriage circle. This creates a particularly disadvantageous situation for poor rural men who are seeking marriage.

However, marriage is regarded as a universal practice for rural residents. Non-marriage indicates social failure. What strategies do single men use to improve their marital attributes and achieve marriages? What forms, degrees, and directions of agency are exhibited among single men in attribute trade-off negotiation processes? How does agency differ among single men from generations with distinct marriage norms? Answers to these questions will be discussed in our analysis that examines the agency exerted by single men seeking spouses and married men who ever encountered marriage difficulties. That will be followed by a discussion on how family members are engaged in this process.

Strategies for Seeking Spouses

In a changing social environment, people are mobilized to make choices and take action, given the available opportunities and constraints, in order to adapt to new situations. In making decisions about marriage, the agency varies among men with different characteristics, attributes, and social networks. As discussed in Chapter 2, with a combination of these endogenous and personal factors, agency can involve exercising choice, passive resistances, and failure of actions (Palriwala and Uberoi, 2008). Birth cohort, for instance, has a significant effect on how rural single men seek spouses. Men born in the 1960-70s and 1970s-80s were exposed to distinct cultural constructions of gender, sexuality, and marriage norms. The former, who are now in the forties to fifties, tend to recognize third-party introductions by matchmakers and acquaintances as a prescription for seeking a spouse. While the latter, who are now in the thirties to forties, tend to exert more agency and prefer approaches that are more open, straightforward, and strategic.
Differentiated Agency

Many single men expect their future spouses to be ‘domesticated,’ ‘filial,’ and ‘easy to get along with.’ A potential spouse should know how to deal with household affairs and be filial towards her parents-in-law. These attributes reflect single men’s expectation for marriage: a desire for a stable conjugal life and a secured late life for aging parents. Given past failed matchmaking experiences, single men are well aware of their disadvantaged position in the marriage market. Many of them construct themselves as having ‘poor attributes’ and ‘little hope.’ Rather than engaging actively in seeking spouses, they develop alternative approaches.

The case of Qian, a 44-year-old single man from a wealthy family in Lijia, illustrates how personality can prevent someone from getting married. Compared to other single men we interviewed, Qian seemed to have the attributes required for marriage. He is a man who dedicates himself to work and earns 2,000 yuan a month by working on construction teams and installing electric appliances. His charity to help around in the village has earned him a good reputation. With the help of his two older brothers (they are doing well too), he built himself a new house adjacent to his second brother’s fancy house. His sister-in-law explained why, according to her, he has failed to find a wife:

Sister-in-law: He does everything, from manual work to electric cable installation. Yes, he is a laoshi ren. He knows everything except giving pillow talk. He does not know how to speak the language of courting a woman for marriage. But he does everything! He also cooks. When he stays at home, he cooks rice and makes buns. These cables were installed by him. Take a look (pointing to the ceiling).

Interviewer: Then why he can’t get married?
Sister-in-law: He does not know how to speak beautifully. People who don’t know him regard him as a dumb. He just doesn’t know how to express emotionally. He is not a dumb. #211109

Being ‘too laoshi’ offsets Qian’s other appealing attributes for marriage, like diligence and kindness. It directly led to the failure of his first and only introduction.

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16 This is a local term that describes characteristics of honesty, frankness, good behavior, obedience and simple-mindedness (Kipnis, 1997:112). It had been a positive term referring to a cluster of good qualities in spouse selection till the early 1980s. Currently, being laoshi indicates a lack of ability to adapt to the fast-changing and increasingly competitive society.
In addition, compared to his prosperous brothers, Qian is far less wealthy, so he worries that he might not be able to afford a wife. Consequently, he stopped seeking a wife and developed a life as a bachelor.

Sun, a single 48-year-old man, exhibited a greater resistance to marital introductions. His mother died at a young age, and he lives with his 80-year-old father. His family was extremely poor. He is a migrant worker in Feng, earning only 100 yuan per day. According to his sister, Sun remains single because he has a limited ability to raise a family due to his poverty. She recalled,

When he was young, I introduced some girls to him. But he was not willing. He told me he was not going to marry and asked me to introduce for his younger brother instead. He didn't want to delay his brother’s marriage because of him. Later on, when he was doing migrant work in Urumqi, he was so different from other boys. He was reluctant to talk with girls. If someone introduced a girl for him, he didn't say anything nor did he show up for dating. He was just unwilling. I am out of strategies. I think there are two reasons why he remains single. One is due to family strains, poverty, you know. The other is that he cannot even raise himself. In the end, he no longer thinks of marriage as he becomes older. #211105

Matchmaking is a process of mutual selection based on individual attributes. It is quite common to see the least ‘eligible’ men or women left in the marriage market. Many single men we interviewed had experiences of been matched with mentally or physically disabled women who were incapable of taking care of themselves, as mentioned in the first section. Here I analyze this issue from another angle concerning agency in introductions. Wang, a 39-year-old single man, had been introduced to women with disabilities twice. When talking about the reasons for rejecting the two women, he said,

I want to find someone normal. I don't care if she looks pretty or not. It is fine to me as long as she is not dumb and is able to take care of me when I get old. I did not go for matchmaking [after the two failed introductions] because I know my attributes. I know I can’t find one. But I don't want to be introduced to a woman whose brain gets problems. #211001
An eligible wife in the context of rural China should play a traditional female role in domestic labour division: taking charge of housekeeping work and caring for children and parents-in-law. A disabled wife cannot help sustain a family, and she brings extra burdens and strains to a man and his family; therefore, single men like Wang would rather stay single to keep an affordable life. Turning down a potential spouse who is disabled is a strategy used to secure single men’s lives. Another strategy is to seek women who are divorced or widowed. Single men’s views regarding accepting other women’s children or having children of their own vary. For some of them, raising a child – the ‘product’ from a divorced/widowed mother’s prior marriage – is believed to be pointless and burdensome, especially when it is a boy.¹⁷

I am willing to have a divorced or a widowed woman. But she cannot bring her children. I don't raise children. It is very burdensome because you have to build him a house, doing this, and doing that. Besides, that is someone else’s child. #211005 (single man, aged 49)

Interviewer: Are you willing to seek a divorced woman?
Single man: Yes, as long as she is fertile; if not, I’d rather live by myself. It is burdensome to live a life of two.
Interviewer: What if she has a child?
Single man: It is okay.
Interviewer: What if she has a child but she is infertile?
Single man: No, that’s not good. If she has a child, I have to raise him and help him getting married. I would be old when he grows ups. He is going to leave me anyways. Regarding this point, you have to think further into the future rather than a short-term thinking.
Interviewer: You are saying you feel insecure without giving birth to your own children?
Single man: Yes.

#211003 (single man, aged 39)

¹⁷ When we ask the question “Is it acceptable to you if this divorced/widowed woman has a child from her prior marriage,” the majority of single men were assuming that it was a boy. ‘Building houses’ is a parental responsibility towards sons instead of daughters in the context of rural areas. Raising a son, whether he is a biological one or not, indicates more financial investments for children’s future marriage.
I am approaching a matchmaker to seek a wife for me. She called me a couple of days ago and said she might have news for me in these days. It is okay if she [a potential wife] is divorced. She should be of almost same age as me, 40 to 50 years old is fine. And I don't care if she is fertile or not. #21008 (single man, aged 51)

As mentioned earlier, housing is a critical attribute in the marriage transaction. Some single men endeavour to make money and build a house before seeking a spouse. Using this strategy, they wish to survive matchmaking and achieve marriage ultimately. Liao is a 39-year-old single man who had been turned down for marriage many times due to poverty. At the point of interview, he was making every effort to save money in order to build a house, along with his single older brother (slightly mentally disabled). He was doing house renovations on construction sites with a poor income of 70 yuan per day. The following segment of conversation shows his strong desire, as well as pressure he felt, in pursuing a better life:

Interviewer: Does your brother talk to you when he gets upset?
Liao: Yes. We talk about economic difficulties in our family. [We plan] striving to make money, building a house, and finding wives. He said we should pull our money together and ask our parents to keep it. Then use the money to build a house. [……]

Interviewer: Do you have sleep problems?
Liao: I do. My brain keeps thinking about making money that I can’t fall in sleep. [I am thinking of] pulling money together and helping each other building a house. One of us has to get married.

Interviewer: Are there any occasions that you feel really upset?
Liao: Yes. I hate myself for being incapable. I am already a man over 30 years old yet I failed to find a wife; there is great pressure.

Interviewer: Do your parents worry about you and your brother?
Liao: Yes. They worry about this [getting married]. They told us to make money, build a house, and form a family.

Interviewer: Would your parents be upset?
Liao: Yes. But they never reveal sentiments. They are even smiling when having meals. But they put it deep in the heart and never tell us. #211003

Among married men we interviewed, Luo is the one who achieved marriage by working hard and striving for a career. He had gone through five matchmakings in
his 20s, but none of them worked out. He attributes his failure to poor living conditions and lack of a career. He did not get married until he was 31 years old, and, when interviewed, he had a seven-year-old daughter. Luo talked of his depression of being single in his early adulthood:

My parents were worried about me so much. I didn’t have a career, nor did I have a decent house. I was living in the mountain. All my attributes were poor. I was really depressed. I, as a young adult, failed to go to school, nor did I have a career or a promising future……. My father introduced five to six girls to me, I didn't even return home to see some of them in person. I did not have any confidence or hope in marriage. I was really sad. #112007

Luo’s life and marriage prospects turned the corner when he started working in a mine field. He told us how he began pursuing a career and was recognized by his superior as a considerable match for her niece. He recalled,

I felt I had something to do. It was harsh and sometimes hazardous in the beginning. I had to purchase materials from Xi’an. I became a technician soon. I was spirited up. I gradually picked up my confidence for marriage. Later on, my boss, who is her [his wife’s] auntie, thought I was honest, loyal, and longheaded. So she introduced her niece to me. We got along well with each other. #112007

The above narratives and segments of dialogues were from single men or married men with difficulties who were born in the early 1960s to middle 1970s. Men of this birth cohort reached marriageable ages in the early 80s to 90s, during which time semi-arranged matchmaking, based on the willingness of respective parents and young adults, was prevalent in the rural marriage market. In the discourse of collective-oriented lifestyles in traditional China, individual aspects of life, such as expressions of love, were less exposed to public gazes. Instead of pursuing free love, young adults likely felt more comfortable meeting potential spouses through intermediaries. This strategy, subsequently, evolved as a prescription of seeking a spouse.

This generation of single men does not approach potential wives directly. The agency they exercise is exhibited in various forms and directions under a restraining
environment with limited resources. Single men, who no longer expect to find a wife, resist marital introductions by rejecting ineligible candidates or no longer asking people to make introductions. To some degree, accepting the status of single secures their lives, since their economic condition would likely prevent them from supporting another person. Single men, who are disadvantaged in the marriage market, yet hope to marry in the near future, lower their expectations of a spouse. Seeking a woman who is divorced or widowed (either with children or not) becomes acceptable. As discussed earlier, improving crucial attributes, such as housing and job stability, has been proven to increase the odds of attracting a single woman.

With the drastic economic and social revolutions initiated by the Reforming and Opening-up Policy, the dynasty of the 1980s witnessed the beginning of an open and diverse social environment concerning gender relations. The spouse-seeking experience of Xu (24 years old, born in 1988), described below, provides an excellent illustration of young adults’ agency.

*A Story of Spouse-seeking on Motorcycles*

Xu had been married for six months before we interviewed him. He was not, however, content with his new wife and regretted his rushed decision to marry a girl whom he had dated only three months. When talking about his hasty marriage, he said,

I feel it has been hard to find a wife. I am stressed out. I use to have a girlfriend [when he was 23], but her parents didn't agree on our marriage. In the end, we were engaged. She was really young at that time [20 years old]. Her father asked me for a 30 thousand yuan [of bride price]. Where can I get 30 thousand? In the end……I did not get her parents’ approval. It did not work out. We broke up. I was heavily discussed by villagers. They said, ‘how can this boy get married?’ I was thinking about finding a random person to get married. Later on, I met her [his wife] in a few months. #112003

Xu made a monthly income of 1000 yuan, which was far from sufficient to make ends meet, by working in a brick factory located in a city 120 km northwest of his hometown. He was very anxious about the expensive bride price. He was also concerned about the scarcity of females in the villages – they had become ‘as
precious as gold’ (*Jingui*). He noticed that girls in his age cohort were all married, and some of them even had children. Some girls younger than him also had babies. Within Baijia town, except those who are doing schooling, all the girls were married. Every time he returned to his hometown, he had to face the embarrassing question raised by folks – why are you still unmarried? The pressure on him was so great that he thought he would likely become an ‘old-aged boy’ to be abandoned.

Another issue was that Xu’s parents might not be available to offer assistance for his marriage. According to him, single men get married at an average young age of 22 in his village. Marriages of men from wealthy families are secured, since their parents are able to provide funds and arrange marital introductions for them. Young adults like Xu, whose parents are less financially capable, have to work on their own to find a wife. Limited resources from his parents, a shortage of marriageable girls, and the overwhelming public gazes had heightened Xu’s sense of anxiety about getting married. He was stimulated to take action when he was 22 years old.

In 2010, along with his single friends, Xu came up with the strategy of seeking spouses in valleys by riding on motorcycles on a daily basis. Once they found suitable girls, they would search in their network to see if there is an acquaintance available to make introductions. Relatives are usually the best to approach, so Xu and his friends would buy gifts with a value of around 100 yuan for the targeted relative to show their appreciation. The introducer would not likely reject their request once the gift was presented. If a relative agreed to act as an introducer, the targeted girl would receive a visit and be informed of the intentions of one of the boys. Afterwards, the boy would visit the girl in person and bring gifts.

Unfortunately, this strategy did not always succeed as expected. In many cases, the girls would immediately return the gifts, leaving the boys embarrassed. Xu admitted that the success rate was actually low, especially for his friends. But luckily, it was through this strategy that he met his first girlfriend (the one who broke up with him because of parental disapproval). Recalling his courtship experience, Xu said,

It was midnight and I was still at her home. I was negotiating with them [her parents], but they were not willing. It was almost 1 a.m. when I rode back. It was so dark and I was scared. But what can I do? I have to tolerate. In the end, her family disapproved. I felt heartbroken. I really tried hard but it ended in breaking up. (Sign) Life is really pointless. I was thinking I should get married at an earlier
time in order to relieve my parents, and prevent folks from gossiping about me…. #112003

Although Xu failed to get married using his motorcycle strategy, the active agency he exhibited is in stark contrast to that of men born in the 60s-70s. Rather than sitting and waiting for parents or relatives to make introductions, Xu and his peers took the initiative to approach girls, by pooling their resources, and utilizing social capital (e.g., relative network). As in semi-arranged matchmaking, an introducer is employed as an intermediary. Xu’s matchmaking on motorcycles differed in that it was self-arranged and driven by the young men’s autonomy. Xu is not alone in his preference for free love. Many young adults in his cohort expressed the same inclination, but did not entirely reject third-party introductions.

I really do not like other people making introductions for me. I know my parents are worrying about my marriage. They told me it would be more difficult [to find a wife] when I become older. If people approach me for marital introduction, I will handle it for the sake of their face. I prefer seeking a wife on my own. I do believe in kismet. It will work out when the kismet come. #211002 (young unmarried man, aged 26)

I don’t like introductions. It is unlikely to know an introduced girl very well upon marriage. The key point is that it would be a nuisance taking a long time to know each other after marriage. I want to find someone suitable first. Get to know her well, then get married. #111301 (young unmarried man, aged 22)

My family had made introductions for me, twice. I went to see the boys. But I did not feel comfortable. I am not willing to go if they ask me to do matchmaking next time. I prefer getting to know someone in my friend circles. It is not appropriate to me to have a boyfriend encountered by accident. #214006 (young unmarried woman, aged 20)

Xu’s creative strategy of using his motorcycle to seek a wife highlights two important points. First, his experience reveals how young adults in his cohort make marital decisions independently as social actors and exert agency in seeking spouses in a flexible manner. With individual constraints (low income, limited family
resource) and extra-personal hindrances (overly high bride price, early marriage of girls), single men develop variations of spouse-seeking strategies and make the best of what the situations offer. The traditional strategy of third-party introduction, although still used by many people, is losing its popularity among young generations. We have few young single men in our study who were born in the 1980s or after; hence, Xu’s case holds empirical implications with regard to the marital strategies of rural single men of a younger generation. This issue requires further exploration.

**Participation of Family Members**

In traditional rural societies, marriage is tightly linked to prospective fortunes of families on both the groom’s and the bride’s side. Since marriage is a function that satisfies the ethical dictates of the culture (Sun-Pong et al., 2004:37), it has long been parents’ obligation to seek wives for their adult children. Most of the parents in our study were worried or anxious about their single sons and nagged them to get married promptly. If they had the necessary financial capacity and social networks, some of them would engage in spouse-seeking activities. Some aging parents were less capable of helping single sons due to household poverty and felt guilty.

Gao is the father of two sons. The older son is 23 years old – an introvert who does not talk much – and drives a forklift at an iron mine field. The younger son is 19 years old – an extrovert with many friends – and works in Zhashui. Gao worries most about his older son, even though he makes more money than his younger brother. He talked about how he helped find a spouse for the older son:

> I have introduced some girls in the neighborhood to him. But he did not agree on the match. I was worrying about him. He is already 23. He is worrying, too; living in the mountain …… I attempted to nose around information on suitable girls. I also entrust my acquaintances to introduce girls for him. I even built him a house for wedding. #112004

Yu, the mother of a 40-year-old man, who got married at the age of 31 years after six failed introductions, had a strong emotional reaction towards her son’s singlehood. She has put great effort into seeking a daughter-in-law in the past years, but none of the introductions worked out.
Yu: I was so worried. The reason that my eyesight is impaired is because he could not find a wife. I was crying while working and farming in the mountain...at that time, wherever we went, I asked people to drop by and take a look [at my son]. I cooked for them and served them meals. But they just rejected him.

Interviewer: Were you upset at that time?

Yu: I was. How can I not be upset? I was crying all the time. I scolded my son. But he would put the blame on us because we were living in this high mountain. We parents did not have the capacity [to move down]. We just lived in the mountain. #113104

Siblings of single men may not engage directly in the practice of spouse-seeking, but they are likely to provide financial support to their single brothers, especially when a good relationship is shared among siblings.

My fourth brother’s singlehood does not affect the affections among us four siblings. We make phone call to each other several times a month. The primary reason of his singlehood is that there has not been one taking a fancy to him. If there is one, we will raise money for his marriage. #111102 (single man’s brother, aged 49)

He has a good relationship with his second and third brothers. They are such intimate brothers. Once a spouse comes in, we would do whatever we can to help him, all aspects of affairs. #211109 (single man’s sister-in-law, aged 53)

In the field, we observed numerous cases in which family members made great attempts, direct or indirect, to marry off their single sons or brothers. Conversely, however, parents can hinder the potential marriages of the next generation. Yang (aged 40), the second of three sons in a family, is the only one left remaining single. His two brothers made great efforts and got married at the late ages of 27 and 30. When asked about the reasons for the second son’s singlehood and his two brothers’ late marriages, local people attributed it to the bad relationship between their mother and her neighbours, which had impeded countless introductions for the three brothers. This was an anecdote that was known to almost everyone in town. Local people named the situation as ba mei, literally meaning ‘sabotaging matchmakings’. One of the local cadres explained:
Ba mei is the action of matchmaking violation. If you introduce a date to her son, her neighbors will approach the date’s family and say, ‘you can’t lead a normal life if you were to marry to this family.’ The neighbors had done this for many years. When her eldest son got married, people who offered help on the wedding feast had no idea where the bride came from. This old lady was scared of ba mei. The neighbors sabotaged marriage as soon as one was introduced to her sons. By the end, she kept the secret and seek a daughter-in-law whom people had no idea about her origins until the end of wedding. #211104

Uxorilocal Marriage: An Alternative?

In both fieldwork sites, patrilocality is a predominant marriage arrangement; however, alternative marriage patterns do exist within the two towns. In Baijia, uxorilocality has been a well-accepted strategy to achieve marriage, especially among men who find it difficult to marry. Uxorilocality, in contrast to patrilocality, requires that the groom live with the bride’s family after marriage and changes his surname to that of his bride. Once he ‘marries in’ to the bride’s family, he agrees to serve as a surrogate male heir, fulfil his obligations, carry out rituals, and provide elder care support to his parents-in-law. This practice is strongly resisted by single men and the local villagers in Lijia.

This salient difference is partly linked with geographic features and migration patterns of the two places. Baijia is located in Northwestern China. Owing to the mountainous landscape and a backward economy, it is a place of out-migration instead of in-migration for work or marriage. Local women prefer marrying out, and non-local women who pursue hypergamous marriages through marriage migration are not likely to want to settle here. As a result, with outflows and not inflows of marriageable women, it becomes difficult for local men to marry. Disadvantaged single men have to resort to uxorilocality as an alternative to solve marriage difficulties. This situation provided room for the acceptance of uxorilocality as a variation. The following narrative from a woman living in the mountains illustrates the flows of female out-migration.

There are not many girls in the mountain. They all migrated for work. They only stay at home during the Spring Festival. There are more
girls marrying out than marrying locally. #111104 (married woman, aged 41)

A 17-year-old unmarried girl talked about out-migration for work or marriage of girls at her age:

Most of the girls of my age seek boyfriends outside village, in places where they do migrant work. Because they have long been working outside, they are unlikely to know boys at hometowns. Many girls claim that they are going to marry out in the future. At such a young age, they already don't feel like living in such a poor place. They want to marry out, marrying to big cities. #114006

In contrast, Lijia is an attractive town, located in East China, with a plain landscape and relatively prosperous economy. It generated an inflow of female marriage migration in the 1980s-90s, a phenomenon that no longer prevails. In the current marriage market, local women do not reject marrying locally and non-local brides are brought in by local men through labour migration. Despite the existence of female hypergamous marriages, the supply of marriageable women is more satisfactory than that of Baijia. Therefore, it is not necessary for local men to marry uxorilocally, and this marriage arrangement remains highly opposed. A non-local bride explained the reason for marrying into Lijia, thousands of kilometers from her hometown in Sichuan:

I met my husband when I was a migrant worker in Jiangsu. I moved to work in Jiangsu because my family was very poor. I was thinking of marrying here and never going back to Sichuan. There are no mountains here. It is plain and it makes life and work convenient. It is not like Sichuan. Sichuan is located in mountainous areas and it is very inconvenient to do farm work. And the life there is not rich. #213209 (non-local bride, aged 49)

In what follows, I elaborate on the practice of unxorilocality and its related cultural norms, as well as the perception of single men and the local villagers to this type of marriage arrangement. Two cases of uxorilocal marriages are illustrated to analyze uxorilocal grooms’ standing and their intergenerational relations within a family. I separate participants’ interviews into the two sites, in order to examine how
uxorilocal marriage is accepted or rejected in the communities, and, importantly, how the practice of uxorilocal marriage is affected by the changing dynamics of the respective marriage markets.

\textit{Lijia}

In the course of the fieldwork in Lijia, we did not encounter any uxorilocal grooms and we felt strong resistance against uxorilocal marriage among the male participants and our informants. A local villager said,

Generally men are unwilling to marry uxorilocal, even if they encounter marriage difficulties. Men are not willing to do uxorilocal marriage because they become inferior and are discriminated by others. #215001

Li, who was said to be good-looking, but from a poor family, practised uxorilocal marriage with a girl from a five-daughter family. Among the five sisters, four ‘married out’ and only Li’s wife ‘called in’ a groom. Li and their children took the wife’s last name (Qiao). Apparently, this marriage functioned as an alternative approach to ensure the continuity of family lineage on the bride’s side. A local cadre explained how Li resisted uxorilocality and suffered from its stigma. He recalled,

When a mother-in-law dies, the heir is ordered to smash a basin [by the beginning of the funeral ritual]. When Li’s mother-in-law died, he was asked to do so. But he refused. Neither was he agreed to direct the way to the funeral when asked. The uncle and other relatives from the mother-in-law’s side were unpleasant. They said to Li, “Once you were called in as an uxorilocal groom, just like a son, you have to smash the basin. If you do not do it, we are going to beat you.” Later on, the onlookers started persuading him, said, “Please do it. If your uncle’s family is not beating you, then we are going to beat you.” He did it in the end. There was no way out of it with so many people around. Rural people are fond of bustle occasions. It was basically people in the entire village over there watching if he smashed or not.

There was another time when someone in Li’s family got sick and needed his signature [for hospitalization]. He put his original last name ‘Li’ on the form and was discovered by [his wife’s] fifth sister.
She walked right away and had been unhappy all the way home.

Uxorilocal marriage initiated by all-daughter families is termed ‘preservative uxorilocal marriage’. Men who enter such marriages are usually from poor families with more than two sons that cannot afford marriage for all their sons (Pasternak, 1985). There are two agendas for this type of marriage. One is to provide security for parents without sons in their later life, and the other is (as Li’s case) to carry on the lineage symbolized by the woman’s last name – not as a flesh husband who marries his wife, but as a symbolic male body who can carry on rituals. Li’s entering into uxorilocal marriage is no indication that he accepts his identity as a ‘male daughter-in-law’, nor the symbolic and practical role of a legitimized heir. Li faces enduring resistance to his in-laws and experiences an intense relationship with them. Li’s case shows how an uxorilocal groom is confined, physically and emotionally, in his wife’s family. In addition, he is faced with the reactions of onlookers that evidently reflect how this form of marriage is stigmatized and strongly resisted by the town. The local cadre provided a testimony to demonstrate the general attitude towards these marriages:

Nowadays girls in South Jiangsu18 are not happy to marry out because of their good attributes. They are calling in our local boys as uxorilocal grooms. But few of the boys are willing to go. They are likely to be underpowered (shouqi) and discriminated. [Because] you have to take your cue from the girl’s family. #215001

Despite the massive rejection of uxorilocality in Lijia, we question to what extent single men, whose individual attributes (e.g., age, personality) and socioeconomic status have put them at a disadvantage, would consider uxorilocality as an alternative? When asked about the willingness to practice uxorilocal marriage, many single men rejected it emphatically. Besides the pressure and stigma around uxorilocality, being able to have an heir with their own surname and being responsible for biological parents in old age are also reasons taken into account. The following dialogues with Liao and Huang illustrate the resistance to uxorilocality:

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18 An economically advanced area that represents one of the leading economic interregional bodies in China, including fast-developing cities such as Shanghai, Nanjing, Wuxi, etc.
Interviewer: Have you thought of uxorilocal marriage?
Liao: No.
Interviewer: If this is the case, are you willing to do it?
Liao: No, I am not.
Interviewer: Why?
Liao: I am filial to my parents.
Interviewer: You have a brother whom you can have to take care of parents, I guess.
Liao: I don’t have any offspring here. My kids would be named after their last name if I move to live with them. It would be under my last name if my wife’s family lives with me.
Interviewer: You really care about the names of kids.
Liao: This is actually important, for sure. #211003 (Liao, aged 39)

Interviewer: What happened to the girl who was introduced to you?
Huang: She required me live with her family after marriage. I do not have time.
Interviewer: Would you go if you had time?
Huang: Then forget about it. I am not going.
Interviewer: How come?
Huang: I am considering my ageing parents. They would be left nobody to take care of if I leave. My brother is still young and working outside village. She [the girl] hoped for uxorilocality. My aunt called me [to see what I think about it]. I replied that I did not have time.
Interviewer: If there is an appropriate candidate, are you willing to go for uxorilocality?
Huang: I am building a house right now. I will marry locally once it is done. It is not easy to practice uxorilocality, very thorny.
Interviewer: Why do you think so?
Huang: I have to live in someone else’s home. You can get along with them under good situations. If the parents are bad tempered, it is not easy to get along. Also there is no freedom staying at others’ home; there is nothing better than my own. #111005 (Huang, aged 33)

Reproduction of offspring and filial piety are moral obligations towards parents prominently featured in male-centered Confucian culture. For Liao, children are important to families. But what matters more is the guarantee that children will take the ‘right’ surname; otherwise they are regarded as children belonging to the
wife’s lineage. Without any hesitation, Liao equates uxorilocality to a practice against filial piety. For the majority of locals, patrilocality is the most ordinary and habitual form of marriage. It is rooted in the institution of marriage as a taken-for-granted arrangement. It legitimizes and reproduces male-privileged gender relations, while uxorilocal marriage is considered a transgression of the lineal kinship system. For instance, in the views of Huang, the wife’s house is not recognized as a ‘home’ under uxorilocal residence, nor are her family members considered ‘family’. Patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal ideologies are deeply rooted in Huang’s mind.

Huang’s concern regarding elder care of parents was not exclusive. Many bachelors, including those in Baijia, prioritized taking care of parents in their plans to marry, criteria used to select a wife, and choice of workplace. If necessary, they would stay single in order to provide support to their parents. Liu, one of the three bachelors in our interviews who showed willingness of uxorilocality actually considered his mother in the first place:

I am getting old. I have an elder brother to take care of my mother at home. So I am willing to do it if I get a chance of being an uxorilocal groom. #211013

As mentioned earlier, one of the most important criteria for a potential wife is that she be domesticated and filial towards her parents-in-law. Some bachelors claimed that they would rather stay single than marry a wife who lacked parental respect. Others would choose to stay in their hometowns and be geographically close to their parents, rather than work in another province and only come home occasionally.

_Baijia_

In contrast to Lijia, uxorilocality in Baijia is more accepted. People speak about this type of marriage with a neutral tone. Rural men who find it difficult to marry employ it as a strategy, or sometimes a last resort, to marry. According to our informant in Baijia, men over 30 years of age who live in strikingly poor valleys are most likely to resort to uxorilocal marriage. A household calls in an uxorilocal groom when the daughter is getting old, divorced, or widowed. Like patrilocality, interestingly, spatial hypergamy also exists in uxorilocality. Men also expect better
economic conditions on the wife’s side if they marry. Some single men who are willing to practice uxorilocal marriage turn down the potential spouse’s family due to a poorer location and worse economic conditions than their own.

I have discussed the type of ‘preservative uxorilocal marriage’ earlier. This marriage is practised to carry on the lineage and provide security to the wife’s parents in later life. ‘Institutional uxorilocal marriage’, on the other hand, is dictated by non-demographic, mostly economic, considerations and occurs in families with at least one son (Li, 2003:3). Transmissibility features in uxorilocal marriage because, once one son practices it, other male family members, such as brothers or nephews, are more likely to be drawn into such marriages. Transmissibility is related to household economic conditions, which drives single men to follow their brothers into similar marriages.

In Baijia, we encountered many cases of institutional uxorilocal marriage. For example, Huang, a single man in his thirties, revealed his intention to enter into an uxorilocal marriage. Although he did not make it happen in the end, his younger brother also expected to marry into a place with better transportation and economic opportunities. Also, a young single man (#111301) told us that both his uncle and cousin (the uncle’s son) resorted to uxorilocality, which indicates that vertical intergenerational transmission is possible in a household.

We interviewed two uxorilocally-married men. I will elaborate on the marriage experience of Hua for two reasons. First, compared to the intergenerational relations between parents-in-law and daughter-in-law in a patrilocal marriage, the relations between parents-in-law and son-in-law in an uxorilocal marriage tend to be more intimate and harmonious (Li, 2003, 2006). In Hua’s case, however, conflicts and contradictions between him and his mother-in-law negatively impacted his conjugal relations and his marriage. Second, academia and the mass media have long portrayed single men as being poor, incapable, distressed, suppressed, or even antisocial. Despite feeling frustrated and helpless when seeking a wife, single men’s lives can be as normal as others. As I have shown, many of them have their own strategy to tackle marriage difficulties or adjustment to singlehood.

Hua: An Uxorilocal Husband

Hua is a 50-year-old single man who has had two failed uxorilocal marriages. He did not have any children from the two marriages. He married his first wife when
he was 21 years old and worked as a coal miner. They lived at the wife’s house, which was 400 km north of his hometown. The wife and her family members treated him well; however, he left his wife after 18 months because she was ill with leukemia. He returned to his hometown and started working in many places across the country. Afterwards, he recalled, “I did not have any intention of seeking another wife at that time because my brain was not ‘developed’ (not ready to deal with love). I never thought of forming a family.” He stayed single for the next 24 years. Four years ago, he married his second wife, who was good-looking and from a well-off family. He married and moved to her place, located 38 km from his hometown. Although the couple got along well, the relationship between his mother-in-law and him became increasingly tense as time went by. He had been attempting to run away, but did not succeed until last year when he was invited to a relative’s wedding feast. When asked about his relationship with the mother-in-law he said,

Before me, my mother-in-law called in five uxorilocal grooms, among which two ran away and two died. There were two things that I frowned upon. First, she stole things from neighbours. People came to tell me that she stole their stuff. Her behaviour is what I hate most. It is not decent at all. Second, she was fond of poking her nose into my business. She was never content with the food and clothes that I bought for her. Whenever I went, she had an eye on me. There were people of hers watching me all day long. I was followed when I was working in mountains or visiting my relatives. She had been monitoring me. I tried to run away twice but was blocked by her people. I saw through this mother-in-law after two years. No wonder people say that ‘it is better to leave early than late and it is better to leave right away than leave early.’ I left in the third year [of marriage]. #112102

Hua also takes neighbours’ thoughts into account. He said,

My mother-in-law is like this. People would doubt if it is me that failed to educate her to behave in a good way. People who know her understand why she steals – it was stemmed from indulgence in her childhood. But those who don't know her may think it is I that order her to do so. So I didn’t want to stay there anymore, nor did I want to hear those gossips. #112102
This negative relationship between Hua and his mother-in-law was overwhelming, taking the place of the husband-wife dyad, which was supposed to be a pivotal axis. In an uxorilocal marriage, intergenerational relations might be as thorny as in patrilocal marriages. Surprisingly, however, after all these marital disturbances in the first half of Hua’s life, he remains optimistic and determined about marrying a wife:

I am not frustrated. This is my fate. I cannot blame this and blame that. I am still confident about finding a wife and forming a family. Although I am in my fifties, I don't think it is old. If I am in my sixties, I will give up. There’s no point in getting married at such an old age. People will laugh at me. #112102

Some single men laugh at Hua because, at the age of 50, he still hopes to find someone and raise a family. Hua asserts confidently that they are all wrong in terms of life value. Other bachelors might regard forming a family burdensome or unaffordable, but Hua believes that ‘sharing brings along happiness.’ Based on this motto, he established his own ideology of how to approach marriage:

If you want to form a good family, you should have a positive thinking. You need to think how to make the family united and prosperous. If you do not think that way, it is never possible to find a wife. #112102

At the time of the interview, Hua was planning to make money in order to migrate to the South, possibly to the province of Yunnan, where he believes the scenery is beautiful and people are kind. The two attributes of that area that appeal to him are the easy access to girls and a milder climate. He said,

To be honest, my ultimate agenda for going to the South is to form a family. In Yunnan, girls like singing mountain songs [a type of indigenous folk songs] and making dialogue-styled songs with boys. At that place, once you are able to fit in their songs, girls are offered to you for free. I will make every effort to the South. They have better

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19 Yunnan is the most southwestern province, noted for a very high level of ethnic diversity. Some 38% of the province’s population are members of minorities, such as Yi, Bai, Tai, Dai, etc. Retrieved from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yunnan#cite_note-10
attributes than us. The temperature is pleasant and the air quality is good.

In Baijia, we did not discover any traces of migration for marriage among rural men, especially interprovincial or long-distanced. Hua is the only one to acknowledge a strong-minded intention of marriage migration. Upon closer examination, we find that this marital strategy may contain some fantasy, which reflects the fact that the discourse of migration for marriage is far from generated at the local level.

The Marriage and Labour Migration Nexus

Labour migration has become irreplaceable for many people in rural areas, since the rural-urban labour force transferring channel was established. It fosters the generation of migration culture among people in places of origin and is recognized as the most sustainable (sometimes the only) way to make a living out of non-agricultural sectors. Once individuals choose to work outside their home villages, their life trajectories are altered. Migration impacts individual well-being, interpersonal social relations, and both labour sending and receiving communities. In this section, I explore the relations between marriage and labour migration among male rural migrants who were single at the time of migration. Labour migration provides opportunities and imposes constraints on individuals with differentiated resources who want to marry. The rural marriage market has to be understood in connection with the ongoing practice of labour migration.

Unlike working in hometowns where geographic territories largely constrain the extent of the social network, labour migration in counties or cities gives rural migrants the opportunity to meet people from other provinces. A workplace (usually a construction site or a factory) serves as a hub of migrant workers, with most coming from rural areas in less developed regions. Rural migrants can, therefore, establish a network that includes fellow villagers, relatives, workmates, and employers; information about news in hometowns, job opportunities, and matchmakings are circulated. Regarding marriage, according to returning migrants we interviewed, many met their wives in the workplace or by third-party introductions through employers, friends, and relatives. Since labour-intensive jobs in the city are occupied by rural migrants, the majority of women that male migrants
meet are from rural areas as well. The homogeneity of the social network established
in the workplace further (re)produces rural-rural marriages. A returning male migrant
stated how he met his wife and the importance of social networks in seeking a partner:

I was working in a brick factory in Xianyang. She was working there, too. We got to know each other by working together. We were friends in the beginning. We started dating afterwards. Then I felt it was time; so we got married …… the condition in our mountain is very poor, lacking transportation. You cannot get out once it rains. Social intercourse is particularly rare. So girls get married at a young age, and we boys are left out (laughter). But you know, if you are working outside, like me, you must have known many people. Once you know more people and your network is wider, you can seek a girlfriend by yourself. If you stay at home, people you meet are fixed. How can you find a girlfriend? #112003 (married man, aged 24)

Drawing from his personal experience, this young man believed that marriage was achievable through labour migration. This point of view was echoed by many people in his home community. Another married man proved the prevalence of this strategy. He stated,

Nowadays there are many people working outside while seeking brides at the same time. Many young men living in the mountain succeeded in finding a wife while they are working outside. #112004

Apparently, those who do not do migrant work but stay in their hometowns have fewer opportunities to meet women. The sister of a single man blamed her brother’s singlehood on his not working outside. She said,

He did not work outside village when he was young. As a result, he did not make money. If you don't make money by migrant work, then you can't find a wife. #111104

Another single man recognized his geographic constraints on his marriage prospects. He said,
I stay at home. I did not work outside. If I did, there would be more chances to encounter a woman. #211001

Spending leisure time among male migrants from different generations shapes their social network. A 17-year-old girl, who is a salesclerk in Zhashui, talked about the difference between the social life of young migrant workers and their older counterparts:

Younger men [migrant workers] often hang out and sing karaoke. They know more girls. But for older men, they are unlikely to go to places like that. They do shopping at most. But their shopping is very simple, just buying stuff they need. So people they know are fewer. #114006

It seems that young male migrant workers benefit more than their older counterparts from their social networks. Besides, older single men have to face more constraints in seeking spouses. Many workplaces with migrant workers are highly masculinized, making it difficult to meet a woman. A single man who used to do migrant work on a construction site said,

Last year I was working in Shanghai. The construction site was in a barren area with countless mosquitos. And there were no women in the site. #211001

Another single man stated,

I am working in a tunnel. There are no suitable women; most of them have married. #111007

Even if single men do meet women at work, poverty is an important factor that hinders successful marriages. A single man from an extremely poor family explained why he was reluctant to find a wife outside his village:

I have thought of bringing a wife while I was working outside. But my family is poor. If I date someone while I am working outside, I cannot make it to bring her home [to meet with parents and talk about marriage]. Once she comes to visit and see this poor condition, it is
just like human trafficking. Who would like to marry into a poor family? #211003 (single man, aged 39)

Except for reasons, such as the nature of social networks, the sex ratio of the workplace, individual economic conditions, personal preferences on the forms, and timing of marriage also impact the outcome of labour migration. A young migrant worker explained why he did not have the intention of finding a spouse at workplace. He was working in a factory producing electronic goods thousands of kilometers away in the South. In the factory, there are more female workers than males; women are seen as more suited to assembly line work because they are more detail-oriented. He said,

I don't want to find one here [in the factory]. All are non-local people here, not reliable. I have heard many cases that the couple broke up after one or two years of dating. They were not dating for the purpose of marriage. Girls just made their partner to spend money for them. #111301 (young unmarried man, aged 22)

Another man talked of his changed ideology on the timing of marriage:

I have been doing migrant work in Xi’an for 18 years. While I was 24 years old, I did not want to marry at such a young age, because I was working in the city and it [the standard for marriageable age] was different comparing to my hometown. I did not get married until 30 years old. If I was at my hometown, I should have got married in my early twenties …… the situation of my brother was the same to me. He got married in 2005 when he was 28 years old. He was a migrant worker, too. That was why he had a late marriage. #112005 (married man, aged 40)

I have discussed how labour migration expands the rural marriage market and its subsequent marital benefits for male migrant workers. Labour migration does not necessarily bring about marriage. Unlike young competitive male migrants, however, migrant workers who have experienced longstanding singlehood are more likely to be constrained by factors, such as the masculinity of the workplace and economic capability. Besides, if endogamous marriage or a late marriage is preferred, labour migration is not likely to serve as a drive for marriage.
Quantitative studies have found that labour migration restrains the practices of early marriage among rural adults who have been migrant workers. Mobility (for marriage or work) affects age at first marriage more significantly for women (Jin et al. 2011:5). Late marriage among rural migrants is believed to have a positive effect on the ‘quality’ of the rural population (Cui, 2007). In this study, interviews with single and married men confirmed that labour migration is likely to delay age at marriage.

I was working outside for most of the time and seldom spent time at my hometown. There were introductions for me when I return home. But I didn’t consider them because of unmatchable ages. I am turning older and there are no suitable [candidates] for my old age. Besides, I don't have any acquaintances to do introduction for me. #111007 (single man, aged 49)

I had been working in Niaoning province for nine years, and I didn’t get married until 30 years old. Some people from my hometown did help introducing partners to me. But I didn't return home [for meeting introduced girls] … I met my wife when I was working in a plywood factory in Niaoning; she was born and raised there. #212001 (married man, aged 42)

Labour migration to other places means that migrant workers are physically absent from their hometowns. Most rural men leave for work as soon as they finish junior/senior high school (at approximately 16-18 years); they remain absent from home during their prime marriageable ages of 22-23 years. It, thus, becomes difficult for their family members or friends to do marital introductions for them. Besides, transportation fees to hometowns can constitute a big proportion of their already low earnings, particularly for long-distance migrants. It is unlikely that they would spend money for the purpose of meeting someone who might not be their wife in the end. On the other end, in places of destination, migrant workers are exposed to urban ideologies in every aspect of life. Hence, they may redefine what it is the appropriate time to marry.

To conclude for this section, labour migration has been recognized as an approach to achieve marriage, especially in the eyes of local villagers who witness migrant workers’ success of getting married in such a way. But can we assert that
labour migration has been employed as a strategy for seeking brides among rural men? In other words, does migration for the purpose of marriage exist among rural men? It seems natural to yield an affirmative answer. However, when we closely examine migrant workers’ motives, it is evident that making a living, rather than seeking a spouse, is prioritized among rural men; single men that we interviewed are included also. Single rural men who work outside are attracted by more job opportunities and higher incomes. They do not regard seeking a spouse as a priority while migrating. Occasionally, migrant workers will establish a relationship with a (migrant) woman and get married eventually. A large number of migrant workers will return to their hometowns upon the Spring Festival in order to fulfill one of the most important affairs in their life – marriage. Thereafter, marriage and economic attainment are separate goals in the trajectory of labour migration. In essence, marriage is an unintended outcome of labour migration, rather than an agenda.

Labour migration and marriage form a complex relationship, whereby a range of factors enhances or hampers the possibility of marriage through migration. On one hand, an expanded network is anticipated to result from labour migration. Rural migrant workers are exposed to more opportunities to find a spouse in the workplace in the city. Besides, migrant work also brings them higher incomes, which strengthens their financial position to a certain degree. On the other hand, a number of factors play the role of counteracting marriage. These factors include individual preferences on the normative type, timing of marriage, low degree of exposure to suitable women at the place of destination, and underdeveloped economies at the place of origin. Ultimately, no single factor is sufficient to explain the nexus of marriage and migration. Individual, institutional, and structural factors are intertwined and shaping the potential marital outcome from labour migration.
Chapter 6: Elder Care Support and Intergenerational Transfers

In a household, reciprocal exchange flows between and within generations through financial, instrumental (hands-on nursing care and practical support, such as doing household chores), and emotional support. ‘Reciprocity’ defines domestic generational contracts; it governs how individuals accept and provide support involving rights, responsibilities, credits, and debts within the institution of families (Izuhara, 2010). While children are young, parents nurture and support them. In return, when children reach adulthood, get married, or become economically independent, they provide support to ageing parents in need. Marital status is one of the central factors that affects the scope and volume of resources that the adult children can pull together to support parents. Adult children establish spousal kin networks and strengthen family ties through marriage, which is likely to reconfigure previous patterns of intergenerational care arrangements. Essentially, marital status is a source of differential power in negotiating family relationships (Connidis, 2010:248).

However, adult children may voluntarily or involuntarily remain single for various reasons. Single sons and daughters do not have spousal ties to share elder care responsibilities; elder care arrangements among groups of single and married children are differentiated from those groups of all married children. Children’s single status can affect their involvement in elder care in two ways: single adult children may provide more care given their higher availability because they have no spousal commitment or less care because of their smaller familial network. The types and volume of support provided to aging parents by single adult children need to be understood with relation to resource allocation among siblings, cultural expectations on filial responsibility, and structured social relations based on gender and class (Connidis, 2010).

The focus of this chapter is examining to what extent the former’s prolonged status of singlehood affects roles of parents and siblings in caregiving or care receiving. I first look at how, and to what extent, single sons and their siblings are engaged in the practice of parental elder care, analyzing how individual, institutional, and structural factors are impacting the configuration of care arrangements. I identify three modes of care arrangements to exhibit generational care flows. In particular, I
illuminate the triangle care ties among parents, a single son, and siblings. Second, I explore intra-generational relations by investigating single men’s intentions regarding elder care arrangements for themselves in the future. Diverse strategies for securing support in later life are exhibited.

**Inter-and Intra-generational Care Flows**

Elder care support in rural China is a gendered practice in favour of sons. In both sites, villagers are constantly practicing the cultural prescription inherited from precedents: the son is the one who takes primary responsibility for aging parents’ care. The daughter is supposed to marry out; she is perceived as ‘water pouring in the neighbouring garden’ (Attané and Guilmoto, 2007) who are not legitimatized as care providers. Variations exist when a household is composed of all daughters. In such cases, parents may call in an uxorilocal groom for one of their daughters; the uxorilocal groom is considered a ‘male daughter-in-law’ who should fulfill all the filial obligations that his parents-in-law would expect a biological son would. This recognition of men as caregivers reflects the gendered cultural expectations of elderly support. In today’s rural society, however, it has become more common to find a daughter taking care of her parents, especially if she marries in close proximity to her natal home. Despite this, the cultural preference is that sons care for the elderly; many old people we interviewed said that they would prefer that a son take care of them.

In addition to gender differences, birth order and marriage order among siblings configure patterns of living arrangements and elder care support. The nuclear family is a defining characteristic of the current rural societies. It has substituted the extended family in which sons brought their wives to live with their parents under the same roof. In the nuclear family, every marriage of a son initiates a household division. Usually it is the oldest son who marries first and leaves his natal family to establish his own nuclear family. Other sons follow the same path upon marriage. As a result, parents are left to live with the youngest son until he marries. Upon marriage, he will very likely continue to live with his parents and take care of them. However, if the youngest brother marries before the older ones or one of the brothers remains single for a significant period of time, parents will live with the son who marries last or remains unmarried. In a family with multiple sons, the process of household division can last a long time.
Family support of parents is interlinked with the process of household division and sons’ marital status. Married siblings negotiate the distribution of elder care responsibilities according to individual availability and financial capability, as well as cultural norms of filial piety. Usually sons who have moved out provide financial support as compensation for their lack of physical availability to provide hands-on support. In our study, married sons often work as migrant workers and send remittances to parents on a regular basis. The last married son who lives with the parents provides instrumental support, and his parents, in return, take care of his children or share in the household work.

This household division process and elder care arrangement is an ideal type and does not apply to every household in the two towns in our study. It only reflects intergenerational care flows within households with married sons. The presence of single sons leads to differences in the type and amount of parental care support given. The concepts of ‘care recipient’ and ‘caregiver’ are broadly defined according to the context of this study. ‘Care recipient’ is defined as a person with at least one activity of daily living limitation that leads to physical or financial dependence on others; primary caregiver refers to the person primarily responsible for providing care to that individual (Stone et al., 1987).

Based on interview data, I identify three modes of inter-and intra-generational care flows by identifying different parental needs and the single sons and siblings’ ability to provide elder care. Through individual cases, I analyze the interactions of three parties (parents, single sons, and siblings) and examine the underlying characteristics of family ties respectively. The three modes are as follows:

1) Single son as primary caregiver and married siblings as secondary caregivers;
2) Married siblings as primary caregivers and single son as secondary caregiver/care recipient;
3) Mutual support between parents and single men and married siblings.

**Single Men as Primary Caregivers**

Liu is 49 years old and has an older brother and a younger sister. He lives with his mother, who is 80 years old and constantly suffers from swollen legs and hypertension. His father died three years ago. His siblings and their nuclear families are struggling with poverty. Although his brother is unable to provide any concrete support to parents because he must save a considerable amount of money for his
son’s marriage, he pays frequent visits to his mother. Liu’s sister is slightly better off financially than her brothers. Unfortunately, her family incurred a debt due to her daughter’s leukemia years ago. The sole source of financial support for the mother comes from Liu’s sporadic earnings from some light physical work he does in the neighbourhood. The only appliance in the house is a second-hand television provided by the sister, who also paid the bill for renovations to the home. Liu talked about how he is solely responsible for the daily care of his mother:

I am the one who constantly takes cares of her. My mother has been unwell recently. I do some work outside only if she feels better. [When I am working outside] I come home at noon and check on her. My old mother needs to take injections when her legs are in pain. I can’t stay away from her [because of this]. For meals, I buy buns for us. I planted some corn on my land, but my brother does most of the farm work. For housekeeping work, I seldom let my mother do it. I take time to do all the housework by myself. #211007

Apparently, Liu plays the role of primary caregiver in the family, financially and instrumentally. His responsibility is increased due to his mother’s intensive health care needs and the limited ability and availability of his siblings. Lui’s brother, although living close to his mother, can provide only emotional support by making routine visits to her due to his difficult financial situation. Although Lui’s sister is not expected to provide assistance, she provides some material support that improves their mother’s living conditions. We have limited information on the decision-making process regarding who should take on certain elder care duties, but it appears that this arrangement is generated naturally. The siblings are of a low economic status and have overwhelming responsibilities for their own nuclear families, which constrains their ability to provide for their mother. Because Liu is single, he resides with his mother and is primarily responsible for her. To a certain degree, this constrains his potential for finding a spouse. When asked about the possibility of entering into an uxorilocal marriage, he replied with a firm tone, “No, I can’t do that. You know, my old mother is here. I can’t leave her.”

Wang is a 39-year-old bachelor who is a peasant farmer and a primary care provider (his matchmaking experience is described in Chapter 5). He performs all types of assistance, except financial, to his parents. His mother got cerebral
thrombosis, and his father’s forearm was amputated because of nerve sarcoma. Despite being slightly crippled from childhood polio, Wang is independent and helps around the house on a daily basis. According to his mother,

We have seven acres of land and he is the one who farms. Neither of us can do it now. I got cerebral thrombosis soon after retirement. I am inconvenient on my arms and legs. He does cooking, cleaning, laundry, and grocery shopping. He buys me clothes and cigarettes. He does all the things for us. #211106

Economic conditions and job characteristics of siblings affect involvement with aged parents. When talking about what his elder brother contributes in elder care, Wang said,

He works in a credit corporative in the county and often has business travels to Beijing. He is not with us, but he visits us when he is available. He sends money to our parents, 500-1000 yuan for a month. He and his wife often help me seek a wife. #211001

This adequate sum of money, along with his father’s pension, serves as a financial guarantee of Wang’s service to his parents. Meanwhile, Wang’s singlehood and availability for hands-on service offsets the physical absence of his brother. It is the combination of their advantageous attributes that produces an effective care pattern of task sharing.

The cases of Liu and Wang illustrate how single sons play central roles in meeting parents’ needs. It is important to bear in mind that, without assistance from siblings, it remains difficult for single brothers to sustain adequate daily care for parents. Different types and amounts of assistance from siblings can largely alter the nature of elder care. This feature can be detected by a comparison between Lui and Wang. Liu and his mother are struggling with insecurity and vulnerability; whereas, Wang’s care responsibility is significantly alleviated by the financial support of his brother.

From the above two cases, it is evident that the status of singlehood and single men’s job characteristics is in association with proximity and availability to parents. Parents’ needs also signify the magnitude of single sons’ elder care involvement. For dependent parents, like Liu’s mother, a single son’s regular service
is incorporated into his ongoing activities. Nevertheless, the scenario varies when the single son is a migrant worker or the parents require varying degrees of assistance. For capable parents, the single son is likely to provide major financial support and the role of caregiver is performed less, as illustrated by the following case of the Lu brothers. For dependent parents, elder care obligations are transferred to other siblings who live close to parents, regardless of their sex. This is the case of married siblings acting as main caregivers and will be elaborated in the next section.

The Lu brothers are the only two still single among four brothers and four sisters. Both of them are long-distance migrant workers who do not return home until the Spring Festival. The brothers live with their parents when home, with two other married brothers’ houses next to theirs. The elder brother comes home only when his labour is needed for farming. The parents lead an independent life. When the Lu brothers return home, their parents cook for them, and, in return, the brothers provide light hands-on assistance. The brothers are the major financial providers, each providing 1000 yuan (USD$162) annually. The elder single brother explained why they contribute more than the other siblings:

My younger brother and I give more. My two older brothers give less [because] they have heavier burdens, building houses and preparing weddings for sons. They must have a tight budget. My little brother and I are far less burdensome. #111007

Due to geographic distance and parental needs, the Lu brothers are not likely to be round-the-clock caregivers. However, it is their primary financial and instrumental support that defines their major roles in the elder care arrangement. Married siblings provide limited support to their parents because they must support their nuclear families and save for their sons’ marriage (as in the case of Liu and the Lu brothers). Being married and having commitments to a spouse and children is a legitimate excuse for not providing support (Finch, 1989). Without the attachment to spouse and children, single sons are available to provide more support; this also puts additional pressure on them to be providers and limits their ability to marry (as in the case of Liu). Sometimes the responsibility for parents is so overwhelming that single sons may give up seeking a wife and prioritize their roles as primary caregiver (see Chapter 5). The status of singlehood puts middle-aged men in an ambivalent position.
– attempts to find a wife are constrained by cultural expectations that sons are responsible for old parents. Playing the role of primary caregiver further serves as a legitimate excuse to not marry.

Notably, the nature of adult children’s responsibility is not only related to individual characteristics, but is also linked with the type of care that is requested from parents and how care needs evolve over time. Matthews (2002:30) critiques that there have long been negative stereotypes of aging parents due to an almost exclusive focus on those who need a great deal of care. Sibling involvement in parental care varies considerably depending on whether parents are capable, dependent, or in-between (Matthews, 2002). Indeed, in the case of the Lu brothers, their two married brothers and their nuclear families live right next to their parents’ house, yet they do not have to provide extra support to their capable parents. We did not find parents depend to a great extent on children, or vice versa. Taking various parental needs into account, adult children are able to mobilize their resources and financial capital within households, and, ultimately, form a collaboration whereby both parents and children benefit.

The second commonly perceived negative issue is that rural single men lack resources and the ability to generate strategies for managing family affairs (Wei et al., 2008:2). Although single men’s financial and emotional support tends to be less than that of their married peers and their instrumental support is slightly greater than their married peers, there is no significant difference (Jin, 2012). Past research addresses comparisons between single men and married men, but assumes that single men have a lower socioeconomic status. The nuances within the group of single men are significantly overlooked. In addition, the interaction between single brothers and their siblings is under-researched. In quantitative research, it is not surprising to find that married men tend to provide more concrete financial and emotional support than single men. However, this does not serve as a justification that single men are incapable of providing elder care. Single men in our study do exercise agency in offering financial and/or instrumental support; in some case, their support is greater than that of their married brothers.

*Married Siblings as Primary Caregivers*

When the role of single men in elder care support is ‘replaceable’, I define this type of single men as ‘secondary caregivers’. ‘Replaceable’ refers to either of the
following scenarios: single men engage much less than their siblings in providing both financial and practical care or the living conditions of single men themselves is so precarious that sibling support is required. Despite the fact that a single son is available for hands-on care because he co-resides with his parents, his married siblings provide concrete and irreplaceable support to the parents.

Chen is a 49-year-old single man who is being supported by his younger brother. This pair of brothers drafted an oral contract. Specifically, Chen provides free labour on his brother’s land, and the income gained from the agricultural work is turned over to the brother. In return, the brother provides for Chen. Chen lives with their mother, in a house next to the brother and his wife. Although the dwellings are separate, the families are not completely independent; for example, they still eat together. The mother described the primary support she received from the younger son and her daughter-in-law:

My younger son is filial. I never made money. He gives me money once he is available. My daughter-in-law is filial too. She sells fruit on the street. She cooks for us. And when you need laundry, just let her know. What can my senior son give to me? I never ask him for money. #211110

Chen’s narrative also reveals his role as a care recipient and the secondary support to his parents. Despite being content with his brother’s support, Chen felt insecure about elder care issues for himself in the near future. The committed relationship with the brother depends on the norm of reciprocity, and, if it breaks down, Chen’s livelihood could be very uncertain. He said,

I follow (gen) my brother to do work and eat. He treats me well. He often sends meat over if he gets some. But this is hard to tell when I get old. Now it is good, since I am able to work. Can I rely on my brother when I am unable to work and lying there eating? […] I also take care of my mother. But if I am not present, he can still do what I do for her. #211013

Kong is a 51-year-old migrant worker in Shanghai. He is exempted from providing support for his mother due to the geographic distance from his mother and a relatively low income that cannot fully support his livelihood. He has three elderly
sisters and one younger sister who are all married. Kong lives an independent life separate from his sisters and mother. He is much less involved in his mother’s elder care than his sisters who share responsibility and offer financial, practical, and emotional support to their mother. He explained how family care labour is distributed among four sisters:

My elderly sister is responsible for farming all the land we possess because I have to work in Shanghai. She takes care of our mother who is 87 years old and sits all day long. She does cooking and laundry for mother. When I come home, I eat with them. […….] My younger sister and her husband have been running a business for 20 years in Shanghai. They are in charge of all the expenditures at home. […….] The other two elder sisters live close to us in the same village. They often drop in. #211008

When a single man lives closer to his parents, personal characteristics may also result in low engagement. Yan and his father (aged 80) live in a mountainous area with poor transportation and a backward economy. Yan has an annual income of 2000 to 3000 yuan (USD$320-$490), which is definitely inadequate to meet his daily expenses. His two married elder sisters provide constant financial support to Yan and their father. The senior sister married locally so she is able to pay frequent visits and bring food to them every several days. In the household, the father cooks and cleans, while Yan does a limited amount of farm work. Because of Yan’s slackness and aimlessness in life, he is not expected to provide more service to his father. When asked about Yan’s daily routine, the senior sister said, with disappointment and helplessness,

A young adult! He doesn’t want to do any work. He stays at home for most of the time. Nor does he visit neighbours. He never responds to me when I ask him to do work. He is on his own charge. He would quarrel with me if I step in. He doesn’t listen to me (bu tinghua). […….] He gets a bad temper. He would lose his temper with my father when he feels tired. We are hands-off. #111004

Living with his father, Yan is in the most convenient position to provide care; however, he contributes much less than his sisters. Due to his inability to provide aid,
his sisters substitute his gendered filial obligation and play the role of caregiver for both their father and Yan himself. This is also the scenario in Kong’s case.

**Mutual Support between Parents, Single Son, and Married Siblings**

In this scenario, parents are capable of taking care of themselves; single sons are less likely to provide any concrete support to parents; and siblings may provide some financial support directly to parents, but are less engaged in daily interactions. Usually, parents and single sons co-reside or live next to each other. The parents usually do the cooking, while the single son does farm work in return. Other facets of life are parallel and exclusive to each other. In this study, there are three cases that practice this type of intergenerational care.

When we approached Song in Baijia, she was cooking, while waiting for her older son to finish work and her granddaughter to return from high school. She had been lodging in her friend’s house (located in plain areas) for a while, in order to provide daily meal service for the older son who had been busy working in a local construction site. Her own house is in a valley with poor transportation. Song has two sons and three daughters. All of them were married except her younger son, who was crippled 22 years ago due to an accident on a minefield. He did not go out to work until two years ago. Song talked of how she helped the married son’s family for years:

This younger son was handicapped, but my elder son got married. My daughter-in-law is nobler than my own daughters. I took care of her two children. She breastfed them and I took charge of the kids’ lives. My granddaughter treats me very well (smiles happily). […] I help doing housework for my older son, since my daughter-in-law is out working in a brick factory. […] [Seven years ago] the school in our valley was removed. [But] my granddaughter and grandson needed schooling. So my son rented a house [close to the new school in plain area], and I have cooked for them for four years. My granddaughter got admitted to high school. And I came back to our house [in a valley]. Now many people are moving down and building new houses. [That is why] my son is here working for them. #111101

When asked about who provides support to her, she said,
I take care of myself and cook for sons and my granddaughter when she is home. Who takes care of me? Do I have such a good fate? [...] Usually my second daughter gives me some money. She is a teacher. When I get sick, she is the one that takes care of me. But she pays fewer visits to me since she was transferred to work in the county [Zhashui]. She only came back three times in the last winter vacation. My son-in-law [the second daughter’s husband] also gives me some pocket money. [...] My oldest daughter is a peasant who never works outside. She does not make any money. Her life has been tough. She has the will, but lacks the ability. She gives less. I understand their good will. I know that as a mother. #111101

When talking about the younger son’s life with disability, Song became sad with a low-spirited tone:

He was never introduced to any girls because of his handicap and our extremely poor household condition. He stopped working in the field and drifted along after the injury, doing nothing. But he is not old right now [aged 44]; he can cook for himself. When his life gets really tough, his siblings help out a little bit, buying him noodles. He receives the subsistence allowance for a sum of 40-50 yuan monthly [USD$6.5-$8.1]. #111101

In Song’s narratives, we can find that she offers most of her support, such as raising children and doing housework, to her elder son’s family. The only intergenerational support she receives is from daughters, which allows her to be financially independent from her sons. Living on governmental welfare and having limited earnings, the younger son leads a fairly independent life. For at least the last two years, Song and her younger son have led more separate lives. Song’s 19-year-old granddaughter said, “We don’t have much contact with him. He only returns home occasionally.”

Liao and his elder brother are both single. They live with their mother, who is 71 years old and makes 12 yuan per day by stripping traditional medicine. The brothers work in the neighbourhood and earn daily incomes of 70 yuan and 20 yuan, respectively. They also do most of the farm work in the field. In return, the mother cooks for them. She said,
I am getting old and I don’t need their money. Yes, we live together. But we all live on our own. I keep my younger son’s earnings for him [for building a house]. My elder son takes charge of his own earnings. Neither of my sons is striving. They do some work when they want to. If not, they just sleep at home.”

In one of the early quotes (#211003, p.76), Liao talked about the mother’s expectations of the brothers, i.e., making money, building a house, and forming a family. Despite her modest earnings, the mother contributes to making the wishes come true by working at an old age. Offering mutual intergenerational support and sharing the same objective, Liao’s family members are virtually interconnected and bounded.

**Elder Care Plans of Single Men**

The average age of all single men participating in our study is 46.7 years, which is a prime age over the life course. They are not likely to encounter elder care issues for at least 10 years. Thus, it seems early to investigate bachelors’ strategies of survival in their later life at the point of our fieldwork. However, academics have called attention to a potential dearth of supply of both formal (state-funded) and informal (family-provided) elder care in the near future, which would be heightened by a dramatically growing number of single men whose later lives are thought to be precarious. Therefore, it remains valuable to understand bachelors’ intentions for accessing elder care and family members’ engagement. In our study it is most critical to examine how a kin network is anchored in corresponding to the needs of bachelors. Three types of elder care plans are generated from the data: relying on the government, relying on close relatives, and self-dependence. Those who have not thought about the issue or do not have any plans will be discussed subsequently.

Numerous single men resort to the rural Five-Guarantee Support Provisions as the financial support for their later life. This program is part of the governmental welfare system and caters to vulnerable populations in rural areas, mostly childless seniors and the disabled who lack labour capacity or access to income. ‘Five-Guarantee’ refers to five basic living needs, including clothing, foods, housing,
medical care, and burial expenses, most of which are offered as material goods. Frequently, local people use the term ‘five guaranteed households’ as a reference to the program. Except material support, monetary support is secured by old-age insurance, which is available to seniors over 60 years of age. This is the only channel of receiving financial assistance for some underprivileged old single men. Nursing houses are established in central towns in order to support seniors collectively. In official discourse, these three regulations are triple-guarantees for the older population.

The budget of Five-Guarantee Support Provisions and the amount of old-age insurance vary according to the fiscal status of local governments. Baijia is less economically developed than Lijia; both the two items of assistances are lower in Baijia than in the latter. According to our informants in the field, in Baijia, the total budget for the Five-Guarantee Support Provisions is 3000 yuan in 2011. And the old-age insurance is 50 to 70 yuan per person per month. In Lijia, by contrast, The Five-Guarantee Support Provisions provide 1,800 yuan per person per year for people who prefer living at home. The local government encourages seniors in need to reside in nursing houses collectively; a higher amount of 2,600 per person per year is offered for those who prefer this living arrangement in later life. Old-age insurance in Lijia is 150 yuan per person per month, two times more than that of Baijia.

Other than state-funded elder care support, people in both sites develop similar elder care norms and practices. It is prescribed that an individual family member (usually a nephew or a niece) should carry on the responsibility of taking care of childless seniors in the family. This practice is evidently encouraged and further regulated in Baijia. According to our informant, the local government regulates that each family with childless seniors should allocate a person within the family to take the responsibility of elder care. However, it is not a compulsory but merely a moral obligation. As a result, nominal allocations may occur when the assigned person fails to meet the obligation.

Relying on the Government

Relying on the government refers to the situation that single men plan to be or are primarily supported by any of the three state-funded resources: the Five-
Guarantee Support Provisions, old-age insurance, and nursing homes. For single men, who are of extremely underprivileged condition, formal support provided by the government is the only resource available to them.

Now the national policy is getting better. Some of the single men rely on the country exclusively. Like in my village, there are a lot of problems alike. Many Five-Guarantee Households involve people who fail to get married. In the end, they have to be supported by the country. There is no way out of it.

#112004 (married man, aged 44 years)

Interviewer: Since two of your sons are not married, what do you think would happen to them when they are getting old?
The mother: What can you do? We can only go to the Happiness House [local nursing home]. We have no strategies but relying on the country to support.

#211111 (mother of two single sons, aged 71)

However, a nursing house is not truly welcomed by single men in both towns, probably because it is not identified as a home. More likely, it serves as the last resort for people who are dearly short of living capital. Like Kong (aged 52) said, “I will go to the nursing house if I am out of means one day, but not for now. Home is much better.” A 67-year-old bachelor who relies heavily on governmental support revealed his hesitation about nursing homes, as well as his general thoughts on elder support programs:

My life is okay so far. The country is caring. I have a pension since I was 60 years old. And I have the ‘Five-Guarantee’ to provide me food and clothes. I don’t have major problems in my life because I am taken care of by the country. But when I get older, that is the next step. I haven’t thought of it. It is hard to tell. We have a nursing house here. If you can move, you can spend your later life there by transferring the pension to the house. If not, they would send you back. #211012 (single man, aged 67)

For some single men who are capable of making money and have wider social networks and kin resources, formal support is not regarded as the only dependence. But among various alternatives, such as relying on nephews and saving money for
elder care, formal support is ranked as a prioritized source. A single man talked of his future plan:

I don’t have any other thoughts [on seeking a wife]. I am already 50 years old. The national policy would be better in the near future. It would be perfect that I am settled down in this way. If not, I have a nephew. He would take charge of me if he can. If not, I will go to somewhere else. I have other places to go. I know some employers who are good to me. [I will] do migrant work outside and make some money. When I am old, if the country doesn’t give me money, then I have money on my own. I can’t aggravate burdens to the Party and the government, nor can I do that to my nephew. #211003 (single man, aged 39)

When he gets old, we will apply for the ‘five-guarantee’ and let the country take charge of him. He can also make some money on his own. My whole family might be taking care of him as well. #211105 (sister-in-law of a single man, aged 61)

**Relying on Close Relatives**

Except for material and monetary support from public service, single men view familial support as a practical way to secure later life. Some adopted children as their future caregivers (adoption is also a strategy of securing elder care, discussed below), rely on their siblings, or their nephews and nieces for instrumental support. This generational contract is unwritten and abides by no law in either town (regulated by the local government of Baijia in a relaxing manner though), but is developed as a social prescription.

My aging father is worrying about my brother. He entrusts us to take care of this brother when the time comes. We have not thought of how to take care of him. We will discuss it by that time. When he gets old, his brothers and sister [herself] will take care of him. Right now, he doesn’t need any help. He eats on his own and has working skills. He earns 100 yuan per day. That is sufficient for one person. #211105 (sister of a single man, aged 55)

For now, my mother-in-law lives with her two single sons. When they get old, it would be us to provide [them with support]. We are their brothers [and sisters]. His brothers are going to take care of him. Also,
I have three sons. The third and the fifth brothers-in-law have sons, too. These sons are going to take care of him. #213209 (sister-in-law of two single men, aged 50)

The following segment of conversation reveals how taking care of childless single men is internalized as a practice that is as normal as a son’s responsibility towards his parents.

**Interviewer:** When he gets old …

**Sister:** When he gets old, what can he do? Relying on the ‘five-guarantee’ and he has some nephews to take care of him. What else can you do about it?

**Interviewer:** Do you think this arrangement would increase burdens to the nephews?

**Sister:** Great pressure, but no way out of it. He doesn’t have a son, which means his nephews are going to provide elder care. In rural areas, if one doesn’t have a son, then his nephews have to take care of him. No matter how poor the nephew’s own food is, he serves him with the same food.

#211105 (sister of a single man, aged 55)

While the above quotes are from close relatives who share family ties with single men, it is important to hear single men’s voice on elder care support. Both uncertainty and certainty are exhibited in the following narratives.

My nephew and I get along well. But in terms of whether he takes care of me when I get old, it is really hard to say. It all depends on how his life is coming along. #211007 (Liu, single man, aged 49)

My nephew does interior decoration in the county. I think he is able to take care of me, but not his wife. I can’t say it for sure. She has a bad temper. She speaks in an impulsive and cranky way. For me, they [the couple] have parents to support. In our village, there is a man who is incapable of maintaining his own parents, let alone me, the uncle of my nephew. I am worried that they don’t take care of me. So I do migrant work outside and make money for elderly support. #12102 (Wang, single man, aged 50)

A 67-year-old bachelor talked, in a confident tone, about why his nephews are likely
to support him:

I have a nephew [on his brother’s side] who can take care of me. I also have some nephews on my sisters’ side, and I think they will take care of me too. [Because] they take excellent care of my sister and they visit me regularly. My nephew [on his brother’s side] treats me well. I think it is possible that he takes care of me when I am old, 80 percent of odds. Because I treat him well, and I often buy snacks for his kids. #211012 (Gong, single man, aged 67)

If I fail to find a wife in the future, then I will ask my nephews to take care of me. I have talked about it with my sister. It is good if I can get married; if not, I will let her two kids take charge of me. Everything I possess will be theirs. #111004 (Yan, single man, aged 40)

Both Gong and Yan were fully aware of the vital role of norm of reciprocity in defining ‘elder care contracts’ with their nephews. They attempted to increase the likelihood of being taken care of in the future by using strategies, such as investing in a kin tie and giving inheritance to a potential caregiver.

Our informant in Lijia narrated a local ritual called guoji, referring to a practice of acknowledging the nephew as the son of a childless senior or unmarried uncle. As a result, the nephew, as a surrogate child, should play the role of caregiver and take charge of elder care for his ‘father’. This ritual offers a solution for the problem of childless vulnerable individuals’ later life support. This ritual resembles the practice in Baijia and is universally shared in a wider rural environment in China (possibly under different names and varied regulations). The informant said,

If a single uncle has a brother who has [at least] two sons, it is likely that the second son is guoji to his uncle. In our dialect, we call it qinshou. The uncle has no descendants. Who is going to get the property once he dies? Give it to his close nephew. The nephew inherits his property, and for sure he is granted the maintenance obligation towards his uncle. But, the uncle doesn’t necessarily have the obligation of raising the nephew. With the practice of guoji, the father-son dyad is legitimized in the law. Besides, the issue of face matters. It would be very embarrassing when a single man hits into later life, yet there is nobody in front [taking care of him]. He will
come up and practice qinshou. There are not many people doing this, eight to ten in every village [in the town].

Evidently from the narrative, the norm of reciprocity is embedded in the ritual of gouji. Financial resources (the uncle’s property) and elder care service (provided by the nephew) are exchanged in a formal way to ensure equal benefits for the two parties. It appears that symmetrical reciprocity is a defining feature of this ritual; consequently, it is less likely to occur if the single uncle is unable to offer adequate property to his nephew due to household poverty. Consequently, the nephew might become a net provider over the long term, without receiving any concrete returns. The resource exchange between uncle and nephew can be asymmetrical.

Now I shift the analysis to the individual level, which allows for a better understanding of the reciprocity assumption in inter- or intra-generational care contracts. Although the previous three individual cases (Gong, Yan, and Chen) did not explicitly indicate their intentions to practice gouji, their ideology on elder care support virtually resembles the norm of reciprocity. Their narratives of the stress on what they should contribute in the intergenerational care relation, for instance, serves as testimony to their positive expectations of nephews or siblings, and it further justifies their roles as potential care recipients. Once the contribution is reduced or vanished on the single men’s side, like in the case of Chen, the strategy of gouji, as a guarantee of care provided by a nephew or seeking care support from siblings, tends to be uncertain and fragile in the eyes of single men.

Now we turn our focus to gender differences to examine whether the roles of brothers/nephews and sisters/nieces are perceived differently in elder care support. As stated earlier, none of the single men we interviewed are singletons. On average, they have three siblings. For sibling potentially becomes a caregiver; gender differences are not highlighted in the narratives of both family members and single men (for example, see the monologue of Sun on p. 74 and Chen on p. 105). Either sisters or brothers can take on the task of caring for single brothers; however, for children of siblings as caregivers, nephews are strongly preferred. This preference is not surprising, given the fact that rural residents widely regard males as caregivers, a role that is recognized by males as husbands, brothers, sons, or nephews. In the fieldwork, there were only two participants who linked elder care responsibility to
neces. The following dialogue with bachelor Wang (aged 39) reveals his uncertainty when facing the unpredictability of elder care by his niece.

Interviewer: Have you thought of your elder care issue?
Wang: I am thinking … my brother has a daughter …
Interviewer: How old is she?
Wang: 20 years old.
Interviewer: You are thinking of letting your niece take care of you?
Wang: Yes.
Interviewer: Have you talked to your niece? What’s going on in her mind?
Wang: I have. She said she is going to take care of me.
Interviewer: But your niece will marry out someday, right?
Wang: Marrying out, she can come to see me on a regular basis.
Interviewer: What if your niece marries to a remote place? Then she is unable to take care of you.
Wang: Yes ….. yes ….. (silence)
Interviewer: Do you have any plan on elder care?
Wang: I can say yes, the nursing house. But I have never thought of living in a nursing house so far. I will think about it later [when I get old]. #211001

Pan is 19 years old. She is the granddaughter of Song whose story was presented earlier (see p. 116). She is the niece of Song’s younger single son. She just returned home from the National College Entrance Exam when we approached her. She looked quiet and talked softly. She assured me that she and her brother are the ones who are going to take care of their uncle when he ages.

Interviewer: Do you or your family have frequent daily contact with your uncle?
Pan: Not too much.
Interviewer: If your uncle doesn’t have a wife and children to take care of him in the later life, would you worry about him?
Pan: My brother [aged 13] and I will take care of him.
Interviewer: Have you talked to your uncle? Do you and your uncle agree on that?
Pan: No, it is what I think in my mind.
Interviewer: Do your parents agree on your decision?
Pan: I think my uncle treats me very well. And my parents also expect me to take care of him. #114002
The above substantial narratives reveal that close relatives revolving around single men do exhibit a high level of willingness to share elder care obligations in the near future. However, family solidarity does not necessarily define a household unit as a unitary one. Conflicts and contradictions provoked by single men’s elder care issues can go hand in hand with harmonious aspects of family relations and sometimes stand out as a feature of households. I employ the case of Xiong to exemplify the ambivalence of family relations.

Relying on the Five-Guarantee Program, Xiong has been living alone for more than 35 years. He has been single ever since his wife divorced him after a two-year marriage in 1974. The divorce was attributed to the dissolution of his exchange marriage. His sister, who was married to his wife’s brother, got divorced because of domestic abuse. With a strong sense of unfairness, Xiong’s father has not submitted to this situation. Later on, he asked Xiong and his wife to divorce and sent his wife back to her natal family.

His wife raised their only daughter, who was young at the time of divorce. The daughter did not recognize him as her father until three or four years ago. He also admits that there were no emotional ties to his daughter. He has a brother and two sisters who treat him well, but he does not get along well with the brother’s wife (his sister-in-law) or the elder nephew’s family. Xiong talked of his status after divorce and his relations with the sister-in-law:

I was of low spirit after the divorce. I have been living alone and having nobody to talk to. The divorce stressed me out and I did not feel like talking to people for a long time. My sister-in-law does not treat me well. She scolds and irritates me. She has a bad attitude against me because I am single. She is not reasonable. She would suspect me if something in her house were missing. My brother is good to me. It is just my sister-in-law. My brother would invite me over for lunch or dinner. But I don’t feel like going because of my sister-in-law. #111201

When asked if his nephews (his brother has two sons) would be able to take care of him, he revealed his conflicted relations with the younger nephew’s family:

I have thought of the possibility of receiving support from my brother’s children. But I don’t see the possibility. His younger son is
handicapped and single, and leads a tough life. The senior one, I don’t want to live with him. He doesn’t treat me well. Usually, I don’t talk to this couple. It is meaningless to make contact with them. For example, I give away stuff to them when I am capable. But their stuff, you never think about it. They do think of the elder care issue of mine. What is in their mind is that everything of mine goes to them when I am old or dead one day. #111201

Except for nephews, the last resort goes to his daughter. But according to Xiong’s narrative, it is very likely that he is going to live by himself for the rest of his life:

I take care of myself regularly. It is very difficult to tell whether my daughter is going to take care of me. She has never lived with me. I am neither sure nor expecting that she takes care of me in the future. I don’t want to stay in the nursing house neither. I plan to stay at home when I get older. #111201

Xiong has both positive and negative relationships with family members. He was overwhelmed by discordant ties with his sister-in-law and his nephew. The detached and estranged relations with his daughter have left little hope for him to rely on her for elder care. Relationship quality is an important indicator for how much, if any, assistance single men can get in later life from close relatives.

Self-dependence

Rather than resorting to public and familial resources to guarantee elder care support, some single men attempt to secure their future by saving their own money.

I have an annual income of 10,000 yuan [USDS1620], out of which I can save 4,000 to 5,000 yuan. I primarily save the money for elder care of myself, and a suitable wife as well. #111007 (single man, aged 49)

Interviewer: Do you have any plan for your later life?
Single man: I am not planning anything. [I don’t know] if I were to die here or my bones were buried somewhere else. Economic wise, I work for people on a minefield, driving a three-wheeled car, and transporting minerals. Anyways, if you have a healthy body, you are not likely to run out of
what you have made in one month within a year. I will make money to arrange myself in the future.

#112102 (ever married single man, aged 50)

The other independence strategy is adoption. Because of son preference, boys are preferred to girls in terms of elder care. It is not as easy to adopt boys, since they are abandoned less often than girls, especially in rural areas. At the point of fieldwork, there were four cases involving adoption, three of which will be elaborated below (the information on the fourth case was indirectly retrieved from a neighbour of the subject, we know little about the detailed process of adoption). Not many single men resort to adoption, although many have the desire. Lacking skills for raising children and having limited money or resources were highlighted as the major reasons for not adopting.

I have thought of adopting a kid. But my parents are too old to take care of kids, and I am not confident to raise a kid on my own. #211001 (single man, aged 39)

I have never thought of adoption, given the fact that I can’t even feed myself. I can’t do heavy work because my waist hurts. I can work for people and make small money when my waist is not in pain. Now I can’t make money, what do I need a kid for? Schooling, housing, and marriage [all cost money]. I can’t even get married; do I have to help him get married? #211005 (single man, aged 49)

I have thought of adoption. But there are no available places [to adopt]. There are no kids available for adoption due to the One-child Policy. And I am not at home all the year round. #111007 (single man, aged 49)

In one of the three cases of adoption, parents adopted a daughter for their son, Lin, who did not get married till 31. The other two (Lu and Dong) are single men that took initiative to adopt; Lu adopted a son and Dong adopted a daughter.

Lin’s mother recalled their motives for adopting a daughter:
Girls were not willing to be introduced to my son. We were too poor. We were worrying about his marriage all the time. At that time, we were thinking of adopting a kid. This kid can take care of him if he failed to marry in the end. We adopted a two-year-old girl when he was 25 or 26 years old [in 1997 or 1998]. #113104

About five years later, Lin got married and had his biological daughter in 2005. The adopted daughter, although treated as a family member in the household, was then taught to call Lin ‘uncle’ instead of ‘father.’

By utilizing their personal networks, both Lu and Dong’s adoption were processed informally and privately. There were no involvements of official adoption registration institutions, such as Children Welfare House or Civil Bureau. Neither did they register the adopted children in the National Household (hukou) Registration System, which collects basic information of Chinese population. Lu talked about his adoption experience:

It has been 7 or 8 years [since adoption]. It was when I was doing migrant work in Jiangxi [a province over 1200 km from his hometown]. I had a close friend there. He had a wife. But he got involved with another woman and gave birth to a boy. I was then thinking that I was getting old yet still unmarried. So I adopted the boy as my son. The other woman was very willing to do so, since she was afraid to be discovered by the wife. I spent 10,000 yuan on the adoption. I think it is definitely worthwhile. How come it never be worth it (smile happily)? #111002

Lu did not inform his parents about the adoption in advance. He talked of how they reacted when he brought the boy home for the very first time, and how he and his family took care of him:

They [parents] just asked me, ‘where did you get the boy?’ I was then 35 years old and worried about not being able to get married. So I adopted a kid. It’s much better that I brought a kid home. It was my mother who raised the kid till he was one year and a half. She diapered him and did other things. Afterwards, I brought him to Jiangxi to attend kindergarten. [But] he can’t be registered. Good schools require household registration information, but not the case of
inferior ones. I have acquaintances there [in inferior schools] and they can handle it. My son has started elementary school for one year and a half. He lives with me in Jiangxi. I cook for him. I drop him off and pick him up at school on a daily basis. #111002

Likewise, Dong adopted a girl in a similar way. His mother stated with deep love to her ‘granddaughter’:

My son was introduced to this deal when he was doing migrant work in Xi’an. It was an illegitimate girl. The mother did not ask for money. We bought her some eggs and candies. We could not afford money. Then the girl was brought home. You haven’t seen the girl. Her skin is light, and she has big eyes with double-fold eyelids (smile happily). We love her so much. Whenever we have something to eat, we give it to her first. She helps do housekeeping around the house, and she is very diligent. [Interviewer: why did you want to adopt the girl?] I am already 80 years old. For how many years can I live? I was thinking there should be someone that takes care of him when I die, washing clothes and something like that. She has to marry in a place close to ours so that she can take care of him. #211108

There are three points highlighted in the cases of Lu and Dong. First, formal adoption is never considered a feasible channel. This is largely because the marital status and socioeconomic status of single men cannot meet the official criteria for eligible parents to adoption. Second, despite the fact that some single men do have the intention of adopting children (most of them have strong desires for sons), adopting a child is not intentionally planned. Labour migration significantly facilitates illegal adoption. Migrant workers, like Lu and Dong, are exposed to wider population and gradually form diversified social networks. Compared to other single men who are limited to smaller communities, they are more likely to achieve their intentions. Third, the availability of family members (especially mothers) ensures the success of adoption; playing the roles of both grandmother and mother, their contribution in caring for adopted children evidently buttresses the bond between adopted children and single men as fathers.
Not Planned/Giving up

For single men in their 30s and 40s, it is too early for them to consider the issue of elder care. They maintain a rather positive attitude towards their present and later life.

I have thought of my future. There are many things coming up, building and decorating the house, paying off debts, and buying a car later on. But I haven’t thought about my elder care issue. I am still young. I adjust my plan according to the situation. Seeking a wife, for example, if I can find one I will go for it; if not, just stop seeking. #111005 (single man, aged 33)

I am at my prime age; there is nothing that I am incapable of. As to elder care, I haven’t thought of that. Now I am physically healthy and able to work outside. So I don’t think about it. #111007 (single man, aged 49)

For most single men, a shortage of living resources and elder care strategies becomes a salient problem as they age. Without financial support and familial care networks, their later life is likely to be uncertain. Being pessimistic about life, one was even inclined to commit suicide as a solution to facing an unattended life in the future (see the fourth segment of narrative).

I haven’t thought of elder care issue for myself. I have no idea whether my relatives would be able to help me. Nor do I have enough money to support myself. #211008 (single man, aged 51)

I’ve no idea what is going to happen in the future. I don’t have old-age insurance or subsistence allowance right now. I haven’t thought of elder care. I can’t adopt a kid, since I am unable to raise one. Although I made some money by doing migrant work, I can’t afford adoption. I can’t plan out anything. #111003 (single man, aged 59)

I am worrying that I will be unattended when I get older. I am worrying about my future. But there is no way out of it. I don’t have any plan right now. I have to keep going and count the days. #111201 (single man, aged 62)
I have thought of my plan when I get older, at an early time. Many people who have sons and daughters even hang themselves. Children can secure your life once you are unable to move. Who takes care of you if you don’t have any children? It is impossible to ask my nephew to take care of me. Can he do a good job? I don’t think so. I am thinking of having an early ending once I can’t move. No nuisance caused by me at all. #211012 (single man, aged 67)
Chapter 7: Conclusion and Discussion

This thesis adopted a multi-perspective approach to capture the dynamics of single men’s lives in rural China. Importantly, the analysis shed light on the transition to bachelorhood, and it situated this transition in the broader structural context of kinship, gender, and demography. First, the study revealed how single men exercise agency to seek a spouse in a severely constrained marriage market, where gender power differentials persist. By treating gender as a force operating on multiple levels, I was able to examine single men’s standing and their gender relations in the marriage market. Second, with regard to elder care arrangements, I provided insight into single men’s contribution to inter-and intra-generational transfers. Third, I have been able to contribute to a greater understanding of the nexus of labour migration and marriage in China’s current economic development, which is characterized by extensive internal labour migration flows. I argued that China’s internal labour migration contributes to both the expansion and reduction of marital opportunities. In this chapter, I discuss these three main findings and then provide a conceptual synthesis of how structural parameters contribute to an increasing proportion of single men in today’s marriage market.

In a nutshell, a structure and agency theoretical approach furthered our knowledge by showing that (1) high rates of male singlehood cannot be reduced to an outcome of the demographic female deficit because other significant structural parameters shape marital opportunities and the life course and (2) single men are active agents who contribute to their household, attempt to better their lives, and make plans for the future.

Marriage Strategies and Agency

The first research questions we asked were (1) “What are single men’s spouse-seeking experiences and strategies?” and (2) “What is the role of parents and siblings in this practice?”. Existing literature on this topic puts great emphasis on the active aspect of marriage agency, in the form of self-arranged free love and third-party introductions (see for example, Wang, 2012; Wei et al., 2008). Indirect and less initiative strategies are often ignored. This study suggests that marriage agency among single men is exhibited in diverse forms, directions, and strengths. While the
traditional introduction by matchmakers and acquaintances still serves as an optimal strategy to meet a potential spouse, alternatives are used to increase the chances of getting married. Seeking employment in order to make money and build new houses is an active form of agency, employed particularly by single migrant men. Rather than marry less eligible candidates or enter into unaffordable marriage transactions that will result in a deterioration of their quality of life, single men prefer to remain bachelors. While family members and relatives can assist their single son/brother in finding a spouse, parents’ discordant relationships with others may prevent their single sons from being matched successfully.

Birth cohort impacts on the nature of marital agency. The older generation of single men tends to be loyal to conservative spouse-seeking strategies. Considering the timing of the rising sex ratio, the younger generation of rural men born after the 1980s is more susceptible to the ‘female deficit’ in the marriage market. We find that some of them are motivated to practice more direct and flexible strategies to face marriage difficulties. The distinct manifestations of agency reflect the social construction of age expectations and normative marriage practices in two time periods. Despite the fact that single men in different generations face diverse structural constraints, our analyses support the argument that single men in disadvantaged positions are well aware of their capacity by virtue of their knowledge of the rural marriage market. Many single men are not passive victims of the shortage of women, but are able to make choices and seek alternatives in a severely constrained social environment. This finding manifests the proposition that the scenario of ‘having no choice’ does not necessarily result in a lack of action (Giddens, 1979). Singlehood can be used as a strategy for single men to avoid non-desirable marriages and maintain their quality of life, which fosters the transition from involuntary to voluntary bachelorhood.

**Gender Relations in the Marriage Market**

The second research question we asked was “What is the standing of single men in the rural marriage market?” and “How do gender relations affect single men’s standing and marriage transactions?”. Supporting the claims of Fan and Huang (1998, 2002), housing and the prospective husband’s location are central factors in the marriage decision-making in this study. The patriarchal system legitimizes men’s role in providing housing and financial security for marriage. Female hypergamous
marriage reinforces the importance of husband’s location, making it more difficult for men in remote locations to seek a wife. By and large, rural men are subject to the gendered structure of the marriage market, which is termed ‘gendered geographies of power’ by Mahler and Pessar (2001, 2003).

The framework of ‘gendered geographies of power’ is applicable to the research on the gender relations in the Chinese rural marriage market. Gender operates on multiple spatial and social scales (Mahler and Pessar, 2003) and is salient in the rural-rural and the rural-urban marriage markets. On the interpersonal scale, women are granted bargaining power to negotiate material benefits in the context of rising bride prices, aimed at providing them with an economically advantaged life. In the marriage market, the gender-biased practice is manifested in a spatial hierarchy of locations, ranging from remote mountains, the least desirable places, to central cities, the most desirable places. The economic disparities between rural and urban areas further motivate women to migrate through marriage to be upwardly mobile. Consequently, single men, who reside in remote locations and are of low socio-economic status, are trapped in the most disadvantaged position and vulnerable to be ‘left over’ in the local marriage market.

The stark contrast in marriage forms between the surrounding villages of Baijia town and Lijia town provides evidence of how gender is relational and performative with the changing social environment (Donato et al., 2006). For local and non-local women, Baijia is a less attractive place for marrying-in, due to its poverty and poor accessibility. Uxorilocality used to be viewed as an affront to male superiority and a transgression of the mainstream patrilocality. When faced with a shortage of women in the local community, single men chose uxorilocality as an alternative marriage arrangement. With more men practicing this form of marriage, it becomes more acceptable among the locals. Uxorilocality is strongly resisted in Lijia due to the relatively gender-balanced marriage market generated by a considerable in-flow of female migration. The prevalence of uxorilocality among single men in Baijia indicates that gender relations can be shaped by the changing dynamics in the local marriage market. Single men adapt to these changes by redefining uxorilocality as an alternative marriage strategy.
Elder Care Support

The study of elder care arrangements in households with at least one single man constitutes an important aspect of this thesis. With respect to this topic, two questions were addressed: (1) “What are the patterns of intergenerational transfers in households with single men?” and (2) “What are single men’s strategies for securing elder care support for themselves?”. A handful of literature has suggested that single men appear to be isolated from family and they are less qualified as caregivers for parents than their married peers. In this study, however, we find that single sons play a role in contributing to elderly support. Many of them are not isolated, but, rather, involved with family members in everyday life. The nature and amount of care provided by single sons varies according to their socio-economic characteristics, their siblings’ capability and availability, and parental needs.

Based on interview data, I identify three modes of elder care arrangements among parents, married siblings, and single sons. The first mode highlights the single son’s role as a primary caregiver and married siblings’ role as secondary caregivers. Single men mostly engage in nursing care, housekeeping work, or financial support. In the second mode, married siblings act as primary caregivers, while their single brothers act as secondary caregivers or care recipients. Being dependent on siblings to a certain degree, single brothers are not expected to provide concrete support to parents. The third mode is mutual support among the three parties. Caring support to parents can be roughly shared equally between single sons and their married siblings.

This research contributes to the knowledge of elderly support in households with single men in two ways. First of all, I argue that single men can play a central role in meeting parents’ needs. Single sons can provide various types of support, which is often indispensable to parents. This is particularly manifested in the first mode. Second, in both the first and second modes, the pattern of sharing tasks between single men and their siblings underscores the siblings’ role in offering support. In terms of elderly support for single men in the near future, the siblings’ role is highlighted as well. Relying on siblings and their children serves as the most pragmatic strategy for single men to secure aid in later life. Other strategies include relying on state provisions and implementing independent strategies, such as adopting children and saving money for old age.

The tradition of patrilineal filial piety dictates the paternal nephew’s filial obligation towards his single uncle. This form of intergenerational transfer has
become a social prescription in both Baijia and Lijia. However, with the infusion of egalitarian relations among generations in urban areas, the traditional principle of mandatory obligation towards the older generation is changing. In contemporary rural China, many people from the younger generation tend to believe that a ‘reciprocal contract’ serves as the basis of filial piety. Single uncles, who plan to rely on their nephews, are well aware of the importance of reciprocity.

This study finds that single uncles employ strategies, such as monetary and emotional investment in a kin tie, in an attempt to secure care from their nephews. While this uncle-nephew ‘elder care contract’ can work well for single men in some households, some other single men may end up having no nephews to care for them if there are discordant relationships with family members.

The life course perspective and its principles of interdependence (see Elder and Giele, 2009; Marshall and Mueller, 2003; Mayer, 2004) shed light on a theoretical understanding of inter- and intra-generational transfers in households with at least one single son. The first principle addresses the interconnection of the past, the present, and the future life of an individual (Heinz et al., 2009). Actors are able to monitor their thoughts and actions, by drawing upon past experiences and future expectations. In this study, single men are motivated to take purposive action in order to guarantee a secured later life. While many single men are limited to finding support in their immediate surroundings, some are able to use their own initiative to exercise agency and strategically foster their nephews, nieces, or adopted children as potential caregivers. Given the weak formal state-funded support, obtaining support from kin networks remains prevalent among single men in both study areas.

The concept of ‘linked lives’ (Elder, 1985a) shifts the focus from individual actions at the micro level to social relationships at the meso level. As Moen and Hernandez (2009) suggest, family members who share intimate networks are on a ‘social convoy’ where individuals are involved in intertwined relationships and their trajectories affect one another over time. In the case of single men in rural China, one of their most salient social networks is tied to siblings. Without siblings, single men are less likely to provide satisfactory support to parents, and their own elder care plan tends to be problematic. Marriage, as an important transition over the life course, impacts how care tasks are allocated among siblings. Empirical analysis of this research indicates that being married and committed to a spouse and children can serve as a legitimate reason for married siblings to avoid substantial support. Single
men are, subsequently, under more pressure to be caregivers. In addition, given that the failure to marry and produce offspring can be interpreted as an unfilial action, according to the rules of filial piety, some single men may weigh meeting dependent parents’ needs over getting married. Consequently, single men experience the transition from involuntary to voluntary bachelorhood with the practice of parental elder care.

This task-imbalanced care arrangement may cause conflicts between a single brother and his siblings, as well as create ambivalent feelings towards the single brother. In the life course perspective, marital status is a common cause of power differential among siblings. This study illustrates how some married siblings hold more power than their single brothers, regarding, for example, access to money and parental elder care arrangements (see the case of Chen as an example, in Chapter 6, p. 105). Disagreements with married siblings may stem from these power differentials, although it is not explicitly seen in this study. Some single men – who still maintain the desire to marry – may view their role as a primary caregiver ambivalently; their chances of finding a wife are virtually constrained by the cultural and institutional expectations on a son’s filial obligation to his parents. This form of sociological ambivalence reveals the complex relations among single sons, their siblings, and elderly parents (Connidis, 2010; Connidis and McMullin, 2002a, 2002b).

Most of the single men who participated in the interviews were born in the 1960s and 1970s, when larger families were expected in rural households and encouraged by the state. Single men in this cohort often had multiple siblings, as seen in this study where single men have an average number of three siblings. At the local level, causes of bachelorhood among men of this generation were primarily attributed to poverty, the inequality of marriage resources among brothers, and individual characteristics.

As a result of the preference for fewer children, as well as the mandatory birth control policies, fertility rates have declined rapidly since the early 1980s. Men born throughout the 1980s and 1990s are likely to have only one sibling at most (Greenhalgh, 1994). Moreover, men of this generation who belong to the first cohorts will likely face a very competitive marriage market when they reach adulthood. In this study, most of the single men we interviewed were from earlier generations, typically born in the 1960s and 1970s. The evidence we provided revealed the
important role of single men’s siblings in providing care for both parents and single men, indicating how families adapt to the presence of a single man. In the future, it could be a potential problem for younger generations of single men, who have fewer or no siblings/nephews to rely on. It will be worth exploring how single men negotiate elder care in smaller families.

**Labour Migration and Marriage**

The third set of research questions asked included (1) What is the relationship between labour migration and marriage/non-marriage? and (2) How does labour migration affect single men’s marriage ideologies and practices? Some scholars have argued that labour migration has a positive effect on marriage among single migrant workers. It appears that labour migration expands migrant workers’ social networks and increases their chances of meeting potential spouses from outside villages (Davin, 2007; Fan and Li, 2002). Because it is easier for female migrant workers to get married during or after labour migration, women benefit more from labour migration (Bossen, 2007; Fan and Huang, 1998; Zhang, 2009).

From the perspective of my study participants who migrate for work, however, labour migration was not viewed as a strategy to find a spouse. Rather, marriage was an unintended outcome of migration. Migrant workers, regardless of their marital status, prioritized making money, rather than getting married, as the motivation for working outside their home villages. Besides the positive nexus between labour migration and marriage, we find that labour migration can actually prevent marriage. The remote geographic distance between the place of origin and destination often blocks single migrant men, who prefer endogamy, from seeking a spouse back home. In some cases, marriage through labour migration tends to be less achievable when the sex structure in the workplace is highly masculinized or feminized. Thus, labour migration often delays the timing of marriage. It sometimes serves as a cause for remaining single or as a transition to permanent singlehood, even when it would be difficult for these men with less attractive attributes to seek a wife regardless. Therefore, labour migration and marriage interact in complex ways. Whether labour migration results in marriage must be understood in association with individual preferences, the gendered labour market, and structural forces underlying migration.
Singlehood, Marriage, Elder Care Support, and Structure

Singlehood is not only a status that results from a postponed transition to marriage and parenthood; it is also a process embedded in broader institutional and structural parameters. The concept of ‘duality of structure’ proposed by Giddens (1979:69) is central to understanding the complex relationship between singlehood and the wider social processes. Giddens (1979) contends that the structural properties are both the medium and the outcomes of the agent’s practices. Addressing the interaction of multiple structural properties, Sewell (1992) suggests that structures can operate at multiple social levels and also intersect with one another. In this study, there are three institutional/structural factors that provide theoretical underpinnings of marriage and non-marriage, the marriage market, and elder care arrangements among households with single men. They also provide fundamental contexts for this research of singlehood in rural China. These factors include the following:

1) The patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal kinship system as an institutional principle;
2) Gender as a structural principle;
3) The skewed sex ratio at birth as a structural property.

First, as elaborated in Chapter 2, the patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal kinship systems serve as an institutional property that establishes marriage norms among rural residents. The patrilocal post-marital living arrangement makes the attributes of prospective husband’s housing and location of residence crucial in marriage transactions. The patriarchal system also dictates that the husband and his family should pay a bride price to the bride’s family, as a form of compensation for the loss of labour from the wife’s family. Rural men, who are less capable of meeting such requests, are more likely to stay single. Meanwhile, the very system enables women to be more mobile and marry into more prosperous villages, creating gender power differentials in favour of women in the rural marriage market. On the other hand, given a son’s legitimate status in a lineal system, a son is obliged to serve his parents in their old age, according to the rules of filial piety established on the basis of the kinship system. For a single man, the failure to continue his family’s lineage may heighten him with the sense of not being filial. Subsequently, he has to conform to the expectation of filial piety. Hence, the Chinese kinship system is intimately
related to marriage difficulties among single men and the gendered filial obligation to parents. Individual single men’s choice and agency are driven, and reproduced, by the kinship system, which features patrilocal marriage and patrilineal descent.

Second, in my theoretical chapter, I elaborated on how gender, as a process and stratification, exerts an impact at multiple social levels that link the institution of marriage. To move beyond the institutional level, gender as a structure also produces gender inequality within households and in the marriage market. The intersection of gender, location, and class further leads to a power hierarchy among men and women of multiple socio-economic statuses. Consequently, men from the bottom of the social rung are subject to a shortage of ‘acceptable’ spouses. With regard to elder care support, gender is an embedded factor that constructs the patriarchal system, particularly patrilineal descent and patrilineal inheritance. Nephews, instead of nieces, continue to be an important source of elder care for single men in later life; they are also legitimated as ‘heirs’ of their single uncle, if they agree to perform the role of caregiver. In this male-centered kinship system, paternal nephews become surrogate sons for single men. Gendered care arrangements and patrilineal descent assign the symbolic and practical meaning of the father-son relationship to the uncle-nephew dyad.

Third, the rising sex ratio at birth since the 1980s sets the demographic backdrop for understanding male bachelorhood. Most research to date casts the increase in single men as a direct effect of this demographic imbalance. Indeed, strictly speaking, a surplus of men, relative to women, creates a ‘marriage squeeze’, which is a salient problem for men in rural areas. However, this demographic effect cannot be considered above other structural factors and must be examined as part of the fundamental organizing principles of Chinese society, such as the kinship and gender systems. This is in association with labour migration, whereby the spasmodic migration flows mask the true picture of the sex structure of local populations. Interviews with a wider range of residents in Baijia and Lijia affirmed this proportion.

Despite the fact that high levels of sex ratio at birth were documented in the two towns studied for this research, the perception of the sex imbalance in the local marriage market varied among rural residents. A few young unmarried men, who were born in the late 1980s and are in the first cohort of ‘surplus men,’ claimed a strong sense of a smaller proportion of marriageable girls. Some of their female peers
and a few middle-aged married men, who were finding it difficult to marry their sons, echo the viewpoint of those young unmarried men. People’s perceptions were based on the sex composition of households they observed in their everyday lives. Most of them told us that, while many households have two boys or a boy and girl, it was rare to find households with two girls. This was the case in both study sites.

On the other hand, however, a sizeable number of single men, middle-aged men and women, and seniors did not have the sense of the ‘female deficit.’ They observed that unmarried men could always find girlfriends in the workplace and bring them home to marry. This was particularly salient in Lijia. Indeed, the locals, even single men of prime marriageable age, did not readily identify the ‘marriage squeeze’ at the ground level. This is largely due to the rural-urban migration for work. Like their male peers, young unmarried women were also absent from hometowns because they were working in urban areas. The outflows of the younger population distorted the sex structure in the local marriage market, making the issue of the ‘marriage squeeze’ less appreciable.

In sum, an analysis of the complex relations between singlehood, the marriage market, elder care arrangements, and the three institutional/structural factors discussed above provides evidence for the ‘duality of structure’ or ‘agency within structure’ (Heinz et al., 2009). The patriarchal kinship system and the structure of gender operate at multiple levels, including the micro (individual and interpersonal), meso (family and marriage), and macro (demographic structure). The sex imbalance is manifested at both the meso (family and marriage) and macro (sex structure) levels, while it is veiled at the micro (individual) level by the distortion of migration. With the deterioration of the sex imbalance, the three factors also intersect and will produce combined effects in rural communities. First, the intersection of the patriarchal kinship system and gender creates female-advantaged gender relations in the marriage market, while males continue to be advantaged within households (see Bossen, 2002; Wolf, 1972; Yan, 2004). Second, the interplay between the sex imbalance and gender may lead to ambivalent statuses among rural women, increasing their value on one hand, while exposing them to the risk of kidnapping or trafficking for marriage on the other. Third, the rising sex ratio at birth exacerbates a shortage of women, which may lead to the weakening of son preference, provoke changes with respect to marriage norms and singlehood, and enhance the status of daughters relative to sons.
Study Limitations and Future Research

This research has a number of limitations that affect the scope of the findings. First, due to the selection effect of out-migration for work, younger men in their 30s were absent from both Baijia and Lijia. Most of the men, who were present and available for interviews, tended to be over 40 years of age. While men in the 30s are theoretically recognized as belonging to the first generation of ‘surplus men,’ a larger number of interviews with them would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effect of the sex imbalance at the ground level and the magnitude of the ‘marriage squeeze’ in the rural areas. While my analysis of the younger cohort of ‘surplus men’ is only based on a few cases, it is important for future research to splice a holistic picture regarding spouse-seeking strategies and intergenerational transfers among younger cohorts.

Second, our anticipated extensive ethnographic observations were limited by the bureaucratic constraints from the local governments in both towns. One of our original research objectives was to examine how singlehood affects family relations over time. However, given limited time, it became difficult for researchers to capture the dynamics of family relations, which requires substantial interviews and observations. The short period of fieldwork limited my ability to unpack both the inter-and intra-generational relationships of single men.

Based on the scope of existing literature on single men’s family dynamics and bachelorhood in rural China, future researchers can expand their views to explore how singlehood affects elder care arrangements over time and, in turn, how filial obligations affect the transition to permanent singlehood. Two additional questions to examine are “How do bachelor migrant workers seek spouses in the workplace?” and “In seeking marriage partners, what factors facilitate or constrain them?”.

Studies that approach Chinese rural society with an open approach to how communities both contribute and adapt to social change will yield insightful results. Such studies will be particularly relevant when the so-called ‘marriage squeeze’ becomes more acute and younger generations reach marriageable ages. It is worth exploring how this demographic shift will potentially reconfigure gender relations in the near future. The frequent labeling and stereotyping of single men as being poor, uneducated, isolated, and a threat to stability and security must continue to be questioned.
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Appendix A: Interview Guide

A. Interview Guide for Single Men

1. Physical and psychological well-being
   - Health condition, medical history
   - Are you satisfied with your life?
   - Have you ever received unfair treatment in the neighbourhood?
   - Do you smoke/drink excessively?
     - If yes, in what condition and why?

2. Marital strategies
   - Spouse selective criteria, matchmaking experiences.
   - Have you thought of uxorilocal marriage? Why or why not? How do you view this form of marriage?
   - Have you thought of marrying a non-local woman? How about divorced, widowed women?
   - Have you thought of moving to live in other places?
     - If yes, what is your plan?

3. Interactions with family members
   - Do you co-reside with your parents?
     - If yes, please describe one ordinary day. Probes: domestic labor division in aspects of farm work, chores, errands.
     - If no, please describe one ordinary day, including when you work outside and when you return home. Probes: whether do housekeeping chores on your own? Do your parents help you? How do you view the housekeeping work which is supposed to be done by the wife?
   - Elder care of parents
     - What are your parents’ health conditions?
     - Are they capable of taking care of themselves or are they dependent?
       - If dependent, who takes care of them? What kind of care do they need? Do your parents receive support whenever they ask for?
   - Family relations: Parents and single men
     - How often do you see/contact them? Do they come to see you (if live separately) and how often?
     - Do you like to see your parents? Why or why not?
     - Do you feel comfortable staying with them? Why or why not?

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21 Given the scope of this research, the interview guide for non-local brides, and the theme of local people’s perceptions on non-local brides are not presented here. This is the translation of the original Chinese interview guides.
- How do they view your elder support contribution? Have they complained about it?
- Do you think your parents treat you as equal as your siblings? Why or why not?

**Family relations: Siblings and single men**
- How often do you see/contact them? Do they come to see you (if live separately) and how often?
- Do you like to see your siblings? Why or why not?
- Do you feel comfortable staying with them? Why or why not?
- How do they view your elder support to parents? Have they complained about it?
- Are you fairly treated by your siblings? Why or why not?
- Have you ever involved in quarrels/fights? Probes: If yes, in what condition, why, and how often.

**Family relations: Parents and siblings**
- How often do your siblings see/contact parents?
- How is the relationship between your parents and siblings?
- Have they involved in quarrels/fights? Probes: If yes, in what condition, why, and how often

4. Elder care plans of single men
- Do you have any plans for your own elder care?
  - If yes, what is it? How do you come up with the plan?
  - If no, do you think it is necessary to make plans?

**B. Interview Guide for Family Members of single men**

1. Marital experiences of each adult child. Probes: marriage transactions, the process of wedding, marital rituals, economic support from parents to to-be-married children, difficulties in providing support to marriage.

2. Familial pressure of having a single son/brother
- Does your son/brother’ bachelorhood produce any impact on your family life? If yes, what are they?
- Do you have any pressure on your son/sibling’s being single?
- Have you or your family members been treated differently because you have a single son/brother? What do you do when it happens?

3. Familial strategies for seeking a spouse for the single son/brother
- Have you or any of your family members attempted to seek a spouse for him?
- Have you or any of your family members asked a matchmaker to tie the knot for him? If yes, how many introductions have he experienced so far? What happened in each introduction? Have you encountered troubles during the
matchmaking? How did you deal with it?

- Have you or any of your family members thought of seeking a divorced/widowed/older/non-local woman for him? If yes, what happened?

4. Elder care arrangements (For parents)

- Do you co-reside with your single son?
- Do you need assistance from your children? If yes, who provides what kind of support for you? What is your single son’s role in taking care of you?
- With the absence of the daughter-in-law of your single son, how do you view the current elder care arrangement?

5. Family relations (similar probes as in section A)

- Single men and parents
- Single men and siblings
- Parents and siblings

6. Elder care plans of single men

- Do you have any elder care plans for your single son/brother? If yes, what are they?
  - If yes, what is it? How do you come up with the plan? Why do you plan it out like this?
  - If no, do you think it is necessary to make plans?

C. Interview Guide for Married Men

1. Marriage and conjugal life

- Age at marriage? How and where did you meet your wife? Have you encountered any difficulties in finding a spouse and/or getting married?
- Probes: third-party introductions, free love, through migration, etc.
- Marriage cost, amount of payment on the husband’s side and the cost of bride price, amount of payment on the wife’s side and the cost of dowry, amount of payment for the intermediary.
- Are you satisfied with your current life? What is your standard of a ‘good wife’? Do you think your wife is a good one?
- Domestic labor division. Who is the head in your family? How do you make decision on family affairs? Who has a say in the decision-making process?

2. Perceptions on single men

- Do you know any unmarried older men in your village?
- How many? What are your perceptions on them?
- According to your observation, how are single men’ relationship with others in the village?

3. Elder care of parents
• What are your parents’ health conditions?
• Are they capable of taking care of themselves or are they dependent?
• If dependent, who takes care of them? What kind of care do they need? Do your parents receive support whenever they ask for?

D. Interview Guide for Local Married Women
1. Marriage and conjugal life
• Age at marriage? How and where did you meet your husband?
• Marriage cost, amount of payment on the husband’s side and the cost of bride price, amount of payment on the wife’s side and the cost of dowry, amount of payment for the intermediary.
• Are you satisfied with your current life?
• Domestic labor division. Who is the head in your family? How do you make decision on family affairs? Who has a say in the decision-making process?

2. Elder care of parents-in-law and natal parents (ask separately)
• What are your parents’ health conditions?
• Are they capable of taking care of themselves or are they dependent?
• If dependent, who takes care of them? What kind of care do they need? Do your parents receive support whenever they ask for?

3. Perceptions on single men
• Do you know any unmarried older men in your village?
• How many? What are your perceptions on them?
• According to your observation, how are single men’s relationship with others in the village?

E. Interview Guide for Parents-in-law of Local Married Women
1. Marriage and conjugal life of married sons
• Sons’ age at marriage? How and where did they meet? Do you find it difficult to finding a spouse and/or getting married for your son? If yes, what happened?
• Marriage cost, amount of payment on the husband’s side and the cost of bride price, amount of payment on the wife’s side and the cost of dowry, amount of payment for the intermediary.
• Domestic labor division. Who is the head in your stem family (or the nuclear families of sons’)?
• (If co-residing with the daughter-in-law) What kind of work does she do at home? Does she help you doing chores?
• How is the relation between you and your daughter-in-law? Any conflicts or contradictions?
2. Elder care arrangements/intergenerational transfer
   - Do you need assistance from your children? If yes, who provides what kind of support for you? What are your sons and daughters-in-law’s role in providing support, respectively?
   - Are you in charge of minding your grandchild (if she has one)? If yes, do your daughter-in-law pay for your work? If no, why not?

3. Perceptions on single men
   - Do you know any unmarried older men in your village?
   - How many? What are your perceptions on them?
   - According to your observation, how are single men’s relationship with others in the village?

F. Interview Guide for Young Unmarried Women
1. Family status
   - Do you assist your parents to do housekeeping work? What items do you do?
   - Are you involved in decision-making in your family? If yes, what kind of affairs are you involved in?

2. Relationship
   - Do you have a boyfriend?
   - If yes, how did you meet him?
   - Have you encountered any conflicts in your relationship? If yes, what happened? How did you solve it in the end?
   - Do your parents set up matchmakings for you? Do they recognize your boyfriend whom you seek on your own (if she has one)?
   - Do your peers have boyfriends/girlfriend? How do they meet with one another?
   - Do you find it difficult to find a boyfriend?

3. Marriage expectations
   - What do you think about marriage?
   - What is the ideal of your future husband? What is your parents’ ideal of your future husband?
   - Do you mind marrying afar from your home village? How about your parents?
   - In your opinion, what is the role of a wife? And what is the role of a husband?
   - What kind of living arrangement do you prefer after marriage?
   - What filial responsibilities do you think you should perform for your future parents-in-law? How about your biological parents?

4. Perceptions on single men
- Do you know any unmarried older men in your village?
- How many? What are your perceptions on them?
- According to your observation, how are single men’s relationship with others in the village?

G. Interview Guide for Cadres

1. Impact of the presence of single men
   - What is single men’s status in the village? Are you marginalized? Do they create trouble to your community?
     - If yes, what happened?

2. Policies on single men
   - Do you have any policies targeted single men in order to improve their lives?
   - Do you have formal elder care plans for single men? What will happen to them when they age?
   - Does the local government assist them in finding a wife?
Appendix B: Informed Consent

To whom it may concern:

Our research team is working on a project concerning the social impacts of the sex imbalance. We now sincerely invite you to participate in an interview. It is up to you to decide whether to participate or not. You are free to reject us if you do not feel comfortable about it. We anticipate 120 people to participate in interviews, including single men and their relatives, married men/women, unmarried young men/women, and etc.

This is one-on-one interview, during which an interviewer will ask you questions regarding your biographic information, courtship/matchmaking experience, domestic labor division and conjugal relations, elder care arrangements and inter-generational relations, and social networks.

The interview takes approximately 50 minutes. Feel free to reject any questions that make you uncomfortable during the interview. We will send you a gift once you finish the interview, for your kind cooperation. Your answers will help the government to understand the status quo of the sex imbalance issue.

We assure that we conform to the rules of anonymity and confidentiality, which means your personal information and answers will not be exposed to anyone except authorized researchers. We will keep the record of interview data in Xi’an Jiaotong University for five years. The interview does not involve any questions that expose your identity. Your answers will be analyzed in the form of interview data and publicized selectively for research purposes.

Feel free to contact us if you have any concerns or if you want to acquire further information on this research.

Call xxx-xxxxxxxxx to get in contact with Dr. Li Yan.
Or write to:
The Institute for Population and Development Studies (IPDS)

I have read the informed consent. I volunteer to participate in the interview after I was informed of my rights and obligations during the interview.

Signature of participant ___________________       Date ___________________

I acknowledge that the interviewee agrees to participate in the research based on his/her will. I have explained the rights in the interview to him/her. I believe that the interviewee understands the context of this consent, and volunteers to participation.

Signature of interviewer ___________________       Date ___________________
Use of Human Participants - Ethics Approval Notice

Principal Investigator: Dr. Daniele Belanger
File Number: 102472
Review Level: Full Board
Approved Local Adult Participants: 0
Approved Local Minor Participants: 0
Protocol Title: The Impact of the female deficit in Asia: case studies in Vietnam and China - 169765
Department & Institution: Social ScienceSociology, Western University
Sponsor: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council

Ethics Approval Date: April 25, 2012 Expiry Date: December 31, 2013

Documents Reviewed & Approved & Documents Received for Information:

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This is to notify you that The University of Western Ontario Research Ethics Board for Non-Medical Research Involving Human Subjects (NMREB) which is organized and operates according to the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario has granted approval to the above named research study on the approval date noted above.

This approval shall remain valid until the expiry date noted above assuming timely and acceptable responses to the NMREB’s periodic requests for surveillance and monitoring information.

Members of the NMREB who are named as investigators in research studies, or declare a conflict of interest, do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on, such studies when they are presented to the NMREB.

The Chair of the NMREB is Dr. Riley Hinton. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB00003441.

Sign off

Ethics Officer to Contact for Further Information

Grace Kelly
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