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Love and marriage for ‘leftover’ women: Representations and readings in Chinese media

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of Warwick, Department of Sociology

September 2019
To every woman who endeavours to obtain the choice, ability and courage to pursue the lifestyle she dreams of.
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### Abbreviations

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CCP</td>
<td>Chinese Communist Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>CDA</td>
<td>Critical Discourse Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eWOM</td>
<td>Electronic Word-of-Mouth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRC</td>
<td>People’s Republic of China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UGC</td>
<td>User Generated Content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOM</td>
<td>Word-of-Mouth</td>
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<tr>
<td>WTO</td>
<td>World Trade Organisation</td>
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Declaration

I declare that the thesis I have presented for examination for the PhD degree of the University of Warwick is solely my own work and that no material contained in this thesis has been submitted for a degree at another university.

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Abstract

For the last decade, urban professional single women in China aged thirty-plus have been labelled *sheng nü* (translated as ‘leftover’ women in English), a term popularised by the media. This research analyses three recent Chinese films portraying ‘leftover’ women, together with online reviews of the films. I address how ‘leftover’ women are constructed in Chinese media, how these representations are read by the audience and how this links with wider changes in Chinese urban society. The latter include changes in gender relations, love, marriage, intimacy and family relations, as well as wider trends concerning choice, modernity, individualisation and consumerism. Using genre analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA) along with multimodal techniques, my thesis addresses the representations and readings of ‘leftover women’ through the following key themes: self-identity, choices in love, and intergenerational and social ties with families and friends.

I argue that ‘leftover’ women are represented as having complex, mixed emotions; while proud of being independent professional women they also express anxieties about ageing and desires for a stable relationship. ‘Leftover’ women’s search for love in the films is associated with several cultural components, such as concern with the remote consequences of one’s decisions, cultural norms and consultation with family and friends. While marriage focused on *men dang hu dui*\(^1\) remains an acceptable and popular principle of a ‘good match’, the films also address individuals’ personalities and socioeconomic status as important dimensions. Finally, tensions between life choices as an individual and life choices shaped by tradition emerge from the representations and their audience readings, with parental intervention simultaneously normalised and criticised, and friends’ involvement emerging as a new form. Overall, I argue that the contemporary preoccupation with ‘leftover’ women reflects anxieties about the changing status of Chinese women and their quest for more agency and autonomy, as they navigate the tensions between choice and tradition.

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\(^1\) Compatible family backgrounds
Chapter 1 Introduction: The Chinese ‘leftover’ women phenomenon

Introduction

If you are an unmarried Chinese woman in your late twenties, as I am, you may face several questions when meeting family members: ‘Do you have a boyfriend?’; ‘Are you dating someone now?’; ‘To find a husband is an urgent task!’ It is embarrassing when my relatives ask similar questions, especially at family gatherings such as the Chinese New Year. Their anxiety and concern about a daughter’s unmarried status induces parents to gather in parks, displaying photos of their daughters and listing requirements that a potential husband needs to meet: a man with a house, a car and a stable income, and so forth (Ji, 2015). Consequently, these questions and concerns are more than personal or family issues, and unmarried women in their late twenties in contemporary China have been given the official term sheng nü, which translates as ‘leftover’ women. In this thesis, I argue that the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon relates to wider changes in Chinese urban society, in love and marriage culture, intimacy and gender relations. Moreover, these shifts are in turn related to broader trends concerning choice, neoliberalism, individualisation, modernity and consumerism in contemporary China. Researching ‘leftover’ women has proved a fruitful way to better understand and critique the concept, and to open-up debates and anxieties about the changing status of Chinese women; women who seek more agency and autonomy in their personal lives as they navigate the tensions between choice and tradition.

My thesis is a qualitative analysis of the representations and readings of ‘leftover’ women in film. It is broadly situated in several academic fields: film and audience studies, women and gender studies, family and marriage studies. I investigate three Chinese romantic comedies about ‘leftover’ women, together with relevant long audience reviews about these films on the Douban Movie website (a film review platform). Using genre analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA) accompanied by multimodal textual analysis, I analyse the representations and readings of the

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2I place ‘leftover’ in inverted commas to contest that these women are “leftover” by men and the associated stigma.
‘leftover’ women phenomenon through the following key themes: self-identity; choices in love; romantic relationships, intergenerational and social ties with families and friends. In this introductory chapter I will start by further contextualising the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon, providing a rationale for the thesis and detailing my research questions. Thereafter I will highlight my methodology and research design, before concentrating on my research aims and contribution to knowledge. The chapter ends with an outline of my thesis structure.

1. The Chinese ‘leftover’ women phenomenon

The word *sheng nü* first came to my attention in 2012. I was a student at Fudan University conducting a study on a dating show. It was a popular word used on the TV show to describe single women over a certain age. When talking with my friends and family about ‘leftover’ women, lots of them told me that they knew the word and had learned it from media representations. I was surprised how widely the term was circulating; even my grandparents in their seventies knew it. Thereafter, more television dramas, films and news coverage represented/reported ‘leftover’ women’s love lives and lifestyles, invoking much public and academic interest. I watched a television drama called *Let’s get married* with my family in 2013, based on the story of a 32-year-old professional urban woman, Tao Yang, her singlehood, her marriage and her family. I remember, very clearly, a man being rude to Tao on a blind date. He said, ‘You are a leftover woman that is already over 30. Only your face can be called somewhat pretty. You should be begging men to marry you!’ I was shocked that he said these rude words, but also confused and curious about why an elite single woman like Tao would be called ‘leftover’? I was provoked to conduct research on gender stereotyping and constructions of ‘leftover’ women during my MSc and the more I learned, the more complex I found the Chinese ‘leftover’ women phenomenon to be.

It is difficult to locate the origin of the term *sheng nü* (‘leftover’ women). It was officially recognised in the Chinese lexicon in 2007 (Qin, 2012) and has certainly been popularised since then by the media. The word *sheng* is used to describe ‘leftover’ or ‘spoiled food’ and *nü* is a generic word to refer to women (Fincher, 2014). When *sheng nü* is used in relation to women, the term means ‘those women who are not desired by
men and remain unmarried’. The implication is that they are ‘leftover’ because they will never be regarded as marriageable, but rather “spoiled” and “left on the shelf”. The definition and translation of *sheng nü* have changed somewhat over time. In earlier research, *sheng nü* are also called ‘3S women’ in its translated form, which means they are single, born in the seventies and stuck in their singlehood (Lv, 2011). However, in popular parlance, *sheng nü* is usually translated as ‘leftover’ woman and used to describe a well-educated, high income, independent woman who is single, never married and near or over 30 years old (Cheng, 2011). Certainly, such unmarried women are an empirical reality. According to the 2010 Chinese Census, there were more than 1.2 million unmarried women (aged 25 to 34 years old) in China, and the number of unmarried, independent women has been increasing—in affluent Chinese cities in particular (To, 2013). However, the extent to which they are ‘leftover’ obviously needs to be investigated, not just assumed.

Various media products about ‘leftover’ women were quite popular when the term emerged; for instance, news coverage titled ‘Behind the leftover women phenomenon’ and ‘Different ranks in being a leftover woman’ (Wei, 2016); dating shows (*If you are the one, Are you the one?*); TV series (*Let’s get married*); films (*Desire of the Heart, I Do*). Academic studies exploring the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon in Chinese media quickly followed. These include an analysis of single women in the dating show *Are you the one?* (Luo and Sun, 2015); coverage of ‘leftover’ women on Sina news3 (Wang, 2017); the different types of ‘leftover’ women represented on TV (Cheng, 2011); and the media’s role in promoting the concept of ‘leftover’ women and gender stereotypes (Guo, 2015). There has also been some recent discussion of ‘leftover’ women in Chinese films (Li, 2017; Li and Liu, 2016) but this field remains underdeveloped, and there has been no consideration of audience readings of ‘leftover’ women. All these factors, together with my previous research and training in media studies, inspired me to research how films represent ‘leftover’ women, and how the audience reads and responds to these representations.

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3 A Chinese online network
2. Rationale and context of the thesis

Here I will explain my rationale for the thesis and the social context of the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon, before stating my research questions.

2.1 Rationale of the thesis

Film representations and audience readings of ‘leftover’ women constitute the main focus of this thesis. Sociologists have long been interested in films because they, along with other media, contribute to individuals’ consciousness and our understanding of social phenomenon (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1997). While earlier film/media studies, such as the Frankfurt school, neglected the role of the audience, the audience is now regarded as an important element in the circulation of media products in the 21st century. Jenkins (2006) argues that we are living within a media convergence culture and Livingstone (2009) maintains that the development of digital engagement has meant the ‘mediation of everything’. Technological change has enabled ordinary people to participate in today’s media industry and constitute an active audience. For example, user-generated content (UGC) is now a key element of media convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006). Thus, paying attention to audience readings and UGC is crucial to understand the circulation and meanings of a media text. However, notwithstanding the increased academic interest in UGC, there has been little sociological research addressing films and UGC in the context of the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon. My research contributes to addressing this research gap through an exploration of traditional media content (film) and the new UGC culture (online audience reviews of film).

The three films I selected for analysis are all classified as romantic comedies (romcoms) in the Chinese film market. Unlike the extensive debates about Hollywood romcoms, the investigation of Chinese romcoms is comparatively underdeveloped. The existing research can be divided into two approaches: addressing the marketing strategies of romcoms is a popular approach (Dai, 2015; 2016; Liu and Yang, 2014; Nie, 2016); researching the narrative patterns and ideologies of romcoms is a less common approach (Tang, 2012; Xu, 2009). Part of my research takes the second approach, using genre analysis to explore the films’ narrative patterns. This enables
me to do four things: explore how ‘leftover’ women are situated in the narrative; compare and contrast Chinese romcoms with their classic Hollywood counterparts; analyse the ideologies of romantic love, consumption and gender that the films represent; and identify three central themes for further analysis. My research uses CDA to fully explore these three themes: the self-identities of ‘leftover’ women; their choices in love; and intergenerational and social ties with families and friends. Using CDA enables an analysis of the relationship between the circulation of ‘leftover’ women’s representations and changing gender relations, love, marriage and intimacy in contemporary China. For example, I am interested in the relationship between individuals’ love lives and film, since the audience not only seeks representations of romance in romcoms but also learns how to deal with their own intimate relationships (Deng, 2011; Galician, 2004).

In doing the above, I pay close attention to gender. Gendered perspectives are underdeveloped in Chinese media studies but very important; as an intrinsic part of culture, gender is shaped by ideological frameworks and socially constructed by culture and history. Gender “norms” are produced and reproduced through the family, education, religion, the media and other institutionalised relationships (Zoonen, 1994: 32) which may be adhered to, resisted and/or transformed by individuals. Media constructions are understood to be central instruments in circulating ‘stereotypical, patriarchal and hegemonic values about women and femininity’ (Zoonen, 1994: 27). Liebler et al. (2015) argue that the creation and consumption of media products impacts constructions of masculinities and femininities. My research of film representations and readings of Chinese ‘leftover’ women seeks to better understand constructions of gender identities and gender relations in contemporary China, and to consider to what extent patriarchal values about women, femininity and family relations might be changing. While some existing sociological research argues that the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon is ‘gender neutral’, relating to a marrying late trend for both men and women (Li and Wang, 2014; Yan, 2010), I argue instead that the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon is highly gendered, both in its representations and in terms of what it tells us about changing gender identities and relationships in China.

My approach to ‘leftover’ women in film is also distinctive. Some earlier research focuses on criticising the role the media plays in stigmatising ‘leftover’ women as
victims and constructing gender stereotypes (Guo, 2015; Li and Liu, 2016). While this has some value, particularly in terms of gender stereotyping, I am much more interested in the self-identities of ‘leftover’ women in the films, their capacities for agency, and how the audience reads them. Much research also concentrates on producing a typology of ‘leftover’ women figures in Chinese media representations (Cheng, 2011; Dong and Wang, 2017; Qin, 2012; Wang and Zang, 2014). However, I argue that it is necessary to discuss media constructions of ‘leftover’ women beyond typology and treat them as complex individuals, with the potential for mixed emotions about being single. Moreover, I propose that the concept of ‘leftover’ women in modern China relates to wider social transformations and shifts in love and intimate culture, gender relations, and family relations (as discussed further below).

2.2 Social context of the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon

The ‘leftover’ women phenomenon is a significant issue in Chinese family and marriage studies. China has undergone considerable social transformations over the past few decades, although some Confucian traditions still impact individuals’ choices and behaviours in modern China. From the foundation of The People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the government stated that gender equality should be a priority. In 1950, a new marriage law abolished arranged marriages and supported individuals’ freedom in spouse choice. Later on, the one-child policy was implemented in the 1980s; this has had myriad effects on China, and one effect has been to benefit the child who may enjoy all the resources and investments of the family, even if a girl. Shortly thereafter economic reforms were launched, bringing rapid economic growth and opening China up to the rest of the world. China experienced increasing exposure to Western culture and neoliberalism due to foreign trade and international connections through the World Trade Organisation (WTO) from 2003 (Harvey, 2005). Consequently, individualism, neoliberal values and other elements of Western culture have become popular among Chinese people (Harvey, 2005; Hu and Scott, 2006; Xu et al., 2014), especially the generation born after the 1970s. Pursuing an individualised lifestyle and seeking agency and autonomy from the constraints of existing marital and family traditions became a Western trend in the mid-1980s (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) and to some extent China has followed (Yan, 2010). The younger
generation has preferred to focus on self-development, such as better educational attainment and career development, rather than rushing into marriage; therefore, marrying late became a preferable choice (Guo et al., 2015; Li and Wang, 2014; Yan, 2010). Once a policy promoted by the state for demographic reasons; marrying late is now more of a voluntary trend (Guo et al., 2015).

Alongside ideas about choice and individual autonomy, Confucian traditions remain important in China. Filial piety, for instance, requires children to respect, obey and care for their parents both financially and emotionally (Hu and Scott, 2016), and generates some important tensions, since parents are highly likely to see getting married as an important rite of passage for their children. For many Chinese families, marriage is still ‘a big deal – both in the past and the present’ (To, 2015a: XV). Hence the popular expression that ‘falling in love without considering marriage is like behaving like a hooligan in love’. Scholars have argued that Chinese elite professional single women are ‘selectively de-traditionalised’ from strong patriarchy, on the one hand, but not from the impact of filial piety, on the other (Hu and Scott, 2016; To, 2015b). As a result, individual women are caught between satisfying their parents and seeking space and freedom in their lifestyle choices. I am interested in how these dilemmas are represented in the films and read by the audience, and what this tells us about the ongoing tensions between choice and tradition. While single professional women over the age of 30 are not only found in China or Asian countries, the ‘leftover’ phenomenon is rather specific - “made in China”. One example from a Western film is Bridget Jones in Bridget Jones’ Diary (2001), who worries about being single and feels hopeless in love until she meets Mark Darcy. However, in China such concerns for single women are compounded by deeply ingrained Confucian values and a belief that getting married to settle down is still compulsory, required by both your parents and wider society (To, 2015a).

I am not the first to argue that the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon is more than a question of women’s perceived marriageability but also reflects wider social transformations in contemporary China. For instance, Luo and Sun (2015) argue that this phenomenon reflects the penetration of neoliberal values and the pursuit of an individualised lifestyle. Meanwhile, Fincher (2013) and To (2013) argue that the promotion of the ‘leftover’ women concept connects to wider state agendas to promote
marriage alongside declining birth rate and an ageing population. However, few authors have paid attention to what the phenomenon tells us about dating, love and marriage more generally in China, not just for ‘leftover’ women. Furthermore, and to the best of my knowledge, no authors have paid attention to what the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon tells us about changing family intimacy in urban China. In this thesis I will argue that broader conclusions can be drawn from the ‘leftover’ phenomenon about changing patterns of dating, choices in love and marriage and changing family intimacy in wider Chinese society.

### 3. Research questions

The research questions have evolved during the research process, based on the literature, data analysis and my evolving understanding of the research. Questions one to three below were always central to my thesis, while question four emerged as it became clear that my analysis of ‘leftover’ women films and UGC enabled me to address wider sociocultural changes in urban China.

1. How are ‘leftover’ women represented in contemporary Chinese film?
2. How are these representations read by the audience?
3. What do these representations and readings tell us about gender relations and gender norms in contemporary China?
4. To what extent are these representations and readings linked with wider social change in China?

### 4. Methodological approach

To address the above research questions, I use a qualitative approach combining genre analysis and CDA. Genre analysis applied to the selected films enables me to research the social conventions and ideologies of ‘leftover’ women films. CDA applied to the films and the audience reviews enables me to investigate the circulation of discourses of Chinese ‘leftover’ women in the selected research samples. According to Foucault (1979), ‘discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it’ (100–101). Doing
discourse analysis is also helpful for researchers to reveal the way words are articulated so as to reinforce opinions about particular topics (Fairclough, 1995). I am interested in understanding how discourses circulating about ‘leftover’ women might relate to changes in romantic love, family relations, gender relations and wider social practices.

4.1 A feminist approach

The desire to give women a voice in a world that defines them as voiceless is a significant value of feminist scholarship (Dervin, 1987: 109). Post-structural feminists emphasise language and discourse ‘as constitutive of experience and not simply representative of it’ (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007: 44). Lazar (2007: 142) states that feminist CDA enables one to ‘show up the complex, subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, ways in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts and communities’. My research pays attention to the voices of ‘leftover’ women represented in the three films, and also to the voices of the audience through analysing their reviews—most of whom are female (as far as I can tell). I also seek to understand the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon from a sociocultural perspective, relating it to wider social issues and transformations, including gender relations and gender norms. To that extent, I adopt a feminist approach to CDA. Feminist discourse analysis is more likely to concentrate on smaller-scale research to explore the language practices of gender identity, rather than focusing on large-scale quantitative studies of the differences between men and women’s speech (Coffey-Glover, 2019: 27); although researchers of this approach show increasing interest in the gendered meanings of multimodal texts (Brookes et al., 2016).

4.2 The research design

The three films selected for this research were Desire of the Heart (2008); I Do (2012); and The Last Woman Standing (2015). They were chosen from a shortlist of seven films, all romantic comedies with ‘leftover’ women as main characters released from 2008 to 2015. Reviews of the films were sampled from Douban Movie, the most
popular online film review website in China, narrowing down the process to focus solely on long reviews. The analytic approach to this research was divided into two stages. First, I used genre analysis to discuss what the selected films tell us about the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon and shifts in gender relations and Chinese intimate culture, and what makes Chinese ‘leftover’ romcoms distinct from classic Hollywood romcoms. Second, I applied Fairclough’s three-dimensional CDA framework (textual, discourse, sociocultural) along with multimodal techniques to all the research samples. These joint methods enabled me to explore media representations of ‘leftover’ women in multidimensional ways, embracing complex sociocultural discussions within textual analysis.

Researching ‘leftover’ women in the Chinese media required a consideration of ethical issues, especially the ethics of social media research, such as the distinction between public or private data and anonymity. Ethical issues concerning translation were also addressed because the research samples were read and written in Chinese. Furthermore, I addressed the ethical implications of using the term ‘leftover’ women in my research, which risked reproducing its negative connotations.

5. Aims and contribution to knowledge

The first aim of this research is to illustrate the representations and readings of ‘leftover’ women in the three selected films and UGC, and to analyse their shaping by and shaping of ideologies of culture and gender. To the best of my knowledge, there are no other CDA studies highlighting discussions of ‘leftover’ women in films and related UGC. My study intends to fill this research gap in media studies both empirically and methodologically. My contribution is to demonstrate the transmission of ‘leftover’ women discourses and the extent to which they are reproduced, refused, questioned and transformed.

Second, I aim to assess how CDA and genre analysis can contribute towards analysing the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon. Through the lens of genre analysis, I discuss in this thesis the communicative goals and related sociocultural context of romcom films, such as shifts in masculinities and femininities in China. Using CDA, this research
tightly connects film studies with wider sociocultural practices, such as ideologies and social transformations, behind the film scenes.

Third, I use film representations and audience readings as examples to analyse gender relations and love and marriage culture in contemporary urban China, as pertaining to elite single women. This enables me to distil how media representations relate to love and marriage culture, how romantic relationship culture and gender relations have shifted over the past few decades and what the younger generation is looking for in a romantic relationship. As such this thesis contributes to the fields of gender studies, relationship culture studies and contemporary China studies.

Fourth, China has undergone rapid economic and social transformations in the past few decades and my research seeks to use the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon as a prism through which to better understand them. For example, how intergenerational relations are changing in urban China and the impacts of modernity, individualisation and consumerism.

6. Structure of the thesis

In Chapter 2, the literature review and conceptual framework, I situate this thesis in several fields: film and audience studies; the Chinese film industry; Chinese family and marriage studies, and empirical and theoretical studies of ‘leftover’ women. The chapter is divided into three parts. In the first section, I review film studies and provide a brief history of the Chinese film industry, then outline the role of the active audience in a mediated society, and the existing literature on film, audience and romance culture. In the second section, I discuss Chinese family and marriage studies through a historic storyline, especially policy and social changes since the Mao era and marital cultures in 21st century China. I discuss how these changes contribute to individuals’ seeking more freedom in their lifestyles, especially in marriage choices. In the third section, I focus on existing studies of Chinese ‘leftover’ women and point out the space for my research.
In Chapter 3, the methodology chapter, I outline my methodological approach, which combines Fairclough’s CDA of media representations with multimodal techniques and genre analysis. I then discuss my research design, sampling strategies and analytical framework. In the final section, I discuss how conducting research on ‘leftover’ women requires a reconsideration of ethical issues, such as ethics in social media studies and issues of translation.

This thesis is comprised of four analytical chapters. In Chapter 4—Chinese romantic comedy genre—I conduct a genre analysis of the selected films. I start by introducing the films, *Desire of the Heart*, *I Do*, and *The Last Woman Standing*, mapping out their main narratives and characters, and setting them in their creative and commercial context. In the following section, I use genre analysis to explore the films and consider the extent to which they conform to the Hollywood romantic comedy genre or are distinctive from it. Through analysis of their visual characteristics, narrative patterns and ideologies, I explore the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon broadly in relation to representations of masculinities and femininities, gender relations, and love and marriage culture.

In Chapter 5—‘leftover’ women’s identities and mixed emotions—I explore representations and readings of Chinese ‘leftover’ women in the three romcoms and related audience reviews on the Douban Movie website. This chapter is the first of three discourse analysis chapters, focusing on ‘leftover’ women’s self-identities and their internal thoughts about love and marriage. I argue that ‘leftover’ women are represented as having mixed emotions about being single: they are worried about ageing issues and marrying late, but still take pride and pleasure in being single and independent. This chapter is divided into three sections. I start with single women’s ageing issues, anxiety and shame within wider social and cultural backgrounds, and the emergence of marrying late. In the following section, I consider the marrying late trend in more detail, focusing on women’s educational attainment and career development. In the final section, I discuss the recent changes in ‘leftover’ women’s emotions about love and the joys of being single. Under each section, I also discuss how these representations are reproduced, refused, questioned, and transformed by the audience.
In Chapter 6—the architecture of ‘leftover’ women’s choices in love—I mainly explore the individualisation and complexity of ‘leftover’ women’s search for love and the new possibilities they embody, as represented in the films and their related reviews. I use Illouz’s (2012) theory of the architecture of love to explain Chinese ‘leftover’ women’s choices in love. I start by arguing that romantic choice is associated with the remote consequences of one’s decisions (e.g. economic factors, future companionship, children, family background, etc.). In the following section, I investigate how cultural norms are likely to shape the course and outcomes of decisions in love, such as an ‘older woman-younger man’ relationship and premarital cohabitation, invoking new possibilities alongside women’s insecurities. In the final section, I discuss the process of consultation that formalises ‘leftover’ women’s love decisions, using various blind dates as examples.

In Chapter 7—intergenerational and social ties with family and friends in a Chinese marriage—I argue that the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon is related to collisions between traditional family values (e.g. filial piety) and the influences of rapid social transformations and individualisations in urban China. I explore different types of family interventions in the films, for instance, parents arranging a blind date for their daughters, ‘the meeting the parents’ moment in a serious relationship, and parents’ impact on starting or ending a relationship. Then I investigate representations of parents’ shifting emotions about their daughter’s single status in more detail. At the same time, representations of intergenerational relations in urban China are changing, with the emergence of a more intimate parent-child relationship and a ‘gentle’ father. Finally, I demonstrate the significance of friends and peer support in single women’s personal lives and love issues.

In Chapter 8, the conclusion, I review my main research findings about changes in Chinese gender relations, love, marriage and intimacy culture, followed by a reconsideration of the research questions. I then summarise the contribution made by the thesis, consider the limitations of the study and point out some inspirations for further research.
Chapter 2 Literature review and conceptual framework

Introduction

This thesis is broadly situated in several fields: film and audience studies; the Chinese film industry; Chinese family and marriage studies; and empirical and theoretical studies of ‘leftover’ women. The following literature review is divided into three sections. In the first section, I discuss film studies, the active audience, and film and romance culture. I begin by discussing film studies and providing a brief history of the Chinese film industry since 1949, to provide the social context of the research. Then I discuss what an active audience is in a mediated society, leading up to the recent audience participation shift with the emergence and development of Web 2.0 technologies. With the popularity of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) websites (such as Douban Movie) and user-generated content (UGC) (such as online film reviews), the audience becomes an inevitable participant in the way media products are produced, circulated and reviewed. Finally, I examine the roles of films in presenting romance and intimacy, addressing romantic comedies and audience reception of romantic comedies.

In the second section of this chapter, I discuss Chinese family and marriage studies through a historic storyline. I give a brief review of Chinese family and marriage traditions and social transformations since 1949. In particular, I focus on the norms of patrilineality, Confucianism and filial piety in the family and gender system, to explain why marriage is so significant to a Chinese family. I then outline several policy and social changes since the Mao era, discussing how these changes led to shifts in filial piety and Chinese familial relations. I also address how social transformations such as individualisation contribute to individuals’ inspirations to seek more freedom in their lifestyles, especially regarding marriage choices. Furthermore, I discuss marriage trends and relationship culture in contemporary China, to provide background information for this research. Finally, I address Chinese women’s studies and social discussion about single women since the Mao era.

In the third section of this chapter, I focus on existing studies of Chinese ‘leftover’ women and point out the gap my research fills. I summarise three approaches to
analysing ‘leftover’ women: those that focus on explaining the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon; those addressing the significance of and solutions for the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon; and those analysing media constructions of ‘leftover’ women. Despite a growing interest in the analysis of Chinese ‘leftover’ women, little attention has been paid to analysing how film audiences read and co-produce representations of ‘leftover’ women. Moreover, there has been little research into different representations and readings of ‘leftover’ women in the media, in particular linking films and UGC in China, which is a main contribution of the thesis.

1. Media, audience and romance in the 21st century

Early approaches to media (i.e. newspapers, magazines, radio or cinema) labelled them as ‘consciousness industries’ which crafted texts to embody the dominant ideologies of society, to be ‘swallowed whole’ by the mass audience (Smythe, 1977). However, historical changes occurred in the study and the nature of media. On the one hand, media studies soon asserted the importance of recognising the role of the audience as active not passive (Hall, 1997); on the other hand, as Livingstone (2004: 77) claims, the nature of mediated communication transformed from ‘mainly mass communication (from one to many)’ to ‘communication among peers (both one to one and many to many)’. All these issues take distinctive shape when considered in the light of film studies, the development of the Chinese film industry since 1949, the active audience, and when addressing romantic comedies as a particular media product (as I discuss below).

1.1 Film as social practice and the Chinese film industry

Film and cultural studies have developed more or less in tandem. Turner (2008: 272) argues that ‘cultural studies has proved valuable in helping film studies deal with the understanding of film as a social practice’. While Hay (1997: 216) points out that discussing film as a social practice brings with it a consideration of ‘how social relations are spatially organised through sites of production and consumption, and how film is practiced from and across particular sites’ and in association with others. Researching film as a social practice has shifted academics’ interest in the aesthetic
discourses of film to the practices of its popular audience (Turner, 2006). Miller (2001: 306) contests that the division between the text and its context should be broken up and, therefore, the cinema should be restored to a ‘mixed-medium mode’ that includes ‘viewing environments, audiences, technologies and genres’. Additionally, more attention is required in terms of the industrial context and culture surrounding a film’s production and consumption (Turner, 2008). As this thesis is within the context of film, love and marriage culture in modern China, a brief trajectory of changes in the Chinese film industry is necessary before progressing to complex discussions about film and audience research.

In Chinese film studies, the connection between nation and cinema remains a significant element in the analysis of Chinese cinema and the development of Chinese film theory (Berry and Farquhar, 2006; Donald and Voci, 2008). Cinema was the major mass media and spectacle of the 1930s to 1950s (Donald and Keane, 2002). Since the foundation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the film industry has been under traditional party-state control, although it has undergone reforms over the last few decades. Socialist realism dominated Chinese film studies from 1949 to the early 1980s when international communication was rare (Donald and Voci, 2008). The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) used the film industry as a main method to permeate and propagate its political interests (Meyer-Clement, 2017), which concurs with Adorno and Horkheimer’s warning that people are expected to swallow dominant ideology through film representations (D’Olimpio, 2015). There were only 645 cinemas in China in 1949, most in big cities such as Shanghai (Yan, 2011); therefore, many Chinese people had difficulties to watch a film at that time. Later, the state arranged 600 ‘moving cinema teams’ to go to different cities and villages (Yan, 2011) and during this time open-air cinema was popular. However, people could not choose what kind of film to watch in these open-air cinemas, and Yan (2011) claims that film has been an effective tool of political propaganda and education since the 1950s. Also, content included more than propaganda in terms of narrative cohesion and the characterisation of heroic types that appealed to an audience and ‘made identification with revolutionary history possible and worthwhile’ (Donald and Keane, 2002: 13). Cinema content contributed to constructing Chinese masculinity and femininity as well (more in Chapter 4).
The economic reforms of the 1970s (see Section 2.3) are referred to as the ‘New Era’ in China when criticism was actively encouraged, within certain limits, of the socialist past (Zhang, 1997). As a result, cultural production and critical discourse underwent changes (Donald and Voci, 2008). Although Chinese media is still under state censorship, the impact of marketisation and globalisation is significant because of recent policy and social changes (Stockman, 2013). With the reform of state media in the late 1970s, the government decided to deregulate, commercialise and, partially, privatise media outlets (Liu and Lin, 2014). The propagandist voice lessened in Chinese media during the 1980s (Wu, 2016), and from the 1970s the state started to loosen its control of open-air cinemas. A number of them began to be run by private enterprises to make profits and their political function weakened (Yan, 2011). Simultaneously, their popularity began to wane in the 1990s, with the popularity of television and fixed, indoor cinemas. Many cities still have open-air cinemas for entertainment, but they are not such a central part of the Chinese film industry.

Between 1993 and 2000 the state started to change the mode of film distribution to one of ‘tong gou tong xiao⁴’. A series of policy changes happened, such as the loosening of CCP governance, Chinese film chain reforms, innovations of the stock system in film industry, etc. (Liu and Jin, 2014). Simultaneously, market competition consciousness was strengthened. The government’s role changed from one of total responsibility to one of regulation and supervision (Chen and Xian, 2014). Media institutions started to commodify their products and ‘zi fu ying kui⁵’ in the progress of changing from a regulation to a total marketisation system (Wu, 2016). Since then, advertising has become a popular component in most types of media products (Wu, 2016). The Chinese film industry has been involved in global competition since 2001, when China joined the WTO. The unified system of film production and distribution ended in China in 2001. Furthermore, the state permitted foreign capital to be invested into the film industry. Chinese media is carrying out a ‘go global’ strategy to embrace Western culture and introduce media products from the West.

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⁴ Direct state production and distribution
⁵ Achieve self-sustainability
Chinese film reviews or criticism have also undergone considerable change. During the pre-revolution period, film reviews in film magazines or newspapers were common means to promote the film industry (X. Zhang, 2017), but their development ceased because of the Anti-Japanese War between 1937 to 1945, and since then film reviewers have had less freedom. Critical discourse in Chinese film studies has mainly focused on social politics rather than art or cinema because of the state’s control and films’ political propaganda functions for decades (Donald and Voci, 2008; Hu 1995). The revival of an active audience engaged in film reviews and film criticism started from 1979, among professional reviewers and the audience. For example, there were over 400 film review magazines and more than 20,000 film reviewing organisations in the 1980s. Moreover, national competitions soliciting audience reviews were popular (B. Zhang, 2008). From the late 1990s, with the development of digital technologies, online film forums and blogs started to be more popular than newspapers. The Douban Movie website is one of the most popular platforms for film reviews in contemporary China.

Film was seen as a form of mass entertainment rather than a reproducer of ideologies until scholars paid attention to actual film audiences (Turner, 2008). In the following section, I argue that an active and critical audience is a necessary element in the circulation of a media product in the current mediated society (Livingstone, 2019).

1.2 Audience in a mediated society

Adorno and Horkheimer’s idea of ‘cultural industry’ in Dialect of enlightenment (1997) is a significant standpoint in the area of media culture and audience research. They state that the audience will accept what the cultural industry offers without any space for imagination because although ordinary people have the freedom to choose from the mass media, the culture industry produces the same commodified media products. Moreover, Adorno (2001: 106) claims that mass media has become a method for ‘fettering consciousness’, and has ‘impeded the development of autonomous, individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves’. Adorno, and other scholars from the Frankfurt School, perceive the significance and (lack of) autonomy of the audience.
Audience research became central to the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies. Williams (1989: 4) proposes that ‘culture is ordinary’ in every individual’s mind, and he contends that the audience have active and critical capacities towards media power. Hall’s (1973) encoding and decoding model is another milestone in British cultural studies that describes the translation of a message and asserts that culture is a circuit. The encoding of a message denotes the production of verbal or non-verbal symbols, and the decoding of a message is how the audience understands or interprets it (Hall, 1973). Audiences actively create meanings when decoding cultural products in their everyday lives, and we cannot assume that the preferred meaning is swallowed wholesale.

According to Johnson (1986), all cultural products are read by individuals and the active audience and their reading or consumption leads to the transformation of society to some extent. Hall and his colleagues also highlight that audiences actively create meanings by using cultural products in everyday life, not taking them as given (Livingstone, 2019). D’Olimpio (2015) proposes that Adorno overstates his concerns about films generating passivity in their audience. Instead I agree with D’Olimpio’s (2015) statement that films as narrative artworks have the potential to be ‘constructive or destructive’. As Benjamin (1999) claims, films provide the audience space for reflective and critical reading, while Wartenberg (2007) argues that films also allow for philosophical thinking. Thus, the viewers are already philosophical thinkers in order to understand the film and its humour or cultural meanings. D’Olimpio (2015) develops Wartemberg’s argument and suggests that viewers are critical thinkers when watching a film philosophically and that they express an active voice. For example, the viewers of a romcom may be critical of the film’s storyline and may not apply the concept of an “ideal soulmate” to their daily lives. At the same time, they may still feel the romantic burden of such stereotypes when they are asked ‘when are you going to settle down?’ (D’Olimpio, 2015).

Audiences are diverse in unanticipated ways. Encompassing every dimension of their daily lives, made possible by the development of digital engagement, leads us to the ‘mediation of everything’ (Livingstone, 2009). Cultural theorist Henry Jenkins (2006: 16) points out that ‘we are entering an era where media will be everywhere… and we are already living within a convergence culture’. From Jenkins’ (2006) perspective,
media convergence refers to a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to form connections between dispersed media content, and the audience becomes ‘the users’, such as through the emergence of user-generated content (UGC). Livingstone (2019) summarises that in a mediated society the circulation of a message not only includes encoding and decoding of a media product, but further audience encoding as well. Consequently, the theory of mediation is proposed by media scholars to explain changes and new possibilities. Silverstone (2005: 189) states that ‘mediation is the fundamentally, but fundamentally uneven, dialectical process of communication, both individual and institutional, in the general circulation of symbols in social life’. Audiences’ attention has turned from press or broadcasting to a ‘fast-changing array of online and social media service’ (Livingstone, 2019). Now broader media ecology is part of individuals’ daily lives, which includes ‘online news outlets to tag and archive categories of reportage and particularly sites that aggregate across digitalised sources (including news, magazines, scientific articles, blogs and other web-based publications and indeed other aggregating sites)’ (Steinberg, 2015: 5). Therefore, audience research now focuses on the experiences of ordinary people surrounded by media and their mediated practices (Deuze, 2012; Livingstone, 2013). This provides the inspiration for my research: to link online film reviews and the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon.

Ordinary people are participating in today’s media industry, shaping media content, and acting as an active audience. Livingstone (2004: 79) explains that to be an active audience means that the ‘audience and users of new media are increasingly active-selective, self-directed, producers as well as receivers of texts’. Whereas once the audience might write to film magazines about their opinions of film stars in the 1950s (Stacey, 1993: 53), now the development of Web 2.0 applications provide an electronic means for the active audience to participate in the circulation of media products. Many websites provide accessible platforms for the audience to share comments and reviews about films, such as Rotten Tomatoes, Douban Movie⁶, etc. UGC is a key element of media convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006) and UGC analysis

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⁶ Douban Movie is a branch of the Douban website launched by Bo YANG on March 6th, 2005. Douban is a social networking platform, allowing registered users to record information and create content related to films, books, music, recent events or activities in China. It is one of the most influential and popular Web 2.0 Chinese websites. Moreover, it is open to both registered and unregistered users. The site had 300 million active users, monthly, in 2018.
is crucial to understand the circulation of a media product. With the development of social networks and digital technologies, everyone can easily become an active participant through different UGC sites. Media technologies are no longer the privilege of industries as ordinary people gain freedom and space to wield media technologies in a participatory culture (van Dijck, 2009). Audiences are increasingly inclined to depend on online ratings and reviews to make their own film choices (Chen et al., 2016; Feng, 2017). Word-of-mouth (WOM) sites are regarded as efficacious tools for users to create/distribute information about, or recommendations of, products to others (Kimmel and Kitchen, 2014). In a mediated society, electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) platforms, such as the Douban Movie website, are convenient places for users to rate films and share comments and have, thus, become significant cultural tools to gauge audience reception (Yecies et al., 2016).

Generally speaking, UGC analysis reveals how eWOM is utilised as a communicative and social networking channel for spreading films’ ideologies offline and online (Yang and Yecies, 2016). There are several approaches to UGC analysis related to film products, for instance, the relationship between movie reviews and understanding audience opinions (Singh et al., 2013); the different effects of eWOM and critics’ reviews on movie evaluation (Chakravarty et al., 2010); the effects of UGC-based systems on box-office revenue (Niraj and Singh, 2015). In terms of UGC studies and Chinese UGC analysis, the connection between online film ratings and box-office performance attracts much academic research interest. Chen et al. (2016) claim that eWOM platforms such as Douban Movie impact consumers’ decisions about what to watch, and Feng’s (2017) research uses data on the Douban Movie website to explain different attributes impacting people’s intentions to see a film. Other researchers extend this research to focus on UGC and eWOM platforms’ marketing strategies and propagandising roles. For example, Liu (2006) points out that the number of film comments has a positive correlation with a film’s box office revenue. Huang (2016) claims that the film industry has a close connection with eWOM marketing strategies as a film’s box-office revenue relates to its popularity on social networks and the audience ratings. Finally, some research focuses on the eWOM platform itself to analyse its rating system and how it works: through data analysis on control-groups experiments, Chen et al. (2016) use Douban Movie as an example to discuss the generation and dissemination of online information and how it works; while Yang and
Yecies (2016) use big data methods to investigate audience responses to South Korean films on Douban Movie, discussing user-generated popular culture content.

Regardless of the increasing academic interest in UGC analysis, there has been limited sociological research into the Chinese film industry and UGC culture. Additionally, most existing Chinese research focuses on a particular aspect of the data, such as film reviews, film ratings or box office performance, which limits discussions about a film’s critical audience and how audience readings might link to social transformations, such as changing understandings of love and marriage, alongside wider discourses and practices. Through genre and critical discourse analysis (more in Chapter 3), my research addresses this research gap by investigating the traditional media content of three selected films, alongside new UGC Douban Movie reviews, so as to discuss media culture in its sociocultural context within contemporary China.

1.3 Romcoms and their audience

All films between 2008 and 2015 about Chinese ‘leftover’ women are labelled as ‘romcoms’ on the Douban Movie website. It is necessary to investigate why romcoms are appealing to the audience and how an active audience reads a romcom in a mediated society. Empirical studies have documented that audience reception is part of the circulation of a romcom in a mediated society; in that, the audience treat the romcom as a resource for romance. Galician (2004) argues that people seek romance in the media when facing obstacles in their own relationships.

Romcoms are widely consumed (Nash, 2010) and remind the audience about their own love stories, and impact people’s ideas on love relationships. For example, Mernit (2001: 251) contends that when watching a romantic comedy, the audience is looking for ‘those ideas that everybody relates to, stories rooted in experiences that people remember from their own lives’. It has been shown that viewers can learn about intimate relationships and marriage from media exposure. For example, Wu’s (2014) research included interviews of 120 female college students in Shanghai and found that 68.7% of them agreed that films and dramas represent realistic scenes about love and marriage. Moreover, ‘film or drama’ is one of the most important factors
influencing female college students’ love and marriage values. Zhang (2010) claims that romantic films impact people’s views about love which then permeate society.

Furthermore, scholars have examined that romantic ideals in media have focused on films (Hefner & Wilson, 2013; Johnson, 2007). Romantic comedies relate to people’s endorsement of romantic beliefs. They may construct idealistic love expectations beyond the audience in their love relationships, such as ‘love at first sight’ (Johnson, 2007), love can overcome all barriers, everyone has a perfect soulmate, or love is magic (Galician, 2004). However, Hefner and Wilson’s (2013) argument differs from Galician’s; in that, the influence of films on unrealistic beliefs only occurs in certain contexts: first, people are likely to endorse an idea to idealise their partner after watching romantic comedies; second, people often seek out romantic content to learn to deal with their romantic relationships from romantic comedies.

Romcoms also represent the realities of love, such as the dilemma between work and love, affairs, etc. (Deng, 2011). McDonald (2007) proposes that films not only reflect reality, they contribute to creating that reality. Every happy ending can provide single women with confidence and optimistic expectations about future romance; meanwhile, it may also create pessimism for the audience when comparing their love experiences to the perfect life in films. Since traditional romantic comedies always provide a high degree of closure with a happy ending for the audience, they tend to show an on-screen fantasy to the audience, which viewers may lack in real life. Thus, romcoms deserve scholarly attention to investigate their sociocultural meanings and audience interpretations.

The central topic of a romcom usually involves heterosexual couples and their love stories. Although their narrative patterns/plots are quite similar, the romcom blueprint develops as times goes by, which reinvigorates the genre and attracts a new audience (Mortimer, 2010) (see more in Chapter 4). Research around romcoms mainly focuses on Hollywood romcoms, their narrative patterns, romantic ideologies and cultural meanings (McDonald, 2007; Mortimer, 2010). For instance, Mortimer (2010) argues that the romcom genre has its own narrative patterns and comic language, which can be differentiated from romance and general comedy genres. The narratives of romcom focus on longing for love, finding love, losing or gaining love, and talking about true
love (Selbo, 2015). Additionally, Hefner and Wilson (2013: 152) summarise four popular themes to represent an ideal romantic story: ‘love can overlook flaws; love can seek out that one perfect mate; love can happen instantaneously; and love can overcome all obstacles’. Romantic comedies usually foreground a prospective happy ending for the couple at the end and support the ‘stable companionate “strain” [of] love’ (Todd, 2013: 2). Companionate love is the ‘commitment’ of a long-term, durable relationship, and the institution of marriage—distinct from passionate love (Sternberg, 1986; Todd, 2013). In this context, the romcom genre is a suitable source of research when considering ‘leftover’ women’s intimacy and marriage prospects. However, romantic love is not the only ideology presented in romcoms; ideologies of consumption and gender are inevitable elements (full discussion in Chapter 4).

Compared with the research that exists on popular Hollywood films, my reading of the literature uncovered that discussions around romcoms produced in mainland China are insufficient and unsystematic. I found two main research themes in my analysis of Chinese romantic comedy literature: first, a popular approach is to address the marketing strategy of romantic comedies; second, a less common approach is to research the narrative patterns of romantic comedies. First, Dai (2015) argues that the celebrity effect, fan culture and online marketing strategies help Chinese urban romantic films maximise their box-office revenues. Moreover, Dai (2016) claims that new media, such as Sina Weibo and various social network sites, have been important marketing tools since 2000. Dai (2016) summarises that a marketing team has four ways to publicise a film on Sina Weibo: putting up hundreds of related posts and reposts about a certain film; posting key words related with the film; creating an official account for a film; using the main characters to popularise the film. Liu and Yang (2014) add that product placement is an inevitable element in the marketing strategies of romantic films. Product placements in a romcom links with Jenkins’ (2006: 18) idea that ‘media convergence impacts the way we consume media’ (see Section 1.2). For Jenkins, convergence is ‘both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process’ (2006: 18). For example, companies use product placements in films to generate revenue, broaden markets and reinforce audience commitment and, at the same time, consumers try to use media technologies and discern to ‘bring the flow of media under their control and interact with other consumers’ (Jenkins, 2006: 18).
Second, in terms of narrative patterns the research in a Chinese context is scattered and insufficient. Xu (2009) analyses the context, several characteristics (such as filming strategies, close relations between characters and cities, etc.) and the audience of romantic comedies to explain that romantic comedies occupy an important place in the market during Chinese New Year. Tang (2012) summarises that linking romcom content with popular social topics, such as the importance of friends' company during a break-up period, is a noticeable emerging feature of Chinese romcoms. Unlike popular discussions about romantic love and consumerism, research regarding gender ideologies in Chinese romcoms is insufficient, but it is important and necessary. An audience reading of media such as romcoms is ‘one of the practices in which the construction of gender identities take place’ (Zoonen, 1994: 123). Through the lens of romcoms, Chinese masculinity and femininity are constructed and distributed (more in Chapter 4).

Thus, sociocultural studies on Chinese romcoms remain under-developed both methodologically and theoretically. On the methodological side, my thesis contributes towards filling a research gap in Chinese romcom scholarship by conducting research through a systematic romcom genre analysis (Chapter 4) and critical discourse analysis (Chapter 3). On the theoretical side, various ideologies of romcoms are neglected by Chinese scholars, to some extent; hence, my thesis contributes to a broadening of scholarly discussion about the ideologies of a Chinese romcom, including romantic love, consumption and gender (Chapter 4); ‘leftover’ women’s self-identities (Chapter 5); their choices in love (Chapter 6) and intergenerational and social ties with family and friends (Chapter 7).

2. Chinese traditions and social transformations

Cultural understandings of ‘leftover’ women’s experiences of love and marriage in modern China are the central topic of the thesis, and through my analysis I find that Chinese conventional opinions and traditions still influence individuals’ understandings. Thus, I discuss historic changes in the family and in marriage amidst

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7 Friends here also refers to male-female “pure” friendships. The male friend here is called ‘nan gui mi’ and is the woman’s trustful friend without romantic emotions.
the social transformations of the past few decades in China, before progressing to the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon. I begin this section by highlighting marriage and family traditions and their social transformations in a historic storyline. Marriage formation and family are fundamental issues in China, but they are not static. China has undergone massive social transformation over the past 70 years, such as the founding of the PRC in 1949, the implementation of economic reforms since the 1980s, along with processes of urbanisation, globalisation and individualisation, and so on. As a concomitant to rapid economic development, social transformation and exposure to Western couple culture, there have been substantial changes in family and gender relationships (Hu and Scott, 2016); however, marriage is still a universal and significant goal in people’s minds in China (Xu et al., 2017; Xu et al., 2014).

2.1 Traditions in family and gender relationships

In order to develop insights into the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon in 21st century China, the post-reform era, we need to understand the history of family and gender relationships in the pre-Mao, Mao and reform eras, because some Chinese traditions remain influential factors in an individual’s choice and behaviour in contemporary China.

2.1.1. Confucianism and patrilineality

Prior to liberation in 1949, China was dominated by Confucian ideology that defined ‘the family as the basic social unit’ (Charles, 1993: 120). Confucianism has been a governing philosophy to set structural principles of social order, family relationships and proper ethics since the Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE). Under Confucianism, human relations are underpinned by ‘five cardinal relationships/wu lun’: ‘sovereign and subject, father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger brother, and friend and friend’ (Stacey, 1983: 30). Each relationship is governed by a distinct hierarchy, providing a protocol for proper family life and maintaining the whole country’s order (Stacey, 1983; Whyte, 2004). DONG Zhongshu⁸ (Confucius) proposed three cardinal

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⁸ DONG Zhongshu (a philosopher and politician) stated: ‘dismiss the hundreds of philosophical thoughts, revere only Confucianism/ba chu bai jia, du zun ru shu’ in 134 BCE.
guides in an individual’s life, whereby the ruler guides the subject/jun wei chen gang; the father guides the son/fu wei zi gang; the husband guides the wife/fu wei qi gang. Charles (1993) points out that the family was patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal in pre-modern China. Stacey (1983: 12) also supports that patriarchy in China is ‘a family and social system in which male power over women and children derives from the social role of fatherhood and is supported by a political economy in which the family unit retains a significant productive role’. Although some family and gender values have changed over a long-time span, the major tradition within family and gender systems has been the norm of patrilineality for hundreds of years: ‘men and male authority’ (Johnson, 1985: 8). Conjugal relations are regulated by gender roles on the same horizontal level while filial piety serves as the basis for intergenerational relationships on the vertical level (Hu and Scott, 2016; Yeh et al., 2013). The patrilineal system provides a “guidebook” to define an individual’s responsibilities, obligations and relational position in the family and social hierarchy (Ma, 2003; Whyte, 2004). Under this patrilineal system, heteronormativity has been established and cisgender has been assumed.

In the male-centred patrilineal family, women are in subordinate positions in conjugal relations (Croll, 1994; Zang, 2015). The ideal woman is ‘not expected to work or even to be seen outside the home and deference to male authority characterised a woman’s life’ (Charles, 1993: 121). For instance, women should obey ‘three obediences and four virtues’ according to Confucianism. For instance, a Chinese proverb says that ‘a daughter married is like water poured out the door’ (Croll, 1994: 199), expressing that married women will be a part of their husbands’ families rather than their biological families. In a family, the wife’s role is to support and facilitate the husband’s productivity under patriarchy (Whyte and Parish, 1984). Women’s major function in the family is considered to be reproduction and raising children. So, unlike men’s career-based activities, married women are expected to do all domestic housework and, thus, have fewer opportunities to develop their career (Deutsch, 2006; Yan, 2014).

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9 ‘Three obediences and four virtues/san cong si de’: obedience to the father before marriage, to the husband after marriage, and to the son after her husband’s death; morality, proper speech, a modest manner, and diligent work.
2.1.2 Filial piety

Generally speaking, traditional family and gender values remain widespread in current China (Hu and Scott, 2016). Confucian ideology has been the basis of Chinese state governance for over 2000 years (Liu, 2017). Under Confucian ideology respect and obligation are central to maintaining a harmonious family (Mann and Cheng, 2011). Filial piety is one of the core values of Confucianism in family lives and a lynchpin for the entire social structure (Hamilton, 1990; Whyte, 2004). Furthermore, it has been a fundamental priority of individual’s choice and behaviour in Chinese society, and a sacred virtue for individuals (Gao, 1996; Zhang and Kline, 2009). There may be little gender difference regarding filial piety because the intergenerational relations and familial care are ones that every Chinese has invested interests (Hu and Scott, 2016). Empirical studies show that filial piety still resonates today and parental approval appears to affect processes of mate selection and marriage, even for younger generations of Chinese individuals (Hu and Scott, 2016; To, 2015b). Filial piety has been of fundamental importance to individual choice and behaviour in Chinese society. It also defines family relations between children and parents and senior generations (Liu, 2017; Zhang and Kline, 2009). Children are inculcated with the meaning of filial piety from birth.

Filial piety (‘xiao shun’ or ‘xiao jing’ in Chinese characters) means ‘children’s unconditional obedience and respect for their parents’ (Deutsch, 2006; Yan, 2003: 172). In more detail, ‘xiao’ refers to children’s obedience and devotion to their parents and elders (Hamilton, 1990; Levy, 1990: 168; Zhang and Kline, 2009). Parents rely on children, especially sons, for care and financial support in old age: 90% of the endowment system for the aged is provided by family support, 6% by community services and 4% by aged-care institutional services (Tang and Peng, 2016). According to filial piety, children have the obligation and responsibility to provide physical care, mental care and financial support to their parents. ‘Jing’ or ‘shun’ stands for the emotional aspect of filial piety, which means children are expected to obey parents’ expectations in their lives, because of parents’ investment in raising them (Hu and

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10 In ancient China, children followed ultimate obedience to their father because of the strict patriarchal system. But today, filial piety mainly refers to children’s obedience to their parents. Sometimes, it also refers to children’s obedience and respect to their elders.
According to ‘jing’ or ‘shun’, children not only have a care obligation, but also need to be thankful and respectful towards parents for giving birth to them and raising them. Additionally, children’s care of parents needs to be based on love and performed with pleasure (Chan and Tan, 2004; Ho, 1996). From ethnographic research of singletons in the city of Dalian, Fong (2004) points out that urban teenagers enjoyed good living standards and received financial investment because of their parents’ love and hopes for academic success, high social status, good jobs and perfect spouses. Consequently, Fong (2002: 127) summarised that ‘singletons feel overwhelmed by pressure to live up to their parents’ expectations’.

Existing research holds that traditional filial piety has shifted, to some extent. Croll (2006) demonstrates that intergenerational relations in Asian families have been reinterpreted by younger generations and a new intergenerational contract has emerged. Although filial piety is still supported by the younger generations, its meanings have been morphed, from obligations, duty and ‘limitless indebtedness’ to ‘practical expressions of mutual need, mutual gratitude and mutual support for two-way exchanges of support and care’ (Croll, 2006: 483). Reciprocity instead of obligation is a significant factor in new intergenerational relations in Chinese families (Ikels, 2004; Liu, 2017).

In pre-modern China, most people entered marriage at a young age and marriages were arranged by parents (Xu et al., 2014; Xu and Whyte, 1990). Parents controlled children’s marriage effectively to continue the family line. At that time, marriage had little relation with romance or love, and ‘the groom and bride did not meet each other until the wedding day’ (Xu and Whyte, 1990; Zang, 2015: 41). Marriage was understood to build a bridge between two families. The primary purpose of marriage was to have children (preferably male heirs), enlarge the family and improve the whole family’s prestige (Xu et al., 2014; Yan, 2014). According to a proverb in Confucianism: ‘there are three ways to be unfilial, the worst is not to produce offspring’11. This is an old-fashioned proverb and individuals do not have compulsory reproduction duties in contemporary China. However, Confucian norms and ‘marital

11 Bu xiao you san, wu hou wei da
filial strategies’ still persist despite decades of tremendous transformation in Chinese society (To, 2015b). Hence, many Chinese people still bear both marriage and reproductive pressures.

2.2 Social transformations: Gender equality and policy changes

Since the foundation of the PRC in 1949, the guiding policy of the state became Chinese Communism and equality of gender became one of CCP’s goals. Officially the hierarchy between women and men was abandoned, and women’s social positions significantly improved. Arranged marriage was abolished in 1950 when the Marriage Law officially supported monogamy and individuals’ freedom to choose their own spouse, especially protecting women’s rights and interests in marriage (Charles, 1993). Besides free-choice marriage, the government started to promote gender equality from several aspects, such as women’s educational attainment and participation in the labour force (Bauer et al., 1992; Maurer-Fazio et al., 2011). Later on, the government also decided to provide accommodation with paid jobs for individuals ‘in various urban work units known as danwei’ (To, 2015b: 2). To (2015b) argues that this significantly diminished individuals’ reliance on parents for living space; individuals’ living on their own also decreased parents’ interventions in their lifestyle decisions. Additionally, this policy is related to the rise of Chinese individualism during the Maoist era (see Section 2.3).

In December 1973, the government started to launch a ‘later, fewer, lower12’ policy to promote late marriage and lower fertility in China. In 1979, the one-child policy was introduced to encourage each couple to give birth to only one child; however, in rural areas, people could have an additional child if the first child was a daughter (Deutsch, 2006). With people’s widespread obedience, China’s urban societies became dominated by three-person families (Nie and Wyman, 2005), or nuclear ‘2+1’ families (Greenhalgh, 2001). Urban parents tended to dote on and concentrate on their “only hope”, no matter whether the child was male or female (To, 2015b). Therefore, women began to receive better resources and investment from the family, especially in healthcare and better access to education. Nie and Wyman (2005: 331) summarise that

12 ‘Wan, xi, shao’
‘a good education will lead to a good career, which will lead to high social status and high income, which will help build a good family’. The expansion of women’s education led to better opportunities for career development and enhanced women’s economic independence, itself then a major factor connected to postponing marriage (Liu, 2014; Oppenheimer, 1988; Yu and Xie, 2013; 2015a). The one-child policy led to increasing rates of female infanticide in the 1980s (Croll, 1994: 200), however, it also allowed women to play roles as workers and consumers rather than traditional housewives and mothers (Deutsch, 2006; Nie and Wyman, 2005). Finally, the policy also emancipated women from the pressure or burdens of high fertility (Fong, 2002).

The one-child policy has prevented millions of births and brought low-fertility aspirations to China (Zhou, 2019). The declining birth rate contributes to the state’s promotion of the ‘leftover’ women concept: to encourage single women to get married and have children (Fincher, 2014), which also increases women’s anxiety of being single (see Chapter 5). Because of China’s declining fertility, low labour force and rapid population ageing, the one-child policy was abolished in 2015 and a universal ‘two-child policy’ launched in 2016 (Zhou, 2019).

2.3 Economic reforms and individualism

China has undergone profound economic development since the 1980s, and economic growth has brought corresponding social and cultural changes that provide the background for the emergence of the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon.

2.3.1 The Chinese path to individualisation

Important Chinese economic reforms (the reform and open-up policy) were launched in late 1978; reforms that have since been termed ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ and ‘socialist market economy’ (Huang, 2018). Opening China’s market to the rest of the world with strict state supervision was a trial progression; since then, Chinese society has been increasingly exposed to Western culture and ‘incorporates neoliberal elements interdigitated with authoritarian centralised control’ due to commercial connections, escalated industrialisation, and urbanisation (Harvey, 2013). All married couples in mainland China are permitted to have two children since 1st January 2016.
China joined the WTO in 2001, forming a closer economic association between China and other countries. With more foreign direct investment and cooperation, China had to compromise in capitalistic lines with the neoliberal rules and concepts of their international connections through WTO (Harvey, 2005: 123). Along with economic reform and international trade, China also experienced increased exposure to the West’s emerging individualistic attitudes (Xu et al., 2014). Consequently, modern and Western culture became popular among Chinese people, especially those born after the 1980s.

Processes of individualisation were first identified in the West, where Giddens claims that individuals pursue reflexive choices, more personal satisfaction and independence (Giddens, 1992). According to Beck (1992: 127), individualisation entails ‘a categorical shift in the relation between the individual and society’. Individualism has become a global trend of China and the Western world, ‘especially due to the global triumph of neoliberalism and the capitalist mode of production’ (Yan, 2010: 507). Yan draws on Beck’s (1992) argument of individualisation to develop it in the context of China. He states that individualisation in China is a special case, an attempt to ‘pursue modernity that was first explored among Chinese elite at the turn of the last century and later practiced at the societal level’ (Yan, 2010: 509). Yan delineates that one of the main differences between individualisation in China and the West is that individualisation in the West started in an economically affluent, politically democratic society where individuals enjoyed much freedom and had less pressure of material necessities. In contrast, China’s first move to individualisation started in a totalitarian political regime where individuals struggled with material shortage and widespread poverty. Additionally, unlike the West where the capitalist market was the prime mover behind individualism, China’s individualisation was shaped by the party-state and created ‘changes by enforcing a number of top-down institutional changes to build the new socialist person and the society’ (Yan, 2009: 31; 2010).

Chinese society reached its first stage of a ‘partial and collective type of individualisation’ during the Maoist era (1949–76). Although Maoist China was a highly collectivist society where people held little autonomy, Chinese individuals experienced several transformations such as ‘disembedding’ from the constraints of traditional norms, the abandonment of arranged marriages, the promotion of free
choice relationships, and individuals started to participate in political or social campaigns (Yan, 2009; 2010). Since the market-oriented economic reforms in the late 1970s, China’s individualisation entered a second stage which developed into a dual social transformation pertaining to social changes and the rise of the individual. These social structure transformations included institutional reforms, and changes to the economic market, policy supports, etc. (Yan, 2010). Chinese individualisation cannot only be understood as a result of “westernisation” post-reforms, but is also linked to various policies of the CCP, such as halting the state placement of graduates into employment (Hoffman, 2001) and the relaxation of rural-urban migration since the 1980s (Yan, 2010). The rise of the individual entails a shift in one’s biography patterns as well; pursuing a life by fulfilling one’s desires became a trend by the mid-1980s, such as seeking more autonomy in personal choice and freedom from the constraints of existing marital or family obligations (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Yan, 2010).

2.3.2 Individualisation, filial piety and familial intimacy

The concept and practice of filial piety has shifted in contemporary China, although perhaps not as much. Ho (1996) claims that Asians are rejecting the oppressive aspects of filial piety in traditional culture, such as children’s absolute obedience; however, filial piety is still widely accepted and has a continuous impact on Chinese society, particularly children’s acts of respect and caring for their parents (Hu and Scott, 2016; Whyte, 2003). Moreover, although China has undergone dramatic economic development and social transformation, there has been a progressive revival of patriarchal Confucianism in recent decades (Fincher, 2014; Ji, 2015). Sociologists claim that well-educated, professional Chinese women were only ‘selectively de-traditionalized’ from strong patrilineal beliefs (such as the traditional gendered division of labour) and not from filial piety (Hu and Scott, 2016; To, 2015b).

During the Chinese individualisation process, individuals articulate more demands for autonomy, self-fulfilment, freedom and self-satisfaction (Yan, 2009). Yan’s (2003) research reveals individuals’ ‘emotional expressivity’ connects to wider family and social relations in contemporary China. Individuals’ desires for emotional
communication and intimacy in familial relations are changing Chinese intergenerational ties (Evans, 2010). According to Jamieson (1998; 2011: 1), ‘intimacy refers to the quality of close connection between people and the process of building this quality’. The introduction of intimacy to family studies represents a milestone in Western sociology family studies: a shift from focusing on family structure and institutional functions to the substance of relationships (Gabb, 2008; Jamieson, 1998; Liu, 2017). In China, intimate relationships are shaped by social-cultural changes but also assist us to explain these changes (Liu, 2017).

Unlike obligation or duty in the traditional definition of filial piety, the quality of closeness that is indicated by intimacy relates to ‘subjective experiences including a feeling of mutual love’ both emotional and cognitive (Jamieson, 2011). Also ‘affective and communicative disclosure’ among family members is a notable shift when studying family relations (Jamieson, 1998). I agree with Evans’ (2010) idea that individual’s emotional needs and communicative intimacy between parents and children contribute to maintaining harmonious family relations. Thus, when examining ‘leftover’ women’s family relations, it is necessary to investigate intergenerational ties through a lens of intimacy to understand parent-adult children relations and marital filial strategies in modern China. My research contributes towards considering individuals’ emotions, agency and autonomy in family studies, an area currently still dominated by the ideas of obligation and social norms. Moreover, intergenerational relation studies have been conducted on filial piety and elder care (Lan, 2002), filial obligations, intimacy between aged parents and married daughters/daughters-in-law (Liu, 2017); yet insufficient discussions about single women’s filial marital strategies have been conducted in urban China.

Simultaneously, the gender of communications is also a key element when studying intergeneration relations. Mother-daughter relations (about domestic/social matters) and father-daughter relations (about ‘big things’/outside matters) are represented differently in the existing literature (Evans, 2010); despite this fact, I argue that there is a trend towards joint communications and sharing emotional matters among parents and their daughters when facing questions about a daughter’s marriage issues (see Chapter 7).
In summary, Chinese youth have favoured the ‘enterprising self’ since the mid-1990s, focusing on self-development and seeking more autonomy in their lives (Yan, 2010). As individuals desire agency in love and familial communications the understanding of filial piety is changing, and a more intimate parent-child relationship is emerging in contemporary China. However, with individuals’ education level increasing and the popularity of individualisation, their intention to postpone marriage is increasing. Social transformations also bring shifts in love and relationship culture which I will relates to the context of the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon in Section 2.4.

2.4 Relationships and marriage in contemporary China

The next part of this section will address marriage studies in China. In traditional China, a marriage held great importance for family, prestige and other social factors. However, after the founding of the PRC and a set of social transformations, individuals are enjoying more freedom in marriage formation and partner choice (Yu and Xie, 2013; 2015a). Marriage has undergone dramatic changes due to economic reforms and social changes. For example, individuals in urban China prefer to postpone their entry into marriage, but this preference does not mean that they are rejecting marriage (Ji and Yeung, 2014; Me and Xie, 2014; Yeung and Hu, 2016).

Existing research on marriage in China unearths several factors regarding a late marriage trend during the last few decades. Women’s average age at first marriage has increased from 21.4 in 1990 to 25.7 in 2017\(^\text{14}\). The most mentioned factor to explain individuals’ postponing their first marriage is the rapid development of modernisation and individualisation (Li and Wang, 2014; Yan, 2010; Yu and Xie, 2013; 2015a). An individual’s life course was constrained by institutional factors under Maoist socialism: their birth place would prescribe a person’s rural or urban status; the area’s related leadership and governmental organisation would decide a person’s workplace and obligations after education (To, 2015b; Whyte and Parish, 1984; Yan, 2010). Moreover, a couple needed to seek the approval of the authorities in their work unit before marriage registration in the Mao era (Whyte and Parish, 1984). However,

economic reforms in the post-Mao era broke this kind of standard life course, by supporting individuals to ‘pursue alternative employment and career development paths in the private sector’ (Yan, 2010: 502). The party-state monopoly over resource allocations and life courses ended in the 1980s as a result of reform which impacted what opportunities and freedom individuals had access to so as to pursue different lifestyles (Yu and Xie, 2013). Chinese youth have benefited from increased romantic possibilities and more freedom in love, making ‘a lifelong relationship more difficult to achieve or sometimes even less desirable’ (Yang, 2017: 11). Individuals prefer setting higher standards for their choice of partner and enter into marriage later (Qi and Niu, 2012).

After transforming China from a planned economy to a free market system, the high degree of egalitarianism under Maoist socialism ended (Whyte and Parish, 1984: 2). Individuals’ living standards and consumption capability improved due to rapid economic growth. Later commercial housing emerged due to an open market and the end of the planned economy approach; since then most individuals need to purchase their own house with less financial benefits from the work unit (Xie et al., 2003). Increasing housing prices and the cost of a marriage are huge burdens on individuals (Jiang, 2010). Thus, the heavy economic pressure increases individuals’ preference to postpone marriage and pursue self-development before settling down (Li and Wang, 2014; Liu, 2014).

Recent studies show that during China’s social transformation period an individual’s educational attainment and earning power impacts on their marriage timing (Ma and Rizzi, 2017; Qi and Niu, 2012). This is because women with better educational attainment seek more autonomy in their lives and spouse-choosing. For example, some women prefer to put self-development and self-achievement in a prominent place, rather than marriage; some pay careful attention to the quality of a marriage and have higher expectations for a quality partner (Liu, 2014). However, scholars obtain different perspectives about women’s economic prospects and their marriage formation. On the one hand, some studies claim that there is a negative relationship between women’s earning power or educational background and the likelihood of marriage. For instance, Yu and Xie (2015a: 1870) claim that women’s increased involvement in the labour market reduces their gains from a marriage and relates to
their ‘higher likelihood of nonmarriage or late marriage’. On the other hand, Oppenheimer (1988) claims that the higher the woman’s economic status in the labour market, the more attractive she will be in modern society. Sweeney (2002) supports Oppenheimer’s theory that the importance of women’s earning power in marriage formation has grown over time.

Economic factors or educational attainment are not the only factors impacting individuals’ marriage decisions; according to Illouz’s (2012) theory of the architecture of romantic choice, cultural norms and social elements also play significant roles (more in Chapter 6). In China, a spouse-matching pattern impacts women’s marriage; women’s preference to ‘marry up’ (marrying someone from a higher socioeconomic class) and men’s preference to ‘marry down’ (marrying someone from a lower socioeconomic class) still exist in today’s mate-selection process (Lei et al., 2014; Luo and Sun, 2015). In that sense, better educational attainment and career development become “obstacles” for women to find a partner. However, ‘men dang hu dui/compatible family backgrounds’\(^{15}\) has been a popular marriage pattern since ancient China (Qi and Niu, 2012). The original meaning of men dang hu dui means that the husband’s family and the wife’s family share similar political, social or economic status and prestige (Wei and Guo, 2017). Family intervention in Chinese marriage is still alive, in various forms (full discussion in Chapter 7). However, the meaning of men dang hu dui is shifting and widening. With the development of individualisation and related social changes, individuals are placing more importance on their personal happiness and their partner’s traits, such as similar tastes, interests, lifestyles, education backgrounds, economic prospects, etc., instead of only focusing on family factors (Qi and Niu, 2012; Yang, 2017: 1).

Although researchers develop different perspectives on women’s economic status and marriage chances, they agree that men’s economic prospects and position in the labour market are positively associated with their desirability and opportunities to enter marriage (Ji and Yeung, 2014; Lei et al., 2014; Oppenheimer, 1988). In traditional China, men were expected to provide for the household and be the main breadwinner,

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\(^{15}\) Men dang hu dui, is also translated as ‘match door and household’, or ‘a marriage of equals’ or ‘a homogenous marriage’ in other research.
although gender equality has been promoted since the foundation of the PRC, this historic influence remains to some extent. As a result, a reasonable economic basis becomes a necessity for a marriage in terms of men’s economic status and earning power.

Furthermore, individuals are gradually accepting more Western culture, values, lifestyle choices and some romantic relationship values, including cohabitation, because the connection between China and other countries has become more frequent and closer (Ma and Rizzi, 2017; Yeung and Hu, 2016). Premarital cohabitation was unacceptable in traditional China (Parish et al., 2007) and the government’s regulations on marriage strengthened Chinese attitudes against cohabitation in Maoist China (1949–1976) (Y. Zhang, 2017). Ideational changes concerning love and sex, economic motives and institutional changes are influential factors in the emergence of cohabitation since the 1980s (Yu and Xie, 2015b; Y. Zhang, 2017). Individuals with better educational attainment and family backgrounds or individuals from more developed provinces of China are more willing to accept premarital cohabitation (Yu and Xie, 2015b).

Generally, relationship and marriage culture have undergone many transformations, and late marriage no longer needs to be promoted: ‘it is a voluntary trend’ (Guo et al., 2015: 119). On the macro level, China’s social context, modernisation and individualisation are major contributors to changes of relationship culture. On the micro level, individuals’ educational attainment, economic prospects, the desire for agency and autonomy in love and intimacy, and an acceptance of Western culture are also important elements in these shifts. After reviewing shifts in Chinese relationship and marriage culture, I find that women’s identity and their choice in romantic relationships need more investigation. In the following part, I will focus on women’s studies and discourses of being a single woman in China since 1949.

2.5 Chinese women’s studies

As the research focuses on single women in contemporary China, exploring women’s studies, feminism and gender studies are significant components of the thesis. I will
briefly review the history of being a woman and the development of feminism in the Chinese context, and review the social discussion about single Chinese women since the Mao era in the following subsections. Later I will continue with gender studies in contemporary China in Chapter 4.

2.5.1 Being a woman in China

After a series of social transformations over the past few decades, Chinese society remains attached to its social and family traditions, to some extent (as discussed in 2.1). The attitude of the state and society towards Chinese women is also paradoxical and complex to understand. The new Marriage Law of 1950 made free-choice marriage official and it was one of the CCP’s main commitments to women’s struggle for sexual equality. This law empowered women to take control over their lives to some extent, for example, rights of divorce, the right to choose a partner, etc. (Evans, 1997). Also, women were given certain rights in order to improve their status relative to men through family life, including childbearing and family property management (Davin, 1976). There is no doubt that women were given legal rights in relation to marriage and family under Maoism, congruent with the saying which claims that ‘times are different, men and women are now all the same’ (Dai, 2002: 99). Nevertheless, what constitutes “being a woman” in the Chinese context requires more historical and discursive discussion.

Tani E. Barlow (2004: 58) points out that a woman’s body is ‘a field of the state’ under Maoist interpenetrations of state and family, and develops this argument through a discussion of Fulian. Fulian (the All-China Women’s Federation) has been the official national institution responsible for the organisation and administration of women’s affairs since 1949 (Evans, 1997). It contributes to much discussion about gender, women’s economic and social status, and women’s political identity within official discourses (Evans, 1997; Liu, 1993). Barlow (2004: 59) states that ‘the importance of Fulian lay in its power to subordinate and dominate all inscriptions of womanhood in official discourse.’ However, Barlow says Fulian does not always represent the “interests” of women but of the state, whilst one could not be “represented” as a
woman ‘without the agency and mediation of Fulian’. Later, the 1954 Constitution confirmed that women and men held the same rights in all spheres; for example, ‘political affairs, economic, cultural and social life, including family life’ (Attané, 2014: 96-7). A gender-neutral concept ‘tongzhi’ (comrade) was produced in the Maoist era (1949 to 1976). Tongzhi is an asexual and socialist term, disassociating class and gender (Pun, 2005). During this time, there was almost no public discussion about being a female, the feminisation of women’s appearance, women’s marriage and sexual relationships unless linked with the extolment of socialist comradeship (Evans, 1997). For example, Fulian, despite being the official mass organisation, did not publish any document or decision specifically concerning women during 1957-1983 (Li and John, 2005).

Studies of women in China have focused on women’s history, equality, gender neutrality and related theoretical issues since the Maoist era (Evans, 1997). Barlow (1994) noted that Chinese women’s studies and woman theory have been academic discussions and attracted scholars, Fulian workers, and readers since the late 1980s. Evans and Barlow are western scholars commenting on Chinese feminism who summarise key scholars’ and feminists’ work (such as Ding Ling, Li Xiaojiang, Dai Jinhua) and they present summaries of the comprehensive debates in Chinese feminism in historical context. Ding Ling is a significant scholar in women’s studies and Chinese feminism under Maoist nationalism. She is the founder of modern Chinese feminism (Li, 1989). Sociological scholars have engaged in important debates on the diversity of women’s images since China’s economic reform period. The term ‘women’s studies’ first entered Chinese discourses through a book review in the 1980s (Barlow, 2004: 266). At that time, Chinese women struggled to distinguish between ‘self’ and ‘society’ and questioned whether gender equality meant gender sameness (Li and John, 2005). In the 1980s, Li Xiaojiang, one of the pioneers of women’s studies in China, supervised several volumes of her Women’s Research Series (Funü yanjiu congshu) (Evans, 1997). She is also a key scholar in women’s liberation and market feminism since the late 1980s (Barlow, 2004). Li rediscovered that natural sexual differences were repressed during the Maoist Cultural Revolution

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16 The review was published in Studies of Social Sciences Abroad of Shirai Atsushi’s Women’s Studies and the History of Women’s Movements.
17 ‘Natural’ refers to biological differences between men and woman.
and she tried to recover women’s ‘natural’ feminine characteristics. She reinvented the rationale for women’s central position in historical transformations; furthermore, she proposed that an ideal future market economy would provide spaces for women to ‘express subjectively the affect that nature pulls out of them, in their roles as mothers and wives’ (Barlow, 2004: 358-9). Li’s argument about market society offering resources to perform gender also relates with the ideology of consumerism and gender in today’s romantic comedies which will be addressed in Chapter 4. In the late 1980s, Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua (1989) argued that sex differences, to some extent, empower women to assert their equality with men in specific sites through the recognition of biological difference (cited in Evans, 1997: 27). Dai is a feminist thinker who works on gender, women and feminism in Chinese film and film cultural criticism. During the 1990s, Dai pointed out that ‘lacking a subjective social form, women can become female only in the labour of self-writing and invisible writing’ (cited in Barlow, 2004: 306). She further argued that only women can create, and must create a future for themselves (cited in Barlow, 2004: 356). Dai (2002) asserts that Chinese women’s deeds and narrations occur behind history’s back, where discourses of women are silent and/or absent under the shadow of male ancestry (further discussion in Chapter 4). Dai also contributes to gender and women’s studies in Chinese films, which will be discussed in more detail under ‘ideologies of gender’ in Chapter 4.

2.5.2 Being single: “The unnatural woman”?

As explained above, marriage is one of the most significant elements in an individual’s life in China. Evans (1997: 202) summarises that ‘the naturalized representation of marriage as a relationship rooted in biological need coincides with the almost universal practice of marriage in contemporary China’. Chinese girls might, inevitably, begin to consider marriage when reaching the age 18 to leave home (Tian, 1991). When conducting research into unmarried persons in Beijing, the Chinese feminist Li Yinhe (1991) found that it was always assumed that men and women would marry and that there is almost no alternative option. After a series of economic and social

18 Usually 18 or even younger.
transformations over the past few decades, China now embraces more possibilities and opportunities in individuals’ lifestyles; however, marriage maintains a central position in many minds. For example, when the sociologist Sandy To interviewed a group of Chinese professional single women, almost all of them expressed that they were keen to be married: some of them declared that, ‘marriage was something that had to be done’ (2015: 10).

After 1949, marriage and monogamy were constructed as a fundamental biological union; at that point, public discussions about alternatives to marriage were, to a large extent, silenced (Evans, 1997). In the 1950s, the few articles published about ‘being single’ or ‘celibacy’ (dushenzhuyi) conveyed an idea that ‘celibacy is wrong’; as Wei explains, people’s freedom in love did not mean that they would enjoy the freedom to stay single (Evans, 1997; Wei, 1950). Before economic reforms in the late 1970s, political impact was a significant factor in Chinese marital choices, such as a person’s political status (zhengzhimianmao), family origins (jiatingchengfen), social relations (shehuiguanxi), etc. (Qi and Niu, 2012). So, in the 1980s the near universality of marriage and the assumption that everyone would get married still widely existed in Chinese society (Honig and Hershatter, 1988). There have been several discussions about being single since then; in particular, single women over thirty years old have caught much social attention. ‘Old maids’ (lao guniang/da guniang) was a term to describe these unmarried women. For instance, ‘over-thirty-year-old maids’ (sanshi duo sui de lao guniang) contributed to headlines in the early to mid-1980s (Evans, 1997).

Large numbers of marriageable-aged women with ‘attainment, strong dedication to their work and their own unique understanding of love’ found themselves unable to find a partner (Honig and Hershatter, 1988: 106). Media discussions spread pity and sympathy towards single persons; however, some suggested that single women were unfortunate victims of circumstance (Xiao, 1986). Furthermore, the ideology of being single was never considered to be a positive lifestyle choice, which transformed women’s choice of being single into kind of irregularity (Si, 1992). For example, a single woman, Tang Liqin, describes her experiences and social situation: ‘[people say that] I am too picky and a “high-priced” girl, that I’m old, psychologically abnormal, physiologically incomplete, possessed of a shameful secret that cannot be told […] an
“old biddy” who has fought and lost in the arena of love”; moreover, Tang said she had been treated as the target of public criticism (Honig and Hershatter, 1988: 107-8). Unmarried women were discussed in the media, often negatively, in the early 1990s as well and assumed to be incomplete and unfulfilled persons. For example, there were articles about well-educated and socially well-placed single women which imply some mental or biological conditions explained their singlehood (Evans, 1997). This framing carries a social and cultural impact ‘her very naming invariably appears as a means of denying her recognition as a full woman’ (Evans, 2002: 343). The figure of an unmarried woman has also been widely represented as a threat to marital harmony and family stability (Evans, 1997). In Yu’s (1993) article, for instance, single women found it difficult to make a female friend because they were represented as a threat to the norm; what is more, married women also expressed their worries that single women might “steal” their partners.

In her survey of unmarried persons in Beijing, Li (1991) found that the major reason for women being single was failure to find a suitable partner and that they did not lack the desire to marry. Also, women’s marital obligations, such as the actual marital experience and conflict, might make staying single a more attractive choice because, in that instance, they would not need to serve or do things for others (Tian, 1991). Occasionally, representations of single women were injected with positive images. For example, Shang (1992) presented a 35-year-old single woman in a journal who was happy with her unmarried status, expressing a message that being single did not always bring hopelessness, solitude and despair. Returning to Tang Liqin, she expressed: ‘I hope I can gain social recognition and support’ while being single (Honig and Hershatter, 1988: 108). Some newspapers supported that people should not be “forced” into marriage in a modern society and people should be able to make different lifestyle choices (*Renmin ribao*, 13 April 1993); yet Evans (1997: 206) noted that ‘the overriding bias in contemporary representations of single people in China indicates otherwise’. Thus, in the 1990s women’s choice to be single was represented as a distortion of the ‘normal’ female identity and has been described as a ‘rootless cloud’ (*wugen zhi yuncai*) (Evans, 1997; Yu, 1993).

Recently, in the mid-2000s, another term ‘leftover’ women (*shengnǚ*) has become frequently used in public to describe urban single women who are well-educated,
professional, economically successful and unmarried in their late twenties (Fu, 2015). In 2007, Fulian (the All-China Women’s Federation) first defined the term ‘leftover’ women as women who are older than twenty-seven and unmarried (Fincher, 2014: 16). The central presumption made about ‘leftover’ women is that ‘they were destined to get married, somehow, sometime, and to not do so would be defying the tradition […] or they would regret their own decision if they found themselves without a husband and children when they were old’ (To, 2015: 1-2). I argue that the ‘leftover’ women concept is a gendered phenomenon. Gaetano (2017), rightly, argues that ‘leftover’ woman is a sexist term, as while some research uses ‘leftover men’ to describe single men over 30 it is more predominantly used for single women (Tang, 2010; Zhang et al., 2015). Additionally, in popular parlance, professional single men in the urban marriage market are not called ‘leftover men’ but labelled as ‘golden bachelors’ and ‘diamond single men’ (Zhang and Sun, 2014). The term ‘leftover men’ usually refers to single men from rural places with a lower socioeconomic status (Zhang and Jiao, 2015). Media coverage encourages ‘leftover’ women to get married and warns them that they might lose the chance to find a suitable partner to marry and be forever single if they postpone marriage too long (Fincher, 2014). Discussions about Chinese leftover women are discursive, encompassing various aspects that I will introduce more in the following subsection.

The argument that marriage is “natural” and “necessary” applies to men as well (Evans, 1997); however, public debates and discussions concentrating on single women have overshadowed the attention on other groups of single persons such as unmarried men. Evans (1997) argues that there are more social problems related to single men from rural areas, of a lower socioeconomic status; and, to some extent, that these men are the least marriageable in China. Compared with a prominent focus on ‘leftover’ women, the topic of ‘leftover’ men in rural areas needs more attention; especially as their difficulties to get married are more serious in contemporary China (Zheng and Jiao, 2015).

Overall, I agree that the improvement of Chinese women’s situation, across various aspects, is indisputable; notably regarding health, education and employment (Attané, 2014). There is no doubt that Chinese women are enjoying power and freedom at a greater level than in the past (Dai, 2002). However, men and women’s situations in
love and marriage culture deserve more investigation. Although marital pressure applies to both Chinese men and women, women still bear much pressure to marry and being single is not an easy choice for them. At the same time, ‘leftover men’ in rural China is also a serious issue. However, the persistence of gendered roles limits women’s autonomy in family life and contributes to the continuity of gender inequality (Attané, 2014). Hence, the emergence of the concept of ‘leftover’ women relates to China’s social transformations (discussed above), and invokes much academic discussion, as I now consider in more detail.

3. ‘Leftover’ women’s studies in contemporary China

The ‘leftover’ women phenomenon has been a focus of academic discussions since the term was created in 2007 (see Chapter 1). Existing research exploring ‘leftover women’ can be broadly divided into three approaches: the reasons for the appearance of the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon; the significance of the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon and proposed solutions; and constructions of ‘leftover’ women figures in the media. I will now discuss each of these in turn.

3.1 The appearance of the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon

The appearance of ‘leftover’ women is a “gender neutral” phenomenon that relates to the trend of later marriage for both women and men in China. Meanwhile, various economic and social factors underlie this phenomenon. For instance, people’s increasing economic pressure; both men and women are suffering from increased living expenses and high house prices, especially in big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong, etc. (Jiang, 2010). Many couples prefer to consider marriage when they are in stable socioeconomic position with an apartment to live in. Yu and Xie (2013) and Liu (2014) claim that expensive housing is a significant reason for young people to postpone entry into first marriage. Chen (2012) argues that expensive household prices aggravate the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon and become an unavoidable obstacle towards marriage. What is more, researchers argue that the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon is caused by the collision between traditional mating or marriage patterns and modern social changes. For instance, Zhang’s research using
China’s sixth nationwide census shows that the appearance of ‘leftover’ women relates to a national late marriage trend that is a result of the development of industrialisation and modernisation (Zhang, 2013).

Narratives about ‘women not being chosen’ and ‘women not choosing’ both exist in contemporary China. Several sociologists use a ‘marriage squeeze’ theory to explain the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon—when not everyone has an opportunity to marry, some will be “squeezed” out of the marriage market (Tang, 2010). Individuals in the marriage market can be divided into several classes. Women or men with high educational attainment, good economic status and high social class are labelled as ‘A level’ women or men. Although Gong and Li (2015) claim that ‘leftover’ women choose to be single until they find the suitable partner, other researchers find that many ‘A level’ men prefer ‘B level’ women in order to be the dominant partner in a relationship; as a result, a group of ‘A level’ women with high socioeconomic status remain involuntarily single (Gao, 2011; Ning, 2008). Overall, such women are not chosen by men; they are involuntarily squeezed out of the marriage market because of their age, education and career, alongside men “marrying down” norms.

Also, postponing marriage is a voluntary expression of women’s agency. Ji (2015) states that the appearance of the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon is a result of women weaving traditional marriage expectations with modernity in China’s transformation period. In more detail, women’s independence and traditional marriage pressure create the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon. For instance, Gong and Li (2015) stress that economic independence and a well-educated background contributes to women’s desire for autonomy in marriage while patriarchal beliefs constrain freedom and choices. In particular, Yu and Xie (2013) argue that the length of women’s education is negatively related with their entry into first marriage in urban cities. Also, Gao (2011) states that the conflicts between women’s independence, their career development and the traditional housewife role are obvious: women prefer a husband to share their housework and career pressure, not a partner who is longing for a perfect housewife. As a result, women choose to stay single unless they find a suitable man.

19 A common term in Chinese society.
20 A gendered model in traditional China: ‘men should work outside while women should stay at home’/‘nan zhu wai, nü zhu nei’.
Several studies use the unmatched situations between ‘leftover’ women and ‘leftover’ men\(^{21}\) to explain marriage difficulties. Moreover, they argue that ‘leftover’ men’s marriage crisis is higher than ‘leftover’ women’s. Zhang’s (2013) research shows that single people’s marriage crisis arises from their unmatched educational backgrounds, and imbalanced development between urban and rural areas. For example, it will be difficult to advise a well-educated ‘leftover’ woman in an urban city to date a rural ‘leftover’ man with poor education. Zhang et al. (2015) argue that ‘leftover’ men issues are more serious than ‘leftover’ women through 2010–2012 cross-sectional data in China. For example, the possibility of being a ‘leftover’ man is 2.37% higher than women. Thus, being a ‘leftover man’ is a more serious problem. However, the ‘leftover’ men crisis is absent from the selected films and relevant online reviews.

3.2 Significance of the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon and possible solutions

The ‘leftover’ women phenomenon is also related to China’s demographic problems (Fincher, 2014; Gong and Li, 2015). The concept is “created” for state policy purposes to some extent. For example, To (2015a) argues that the Chinese government’s promotion of the ‘leftover’ women concept and encouraging single women to get married links with China’s declining birth rate and ageing problems. As a result, the government chooses a direct solution to promote marriage and encourage couples to have children. Fincher (2014) also argues that state media are propagating the concept of ‘leftover’ women in China to encourage highly educated women to marry and have children, helping to address the demographic problem of an ageing population.

Moreover, the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon is seen as representative of China’s neoliberal transitions and the development of a market economy. Luo and Sun (2015) point out that the penetration of neoliberal values of marketisation, privatisation and consumerism impacts ‘the ability to make choices on one’s own behalf in the daily lives of economically marginalized as well as economically privileged communities around the globe’ (Mohanty, 2002: 508).

\(^{21}\) Single men with the lowest socioeconomical status are labelled as ‘leftover’ men.
Last but not least, some scholars use feminism to criticise the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon in terms of gender equality and gender relations. For example, Zhou (2010) points out that the emergence of the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon is a reflection of male dominion; women are ‘leftover’ because they refuse to be subordinated by men. Some of this gendered research corresponds with my concerns, but I achieve a more exhaustive analysis by addressing the representations and readings of ‘leftover women’ and linking them to broader social change in China. Unlike Zhou’s criticism, I contest that ‘leftover’ women discussions are associated with shifts in gender norms and gender relations (an argument that will be developed in Chapter 4).

There is a small amount of research discussing potential solutions for the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon, usually coupled with reasons for, or the significance of, the phenomenon. For example, Ning (2008) advises the government and media to encourage people to break traditional marriage values and patterns, such as women’s “marrying up” and men’s “marrying down” preferences. Simultaneously, single women could broaden their partner selection range or use dating agencies to find a partner. Chen (2012) also agrees that the government and individuals need to adapt, such as controlling house prices and decreasing the importance of economic factors when looking for a partner. Furthermore, sociologist Sandy To (2015a) provides several practical solutions for four types of professional women’s partnering dilemmas and relationships in her book, *Chinese leftover women: Late marriage among professional women and its consequence*. Her advice includes slowing down at work (prioritise their work concerns less) and focusing on relationships and marriage issues; choosing from Western men; considering lower economic status men with egalitarian values; and looking towards non-traditional forms of relationship which provide more autonomy and self-satisfaction.

### 3.3 Media constructions of ‘leftover’ women

The last academic approach is to discuss media representations of Chinese ‘leftover’ women. The most popular area of interest is in the media construction of different types of ‘leftover’ women. For example, Zhu (2009) divides representations of
different ‘leftover’ women into four types in *Desire of the Heart*: 1) a confusing conventional woman in love, 2) a ‘money-minded’ professional woman, 3) a wealthy woman seeking pure chemistry, and, 4) a divorced woman. Cheng’s (2011) research on several TV series about ‘leftover’ women identifies four categories: workaholic women longing for marriage; hopeless and introverted women; women fearing marriage, and innocent women of love. While Qin (2012) identifies three categories of ‘leftover’ women represented across selected media (The Beijing News, People.cn and TV series): ‘material-oriented’ women, ‘picky’ women and women seeking true love. Finally, Dong and Wang’s (2017) research presents two categories of ‘leftover’ women from reportage on ‘sina.com’ from 2011–2015: women who are ‘cautious towards marriage’ and ‘urgent for marriage’.

Another research theme within media constructions is to criticise the media for constructing gender stereotypes and stigmatising ‘leftover’ women. For example, Guo (2015) stresses that there are more negative reports of ‘leftover’ women (about single women’s loneliness) than positive images (about their happiness as independent single women) in the research samples: 32.1% of news reports are negative about ‘leftover women’, 11.3% are positive and 59.1% are neutral. Li and Liu (2016) argue that film representations of ‘leftover’ women create a gender stereotype about such women who are usually constructed as professionally successful, but not personally due to heartbreak or failures in love. Additionally, through numerous media presentations these women are labelled as ‘picky’, ‘unconfident’, ‘prissy’, etc. For example, T. Liu (2015) asserts that stereotypes of worried and anxious ‘leftover’ women in the TV series *Let’s get married* imply that there are gender inequalities in the marriage market, and that women are under pressure from masculine dominance and patriarchal traditions in China. Other recent research by Feldshuh (2018) argues that discursive practices in the media are constructing myths and creating a crisis about ‘leftover’ women, as non-marriage is presented as abnormal in the dating show *If You Are the One* and women’s ageing is presented as a detrimental factor in dating or marriage in the TV series *Let’s get married*. Scattered research exists about ‘leftover’ women’s identities in films, but generally focuses on one specific film and lacks a discussion of

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the audience. For instance, Zhu (2009) analyses different ‘leftover’ women, their struggles and pressures in *Desire of the Heart*; Li (2017) discusses constructions of anxiety regarding being a ‘leftover’ woman, tensions with her family, and the hegemony of masculinity in *The Last Woman Standing*.

Thus, film studies about ‘leftover’ women are still under-developed and most existing research focuses on one specific film (Li, 2017), or the typology of ‘leftover’ women (Zhu, 2009) or how films create stereotypes about single women (Li and Liu, 2016). The approaches above connect with Adorno’s idea that films have the potential to promote stereotypes, yet today’s audience can be critical viewers (D’Olimpio, 2015). Livingstone (2009; 2019) mentions that we are living in a mediated society and audience decoding plays a significant part in the circulation of a message. A lack of sociocultural discussions on the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon and the absence of audiences’ readings of media constructions of Chinese ‘leftover’ women provide a gap for my research to address.

**Conclusions**

This chapter began by exploring film studies and the Chinese film industry, active audience and UGC analysis, and the existing literature on film, film audiences and romance, especially for romantic comedies. Researching films needs discussing in relation to the social context, surrounding culture and the audience’s readings (Turner, 2008). For instance, every media product that circulates in mainland China is under the CCP’s supervision, and economic reforms, marketisation, and globalisation have injected some new factors into the film industry, such as commercialisation. Additionally, UGC and eWOM platforms are significant components in film studies today. Besides paying attention to films’ marketing and commercial functions, UGC websites require in-depth analysis from a sociological perspective to discuss their social functions. An audience is no longer passive recipient but an active participant in today’s media culture. Simultaneously, the media influences an individual’s views on romance and intimacy and may provide romantic “ideals” to the audience,
especially through romcoms (see Chapter 4). The effect of films and UGC on the new media landscape are significant and need to be developed when discussing representations of ‘leftover’ women in films of the 21st century.

I have also reviewed the literature on family and relationship traditions and social changes since the foundation of the PRC. In general, traditional family and relationship values remain widespread, particularly that of filial piety. People are selectively de-traditionalized from strong patrilineal beliefs, such as total obedience to parents. However, Chinese individuals still face a dilemma between fulfilling parents’ expectations and asserting their own choices; especially concerning marriage issues. China has undergone dramatic social transformations since 1949. With a series of policy changes, women’s marriage equality, education and employment opportunities have been improved. After the implementation of the one-child policy, the only daughter often received greater concern and resources; however, the policy also caused serious downsides, such as numerous female infanticides and a low fertility rate. Economic reforms since 1979 have led to successful economic development and social changes; they have also brought Western culture and modernisation to China and heightened existing trends towards individualism. All of these social changes have impacted individuals’ romantic relationships and choices in love. For instance, economic status in the labour market and individuals’ educational attainment become key factors to establish a stable relationship that leads towards marriage. Cultural norms, such as *men dang hui dui*, are still preferable to most Chinese youth, but the factors under consideration when choosing a partner focus more on individuals’ personalities rather than family backgrounds. Furthermore, Western culture has changed Chinese views on relationships. For example, premarital cohabitation has been accepted by some as part of a romantic relationship. Based on the literature discussed above, Chinese love and marriage culture is formed by several institutions, such as media, the state, patriarchal family norms, etc. However, being single is not an easy choice for Chinese women and women still bear much pressure to get married.

Within the contexts explained above, the final section of this chapter examined existing ‘leftover’ women studies. I summarised several approaches within this research area: reasons for the appearance of the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon; the
significance of the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon and potential solutions; and media constructions of ‘leftover’ women. The scarcity of literature dealing with film representations and readings of ‘leftover’ women’s emotions and choices in love—their challenge to conventional gender norms, social intervention in ‘leftover’ women’s romantic relationships, shifts in their familial relations and relationships experiencing social transformations—are, in part, compensated for by the empirical and theoretical elaborations I make about the single women being studied in this thesis. Taking a sociological approach, I pay attention to representations of ‘leftover women’ in films and how these representations are read and circulated through UGC. I am also interested in how films and UGC are related to wider cultural and social changes in China over the past decades, and how they might provoke future social change (such as through legitimising later marriage, promoting new gender relations and more intimate familial relationships, etc.). The next chapter outlines the research methods that have been used in order to address my research questions.
Chapter 3 Methodology

Introduction

The chapter provides a methodological rationale for the thesis and an elaboration of my research questions, then outlines relevant theories and justifications of the methodology, genre analysis and discourse analysis—particularly Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis. In the subsequent section, I explain several stages of my research design: the sampling stage involved selecting research samples among different media products; the analysis stage was a systematic approach to examine specific media representations identified from the first stage and guided by the overarching research questions of the study. Finally, I discuss several issues concerning the two data sources used: films and online reviews on the Douban Movie website.

In the proceeding section I outline the analytical framework of the study. First, I explain my use of genre analysis to study romantic comedies, addressing generic elements in the selected films, such as visual characteristics, narrative patterns and ideology. In drawing this approach to film studies from an Anglophone tradition, I also consider its applicability in a Chinese context and ask: to what extent are romantic comedies in China distinctive? Then I explain how Fairclough’s three-dimensional CDA is applied with multimodal techniques to the research samples. Through discussing and evaluating the application of these analytical tools in relation to the data, I explain how they support the study. In general, I argue that a combination of genre analysis with CDA enables representations of ‘leftover’ women in the Chinese media to be analysed in multidimensional ways, in more depth than a sole analysis of the text, by involving socio-cognitive aspects within textual interpretation.

In the final section, I discuss that conducting research on ‘leftover’ women requires reconsidering a number of ethical issues. First, I explore two emerging discussions of ethics in social media research, debates surrounding whether data are public or private, and about anonymity. As all my samples are Chinese media products, I also examine
ethical issues of translation in the study. Additionally, I pay attention to undertaking research with ‘leftover’ women, such as the potential for my research to reify and reproduce the negative term ‘leftover’ women.

1. Research questions

In the previous chapter, I outlined the interlinking connections between films and an audience in the 21st century. Livingstone (2009) argues that the unexpected development of digital engagement had led us to the ‘mediation of everything’. Under the impact of Web 2.0 applications, the circulation of a message not only includes encoding and decoding, but audience encoding as well in a mediated society (Livingstone, 2019). Representations of ‘leftover’ women have appeared in various media since the term was created in 2007 (see Section 3.1). Alongside media presentations, the sociocultural significance of UGC are inevitable elements in my research. I find that online film reviews are typical examples of UGC in the Chinese film industry (see Chapter 2). Based on my previous studies on films and audience and my research interests, I argue that film and related reviews of ‘leftover’ women are good examples to analyse the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon in mediated Chinese society. Regardless of increasing academic interest in UGC analysis, there has been limited sociological advancement into the film industry and UGC culture. Through a close look at reviews on Douban Movie, in this thesis I examine media representations of ‘leftover’ women in conjunction with audience readings to provide a broader picture of the Chinese ‘leftover’ women phenomenon and the sociocultural information behind it. Situating ‘leftover’ women research within film and audience readings presents the opportunity to explore various representations of Chinese ‘leftover’ women, and address how they shape and are shaped by Chinese society, especially in terms of love and marriage culture, gender relations, family studies, social transformations, etc.

My research questions have been revised and improved throughout the research process, based on the literature, data analysis and my evolving understanding of the research topic. Questions 1-3 below were always central to my thesis, while question 4 emerged as it became clear that my analysis of ‘leftover’ women film and UGC
enabled me to address wider sociocultural changes in urban China.

1. How are ‘leftover’ women represented in contemporary Chinese film?
2. How are these representations read by the audience?
3. What do these representations and readings tell us about gender relations and gender norms in contemporary China?
4. To what extent are these representations and readings linked with wider social change in China?

2. Rationale for the methodology

In order to address a comprehensive analysis of the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon in both films and UGC, I combine a genre analysis with a CDA to films and reviews.

2.1 Genre, cinema and the romantic comedy genre

Genre is a French word which means ‘type’ or ‘kind’. Swales (1990: 58) proposes an integrated definition of genre: ‘[a] genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes.’ Based on Swales’ definition, genre is characterised by communications that shape and influence discourse, and also constrains the writer’s choice of content, style and intended audience. Bhatia (1993) builds on Swales’ definition by explaining how the definition of ‘genre’ acts in disciplinary and institutional contexts. Moreover, he argues that the concept of genre is usually a highly structured and conventionalised communicative event. Genre analysis stems from the convergence of various studies, such as sociolinguistics, discourse analysis and cultural anthropology (Bhatia, 1993; Swales, 1990). Later, genre was introduced into cinema studies as a more appropriate tool than auteurism23 in the mass entertainment industry (Gledhill, 2000). Also, genre has become a useful conceptual tool for art and artifactual cinema studies (Grant, 2003: xvi). As Hay (2002) argues, film genre studies are profoundly instrumental in film criticism’s rationalisation of films and culture as distinctive formal and textual

23 Auteurism originates from ‘auteur theory’. Auteur theory is a protocol for cinema studies that aggrandizes the director’s role in film production (Menne, 2011).
practices. Genre studies have been integral in attempts to maintain an understanding of cinema discourse as a ‘cultural form’, rather than being labelled as ‘art’, ‘mass’ or ‘popular’ entertainment (Hay, 2002). Smith (1998: 7) argues that genre films share formulaic characteristics that are not completely identical as they exhibit variation. Hence, using genre analysis not only helps us to understand romance films and their related social conventions, but also contributes towards understanding tensions between sameness and difference within these films.

Genres are sites of negotiation between stability and change. As Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995: 6) explains, ‘they [genres] are inherently dynamic, constantly (if gradually) changing over time in response to the sociocognitive needs of individual users’. Although genres relate to recurring contexts and conventionalised communicative purposes, we need to understand the concept of genre as a dynamic social process in which there is space for innovation, it is not static (Bhatia, 2004: 23-4). For example, although using the same romantic comedy genre, Hollywood films are distinctive to Chinese ones to some extent; moreover, Chinese ‘leftover’ women romantic comedies also vary in relation to each other because of different social context. Overall, genres evolve over time, and between cultural contexts.

One important aspect of genre analysis is that the text – in this case film - is regarded as an ongoing process of negotiation which provides space for innovation and remodelling (Szczyrbak, 2014). In the Chinese film industry, the negotiation involves nation, market, cinema, economic reforms, audience, etc. (more in Chapter 2). This approach encompasses a linguistic study of texts in discursive aspects, such as its lexical, grammatical, discursive and rhetorical features (Bhatia, 1993). Film is a key example of texts in genre analysis. When applied to romantic comedies, genre analysis not only focuses on visual characteristics and narrative patterns, but also aims to reveal embedded ideologies and relating social context. Genre analysis is also applied to reach the academic goal of providing a better understanding of the textual conventions of a genre (Bhatia, 1993; de Jong and Burgers, 2013; Swales, 1990).

Different analytical strategies will be applied when doing genre analysis, based on various communicative goals. Genre analysis has expanded from linguistic description to a multidisciplinary system, including psycholinguistic factors and sociocultural
discussions as well (Bhatia, 1993). In detail, linguistic orientations develop pedagogical solutions for ‘English for specific purpose’ classrooms (Bhatia, 2016). Psycholinguistic approaches intend to discuss tactical aspects of genre construction (Bhatia, 1993). The third approach is genre analysis in the sociological arena where researchers analyse texts as ongoing social process and how a particular genre ‘defines, organizes, and finally communicates social reality’ (Bhatia, 1993: 18); particularly, Miller (1984) proposes that genre is social action from an ethnomethodological perspective. I choose the sociological approach in my thesis to explore Chinese ‘leftover’ women films and relevant sociocultural contexts. In summary, as Bhatia (1993) proposes, doing genre analysis not only helps to clarify the communicative goals of discourse communities, but also contributes to understanding the individual strategies to achieve the goals.

Genre analysis has been used in cinema since the 1970s, exemplified by Western films, particularly in the United States where Hollywood studios adopted an industrial model of mass production (Grant, 2003). Other examples are gangster films, musicals, horror films, melodramas, comedies, etc. Additionally, ‘sub-genre’ is also used for referring to particular groupings within genres, such as the romantic comedy, the gothic horror film, etc. (Neale, 2000: 7). Grant (2003: xv) interprets genre movies as ‘commercial feature films which, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations’. He proposes that genre films establish a sense of cinema as a cultural and economic institution, and not only mass entertainment. Understanding genre analysis enables the strategic use of textual analysis for socio-historical enquiry, so that genre can be appreciated as a distinctive sphere of social action (Bennett, 1990: 108). Gledhill (2000: 221) addresses that genre provides spaces to pursue intersections within film theory, as well as interactions between ‘industry and institution, history and society, culture and audiences’, and the central themes of ‘political economy, sociology and cultural studies’. Hence, genre analysis can be used as a conceptual tool to understand how society and film interact, and to explore a broader contextual culture relating to ‘aesthetic mutations and textual complications’ (Gledhill, 2000: 221). I agree with Gledhill’s statement that we need to rethink the genre of films as cultural forms linked with social situations, because in this thesis, genre analysis enables me to reveal the communicative purposes of the selected ‘leftover’ women films of this study, referring to their sociocultural context in modern
China. A context comprised of gender relations, love, marriage and intimacy culture, etc.

Some limitations might appear when conducting a genre analysis. For example, one of the main critiques is that a genre analysis approach might lead to prescription rather than creativity in research practices; nevertheless, one might be more effectively creative in communication and innovation when s/he develops a good awareness of rules and social conventions of a particular genre (Bhatia, 1993). The distinctiveness of Hollywood romantic comedies and Chinese ‘leftover’ women romantic comedies can be an example of this point (more in Chapter 4). Moreover, Hart (1986: 280) disputes that a genre analysis does not need to be used prescriptively every time and states that ‘genre analysis is pattern seeking rather than pattern imposing’. In this case, such analysis need not always be prescriptive when applied to generic conventions; additionally, steps and guidelines for genre analysis need to be used selectively in a flexible method that does not need to be followed step by step in a particular order (Bhatia, 1993: 40).

In my approach, genre analysis provides a necessary means of discussing the connections between film and culture. This is because romantic comedy narratives are always associated with social beliefs, such as views about love, through a film genre’s repetitious nature (Todd, 2013: 8). Most films about ‘leftover’ women in the Chinese film market are classified as romantic comedies; therefore I use genre analysis to discuss how these films follow or differ from the conventions of the romcom genre, and I discuss these films’ communicative goals and related sociocultural context, such as shifts in gender relations (full discussion in Chapter 4).

Applying genre analysis to films is a useful tool to discuss social conventions; romcom genre analysis is a useful tool to discuss social conventions and shifts in gender relations, love, marriage and intimacy in urban China. I chose to apply McDonald’s (2007) romcom genre analysis approach to the selected films, with the aim of considering their visual characteristics, narrative patterns and ideologies. This enables me to accomplish four things in this thesis: to explore how ‘leftover’ women are situated in film narratives; to compare and contrast Chinese romcoms with their classic Hollywood counterparts; to analyse the ideologies of romantic love, consumption and
gender that these films represent; and, to identify central themes for further analysis. The romantic comedy is one of the most generic of genres as it is reliant on stock elements, conventional narrative patterns, personae and even some symbolic words (‘I love you!’). Yet, the machinery of the romantic comedy genre needs more investigation (McDonald, 2007: 11) that will be addressed in Chapter 4. Traditionally, romcom genre analysis is only applied to films which is not enough to present a complex and deep discussion about the circulation of ‘leftover’ women’s media representations in connection with the ideas above; therefore, I also apply CDA to films and reviews to analyse the circulation of discourses of the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon, and shifts in love and marriage culture in contemporary China.

2.2 Critical discourse analysis (CDA)

As a research method, discourse analysis views language as a result of ideologies, perceptions and knowledge (Chouliaraki, 2008; Fairclough, 1995). Discourse analysis does not only focus on language and text, but considers the relationships between texts and the sociocultural contexts in which text is used (Paltridge, 2012). In Hastings’ (1998: 192) opinion, discourse analysis uncovers, through discussing the use of language, the connection between the use of language and broader social processes and practices, such as the reproduction of social relations or the construction of knowledge. Hence, discourse analysis is an appropriate tool to analyse the connection between power and knowledge (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2007; Lazar, 2007).

CDA is one of the most influential approaches of discourse analysis. This approach is linked with critical linguistics, a movement which started at the University of East Anglia, in the mid-1970s, inspired by Halliday, Marx, and Whorf (Djonov and Zhao, 2013). CDA was developed during the next two decades as a ‘problem-oriented, and therefore necessarily interdisciplinary and eclectic… research programme’ (Wodak and Meyer, 2009: 3–4). Its emergence related to several events, such as, the extension of critical linguistic socio-political orientation into the meaning-making process in social semiotics (Hodge and Kress, 1988). CDA provides theories and methods ‘for the empirical study of the relations between discourse and social and cultural
developments in different social domains’ (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002: 60). Under its analytical framework, language is considered as a form of social practice; in particular, CDA ‘offers a powerful arsenal of analytical tools’ for the close discussion of public texts, and it enriches analysis by placing texts within a broader contextual analysis, including the ‘consideration of discursive practices, intertextual relations, and sociocultural factors’ (Hucking, 2002: 157). This approach assumes that power can be transmitted and practiced through discourses; hence, we can study ‘how power relations are exercised and negotiated in discourse’ (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997: 272). Moreover, Fairclough and Wodak (1997) stress that CDA is engaged and committed as interventions in social practice and social relationships.

Notwithstanding the diversities in this field, CDA can be divided into three dominant approaches: Wodak’s discourse-historical approach (Wodak and Meyer, 2009), van Dijk’s socio-cognitive approach (2008), and Fairclough’s dialectical-relational approach (2010). Wodak’s approach is mainly influenced by the Frankfurt school, and explores racism, immigration, nationalism and anti-Semitism. The key idea is that CDA should connect texts with their immediate situational context, and broader sociocultural and historical contexts, which requires abundant empirical data, interdisciplinary cooperation and a diverse methodology (such as corpus linguistics, ethnography, argumentation theory, rhetoric analysis, etc.) (Djonov and Zhao, 2014). The approach by van Dijk is based on cognitive social theories. He argues that discourse structures cannot be directly associated with social structures, unless through individual language users’ mental models of daily experience (Dijk, 2008). Finally, Fairclough’s approach is inspired by a diverse range of theorists (such as Marx, Gramsci, Giddens, and Foucault) that contribute towards critical research on neoliberalism. He points out that discourse is a form of social practice, and CDA is an analysis which focuses on how texts work within sociocultural practices (Fairclough, 2013). The purpose of critical analysis then, is to produce interpretations of aspects of social life that identify the reasons for social wrongs and produce knowledge which could contribute to righting or mitigating them (Fairclough, 2013). Fairclough (2013: 8) points out a primary focus of CDA concerns ‘power relations and inequalities in producing social wrongs’, particularly on the discursive aspects of power relations and inequalities. In his opinion, CDA is not just the analysis of texts, it is part of the transdisciplinary analysis of relations among discourse and other elements of a social
process. Fairclough contributes to constructing ‘the most sophisticated framework for analysis of the relationship between language use and societal practices in general’ (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002: 89). Fairclough’s three-dimensional analytical framework is appropriate to my research because it is focused on media representations of ‘leftover’ women, readings of the ‘leftover’ women’s representations, and the implied ideologies and sociocultural transformations behind those representations.

In addition, multimodal techniques need to be applied to my methodology when analysing film scenes. Since the late 1980s and 1990s, scholars realised that the circulation of a message not only includes languages, but other semiotic modes as well (Machin and Mayr, 2012). The term ‘multiplying’ effect is used by Lemke (1998) to capture the way that different semiotic resources are seen as separate modalities. Multimodal texts are composite products of the combined effects of all the resources used to create and interpret them (Baldry and Thibault, 2006). Multimodal analysis includes a variety of semiotic modes; for instance, language, visual images, body language, music, sound effects and articulation (Fairclough, 2013: 7). Visual communications also denote social constructions that are shaping and are shaped by society; so, a multimodal textual analysis does not only focus on the visual aspects of semiotics, but also on the way that the visual content plays a part in the communication of power relations (Machin and Mayr, 2012). CDA combined with multimodal techniques in this thesis entails showing how images and semiotic modes work together to create meaning in a film scene. These meanings are then discussed as accompanying texts to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Chinese ‘leftover’ women phenomenon.

3. Research design: Combining genre and CDA

In this section, I explain my research design from different perspectives, mainly focused on sampling strategies and the analytical framework. I apply Fairclough’s critical discourse approach to all the research samples. Complementing this analysis, I use romcom genre analytical techniques to research the selected films. Blending all
this analysis together I attain a comprehensive analysis of representations and audience readings of ‘leftover’ women in Chinese media. In this research, I focus on two types of media products: films and UGC (film reviews on Douban Movie website). The films in the study were selected from Chinese films from 2008 to 2015 whose central characters are ‘leftover’ women (when the research started). I selected three films (see Section 3.1) which caused significant discussion in Chinese society. The other research samples are long reviews about these selected films from the Douban Movie website.

3.1 Data sampling

I detail my selection criteria here to address sample representativeness, since research data in CDA need to be highly selective and context-specific to minimise subjectivity. The basic principle for the sampling strategy is that the research data should be empirically interesting and theoretically relevant (Fairclough, 1993). As Meyer (2001: 23) argues ‘there is no typical CDA way of collecting data’ and the relevant criteria are also contextually sensitive.

The term ‘leftover women’ was officially recognised in the Chinese lexicon in 2007. Later, several films around ‘leftover’ women were produced between 2008 to 201524, such as Desires of the Heart (2008), If You Are the One (2008), All About Women (2008), Look for a Star (2009), I Do (2012), The Last Woman Standing (2015) and Go Lala Go (2015). The first criterion for my sampling strategy is that the ‘leftover’ woman figure must be in a central position in the film. Even though all the films above include ‘leftover’ women figures, storylines are centred around men in some films and women are considered as inferiors. On this basis, I discounted If You Are the One and Look for a Star from my sample. My second sampling criterion concerned when the film was made. To the best of my knowledge the film Desires of the Heart was the first film produced after the term ‘leftover’ women became officially recognised by the Chinese government, so I wanted to include the film on that basis. The last film produced, at the moment of data sampling, was The Last Woman Standing which I also included for that reason.

24 The starting point for my research.
Long online reviews of the selected films on the website Douban Movie were the third criterion of my data. Douban Movie was set up in 2005 and is now the most popular website in China for audiences to write film reviews, and mark or make comments about other media products. Almost every film circulated in China can be found on Douban Movie and all the films that I am analysing are included. Douban Movie can be seen a form of social media as well, since users can communicate with others electronically or respond to film reviews on the website. Film reviews are examples of UGC in media convergence culture (see Chapter 2). Douban Movie provides easily accessible methods for audiences to write or read reviews; as such, it facilitates the development of the active audience in a mediated society (more in Chapter 2). There are different types of reviews on Douban Movie: marks, short reviews and long reviews. However, short reviews are only one or two sentences long and while they express viewers’ emotions or evaluations of a film, they are too short to convey an audience’s response to a film. Therefore, long reviews are used in this research.

Fairclough argues that research samples should be empirically interesting. Since the remaining films all fulfilled that standard to some extent. I clarified Fairclough’s idea by applying further sub-criteria: first, except for a main ‘leftover’ woman character, the targeted films should contain different subcentral topics; second, the targeted films should have achieved good box-office revenues in China, meaning they are read by a wide audience; third, the targeted films should lead to a number of discussions and long reviews on the Douban Movie website. Box-office revenues and the total number of long reviews for the remaining qualified films can be seen from Figure 3.1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film</th>
<th>Box-office (Chinese yuan)</th>
<th>Total number of long reviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Desire of the Heart</em></td>
<td>Around 31 million</td>
<td>575</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>All About Women</em></td>
<td>Around 20 million</td>
<td>696</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>I Do</em></td>
<td>Around 85 million</td>
<td>549</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>The Last Woman Standing</em></td>
<td>Around 61 million</td>
<td>516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Go Lala Go</em></td>
<td>Around 50 million</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 3.1* Box-office revenue and long reviews on Douban Movie (data accessed: July 14th, 2019).
In applying these sub-criteria, I discarded *All About Women* because it had the lowest box-office revenue, and *Go Lala Go* because it had the fewest reviews on Douban Movie. In consideration of the sampling criteria, my research interests and the time constraints of a PhD, my final samples are *Desires of the Heart, I Do* and *The Last Woman Standing*. These sample films are empirically relevant, because all three films represent ‘leftover’ women’s dilemmas in Chinese society from diverse aspects, particularly in terms of romantic relationships, marital values, career and love, and familial interventions. I watched the three films many times with different aims in mind, and finally selected several film scenes to be analysed in the four following analytical chapters.

Next, I read all 1640 long reviews for my three sample movies (Figure 3.1), and selected typical reviews for deeper CDA. The sampling strategies at this stage are as follows: first, I discarded all reviews which only contain one or two sentences, because they are too short to provide meaningful insight and a complete circulation of the ‘leftover’ women discourse. For instance, such reviews only mentioning ‘it is a good/bad film’ or ‘I recommend this film for you’; second, I summarised the central topics of each review and coded the topics into different categories. The central topics of the reviews include discursive themes that can be roughly divided into several categories: ‘leftover’ women figures; love, marriage and intimacy culture; dating practices and dating patterns; intergenerational and social ties with families and friends; evaluation and critiques of the films; audience. Under each category, several sub-themes emerged as follow, finally, I selected typical reviews under each theme referring to my research interests and research questions. The findings also contribute to frame my later analytical chapters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Central themes from 1640 long film reviews on the Douban Movie website</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Leftover’ women figures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love, marriage and intimacy culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In summary, my research samples are as below:


2. 1640 long reviews of the three sample films on the Douban Movie website.

### 3.2 Analytical tools: A romantic comedy genre analysis

McDonald (2007: 9) defines romcoms as films whose central narrative motor is the pursuit of love; moreover, such films represent this quest in a ‘light-hearted way’, with most endings suggesting a bright future for the protagonists by the end of the film. I used the term ‘comedy’ in the title above, although the definition of romcoms does...
not insist that they should be funny. Tears are an important element in the narratives of a romcom, as are laughs, and that’s why McDonald uses the term ‘light-hearted’ in his definition. In this subsection, I discuss to what extent do the selected romcom films conform to generic elements of the genre from three angles: visual characteristics, narrative patterns and ideologies. These three angles are discussed briefly below (and in more detail in Chapter 4) in order to summarise their similarities, differences and connections with the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon in China.

Film genres are identified by several types of images found in them; those images become exemplars of a genre and ‘iconography’ is the study of such icons (McDonald, 2007). Chinese romcoms share some similar visual characteristics, for example, locations (always in urban cities) and props (usually connected with weddings, such as flowers, champagne, candlelight, beds, and special outfits for a big date). There are also stock characters who, usually, represent an unsuitable partner. Romcoms, in general, also share similar narrative patterns. Shumway (2003) points out that the basic storyline is boy meets, loses and regains girl. In classic Hollywood romcoms the ‘meet cute’ is often employed, in this scene ‘the lovers-to-be encounter each other in a way which forecasts their eventual union’ (McDonald, 2007: 12). The basic ideology of the romantic comedy genre is about romantic love, between heterosexual couples. Shumway (2003: 21) proposes that marriage and romance are opposing positions, which explains dissatisfaction within married couples in real life and the reason why romantic comedies usually end before the couple embark on married life. Furthermore, ideologies of consumption and gender constitute necessary elements in today’s romcoms (McDonald, 2007). Romcom genre analysis also enabled me to identify central themes for further analysis: the self-identities of ‘leftover’ women; their choices in love; and intergenerational and social ties with family and friends.

3.3 Analytical tools: Fairclough’s three-dimensional critical discourse analysis

In this subsection, I begin with a brief introduction about Fairclough’s CDA approach, apply his three-dimensional CDA framework to selected film scenes and reviews, and end with a critique of CDA and how to minimise its limitations.
3.3.1 Introduction of Fairclough’s CDA approach

The aim of CDA is to show the systematic links between texts, discourse practices and sociocultural practices (Fairclough, 1995: 16–17). It also discusses how texts and discourse practices rise out of and are shaped by power relations and power struggles. Moreover, Fairclough’s approach pays attention to how opaque relationships between discourse and society are factors in power and hegemony (Fairclough, 2013). Fairclough’s CDA framework contains three parts: ‘description of text’ (textual dimension), ‘interpretation of the relationship between texts’ (discursive dimension) and ‘explanation of the relationship between interaction and social context’ (social dimension) (2001: 91). Under his analytical framework, CDA connects texts with features of discourse practice (the production and interpretation of text) and wider sociocultural practices.

The textual dimension is a kind of ‘form-and-meaning analysis’ (Fairclough, 2013: 94). It involves spoken or written text, and the analysis of interwoven meanings in this text includes several stages, such as generic form (its overall structure), dialogic organisations (turn-taking in a conversation), and grammar, clauses and vocabulary (Fairclough, 2013). One feature of Fairclough’s CDA is that textual analysis contains interdiscursive analysis and linguistic analysis in a broader sense. According to Fairclough, text is not only limited to the spoken or written media of language; it is increasingly multi-semiotic and includes multimodal analysis of different semiotic modes (such as language, visual images, body language, music and sound effects) and their articulation (Fairclough, 1995; 2013: 7). Multimodal texts can integrate selections from different semiotic resources to make meaning (Baldry and Thibault, 2006: 17). Therefore, this study pays attention to multimodal techniques when applying textual analysis to the three selected films.

On the discourse dimension, my analysis concentrates on productions and interpretations of the texts (selected scenes and sentences from film reviews) as part of their social practices (gender relations, love, marriage and intimacy in urban China). A discourse method analyses text productions and interpretations from a socio-cognitive angle—how people process social information. Both detailed ‘moment-by-moment explication’ of how texts are produced and interpreted and the ‘relationships
of the discursive event to the order of discourse’ (Fairclough, 2013: 95) are drawn upon and combined in the discourse practice analysis. On the one hand, the nature of the social practice shapes processes of the text production and interpretation; on the other hand, the production process also helps shape the text, and the interpretative process works on ‘cues’ in the text (Fairclough, 2013). Thus, the connections between texts and social practices are being mediated by discourse.

Sociocultural practice can be defined as ‘the social and cultural goings-on which the communicative event is part of’ (Fairclough, 1995: 57). It is part of the wider social practice within which selected discourse samples are located (Fairclough, 2013) and refers to different levels of social organisation, including ‘the context of situation, the institutional context and the wider societal context or context of culture’ (Fairclough, 2013: 95). Fairclough’s sociocultural analysis covers several elements, such as current situations, struggles and ideologies. Thus, sociocultural analysis reflects social realities and reveals implications and struggles between discourse and society.

Combining the above three dimensions of CDA can provide an integrated interpretation of society and power relations. CDA not only brings a critical tradition of social analysis into linguistic studies, but also contributes towards critical social analysis with a particular focus on discourse (Fairclough, 2013).

3.3.2 Applying Fairclough’s CDA to the research samples

To apply Fairclough’s three-dimensional model (textual dimensions, discourse dimensions and sociocultural dimensions), I considered the main themes of the three films: *Desires of the Heart* (2008) presents different kinds of single women’s love stories at a time when ‘leftover’ women was a new term to Chinese people; *I Do* (2012) and *The Last Woman Standing* (2015) present the career and love stories of ‘leftover’ women; whereas parental interventions are a theme of *Desires of the Heart* and *The Last Woman Standing*. Additionally, ‘leftover’ women’s mixed emotions, dating practices, partner preferences and peer support are represented in the three films and film reviews. These three films all show constructions of ‘leftover’ women at different stages and how the concept of ‘leftover’ woman is circulated in China.
The textual analysis of the samples was divided into three parts. First, I reviewed the films and chose several typical scenes according to my research questions and central themes: ‘leftover’ women’s representations, ‘leftover’ women’s choices in love, intergenerational interventions and peer support in ‘leftover’ women’s singlehood. This enabled an analysis of the main characters’ conversations on a textual level. Second, other semiotic resources in the selected scenes were analysed using multimodal techniques (such as visual images, body language and sound effects). Third, the long film reviews on ‘Douban Movie’ were examined through textual analysis, paying attention to different aspects such as their grammar, words, etc. I analysed the selected film scenes and reviews separately, at first, as will be shown in the latter part of each analytical chapter through summaries of their sociocultural meanings.

On the discourse practice level, my research focused on how texts (films and film reviews) and discourse are produced, circulated and interpreted. For the selected films, I contextualised dialogues with background knowledge and interpreted them according to each film’s context, such as the reason for each scene (its potential purpose) and the association of the dialogues with other plots in the films. For the film reviews, I read each review then chose particular paragraphs for deeper analysis. Discourse analysis enabled me to pay attention to the interlink between selected sentences and the entire review. My interest was to analyse the sociocultural information embedded in the films and reviews and how the information creates meaning for the audience.

Finally, on the sociocultural level, my analysis focused on the wider societal context, social transformations and sociocultural backgrounds in modern China. For example, social policy after the foundation of the PRC, economic developments since the 1980s, shifts in gender norms, gender relations and women’s images in Chinese media over the past few decades, love and marriage culture in contemporary China, Chinese family studies and recent shifts in familial relations. Moreover, I sought to consider power relations behind these media representations of ‘leftover’ women, such as women’s struggles and expectations, gender relations, familial relations, etc., in urban China. An analysis of sociocultural aspects not only reflects social realities, to some extent, but also reveals the influences and conflicts between texts and society.
3.3.3 Limitations and solutions

CDA has several limitations. First, CDA involves excessive subjective analysis leading to biased interpretations by researchers which lack objectivity (Wood and Kroger, 2000). From the point of data analysing, Widdowson (1995: 159) raises the concern that CDA is biased by nature because ‘interpreters give priority to their preferences’. Second, another problem is that among all varieties of discourse analysis the data are not representative, therefore, it is difficult to generalise (Gill, 2000). Third, CDA has been criticised for not always providing a sufficiently detailed and systematic analysis of texts (Schegloff, 1997). Fourth, CDA for the most part ignores real readers and listeners and does not pay enough attention to text production (Machin and Mayr, 2012). Widdowson (2004) points out that the producers and consumers of text should be included in a CDA, not just the researcher’s viewpoint.

Since CDA is not a quantitative method, subjectivism is partially bearable, in Fairclough’s opinion, because it can be minimised. The first two limitations can be minimised through explicit data selection. I chose Fairclough’s three-dimensional framework to address the research in a detailed and systematic way; Fairclough’s approach links texts and social practice tightly because his approach enabled me to scrutinise texts alongside their diverse social aspects, not only focusing on words and metaphor in texts but also the implications and conflicts between those texts and society. My research addresses the production and consumption of my selected texts by explicitly incorporating audience research and by considering the production of the films; for example, directors’ stated intentions.

4. Ethical issues

The word ‘ethics’ is derived from the Greek word ‘ethos’, which means character, nature or disposition. This concept is close to the general idea of ethics being moral values—internal and virtuous characteristics which inspire people to behave in a socially acceptable manner (Christians et al., 2016). Moreover, ethics exists on an
individual and a social level, thus, Internet-mediated research raises particular challenges for existing ethics principles. Some challenges include:

…the public-private domain distinction online; confidentiality and security of online data; procedures for obtaining valid consent; procedures for ensuring withdrawal rights and debriefing; levels of researcher control; and implications for scientific value and potential harm (BPS, 2017).

As films and online reviews are available to everyone, I mainly concentrate on social media research ethics from two fields of discussion: the argument about public or private data use and anonymity. I also talk about the ethics of translation in the final section.

4.1 Public or private?

Social media platforms are quite popular in a contemporary mediated society such as China. These platforms are utilised as a convenient means to communicate with others and/or to reflect on all aspects of everyday life. Moreover, social media platforms such as Douban Movie provide a broader opportunity to access data that would otherwise consume much energy or resources to acquire. However, this opportunity is also accompanied by a responsibility to ensure that the study meets the highest possible ethical considerations, addressing issues that more traditional approaches do not deal with (Townsend and Wallace, 2016).

This research follows the BSA’ guidelines on ethics, paying special attention to anonymity, privacy and confidentiality. Of notable concern is whether online social media postings should be considered as public or private data. The Code of Human Research Ethics (2014: 5) highlights that observations of public discussions need to take place in situations where one ‘would expect to be observed by strangers’. However, the distinction between public and private space is becoming increasingly blurred. In my opinion, this question can be answered by the social media platform’s settings, and whether there is a suitable expectation of privacy for users (BPS, 2017).
For instance, if online postings are protected by a password (like a private/closed Facebook group) this should be considered as a private area. However, open discussions on Sina Weibo or Twitter where everyone can post their opinions or respond to others, can be considered public. As for my research, film reviews on Douban Movie are publicly available, it is a public internet sites where people choose to register for a Douban account, and all users can write film reviews or leave comments under others’ reviews. Additionally, all reviews and comments are publicly viewable whether one has a Douban account or not. In this case, it is assumed that those posting on the site are aware that others will be able to access and process their comments, including analysing them.

The public or private debate also links with to the ethics of ‘informed consent’ (BPS, 2017; Townsend and Wallace, 2016). However, social media research contains problems concerning the informed consent of participants; as Townsend and Wallace (2016) state, much research on social media is conducted without informing participants. So participants are rarely aware of their “participation” in such cases. Also, acquiring informed consent is problematic and hard to achieve when dealing with large data sets. Notwithstanding, as I explained above, all Douban reviews are easily available to read and comment on; therefore, in my opinion, the reviewers are aware that their reviews can be read by any online users.

4.2 Anonymity

Issues of anonymity and confidentiality relate to privacy considerations in social media research. With traditional research techniques, researchers generally anonymise information from which participants can be identified (Townsend and Wallace, 2016). Kleinberg (2007) argues there is a potential for anonymity issues to arise when working with data on social networks because anonymisation processes are quite complex and it is difficult to anonymise individual data, since all data can be reproduced by any participant on a social media platform. This makes social media users more traceable and harder to anonymise. Therefore, I am aware that protecting participants’ privacy is a crucial problem when conducting this research. Moreover, given potential sensitivity in the Chinese political economy, all the posts will be
treated with strict confidentiality. Participants need a nickname when registering a Douban account and most of those names are not their real names; however, to protect their privacy, I created pseudonyms for their nicknames and use these pseudonyms in my research to avoid any potential identifiable information disclosure.

4.3 Ethics of translation

Another specific challenge for this research is the ethics of translation. Translation can be regarded as rewriting the original text (Munday, 2016). In Lefevere’s (1992: xi) book, he explains that translation is one of the most influential forms of rewriting since it can help in the evolution of a literature which are beyond the boundaries of the author’s original culture. This research is about representations and readings of ‘leftover’ women in selected Chinese media; therefore, most of my data is in Chinese, except for films with English-Chinese subtitles. Moreover, ‘leftover’ woman is a term linked to a specific Chinese sociocultural context and a new concept in the Western world. Consequently, it is extremely challenging to entirely retain the originality of the text in the process of translation. For instance, film titles are good ways to illustrate this point. The English title of I Do has the same meaning as the Chinese version, the Chinese title of Desire of the Heart is Tao Hua Yun, which is a metaphor using peach blossom for love. In China, we use peach blossom to describe luck in love. The title of The Last Woman Standing is translated from Sheng Zhe Wei Wang. Its Chinese title means ‘the remaining single woman can be the queen’ and that differs from the English version to some extent.

Finally, while this section addresses the main ethical issues, I have also reflected on the potential for my research to reify and reproduce the negative term of ‘leftover’ women, which may bring harm to women themselves. Thus, when writing up the research I have been using words carefully to try my best to avoid reproducing any passive image of ‘leftover’ women. For details of ethical approval for this research, please see Appendix 2.
Conclusions

This chapter has outlined a qualitative approach combining genre analysis and CDA with multimodal techniques to address my research questions. I first explained the rationale for my methodological approach and the overarching research questions for this study. Genre analysis applied to the selected films enabled me to research the social conventions and ideologies of ‘leftover’ women films. CDA applied to the films and the audience reviews enabled me to investigate the circulation of discourses of Chinese ‘leftover’ women in the selected research samples. I argue that this combination of analytical methods provided a comprehensive understanding of the representations and readings of the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon in China from 2008 to 2015.

Based on the CDA literature and my research aims, I have summarised several principles of my sampling process. First, the targeted films and reviews contained a ‘leftover’ woman figure in a central position. Second, the targeted films and reviews covered a span of time, from 2008 to 2015 to contribute to the diversity of the research. Third, the targeted films and reviews needed to be empirically interesting, which I defined in terms of diverse sub-central themes; also, the targeted films attained good box-office revenues and each film gained over 500 Douban Movie long reviews. Based on these criteria, three ‘leftover’ women films (*Desire of the Heart*, *I Do* and *The Last Woman Standing*) and a selection of their long reviews were chosen as the research sample. Additionally, the selection of reviews included summarising the central themes of each review and categorising them into six categories: different ‘leftover’ women figures; love, marriage and intimacy; dating practices and dating patterns; intergenerational and social ties with families and friends; evaluation and critiques of the films and audience.

To enable a richer understanding of women’s constructions within a wider media culture, I have summarised how a romantic comedy genre analysis has been applied to interpreting the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon in the selected films; I have compared and contrasted Chinese romcoms with their classic Hollywood counterparts; investigated the ideologies of romantic love, consumption and gender within the films
and identified several central themes which are examined in the analytical chapters: the self-identities of ‘leftover’ women; their choices in love; intergenerational and social ties with families and friends. Later, I draw on Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis in my approach to the analysis of the themes in all samples, I also draw on Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis in my approach to the analysis of all samples, especially paying attention to multimodal texts when examining a film scene. Fairclough’s three-dimensional framework is applied to the analysis of my research data: thus, I explore all types of texts, discussing words, grammar, visual material, etc., on the textual level; examine how text is produced and interpreted on the discourse level; and explore wider sociocultural practices in order to use CDA to analyse the relationships between the circulation of ‘leftover’ women’s representations and changing gender relations, and other relevant aspects, such as love, marriage and intimacy, in contemporary China.

Finally, the ethical considerations of the study were addressed, drawing from two fields of literature on social media research and debates about public or private spaces and anonymity. I explained that the settings of a social media platform itself inform people whether it is a private area or not. Moreover, as a researcher should be sensitive to the way that data are used, to protect the participants I created pseudonyms for their online user names. The ethics of translation was another element worth considering in the study. As translation is seen as a form of rewriting original texts, I chose words carefully to represent the original meanings. In the next four chapters, I turn to the analysis of ‘leftover’ women films and reviews, beginning with a genre analysis of my selected films through a romantic comedy lens.
Chapter 4 Analysing the Chinese romantic comedy genre

Introduction

Romantic comedies tend to construct romantic myths or romantic ideals for their audience; for instance, ‘love is miraculously arranged’ or love occurs ‘at first sight’ (Galician, 2004). Despite the cultural differences between the US and China, when searching for films about Chinese ‘leftover’ women, the ‘romantic comedy genre’ is also a popular label. In this chapter, three selected Chinese ‘leftover’ women films are analysed through a Hollywood romcom analytical framework. The chapter is divided into two sections. In the first section, I start by introducing the films Desire of the Heart, I Do, and The Last Woman Standing, mapping out their main narratives and characters, and setting them in their creative and commercial contexts; in the second section, I use genre analysis to explore these films and consider the extent to which they conform to the Hollywood romantic comedy genre, or are distinctive from it. Through the lens of romantic comedies, the chapter explores four things: explore how ‘leftover’ women are situated in the narrative; compare and contrast Chinese romcoms with their classic Hollywood counterparts; analyse the ideologies of romantic love, consumption and gender that the films represent; and identify three central themes for further analysis.

1. Three Chinese romantic comedies

1.1 Desire of the Heart (2008)

Desire of the Heart is a film about five single women’s experiences in love, including their happiness and sorrows. The main characters are positioned in different situations but have the same aim: to find a partner and fall in love (see Figures 4.1 and 4.2).
1.1.1 Synopsis

Ying Zhang is a 28-year-old single woman living with her parents, who has never fallen in love. Ying is the only woman among five single women who mentions the phrase ‘leftover’ woman to describe herself. She is quite conventional and traditional about relationships and rejects the idea of living together before marriage. Ying meets Da Zhao, who has just returned from overseas, at a party for single people and they quickly fall in love; however, they argue about living together before marriage. Still, although they break up for a short while they get married at the end of the film.

Xiaomei is a white-collar professional woman who aims to marry a wealthy man. She is aware that Yang Zong is the second generation of a rich family, so she applies for a position in his company to try to win his heart. Xiaomei’s story has an open ending by the end of the film, as Yang’s company experiences financial crisis and Xiaomei chooses to stay and help him to recover from it. Cong Lin is a friend of Xiaomei, and her father left her a sizable legacy before his death. In her words in the film, Cong pursues ‘feelings’ or true romance in a relationship over material concerns and wants to find ‘the destined one’. She meets a poor cook (Xiang Guan) by accident, and hides her wealthy background when dating him. Cong is touched by Xiang’s love and effort to make her happy. Finally, she tells him the truth and they get married.

Shengying Ye and Yajuan Gao are divorced women and both meet promiscuous men. Shengying was dumped by her ex-husband and wants to start a new life and find a new lover after her divorce. Shengying asks a marriage consultant company to find a man for her and through it meets Mang Wang. At the end of the film, she finds Mang to be unfaithful, but she is pregnant with his baby. Yajuan Gao who is over 50 years old decides to divorce her husband because she cannot stand him anymore. However, after one year of singlehood, she prefers to find a new guy. She owns a clothing store and her co-workers help her find a single man, Su Zhang, who is much younger. Yajuan falls in love with him and treats Su as a family member. Even though she knows Su is a liar later in the film, she still chooses to believe in him. At the end of the film, Su is caught by the police for cheating women out of money. Although the director does not tell the audience whether Su will come back or not, Yajuan decides to wait for him.
As we can observe from a brief outline of the plot, several analytical themes emerge beyond the film, such as blind dates and chance encounters, the risks of blind dates, deceit, romantic and material motives, pre-marital cohabitation, etc. I will address all of these themes in the later analytical chapters.

Figure 4.1. Interconnections of the main characters in Desire of the Heart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ying Zhang (Ting Mei)</td>
<td>28-year-old single woman, quite traditional about dating; marries Da Zhao</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Da Zhao</td>
<td>Ying’s boyfriend from overseas (Chinese guy), suggests living together before marriage; marries Zhang Ying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xiaomei (Xiaolu Li)</td>
<td>a white-collar worker in a company whose aim is to marry a rich man with good taste; Cong Lin’s friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yang Zong</td>
<td>the second generation of a rich family; also the boss of a company; Xiaomei wants to marry him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cong Lin (Jia Song)</td>
<td>pursues true love and the ‘right’ feeling in love; inherits a sizable legacy in the film; marries Xiang Guan; Xiaomei’s friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xiang Guan</td>
<td>a poor cook works in a restaurant; marries Cong Lin at the end of the film</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shengying Ye (Junmei Wu)</td>
<td>a divorced mother who wants a new lover and life; asks for a marriage consultant company to introduce a new man for her; being deceived by Mang Wang; gets pregnant at the end</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mang Wang</td>
<td>a cheater who cheats many single women, including Ying Zhang, Da Zhao, Xiaomei, Yang Zong, Cong Lin, Shengying Ye, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shengying Ye</td>
<td>a 55-year-old divorced woman owns a clothing store; falls in love with Su Zhang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yajuan Gao</td>
<td>a cheater who extorts many women and is in debt; caught by the police in the end</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Qiu Yuan)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Su Zhang</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xinzi Yuan</td>
<td>Xiaomei and Cong Lin’s friend, who introduces some single men to them</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4.2. Complementing notes of main characters in Desire of the Heart.*

### 1.1.2 Production and consumption of the film

*Desire of the Heart* is a romantic comedy written and directed by Liwen Ma (female) released on 20th November 2008. Its total box office earnings were 31 million Chinese yuan (around 3.5 million pounds). Its rating is 5.7/10 based on 61,643 viewers’ scores\(^{25}\), an average rating among all films on the Douban Movie website. The name of the film was translated as * Desire of the Heart* in English when released; however, its Chinese name is *Tao Hua Yun*\(^{26}\), which is a metaphor using peach blossom for love. In China, we always use peach blossom to describe luck in love. In this case, love is framed as the motivation for relationships and marriage; thus, it is individualised and not a family affair. The distinctness between the original Chinese title and its translation relates to translation ethical issues that addressed in Chapter 3.

The all-star cast is a significant feature of *Desire of the Heart*. Their celebrity impact and professional acting work also contributed to the box office success of the film and its high ratings. The conflicts between the celebrities’ real-life status and their characters in the film are another eye-catching point. For instance, Junmei Wu/Vivian Wu (character Shengying Ye) is an international film star. She played Wen-Xiu (a wife of the last emperor Puyi) in the film *The Last Emperor* which won nine Oscars (Academy Awards) in 1989; she also became a lifetime committee member of the

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\(^{25}\) Data accessed: 18th September 2019  
\(^{26}\) The fortune in peach blossom
Academy. Junmei Wu is a fashionable woman with outgoing characteristics; her performance of Shengying as an obedient woman and a subservient wife are quite suitable and “real”, even if she has a different personality. Such distinctions between actors’ real personalities and their characters makes *Desire of the Heart* more humorous and fascinating.

Liwen Ma has explained that the current version of *Desire of the Heart* was different from her original story, which was about one man who cheated five single women. However, she thought the original story was kind of scary to the audience; so she changed the story to five independent love stories including two promiscuous men (Sina, 2008). Liwen is famous for directing literary and art films such as *You and Me*. *Desire of the Heart* is her first attempt at a romantic comedy. She has said that although there are lots of critiques of the film, she was satisfied. Liwen said this was because the film would provide the audience with a new understanding and experience of romantic comedies, such as five separate love stories interweaving with each other through similar scenes (L. Zhang, 2008). However, Liwen’s expectation has not been fully achieved. Most reviewers mention that the film’s narrative pattern is slightly messy. One reviewer named Doggy points out that the film editing is muddled; so although Liwen wants to present different women’s stories in one film, the poor plot and jarring scene switches do not work well, thus, the five stories have few connections and appear to be ‘different dishes in one big pot’ (Doggy, 2008). Another reviewer, MissS, thinks the story is reminiscent of *Sex and the City*, but Liwen does not accomplish a Chinese version because of loose plots and missing details (MissS, 2008). Furthermore, Ewe mentions that Liwen tries to display five independent love stories and unfortunately, none of them is a complete one. For example, she does not explain why Shengying would like to give birth to an unexpected baby after she knows that Mang is a cheater (Ewe, 2008). Nevertheless, the reviewers appreciate Liwen’s work for describing single women’s innermost thoughts and feelings. Also, the different endings work well to express the director’s understanding of love, which is not always a fairy tale, but can contain tears, sorrow and helplessness (little M, 2008; Uncle He, 2008).
1.2 I Do (2012)

*I Do* is, mainly, about Weiwei Tang’s love story with Nianhua Yang and her ex-boyfriend Yang Wang. It includes themes of women’s friendship and different women’s ideas concerning love, marriage, and intimacy at different life stages (Figure 4.3).

1.2.1 Synopsis

*I Do* is a story woven around Weiwei Tang, a successful and attractive sales director in her early thirties. She has been single since she was 25 years old when her ex-boyfriend left her, giving no reasons. Her best friend, Xiaoling Jin, helps her arrange several blind dates which do not work out well. During a blind date, Weiwei encounters Nianhua Yang who is older and implies that he has an ordinary middle-class background. They get along quite well and when Nianhua asks her to be his girlfriend, Weiwei agrees to give Nianhua a three-month probation.

During the courtship, Weiwei’s ex-boyfriend Yang Wang reappears as a successful businessman, he has returned from overseas but lacks confidence. When he was with Weiwei, he had nothing but a ‘great dream’. Despite Weiwei accompanying him through failures and unemployment, he decided to leave Weiwei to obtain his dream to be a successful designer when they were both 25. Yang hopes to be with Weiwei again, yet Weiwei cannot forgive him for leaving. Thus, Nianhua and Yang engage in a competition in order to win Weiwei’s heart. In the latter part of the film, Nianhua’s identity is finally revealed as a business tycoon. Throughout the film there are hints to the audience that Nianhua is a very wealthy man. For example, Nianhua and Weiwei meet at J&E Point for a date, which is a high-level restaurant and hotel with a minimum cost of around 300 pounds per person. If Nianhua was a middle-class man as he claimed, he would not have chosen a place that was beyond his budget. When Yang’s company gets into trouble and he finds Nianhua is able to help his company, he hesitates to chase Weiwei and compete with Nianhua. Nianhua is a more powerful and successful businessman than Yang and helps Yang to finish his project. However, Weiwei is angry at Nianhua because he concealed his true identity from her, which she
finds insincere. At the end of the film, the love-triangle continues because Weiwei does not give either man a clear answer. However, a happy ending is implied; in that, Weiwei will enjoy her love story in the near future. Weiwei’s love story, different women’s ideas about love, women’s friendship and commercial culture in the film, inspired me to think about the diverse aspects of Chinese ‘leftover’ women, such as their choice and hesitation in love, varying criteria in choosing a partner, women’s friendship and peer support, etc., which will all be discussed in later chapters.

Figure 4.3 Interconnections of main characters in I Do.

1.2.2 Production and consumption of the film

I Do is a romantic comedy adapted from Tong Chen’s novel of the same name, released on 10th February 2012 with a total box office revenue of almost 85 million Chinese yuan (around 9.7 million pounds). The film’s rating is 5.8/10 based on 104,91727 reviewers’ opinions on Douban Movie. I Do is a story about one woman and two men: Weiwei Tang (Bingbing Li), Nianhua Yang (Honglei Sun) and Yang Wang (Yihong Duan) are the three main characters of the film. All of them are famous actors in China, and Bingbing Li is also popular worldwide for films such as Transformers: Age of Extinction (2014). The casting is also apposite because Bingbing is over 30 years old and was single at that time, although now she has a boyfriend. She is also called a ‘leftover’ woman in the media and many people have urged her to find a partner for years (Sina, 2012).

I Do is defined as both a romantic comedy and a commercial film, as the director Zhou Sun (male) admitted it was the first time he had directed a commercial film. Zhou Sun is recognised as a promising Chinese film director. He has made several films about

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27 Data accessed: 18th September 2019
women since 2003, such as *Breaking the Silence* and *Zhou Yu’s Train*. However, many of Zhou Sun’s films are melodramas, this is his first time making a commercial film on the subject of ‘leftover’ women. *I Do* contains lots of fashionable elements and romantic plots to attract the audience’s eyes. When talking about his inspiration for the film, Zhou said he was inspired by the double-standard in China (Sina, 2012): when a man is unmarried over 30 years old others call him a ‘diamond bachelor’, yet an unmarried women over 30 is called a ‘leftover’ women. Zhou thinks the term ‘leftover’ is unfair for Chinese single women, because many single women are successful. Zhou hoped his film would change people’s biases against single women over a certain age, and show the audience that the ‘leftover’ woman is an inappropriate term. Therefore, he presents Weiwei as an intelligent woman with a successful career, a caring woman to her friends and also an attractive woman to men.

The film’s reviews on Douban Movie indicate that the director’s expectation is fulfilled to some extent. The film evokes discussions about Weiwei’s choices, the dilemma of being a ‘leftover’ woman, single women’s expectations of a partner, etc. The director succeeds in presenting a successful single woman who is labelled a ‘leftover’ woman, but is not ‘leftover’ by men at all. However, the narrative pattern and storyline are criticised by some reviews. There are quite a few coincidental plots that seem remote from daily life. For example, in ordinary life few ‘leftover’ or single women have the opportunity to meet a business tycoon, even occasionally (Feng, 2012), and it seems too convenient that Nianhua is exactly the man who can help Yang when Yang is in trouble (Wen, 2012). *I Do* is also criticised for numerous product placements in the film. For example, *Queen* (2012) mentions that *I Do* is more like several promotional advertisements put together rather than a real romantic comedy. Another point of discussion in the reviews is that *I Do* conveys a message that money and status play deciding roles in a romantic relationship. Oice (2012) writes that the film stresses that money and material conditions take precedent over romantic chemistry and just ‘falling in love’. Even though the film is criticised for attaching love to money, earning power and economic factors are important factors when considering marriage; based on scholars’ discussions about the tight relationship between individuals’ economic status and marriage (Yu and Xie, 2013; 2015), I will argue in Chapter 6 that one’s material basis is a significant factor when looking for a partner in contemporary China.
1.3 The Last Woman Standing (2015)

*The Last Woman Standing* revolves around Ruxi Sheng’s romantic relationships, her parents’ intervention in her love life, in pursuit of her marriage, and her friendship with Lan and Yu (Figure 4.4).

### 1.3.1 Synopsis

Ruxi is a career-driven businesswoman who is still single in her mid-thirties, her wait for true love grows more ‘despairing’ day by day. Indeed, the name ‘Ruxi Sheng’ has an implied meaning as her surname Sheng resonates with the Chinese word for ‘leftover’, and her first name ‘xi’ means the morning sun, always connected with hope in Chinese. So, her name can be understood as signifying that she is ‘leftover’, but also that she lives in hope and hopes for sunshine (love) in her life.

In the film, Ruxi’s mother arranges a blind date for her to find a husband because of her worries about Ruxi’s non-marriage status. Thus, Ruxi meets Doctor Bai, who is dull but seems to Ruxi’s mother to be a ‘perfect husband’ because of his stable job in the hospital. However, Ruxi falls in love instead with her new colleague, Sai Ma (25), a handsome, humorous, young man who cannot promise marriage at present. Sai’s hesitation and uncertainty lead to their break-up in the film; at the same time, it conveys a message that a Chinese man is expected to be able to support a family before considering marriage. Unfortunately, Ruxi’s mother is diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease in the middle of the film. Although she starts to forget many aspects of her daily life, she still worries about Ruxi’s marriage and reminds her to find a partner. Without a partner or child, Ruxi’s mother is afraid that nobody will take care of Ruxi after she and Ruxi’s father pass away. For her part, Ruxi wants to comfort her mother and she feels guilty because she cannot get married as her parents expect. Under such pressure, Ruxi finds herself caught between following her heart to seek true love and comforting her mother by finding a husband as soon as possible. At the end of the film, Ruxi’s parents come to understand her ideas, support her decision and do not push her

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28 The film does not provide Doctor Bai’s full name.
29 The film does not provide Ruxi’s parents’ names.
to rush to get married. Moreover, Ruxi and Sai reunite implying a bright future at the end of the film. This film not only focuses on Ruxi’s love stories but shows her family’s attitude to their only daughter’s marriage, her parents’ worries and their deep love for Ruxi. The film inspired me to think about women’s emotions regarding their singlehood, parents’ interventions in their children’s love lives, ‘the only child’ under multiple pressure during China’s one-child policy, romantic love and material conditions, etc. I will investigate these themes in the following chapters.

Figure 4.4 Interconnections of main characters in The Last Woman Standing.

1.3.2 Production and consumption of the film

*The Last Woman Standing* is a romantic comedy which was released on 6th November 2015 with a total box office revenue of over 61 million Chinese yuan (around 7 million pounds). It is an adaptation of Luo Luo’s 2011 novel of the same name. The rating of *The Last Woman Standing* is 5.8/10.0 based on 69,661 reviewers’ opinions on Douban Movie. Compared with the novel, first-time director Luo (female) changed several plots in the film. In the novel, Luo does not devote many pages to Ruxi and Sai, while Doctor Bai is a main male character. However, Doctor Bai is a marginal person in the film, and Luo focuses on Ruxi and Sai’s story. Another difference is that in the novel Ruxi’s story has an open ending. She does not show any preference for Bai or Sai; however, Ruxi follows her heart and chooses the man she loves in the film. The main character Ruxi Sheng is played by Qi Shu, a famous movie star in China. Qi

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30 Data accessed: 18th September 2019
and Ruxi share many similarities, such as both being in their mid-thirties and unmarried at that time (2015). Qi got married in 2016 and beforehand she faced many questions about love and relationships; for instance, when Shu Qi was asked about her opinions on love and marriage during a TV show (Tengxun, 2015), she said she would follow her heart and did not care about other’s sarcastic remarks. Qi agrees with the slogan of this film: ‘I prefer to be single until I find the right guy in marriage’.

When Huatao Teng, the film producer, was interviewed, he said The Last Woman Standing is more about ‘love’ than ‘leftover women’ (Sohu, 2015). The film is talking about a single woman’s hurts, confusion and hope on the way to finding love in her mid-thirties. Luo also expressed her inspiration during an interview (iFengart, 2015) that directing this film provided an opportunity to consider love and marriage again and correct some ‘mistakes’ in the novel; thus, she re-created Ruxi’s story and gave her a happy ending. Luo is unmarried at present and sometimes she is labelled as a ‘leftover’ woman herself. She has explained that more than 90% of the communications and quarrels between Ruxi and her mum were based on her own experiences. However, Luo has said that she would stick to her choice to marry someone she loves and the only reason for marriage should be love, not responsibility. Luo has also said that with improvements in the quality of life for single women, marriage is not their life goal in contemporary society. Independent women now have more choices in their lifestyle. Marriage is still important, but not the top issue (iFengart, 2015). The film has a happy ending not only in that Ruxi reunites with Sai, but also because Ruxi is more confident and enjoys her life. The film conveys that even if Ruxi is still single, she will suffer less pressure to get married over the short term because she now has her parents’ support.

According to the reviews, the director’s aim to present a fuller picture of a ‘leftover’ woman’s life has been achieved to some extent. Most reviewers on Douban Movie agree that the film reflects ‘leftover’ women’s dilemmas between family pressure and personal choice in love. For instance, Duo (2016) summarises that ‘as a single woman in my 30s, it is like watching my daily life when seeing the film. I have nearly experienced every line, every scene and every mood of Ruxi in reality’. Ying (2015) agrees with Ruxi’s words that ‘love is hard to fight for’. Although people are taught from a young age that if you work hard you will obtain rewards, achieving love seems
to be an exception. Notwithstanding, the film did well at the box office and displays a ‘leftover’ woman’s struggles in love.

There are also many critiques of it on Douban Movie, many of them focusing on film making techniques. First, its loose plots are criticised to a large extent. Some reviewers point out that the storyline is unclear, and the director does not transition smoothly between different scenes. For example, Roger (2015) and Traveller (2015) mention that Ruxi’s mother’s illness is sudden for the audience; the film shows no clear signs or hints leading up to the news that she is unwell. Second, reviewers complain that there are too many implanted advertisements in the film, which are irrelevant to the story. For example, when Ruxi’s mother is suffering with Alzheimer’s disease, Ruxi and her parents drive back from the hospital in a bad mood and there is a big pink box labelled ‘vip.com/wei pin hui’ (an online discount site) in the car (Road, 2015). Road mentions that the advertisement is abrupt and interrupts the mood of gloom at that moment. In my opinion, the jarring pink box also implies that consumerism makes you happy, linked to ideologies of consumerism in romcoms that I will discuss during my later analysis. Finally, the director is criticised for camera angles that hide the characters’ expressions. For instance, she uses a lengthy close-up shot of Ruxi’s father’s face when he talks with Doctor Bai. The audience can see nothing but her father’s face for nearly five minutes; in this case, the scene loses much attractiveness and elaboration (Nuo, 2016).

In the next section, I use romantic comedy genre analysis to address the above films in more detail. I argue that these three films share lots of similarities in their storylines or ideologies that conform to the Hollywood romcom genre, but also display distinctive Chinese characteristics.

2. Through the lens of romantic comedy

*Desire of the Heart, I Do* and *The Last Woman Standing* were classified as romantic comedies on the Douban Movie website when released. Harris et al. (2004) argue that romantic films are potentially more relevant to one’s daily life than most violent or action films. Undoubtedly, the romcom has been one of the most appealing genres
since the cinema experience became popular in the early twentieth century (Hefner and Wilson, 2013). Romantic comedies were named ‘screwball comedies’ in Hollywood when they first emerged in the 1930s. Shumway (2003) explains that the screwball comedy represents ‘an innovation in the discourse of romance’ (Shumway, 2003: 82); in that, screwball comedies portray some of the same familiar elements as historical romances, such as love obstacles, the love triangle and courtship, while their romance aspect is also used as an ideology or function to confuse relationships or create implausible intimacy in screwball comedies. Romantic comedies fell within the purview of heterosexual romance first; then queer romance emerged later and all romantic comedies impact audience’s romantic ideas to some extent (Abbott and Jermyn, 2009; McDonald, 2007). Until now, viewers sought out romcoms, in part, to learn about dating and romance or enjoy them as dating entertainment (Harris et al., 2004; Hefner and Wilson, 2013). In this section, I use romantic comedy genre analysis to discuss my three films together, paying attention to their visual characteristics, narrative patterns and ideologies. At the same time, I illustrate similarities and differences between Hollywood romcoms and Chinese films in order to define the Chinese ‘leftover’ women romcom genre.

In a romantic comedy, the central plot is ‘will these two individuals become a couple?’ rather than focusing on how the actor ‘obtains his goal’ (Mernit, 2001: 13). A romantic comedy is usually embodied by a central romance with a happy ending. Tamara Jeffers McDonald (2007: 9) defines romantic comedies in her book Romantic comedy: Boy meets girl meets genre: ‘A romantic comedy is a film which has as its central narrative motor a quest for love, which portrays this quest in a light-hearted way and almost always to a successful conclusion’. In McDonald’s opinion, romcoms should put love or the couple in the primary position. Additionally, she reminds us that even though romcoms always elicit laughs and happiness, crying and tears are essential when displaying the pain protagonists feel when breaking up from lovers or being lonely (McDonald, 2007). Moreover, a slightly unreal tone or fairy tale quality is allowed for some fantastical convenience in romcoms (Mernit, 2001).

Given the above definition, Desire of the Heart, I Do and The Last Woman Standing conform to the central element of a romcom, being mainly about their characters’ romantic love and marriage choices. Every film begins with the main female
character’s dating issues and they meet some new men, invoking the audience’s curiosity to figure out who is “Prince Charming” this time?, or how will the love story be developed in the film? For example, Weiwei meets Nianhua on a blind date at the beginning of I Do; moreover, both characters indicate that there is some chemistry between them. When the blind date is over, it leaves a space for the audience to consider ‘will they be a couple eventually?’ Even though these romcoms share quite a few similarities such as plots or personae, the rudimentary elements of these three films still required deep discussion. In order to present a detailed analysis of Chinese romcoms, in the following subsections I will focus on three basic components (visual characteristics, narrative patterns and ideology) and illustrate the ways these play out in, specifically, Chinese ‘leftover’ women romcoms.

2.1 Visual characteristics

Colin McArthur (1972) suggests that paying attention to iconography within a genre is useful when studying gangster films. In his opinion, iconography contains essential elements, such as locations, props, costume or stock figures. McDonald (2007) develops this idea to analyse romantic comedies through iconography, for instance McDonald notes that most of the stories are based in urban locations. Considering my three selected films, each story occurs in urban areas; specifically, I Do is based in Beijing and The Last Woman Standing in Shanghai, both big international cities in China; the director does not clarify the exact locations of the five stories in Desire of the Heart, however, it is easy to see that all are urban because of lots of representations of busy shopping centres, fine restaurants, etc. Urban locations also provide potential spaces to link wealth and consumerism with romance, which is one of the main ideologies of the romcom genre (see more in Subsection 2.3). The consumption of goods on screen also indicates the characters’ social status. For example, Weiwei’s luxury jewellery symbolises her wealth and Nianhua’s choice of a high-end dating venue in I Do is a hint about his real identity as a wealthy man.

Moreover, romantic comedies typically contain props associated with romance (Mortimer, 2010: 9), such as weddings, flowers, candlelight, etc., and in terms of costumes the main characters always have special outfits for big dates (McDonald,
There are plenty of props associated with romance in the three films. For instance, a candlelight dinner for Xiaomei and Yang Zong in *Desire of the Heart*; Nianhua invites Weiwei to France for a special date in *I Do*, and Ruxi’s date with Sai in *The Last Woman Standing*. All the films contain wedding scenes, although not for the main characters. *Desire of the Heart* contains several wedding ceremonies, such as Yajuan’s friend’s wedding at the start of the film and Ying Zhang’s wedding at the end. Furthermore, as a Chinese film, the outfits give these romantic comedies specific Chinese characteristics. In Figure 4.5 Ying wears a white, Western-style wedding dress; at the same time in the background there is a red Chinese character on the wall (Xi) that signifies happiness and joyfulness in Chinese marital culture, and which is therefore quite common in Chinese wedding scenes. People usually paste several red Xi symbols in the houses of newly wed couples and their parents. So while they use a white wedding scene in the film, the director inflects it with traditional Chinese cultural practices.

![Figure 4.5][1]

*Figure 4.5 [Screenshot] Ying Zhang’s wedding, Desire of the Heart (01:40:45).*

In *I Do*, Weiwei attends her friend Na’s wedding in the middle of the film; and Ruxi in *The Last Woman Standing* is at a wedding dinner with her mother at the beginning of the film. Both of them wear a red dress in these wedding scenes, which, on one hand, makes them stand out from the married couple and, on the other hand, red is always associated with weddings and other joyful events in Chinese culture such as the red Xi symbol in *Desire of the Heart*. 
Figure 4.6 [Screenshot] Weiwei at Na’s wedding, I Do (01:04:25).

Figure 4.7 [Screenshot] Ruxi at her mother’s friends’ children’s wedding, The Last Woman Standing (00:01:42).

The central characters of I Do and The Last Woman Standing are presented as very different from younger, naïve girls as Weiwei and Ruxi are both in their thirties with good careers and stable incomes. Their clothes and accessory choices indicate to the audience their identity as mature women with good economic backgrounds. For example, Weiwei chooses a sexy, V-neck, tight dress when attending Na’s wedding (Figure 4.6); moreover, there is a close-up of her Bulgari watch in the following scene. While Ruxi goes to the high-end bride clothing boutique Vera Wang and tries on a wedding dress.
Finally, in terms of visual characteristics, stock characters who are usually unsuitable partners at the beginning are common in romantic comedies (McDonald, 2007). For example, in *Desire of the Heart*, before Cong meets Xiang, she has a blind date with a guy that she has no interest in. Similarly, Weiwei has several unsuccessful blind dates before she meets Nianhua in *I Do*. Additionally, in *The Last Woman Standing* Ruxi rejects Doctor Bai who she meets through a blind date arranged by her mother.

Overall, three selected Chinese romcoms fit the Hollywood romcom genre in terms of their visual characteristics, but also include distinctive Chinese features.

2.2 Narrative patterns

I discuss the narrative patterns of a romcom via three approaches in this subsection: comic components, smaller tropes or occurrences and overarching generic pattern.

2.2.1 Comic components of a romcom

Although romcoms focus on more romantic than comedic factors, there are always many comic elements in such films. As Mortimer (2010: 69) explains, the definition of a comedy is ‘a humorous or satirical play in which the characters ultimately triumph over adversity’. Romcoms follow some similar predictable narrative patterns leading up to a ‘triumph’ in love, with several comedic factors involved. First, a common plot in romantic comedies is that the protagonists experience embarrassing moments and
public humiliation, proving that love comes before dignity (McDonald, 2007). For example, in *Desire of the Heart*, Da gets drunk during a dinner with Ying’s family, showing embarrassing and inappropriate behaviours; Xiaomei imagines a scene in which Yang takes her to a shopping mall and expresses his love for her in an exaggerated and embarrassing way. In *I Do*, Weiwei pushes Nianhua out of her apartment and throws all his clothes into his face, because she thinks, erroneously, that Nianhua took advantage of her when she was drunk, and Nianhua tries to explain to Weiwei what happened while encountering her neighbour in the hallway.

Second, Mortimer (2010) mentions that humour is created from collisions between two characters meeting incongruous situations in a film, the narrative idea being that the humour is enhanced, as is also the case when the audience notes a contrast between a film character and the actor’s real-life status. For example, Ying is a traditional Chinese girl who is shown to be very different from Da, an open-minded man from overseas in *Desire of the Heart*. The difference between Ying’s dialect Mandarin and Da’s Mandarin mixed with English when talking adds some comedic factors to the film. Additionally, Ying is played by Ting Mei, a beautiful and fashionable urban actress, and the contrast between Ying and Ting Mei’s fictional and real-life personalities is also a hilarious point for the audience ‘in the know’.

Third, departures from the “norm” and the real world are another pleasure offered by comedy films. As King (2002: 7) claims, ‘one of the pleasures offered by comedy is the freedom vicariously to enjoy departures from the norm’. For example, Cong Lin and Xiang Guan’s “fairy tale” in *Desire of the Heart* is rare in reality because of their huge socioeconomic gap, but because a happy ending is the safety net of a romcom this tension provides pleasure to the audience watching the characters’ worry about their completely different lives (King, 2002; Mortimer, 2010). Moreover, in *The Last Woman Standing*, Ruxi uses some make-up to add a scar on her face and creates a fake story to persuade the boss of a company to win a work project. This situation is unusual in daily life; however, the contrast between Ruxi’s ‘touching’ words during the meeting (‘the scar will never be healed in the lifetime’) and her ‘cool’ behaviour (peeling off the scar) after getting the offer provides amusement for the audience. Just as in the three films in my research, romantic comedies are comprised of several comedic components although their main theme is still love and marriage; specifically,
‘the individuals’ desire for marriage or, the desire not to be married, being actively resistant to the institution’ (Mortimer, 2010: 76). I will consider romantic narrative patterns in more detail in the following two subsections.

2.2.2 Smaller tropes or occurrences

Romantic comedies always utilise similar narrative patterns, for instance, small tropes and in the broader story (see Subsection 2.2.3). For example, the ‘meet cute’ is a staple scene of romcoms where lovers first encounter each other by chance in a way that predicts their eventual union (McDonald, 2007). In Desire of the Heart, there is a meet cute between each couple; for instance, Ying and Da meet each other during a party for single people. These meet cute moments also provide the audience with hints about a future relationship. Usually a joyful or enjoyable meeting predicts a successful relationship. For instance, Ying and Da dance together with a joyful feeling which implies their happy ending. However, the ‘meet cute’ between Shengying and Mang is not so delightful at the start, hinting about her later tragedy. Mang obtains Shengying’s information from a marriage consultant company while Shengying knows nothing before she meets him. Moreover, Mang uses a trick (lying to Shengying’s manager that he is her friend) to meet Shengying, that implies that Mang cannot be trusted in this relationship. In I Do, Weiwei and Nianhua meet at a café where Weiwei has arranged to meet several blind dates. Weiwei’s friend plans that she will meet many different men in one day, each for five minutes. However, because Weiwei is late, all the single men wait for her at the same time. When she arrives, Weiwei pretends to be a pregnant woman to drive away the single guys. Nianhua is the only one who still wants to talk with her. This ‘meet cute’ scene also implies that Nianhua is a nice and patient guy, compared with the men who left. Moreover, their first meeting contains a theme of concealment, a foreshadowing that their relationship may include some pretence and concealment later. In The Last Woman Standing, Ruxi and Sai have a rather different ‘meet cute’ scene; Ruxi’s first meeting with Sai is not a face-to-face meeting, but half of his CV picture. The printer is broken when Ruxi is printing her new colleague’s CV, and that is why she only sees half of Sai’s picture. Then they meet each other at the entrance of the company. Ruxi is stopped by the gate because her staff card has slipped from her hand, and Sai appears and uses his card to
let both of them enter. Based on these two ‘meet cute’ scenes, virtual and real, it is implied that Ruxi and Sai will finally be together, although they will have difficulties to overcome, symbolised by the printer breaking down and Ruxi being stopped at the gate.

The masquerade is another generic element of romcoms whereby one or both characters pretend to be someone else (McDonald, 2007). A masquerade generally happens when the boy tries to acquire the girl in a ‘fake’ way (Selbo, 2015). For instance, in *Desire of the Heart*, Mang Wang and Su Zhang pretend to be considerate and nice men to win single women’s hearts. While in *I Do*, Weiwei pretends to be a pregnant woman when they first meet, while Nianhua hides his elite identity and pretends to be a middle-class man when he is chasing Weiwei. The different endings for Mang, Su and Nianhua make the audience contemplate what kind of lies are acceptable in the game of love. The directors provide some hints about this ethical consideration in the films. For example, both Mang and Su ask women to give them not only love but economic support when the relationship deepens, and receive some money or housing from their lovers. However, Nianhua who is constructed as a rich guy never asks Weiwei to provide any material support, only asking for an opportunity to be her boyfriend. These different representations may give the audience a message that Mang or Su lie to women to take advantage of them which makes their masquerade unacceptable; however, the aim of Nianhua’s masquerade is not to hurt or take advantage of Weiwei which, the film implies, makes his lies more acceptable.

Finally, tears play an essential role in the narrative patterns of a romcom, to express the pain a character feels when meeting difficulties or when parted from their beloved (McDonald, 2007). Tears and suffering are usually part of the process of a character’s self-discovery and transformation. For example, Shengying’s tears in *Desire of the Heart* when two women inform her Mang is promiscuous and share their miserable experiences with her. When Shengying realises that Mang is a liar, she bows her head which implies her sadness and tears after hearing the truth about Mang’s cheating.
Another example is when Yajuan finds out Su is heavily in debt and decides to help Su with some money; moreover, enabling Su to inherit her legacy if she dies. Su cries to express that he is touched when Yajuan shows him the notarisation of the inheritance. Unlike women’s vulnerable tears in traditional romantic comedies, Su is in the inferior position in that relationship, and Yajuan is dominant (older and richer). Tears are also found in I Do and The Last Woman Standing. Weiwei in I Do cries quietly for her lost relationship with Yang, when Yang takes her to the same place they frequented when they were together; those tears also seem to offer a goodbye to old memories. She also cries when Nianhua encourages her to be brave in love and then proposes to her. These tears suggest that she is moved by Nianhua before she unleashes her grievance because he has hidden his real status. While in The Last Woman Standing, Ruxi’s tears are about her love relationships, breaking up with Sai, her mother’s illness and her father’s encouraging words. There is also the lonely, tearful scene of Ruxi in a wedding dress boutique after her break-up with Sai. Ruxi’s loneliness contradicts with other couples’ happy faces and this strengthens the sad and heart-breaking atmosphere of the film.

2.2.3 An overarching generic pattern

Besides having smaller occurrences in common, romcoms also share a similar generic pattern. The classic romcom genre explores a three-act structure between a couple who meet one another, lose one another and get back together (Mernit, 2001; Shumway,
Conflicts between the two lovers are common (Selbo, 2015) as well as concerns that they do not perfectly match, when then typically cause them to lose one another in the second act; thereafter, they break down the barriers between them and reunite. The story between Ying Zhang and Da Zhao in *Desire of the Heart* follows the above pattern. Ying meets Da at a party and they fall in love at first sight. However, Da loses Ying because of their arguments about living together (Da wants premarital cohabitation, but Ying and Ying’s family reject the idea) and the couple break up. Afterwards, Da tries to regain Ying through several strategies, and finally they get married at the end of the film.

The love life of Weiwei and Nianhua follows a similar narrative pattern. Nianhua meets Weiwei at a café; then he falls in love with Weiwei and chases her; later he loses Weiwei because he has hidden his real socioeconomic status. Weiwei and Nianhua have several conflicts, such as their different opinions about Xiaoling’s husband and quarrels concerning Nianhua’s honesty. Finally, the film does not tell us if Weiwei marries him or not, but at least Weiwei forgives him and agrees Nianhua can try to regain her heart.

Ruxi and Sai’s story is another example of a classic three-act romcom storyline. Ruxi meets her new colleague Sai and they fall in love with each other. However, they break up because of Ruxi’s eagerness to marry and Sai’s hesitation. Finally, they reunite as the film ends. In this case there is not much conflict between the couple shown in the film, although Ruxi’s struggles and her inner conflicts when considering her relationship with Sai and their current different life courses are represented.

While sharing similar narrative patterns with the Hollywood genre, Chinese ‘leftover’ women romcoms also have some distinctive characteristics. First, the construction of the heroine in Chinese ‘leftover’ women romcoms is different from that in Hollywood. I agree with Mortimer’s (2010) statement that constructions of the heroine in contemporary romcoms do not change much from the traditional norms. Those women are still constructed as tantalising single women with successful jobs and close friends, but poor love stories. However, while the majority of traditional Hollywood romcoms end with women compromising and making sacrifices for their relationships (Mortimer, 2010: 30), Chinese ‘leftover’ women figures stick to their lifestyles and
create their own rules to find a partner. Most of these women are mature (not in their early twenties) and have stable careers. While they express an eagerness for love, they reject unsuitable bachelors, such as Weiwei’s unsuccessful blind dates before Nianhua and Ruxi’s rejection of Doctor Bai. They may make some sacrifices or changes, but these are more for themselves or their families, not for a man’s love. Furthermore, unlike women waiting for men to make the first move, the heroine is given the agency to decide when to start or when to end a relationship in these Chinese ‘leftover’ woman romcoms. For example, when Ying and Da conflict about living together before marriage, Ying chooses to end the relationship unless Da compromises with her. Additionally, Ruxi does not accept Doctor Bai as her future partner but chooses a man she prefers in *The Last Woman Standing*. Ruxi does not give up her principles towards love, and wants to share her familial and marital pressures with Sai. At that time Sai cannot make a promise or share her pressures, so they break up for a while in the latter part of the film. Likewise, in *I Do* Weiwei is always the person who has the agency to decide on a relationship with Nianhua or Yang.

Another distinctive feature of these Chinese romcoms is the relationship between work and love in the constructions of the heroine. Mortimer claims that the modern-day heroine can only achieve happiness by directing her drive to compete in the male world to focus on her feminine ‘instincts’ to settle down (2010: 30–31). However, the ‘work or love’ rule is broken in these ‘leftover’ woman romcoms. More specifically, workplaces are combined with romantic vibes in Chinese ‘leftover’ women romcoms, conveying messages that love stories or meet cutes do not only happen in restaurants, cafés or on a trip, but have a tight connection with jobs in modern China. For instance, Xiaomei tries to know Yang Zong by applying for a position in his company in *Desire of the Heart*; Weiwei and Nianhua meet again at a work event by chance after their café date in *I Do*; Sai is Ruxi’s new colleague before they date in *The Last Woman Standing*. All these settings and representations tell the audience that romance is embedded in daily life, especially working lives in contemporary China. A point that I will discuss further in Chapter 5.

A close relationship between a single women’s family and her love life is another characteristic of ‘leftover’ women romcoms that differs from Hollywood ones. Family can be absent, fragmented or not involved in the central characters’ love lives in some
Western romcoms, such as *Sex and the City (2008)* (Mortimer, 2010: 8). However, the representation of a Chinese family is normal in a ‘leftover’ woman romcom and a family’s intervention in the heroine’s love life is common. For example, the main reason for Ying’s break-up with Da is her parents’ strong attitude against premarital cohabitation in *Desire of the Heart*. Moreover, Ruxi’s parents’ expectation for her to get married soon is also her major reason for asking whether Sai wants to settle down in *The Last Woman Standing*. I will explain family impact in detail in Chapter 7.

The implication of sex is an integral part of the classic romantic comedy genre (McDonald, 2007). However, emerging representations of sex in ‘leftover’ women romcoms differs from traditional films in that ‘leftover’ woman romcoms present the importance of sex in a relationship, rather than displaying hot sex scenes. For example, Ying calls her friend for advice in Da’s bathroom when she receives Da’s lovey-dovey message. When Ying rejects Da, they have a conversation about having sex or not when dating in *Desire of the Heart*; Lisa (Weiwei’s young colleague) talks about sex and intimacy with Weiwei in a lift with all their colleagues in *I Do*; Weiwei tells Xiaoling that she may have sex with Nianhua when she is drunk, but in fact they do not.

Finally, alternative versions of happy endings exist in ‘leftover’ women romcoms. Some couples get married as in traditional “happy ever after” romcoms; however, sometimes open endings can also be happy endings. I argue that the happy ending in ‘leftover’ women romcoms is based more on the woman’s position and is applied with mixed explanations. For example, both central couples in *I Do* and *The Last Woman Standing* do not get married at the end of the film. Weiwei offers space for both Nianhua and Yang but does not tell the audience her choice in *I Do*. Ruxi and Sai meet and kiss at the end of *The Last Woman Standing*, but there are no further representations of promise or proposal. Here the happy ending for women means having more agency in their romantic relationships, accepting new possibilities, and having the confidence to enjoy life even if they are single.
2.3 Ideology

The ideology of these ‘leftover’ woman romcoms are complex that includes ideas about romantic love, consumerism and gender.

2.3.1 Ideologies of romantic love

The basic ideology of Hollywood romcoms concerns the importance of the couple in romantic comedies—usually heterosexual couples (McDonald, 2007). Their stories focus on wanting love, seeking love, losing love and some discussions about “true” love (Selbo, 2015). In a romcom, monogamy as well as heterosexuality is the norm; women are usually constructed as aspiring to find love and settle down, and “the one” needs waiting for. ‘Leftover’ woman romcoms continue this ideology of the Hollywood romcom genre, confirming the importance and the normality of heterosexual love relationships.

The central idea of the three sample films is about love and women’s tortuous ways to find a partner, but representations of romance vary. For instance, mate selection standards differ between single women in their 20s, 30s, 40s, or over. In I Do, Lisa in her 20s selects other benefits over ‘a promising future’ when choosing a boyfriend, and those benefits could be financial or sexual. Weiwei in her 30s prefers a caring man with an equal (or slightly higher) socioeconomic background to develop a relationship with a bright future. Meanwhile Na in her 40s accepts a man from a lower socioeconomic status who offers a stable family life; she prefers a full family life over a perfect husband. Conflicts and barriers also form inevitable parts of these love stories. Through a narrative constructed around overcoming love obstacles, romcoms stress that romantic love is ideal but still contains sorrow and struggle. Barriers can be different according to socioeconomic status (Cong and Xiang), contradictory dating values (Ying and Da), age gaps and different life plans (Ruxi and Sai), concealments and former lovers (Weiwei and Nianhua).

Finally, the ideology of romance is linked with social elements in a ‘leftover’ woman romcom, such as the support of friends and family intervention in a heterosexual
relationship. For example, every heroine has a group of friends to support her in love. Additionally, both Ying in *Desire of the Heart* and Ruxi in *The Last Woman Standing* experience parental intervention when dating; their parents’ opinions impact decision-making in their romantic relationships. I will explain more about Chinese heterosexual relationships in Chapters 6 and 7.

### 2.3.2 Ideologies of consumerism

The association between romance and consumerism is also a characteristic of today’s romcoms. In a romcom, character’s self-dissatisfaction or self-reflexivity creates a ‘vulnerable space’ for advertisers to target (McDonald, 2007: 14). Illoz (2007: 89) argues in *Cold intimacies* that ‘consumers feel compelled to buy and use advertising products even though, and at that very moment, they see through them’. Schreiber (2011) adds to this argument by suggesting that today’s romcoms present a woman’s identity as inseparable from her purchase of goods, services and experiences. For example, in one scene Xiaomei imagines her perfect date with Yang in *Desire of the Heart*. Yang demonstrates his love by taking her to a shopping mall and buying her lots of stuff. In *I Do*, Nianhua invites Weiwei to Paris for a surprise trip to beg her to forgive him and proposes to her at a formal party. In these examples, romantic love is linked with the consumption of expensive goods and travel. Paying for a date is another representation of the ideology of consumerism. For example, Shengying in *Desire of the Heart* goes to a dating agency to ask the staff to arrange a date for her. The staff inform her that paying more for the service will influence the standard of qualified single men that she will be introduced to. Weiwei in *I Do* joins Baihe.com (an online dating company) to arrange some blind dates and creates a personal dating profile. This genuine dating service has different ranks to choose from (such as Crystal Membership; Premier Membership; Gold Premier Membership), where members pay to receive a better customer experience. To find love requires money to be spent in filmic representations, and viewers can learn how to do it from these films; for instance, how to join the promoted online dating company Baihe.com.

Product placement is easy to find in romantic comedies, part of an expansion strategy in the Chinese film industry adopted from Hollywood that has boosted profits for the
film industry and for the companies paying for their brands to be featured (Gould, 2000; Kaijansinkko, 2003; McCarthy, 1994). Chinese scholars addressing the phenomenon of product placement have tailored the definition of product placement to better fit the Chinese context (Li, 2015). For example, a metaphor has been coined to describe the restrictive affiliation between the Chinese film market and the state in terms of product placement: ‘dancing with handcuffs and shackles’ (Wang, 2010). ‘Dancing’ represents the freedom of artistic creativity for film practitioners to include product placements in their films; however, ‘handcuffs’ refer to constraints (profit-driven, in particular) that are placed on the film industry, and ‘shackles’ stands for the state’s supervision and intervention (Li, 2015). Some Chinese romcoms are commercial films whose producer takes sole responsibility for the film’s profits and losses by combining commercial strategies with the narrative pattern of the film to achieve their commercial targets (Ding and Yang, 2013; Yu, 2013; Zhang, 2015).

Celebrity endorsements of particular brands is a key element of product placement (Winterich et al., 2018). More specifically, actors effectively endorse products in the films, such as Nianhua’s proposal ring, Weiwei’s Bulgari jewellery and her trip to Paris with China Southern Airline in I Do. I Do is defined as a commercial film by its director, even the name of the film is a form of product placement. Although the term ‘I do’ is associated with weddings in Western countries, it is also a jewellery brand in China. When the phrase ‘I do’ is heard or talked about, Chinese people think about romantic weddings and the jewellery brand.

2.3.3 Ideologies of gender

Romcoms are gendered stories that construct gender norms and shape gender relations to some extent. Research on the ideologies of gender in ‘leftover’ woman romcoms are underdeveloped in Chinese romcom research, but I think this topic is important. According to Connell and Pearse (2015: 11), there is no fixed ‘biological base’ for the social construction of gender. They argue that ‘gender is a specific form of social embodiment’ and ‘involves a cluster of human social practices, such as childcare, birthing and sexual interaction’ (Connell and Pearse, 2015: 49). Liebler et al. (2015) also see ‘gender as a cultural construction’. They argue that gender is not ‘inherently
biological’, so the creation and consumption of media products influences the construction of masculinities and femininities. In this case, romcoms provide the audience with interpretations of gender norms. Furthermore, these gender constructions are ‘deeply affected by prevailing historical, social, and cultural contexts and ideologies, which take form through the images, scenes, characters, dialog, and narrative, among countless other artistic and technical elements that comprise a film’ (Furia and Bielby, 2009: 209). Chinese gender relations and gender norms have been deeply impacted by Confucianism since pre-modern China which strongly emphasises social harmony. Later on, Western culture and individualism also contributed towards shifts in ideologies surrounding gender (see Chapter 2). Since constructions of Chinese femininities and masculinities have undergone several shifts in the past few decades, before analysing constructions of gender norms in ‘leftover’ women romcoms in modern China I need to discuss ideologies of gender since 1949.

Representations of the “ideal” woman and “femininity” imply particular social practices, principles and ideologies (Evans, 2002). Women have a higher representation than men in my film samples, moreover, sometimes ‘a male voice’ is missing when referring to marriage difficulties or ageing issues. Therefore, I choose to mainly focus on women’s images in this section.

1949–early 1980s

In Chinese media, men and women’s images have experienced a historic shift from ‘genderless’ to a ‘gender binary’ since 1949 (Cui, 2003; Qin, 2006). The government granted Chinese women ‘half the sky’ from the founding of PRC, where women were given liberation and more equal possibilities in public spheres within the socialist system (Cui, 2003). After 1949, ideas about female beauty focused on inner beauty rather than physical attraction for decades, such as loyalty to the party or the love of their work (Man, 2000). In Chinese films made between 1949 and 1976, the gender binary was diminishing (Dai, 1994). During that period, men and women were represented as belonging to the same class and the same “father”: The Communist Party (Dai, 1994). It was rare to see women spending time on their appearance (such as fashionable clothes) in Chinese films of the 1950s (Zhou, 2011). Patriarchal cultural norms have historically impacted Chinese women, such as women’s physical appearance regarded for male sexual purposes only in ancient Taoist teachings, or
moral principles in Confucian which emphasise women’s gentleness, chastity, piety and marital fidelity (Luo, 2013; Man, 2000). ‘Gender neutrality’ was a common trend between the 1950s and the 1970s in Chinese films; representations of femininity, female beauty and sexuality were minimised (Zhou, 2001). Women were constructed as ‘genderless’ figures in a cinematic content, whose attractiveness and desire to explore and express their femininity were largely ignored (Wang and Barlow, 2002). Instead, women’s presence on the screen exhibited nation-state ideology or signified the improvements of a socialist society compared with the old society; however, woman as herself, as a separate being, was missing and invisible (Cui, 2003; Dai, 1994; Liebler et al., 2015). Given this we might assume that Chinese cinema was dominated by male directors. Yet the state did not lack female directors in Mao’s era, only a lack of women’s cinema; as Cui (2003: 175) argues, ‘from familial daughter to socialist model, she has no name of her own, no subject position’.

Dai’s (1994) research summarises several ways in which women are portrayed in Chinese film after 1949. First, women are presented as victims because of old society and civil war, women who could only be saved by a communist man to become a free woman, such as the main figure Xi’er in The White-haired Girl (released in 1951). Second, women are portrayed as heroines and ‘iron women’ who fight for the state’s liberation with only a vague feminine identity, such as in the film The Red Detachment of Women (1959). Third, women as mothers have been a common female character in Chinese films from 1949 to the present. Those mothers dedicate themselves selflessly to the family and/or the state, such as in the film Mother (1956).

Mid-1980s

In the mid-1980s, a group of female directors created several films demonstrating women’s consciousness from a female perspective, influenced by a new gender discourse in Deng’s era (Liebler et al., 2015). Representations of attractive femininities and female autonomy began re-emerging in male and female directors’ films. Tan et al. (2009: 3) summarise that men and women on the screen were changing from ‘de-gendered socialist figures to sexually liberated ones’. For example, Yimou Zhang’s film Red Sorghum (1988) presents women’s sexuality and men’s desire. Gender constructions in today’s films are longer express a stable universality but
embody diverse images and contested and complex areas with contradictions and negotiations (Tan et al., 2009), yet in the 1980s the feminine ideal, especially representations of wives, portrayed a different range of images. Unlike the ‘collective-spirited, selfless and androgynous’ women of earlier years, diverse feminine images existed in public discourse (Evans, 2002: 340). At that time, Evans (2002: 340) summarised that an ideal woman would be presented as being ‘obedient (tinghua) to her husband, considerate of his needs and gentle and soft (wenrou)’ both in the popular press and academic publications of the post-reform era. The ‘soft and gentle’ woman was widely represented by the media and popular among the audience, such as a famous character Huifang Liu in the television series Kewang (a virtuous, gentle wife and caring mother).

Since the late-1980s

After the reform and open-up policy in the 1980s, China evolved globalism, neoliberalism, individualism and consumerism within a Communist state; yet, at the same time, traditional Confucianism is still alive (Zhang, 2012). The ideal Chinese woman’s image is shifting. Western beauty standards and the idea of inner beauty play essential parts in an ideal woman’s construction (Browbell and Wasserstrom, 2002; Zhang, 2012). Furthermore, representations of women in films are also associated with consumerism as signs of China’s market economy since 1990, echoing the ideologies of consumerism discussed in the previous subsection (Liebler et al., 2015). For example, at the very beginning of I Do, we observe Weiwei’s preparations before work in the morning, such as doing her makeup, choosing clothes, wearing a Bulgari watch and picking out some jewellery. All her preparations convey the message that a woman’s beauty is outward and is associated with commercial products as illustrated by commercial power. Some scholars summarise that today’s model of an ideal Chinese woman has created a standard of being for both married and single women, who are expected to have a beautiful appearance (tall, thin, young) and inner beauty (obedient/tinghua, gentle and soft/wenrou) (Liebler et al., 2015; Zhang, 2012). Moreover, they find many women remain helpless in marriage, and women figures are marginalised in lots of top-grossing Chinese films.
I agree that a beautiful appearance is an inevitable element of the construction of women when considering attractive femininities and the ideal woman in China. However, when analysing single women in *Desire of the Heart*, *I Do* and *The Last Woman Standing*, I find representations of women characters and some men challenge the conventional views of gender norms in current China. First, contradictory to the expectation of women being subservient to men in traditional gender relations, most of the women in the three ‘leftover’ women films have agency in their relationships. In *Desire of the Heart*, this applies to all of the women except for Shengying. For example, when Ying and Da have arguments about living together or not, Ying decides to break up with Da, and when Yajuan cannot stand her husband, she decides to divorce him. In *I Do*, Weiwei refuses Yang’s idea of reunion and Nianhua’s proposal; instead, she gives both of them a chance to win her heart. And in *The Last Woman Standing*, Ruxi refuses Doctor Bai’s idea about their next date. In addition, when she finds herself falling love with Sai, Ruxi expresses her feelings to him directly and later they start dating.

Second, women are not represented as having to be ‘obedient/tinhua’ and a charming person; being confident, independent and powerful are also represented as attractive qualities for women. Many single women in the three films are not obedient women, especially Weiwei and Ruxi. In *I Do*, Weiwei’s representations are mainly about her confidence, her work capabilities, and her independence. It is difficult to find scenes of Weiwei being obedient to a man, except in her last relationship with Yang seven years ago. Ruxi in *The Last Woman Standing* cannot be labelled as an obedient woman in a romantic relationship either. For example, Ruxi refuses her potential partner (Doctor Bai) after their blind date. Moreover, the film shows Ruxi’s performance at work at the beginning of the film, and her confidence being single in the latter part.

Third, men are often represented as younger or with a lower socio-economic status than their female partner or would-be partner, which differs from traditional ideas of men as breadwinners. For example, in *Desire of the Heart*, Xiang is a poor cook from a rural area, while Cong is an urban girl with a family fortune. Su is younger and of a lower economic status than Yajuan, who also accepts Yajuan’s financial support when in debt. *I Do* does not show detailed representations of Weiwei and Yang in their earlier relationship; however, it mentions that Weiwei supported Yang a lot when they were
dating, because Weiwei found a job but Yang was sticking to his dream and being ‘unrealistic’ at that time. Sai and Ruxi in *The Last Woman Standing* is another example. Sai is Ruxi’s new colleague in the film who is younger than Ruxi and of a lower socioeconomic status. Although they break up partly because of their different socioeconomic status, they reunite at the end of the film.

Furthermore, a good man is constructed as caring, considerate, sharing and one who displays an egalitarian version of masculinity, called the ‘new man’ by Hansen-Miller and Gill (2011). For example, Su takes care of Yajuan very carefully when she is sick in *Desire of the Heart*; Nianhua cooks dinner for Weiwei and is patient with her when Weiwei is upset in *I Do*; Sai and Ruxi have a long conversation about her confusion and worries in love when they are on a business trip in *The Last Woman Standing*. However, Yang and Doctor Bai do not have these kind of moments in *I Do* and *The Last Woman Standing*.

Overall, I agree with empirical research on Chinese films that both attractive appearances and inner beauty are presented as essential to build an ideal Chinese woman; however, ideologies of gender in ‘leftover’ women romcoms tell us more about the changing roles of masculinities and femininities in contemporary China. Women have more agency and freedom in their daily lives compared to the past, especially in gender relations. Being obedient or soft and gentle is not generally presented as the most charming personality of a woman in these films. Referring to the ideology of ‘leftover’ women in the films, single women are supposed to seek love, but not be passively “leftover”. More specifically, these single women are constructed as successful professional women with individualised ideas who can negotiate with men and be attractive to younger men. Moreover, within the films women’s independence, confidence and capability create attractive sparkles in dating or marriage. At the same time, men’s roles are changing. They are not always constructed as breadwinners or strong figures following traditional gender norms. Men can be weaker or of lower socioeconomic status than their partners, and a caring and egalitarian version of masculinity is common in the ‘leftover’ women romcoms.
Conclusions

This chapter has explored the production, content and consumerism of three ‘leftover’ women romcoms and summarised the ‘leftover’ woman romcom genre. By introducing storylines in the first section, I mapped out the main narratives and characters of the three research samples and positioned them in their related cultural context. Several worthy analytical themes emerge from the three films that will contribute to later analysis chapters, such as women’s mixed emotions about their singlehood, the close relations between work and love, the blind date and dating practices, gendered partner selection principles, and family intervention in individuals’ romantic relationships. These films display several aspects of Chinese women’s singlehood and invoke audience discussion on the Douban Movie website about ‘leftover’ women, marriage and the Chinese family; while they have been criticised for poor editing, incomplete storylines, numerous product placements, etc., all three films have successful box-office records, thus, the directors’ aims to present a fuller picture of ‘leftover’ women’s life were partly accomplished.

After examining these films through a romcom lens in the second section, I conclude that Chinese ‘leftover’ women romcoms have continued the tradition of the Hollywood romcom genre in terms of visual characteristics, narrative patterns and ideologies, while attaching distinctive Chinese characteristics. More specially, Chinese love and intimate culture are applied to the visual characteristics in a ‘leftover’ woman romcom, such as traditional red weddings and the heroine’s fashionable and mature look. Narrative patterns in Chinese romcoms portray more modifications than the classic ones. For instance, the ‘work or love’ puzzle has been replaced by close associations between work and love; family interventions become a key element in romantic relationships rather than being placed in marginal areas; and a happy ending is not just an ending with a wedding ceremony. However, the ideology of a ‘leftover’ woman romcom does not deviate from the Hollywood romcom genre, in that it still focuses on romantic love, consumerism, and heterosexual monogamous gender relationships.

The romcoms provide viewers with beautiful love stories, moving romance, heart-breaking moments and multiple happy endings. Romance remains the main ideology
of ‘leftover’ women romcoms that inform their viewers about love and intimate culture in contemporary China. For instance, in the three case studies, the filmic presentations of an ideal partner are complex and discursive, for men and for women. An independent woman and a caring man are presented as attractive factors; at the same time, older women/younger men are presented as good matches, and women can be of a higher socio-economic status than men in a love relationship. Meanwhile commercial culture and gender norms are other influential factors that impact the representations of love relationships and the construction of women. Liebler et al. (2015) suggest that economic factors are significant in today’s Chinese films when constructing a feminine ideal and/or a gender binary, a possible outgrowth of consumerism. Furthermore, romcoms contribute to recent shifts towards understanding Chinese femininities, masculinities and gender norms. Although lots of articles or posts exist to teach women to be ‘gentle and soft/wenrou’ on social media; women’s images and femininities have a more varied representation in the films. For instance, women are given more agency in a love relationship, rather than always being weak or ‘obedient/tinghua’. Second, women’s inner beauty and charm is represented not only in their ‘gentle and soft/wenrou’ nature, but increasingly in their confidence, independence, and capability. While, referring to masculinities, a caring, sharing man with egalitarian ideas is shown as a preferable partner for ‘leftover’ women.

In summary, through a romcom genre analysis this chapter contributes towards presenting a broad and comprehensive picture of the general characteristics and transformations in Chinese love and intimate culture, as well as femininities and masculinities. It also sets the thesis in a Chinese romantic context and provides the basis for further discussion in the next three analytical chapters. I find that genre analysis as a research tool lacks deeper critical discussions about texts and discourses within a film and, thus, plays a limited role in relating films to their wider sociocultural backgrounds. Therefore, the genre analysis presented in this chapter is not enough to discuss the Chinese ‘leftover’ women phenomenon, its media representations and sociocultural meanings. That is why, over the next three chapters, I will apply a critical discourse analytical framework to texts and discourses in the three selected films. I will use Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis to examine typical scenes in the films, alongside audience reviews on Douban Movie, in order to discuss several research
themes that emerged from the genre analysis, including women’s identities and mixed emotions (Chapter 5), dating patterns and partner expectations (Chapter 6), and intergenerational and social ties with family and friends (Chapter 7).
Chapter 5 ‘I enjoy being single, but really want to get married sometime!’: ‘Leftover’ women’s identities and mixed emotions

Introduction

Through Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis approach, the next three chapters focus on different aspects of ‘leftover’ women’s love and marriage choices. The representations of ‘leftover’ women in the selected films do conform to the concept in the literature, in that they are midlife professional women (late twenties to forties) with a good sociocultural status in urban China. I begin with ‘leftover’ women’s identities and emotions in this chapter, then continue with their love choices in Chapter 6, followed by family and social interventions in Chapter 7. This chapter sets out to explore media constructions of Chinese ‘leftover’ women in three romcoms (Desire of the Heart, I Do and The Last Woman Standing) and related audience reviews on the Douban Movie website. As discussed in Chapter 4, the constructions of a heroine share some similarities in ‘leftover’ women romcoms. After exploring the representations and receptions of single women’s lives both in films and reviews, I argue that ‘leftover’ women possess mixed emotions about their singlehood: they are anxious about ageing issues and worried about marrying late, but still take pride and pleasure in being single and independent. This chapter is divided into three sections. I begin with single women’s ageing issues, anxiety and shame within wider social and cultural backgrounds, and the historical emergence of marrying late. In the following section, I consider this marrying-late trend in more detail, focusing on women’s educational attainment and career development. In the final section, I discuss recent changes and single women’s emotions about their singlehood. Enjoying being single and independent, also contribute to constructions of an “ideal” single woman in 21st century China.

1. Anxiety and shame

Anxiety and shame are common words when describing ‘leftover’ women’s singlehood in the films and in online reviews. Sianne (2005: 210) states that anxiety
is a feeling that a person refuses to recognise in themselves and ‘attempts to locate in another person or thing’. In association with ‘leftover’ women, their anxiety relates to facing marital issues and other concerns, such as their failure to position themselves as married women. Whereas, shame—which is another key word used by some ‘leftover’ women when talking about their singlehood—is both an individual emotion and a social phenomenon (Sceff, 1997). In this section, using film conversations and audience reviews I discuss how ‘leftover’ women’s anxiety about being single relates to their personal and social ageing issues.

1.1 Anxiety and ageing

The expression ‘women age, men grow up’ is a typical example of gendered assumptions about the ageing process (Lahad, 2017: 57); thus, the ageing processes between men and women is asymmetrical (Gardiner, 2002; Sontag, 1983). The devaluation of women as they age is based on the premise that women’s appearances and reproductive capabilities are crucial elements that constitute their value (Lahad, 2017). Among Chinese ‘leftover’ women—such as Ying Zhang in Desire of the Heart, Weiwei Tang in I Do and Ruxi Sheng in The Last Woman Standing—remaining single near or after 30 years of age creates daily anxiety, due to personal ageing issues as well as social, gendered double standards. Ageing is an unavoidable topic when talking about single women, especially among older unmarried people. Lahad emphasises that ‘single women are aged by societal norms determined by culturally framed expectations’ (Lahad, 2017: 53). ‘Common sense’ ideas typically emerge when Chinese people talk about women’s age in the three films. For instance, people think women will be less and less charming as their age increases and single women will have fewer and fewer opportunities in the ‘marriage market’. Here common-sense is characterised as opinions that are considered ‘inherently reasonable and as such are rarely challenged’, which appear as “natural” to people and are therefore not scrutinised (McLoughlin, 2017: 5) which is not the same thing as saying that these ideas are correct. Here, I use several film conversations and audience reviews to argue that age becomes an invisible burden for ‘leftover’ women; using Fairclough’s three-dimensional critical discourse analysis.
1.1.1 Desire of the Heart

At the beginning of *Desire of the Heart*, a voiceover by Ying provides the audience with some basic information about herself. At the same time, the camera moves, showing the audience Ying’s living environment and presenting a scene about a neighbours’ gathering. Ying lives with her parents in an old apartment, and most of her neighbours are around her parents’ age. Ying isn’t shown, but she says:

> I’m the only daughter, but I’m not a confirmed spinster. The worst is that I have never had a boyfriend before. I don’t know why I would come down to such a worst case. I feel so nervous as I think of this.

On the textual level, Ying’s use of declarative sentences at this point gives an impression to the audience that she is telling some truth about herself. Her voiceover also adds to the effect. Moreover, to begin she uses a negative sentence explaining her wish to find a boyfriend. In the next three sentences she uses the phrases ‘such a worst case’ and ‘feel so nervous’ to describe her singlehood, indicating her anxiety and worries about being single. Nevertheless, Ying stresses that she is ‘not a confirmed spinster’; so she still has opportunities to marry. On the discourse level, Ying’s monologue at the opening of the film implies that a central theme will be single women’s romantic relationships and possible marriage. On the wider sociocultural level, Ying’s words express a single woman’s confusion and worries about being single and the heavy burden of being unmarried as the only child in the family (I will discuss more about family pressure in Chapter 7). Also, her neighbours’ concerns hint that social intervention is an inevitable element of Ying’s romantic relationships. The camera turns to an older woman (around Ying’s mother’s age) who can be understood as a representative of Ying’s neighbours or relatives:

> An older woman asks Ying: How old are you?

> Ying: 28.
The woman: Have you got someone to go out with? When would you like to get married?

[Ying doesn’t answer. She bows her head.]

During Ying’s monologue, the director inserts a conversation with an older woman who asks Ying questions about her age, whether she has a boyfriend and her marriage plan. In contemporary Chinese culture, this kind of conversation usually happens at a family gathering where relatives ask single women similar questions. Therefore, it is culturally normal to use a woman around Ying’s mother’s age to ask these kinds of questions, rather than Ying’s friends or younger people. Thus, their dialogue accords with actual conditions to a large extent, even today. Similar to the older woman in the above scene, people prefer telling single women to be preoccupied with their marriage plan rather than directly saying that ‘you must get married’. In this scene, because she is still single and has never had a boyfriend, Ying bows her head and sits silently, indicating her discomfort and her inability to complain about the older woman’s questions. Ying’s behaviour reveals her worries connected to being single. The conversation starts with the older woman’s questions; even though it is a question-and-answer conversation, the older woman dominates the entire dialogue and Ying only answers once. This kind of setting communicates the idea that being single causes women to feel uncomfortable in public. Moreover, Ying’s reaction to the neighbour’s words conveys a message that she is influenced by others in personal matters, which hints at a later plot about family intervention. As the scene happens at a neighbour’s house or a family gathering (the director does not tell us which), on the sociocultural level it indicates that ‘leftover’ women’s unmarried status and anxiety is not only a personal issue but seen as a family and societal one (see Chapter 7).

[Ying’s voiceover continues] That would be something unheard of…

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31 The English subtitle shows ‘unheard of’ here. I think it can be understood as uncommon or unusual.
Finally, Ying’s voiceover appears again, a short sentence using the phrase ‘unheard of’. The scene’s words and actions display that it is uncommon that a 28-year-old woman has never had a boyfriend in China in 2008. In fact, currently it is a common thing to be single (no boyfriend or unmarried) at or over 28; however, it is seen as a rare situation in Ying’s mind at that time. Also, this sentence explains why she does not answer the woman’s question, because her situation is ‘unheard of’ to others, unspeakable even. Ying’s voiceover and behaviour inform the audience that being single at 28 is the worst thing imaginable and will make a woman feel ashamed and anxious.

The second discussion of Ying’s age is when she dances with Da Zhao at a ball for single people, where Ying hopes to meet some single guys and find a boyfriend.

Da: I can tell that you are a girl with Chinese traditional virtue.

Ying: When I was young, some grannies praised me for that. But when I was over 25, no one says that anymore.

In terms of textual analysis, Ying uses contrastive sentences here to express different experiences before and after 25. She compares the changing attitudes of others towards her to express that a single woman is not young over 25. She says the sentence in a peaceful way that hints she accepts the idea and feels the pressure of ageing. As for the discourse, the conversation happens when Da leads Ying to dance at the ball. It is the first formal dialogue between them. Ying chooses to talk about her age indicating her ageing anxiety. On a sociocultural level, her words imply that she thinks herself no longer as attractive as other younger women in the dating market, however, her words are also a response to Da’s judgement that she is a morally good girl. Moreover, her attitude suggests that a single woman’s age is linked to her impression in others’ eyes: the younger you are, the more attractive you will be. In this case, ageing norms and ageing anxiety are rooted deeply in a single woman’s mind. Ying’s anxiety about ageing links with the age “norms” or expressions of “common sense” in Chinese society; in that, women’s attractiveness will be lower when they get older, or women should get married before 30. Ying describes her single identity at 28 as an ‘unheard
of thing, because she has not fulfilled her projected marriage task. The distinction between her singlehood, her age and social marriage expectations causes her personal anxiety, or at least to express that anxiety.

While Ying’s ageing anxieties are expressed at the start of the film before her love story commences, Yajuan Gao’s worries about her age and lack of confidence are ongoing obstacles to her relationship with Su Zhang. Their story is an example of an ‘older woman-younger man’ relationship in Chinese society. Su is introduced to Yajuan by her co-workers who wish her to find another partner after her divorce. After several days they get along well, despite Yajuan’s co-workers stating that ‘he is too young to match with Yajuan’, so the audience is aware that Su is younger than Yajuan. When Su suggests they can live together in Yajuan’s house in the future she responds by telling him her age, clearly worried about it:

Su: I have a feeling like my own home. I want to stay here for the long term.

Yajuan: I am actually 55 to be precise. Besides my age, I am still quite capable.

Su: Love doesn’t count for age. I like mature women. They are more mature, staid and have a power of motherhood. For a feeling of security and charm, it has nothing to do with age.

[Yajuan smiles and nods in a way that shows her agreement to live together.]
The above conversation happens at Yajuan’s house. The director uses several multimodal techniques such as restricted spatiality and close-up filming, which provide their conversation with a quiet and private environment. Their clothes are casual compared to other outfits in the film which also provides a relaxing and close space for their conversation, and gives the audience the impression that they will discuss some intimate and interpersonal issues. The couple are holding hands when talking, an indicator of their close relationship. The use of declarative sentences makes her words seem reliable and show she is not joking; while her tone of voice shows her lack of confidence and insecurity before Su. For example, when Su wants to start a long-term relationship with Yajuan, she tells him her age first in a lower voice. This suggests that age is the only thing she worries about in terms of their relationship. Yajuan is constructed as a bright, independent and capable woman in the film, who owns a small clothing store. She is a powerful woman who handles everything, except her romantic relationship with Su. Thus, Yajuan’s words and behaviour here contrast with her character, showing her insecurity about this relationship. Su uses gendered language to express his fondness for her, such as ‘mature’ and ‘motherhood’ when describing Yajuan; the words also convey a stereotype of femininity: mothering, not companionship. Su explains his ideas to Yajuan and lets her know that she is good enough to be loved and, finally, Yajuan agrees with Su’s suggestion. In the conversation, Yajuan only expresses her opinion once, while Su talks a lot which suggests that Su dominates their private life, although he cannot be financially
dominant. According to traditional social norms for men, they should be the ‘breadwinners’ in the family; however, in Yajuan and Su’s relationship, Yajuan earns more than Su, and lends money to Su. Nonetheless, Yajuan and Su’s conversation implies Su’s eagerness to be the dominant partner in the relationship. Moreover, Su invites himself to stay in Yajuan’s house which is not common in Chinese culture (at least not in 2008). Normally, a couple will live at the man’s house or apartment when cohabiting. Yajuan experiences is a different kind of ageing anxiety than Ying. Ageing anxiety might be an issue in relationships between older women and younger men. Ying is afraid about being too old for marriage per se, while Yajuan is worried about being older than her partner.

Despite these different representations of single women’s ageing issues in *Desire of the Heart*, not many reviews discuss ageing on the Douban Movie website. This might be because ageing issues are too sensitive to talk about online. Or perhaps, the audience agrees with the film’s representations and thinks the ageing issues are obvious. There are only some scattered discussions about Yajuan’s age and her relationship with Su as some reviewers think that Yajuan’s story is unreal. For example, Tian (2009) thinks that it is difficult for a divorced woman over 50 to start a new relationship, because most of the women Tian knows around 50 are busy with their family, supporting their husband and taking care of children or grandchildren. Compared with Yajuan who chooses to divorce in the film, to end a marriage is a rare and uncommon decision for women over 50. In Tian’s opinion, women’s age shapes their social behaviours or decisions. Everything is settled down by this stage of life, and it is too late to change by Yajuan’s age. However, another reviewer thinks that Yajuan is a cool and unconventional woman at her age, and that her story will let other single women know they do not need to live someone else’s life (Cabbage, 2009). Cabbage’s writing is an example of how the film not only presents woman’s realities, but also helps to create them. Yajuan can be an example for other single or divorced women over 50 to learn from.
1.1.2 I Do

Focusing on I Do, the ageing issues of this film revolve around Weiwei and her colleague Na. Weiwei Tang is a single woman who is 33 years old. The film uses several ways to describe Weiwei’s age, all in the words of others that I will discuss later in Chapter 7. Here I employ the sole scene which mentions Weiwei’s internal ideas about her singlehood.

At the beginning of the film, a voiceover from Weiwei’s best friend, Xiaoling Jin, tells the audience some necessary information about Weiwei:

[Weiwei is] beautiful and has good taste absolutely. [She is a woman with a] High salary, highly educated and high position. She does not worry about finding a Mr. Right as she is, but she is over 30 and still single … Most women have a common problem. They feel uneasy being still unmarried after their 30s. Tang Weiwei is not a special example.

In terms of textual analysis, Xiaoling uses a contrastive sentence when talking about Weiwei’s self-conditions and her age: despite her advantages in life she is over 30. Xiaoling’s words give an impression to the audience that age is a sensitive topic to unmarried women over 30. Xiaoling’s words also reflect a ‘leftover’ woman’s situation in current China. Such individuals are usually constructed as single women who are independent and well-educated in media products; however, they are worried about their increasing age. From a discourse perspective, Xiaoling’s words are the audience’s first impression of Weiwei. Those words are at the start of the film, and convey that Weiwei’s non-marriage is the most important aspect of her personal life at present. Finally, from a sociocultural perspective, on the one hand, Xiaoling’s words imply that a single woman’s opportunity to get married will be lower after 30; on the other hand, her words also reflect ‘leftover’ women’s own worries about marriage after 30, because she uses the word ‘uneasy’ to describe Weiwei’s situation. Xiaoling is married and concerned for her single friend in the film. Her worries about and
suggestions to address Weiwei’s single status and Weiwei’s support of Xiaoling in defending her marriage throughout the plots imply that friendship has become a key element in individuals’ romantic relationships (I will unpack this idea further in Chapter 7).

Another example concerning ‘leftover’ women’s ageing issues in *I Do* involves the conversation between Weiwei and Na before Na’s wedding ceremony. When Weiwei asks Na if her husband is a reliable man, Na replies,

> When I was your age, I was afraid that the men cheated me. But now, at my age, I am most afraid that I am not useful\(^{\text{32}}\) to men … After 50 years old, I still need a man? I need a son enough.

The director does not tell us how old Na is, but she is older than Weiwei at least, because she says ‘when I was your age’ at the beginning. From a textual analytical angle, Na uses the word ‘afraid’ to describe her attitude towards a romantic relationship which indicates a negative attitude and anxiety, to some extent. In her opinion, she is no longer young enough to be a woman with lots of agency to choose a husband. She implies that women at her age are waiting to be chosen by men, but their prospects are poor because they are ‘not useful to men’. On a discourse level, their conversation happens before Na’s wedding ceremony. As Na’s marriage is approaching, she would like to share her opinions and experiences about romantic relationships with Weiwei. Na’s words and her marriage provide Weiwei with an example through which to imagine her own love story. Moreover, Na’s ideas about love and marriage links to the next scene when Xiaoling forgives her cheating husband (see Chapter 7). From a sociocultural perspective, Na’s words show how ‘leftover’ women’s ageing issues are linked with gender norms (such as women’s attractiveness and their age) and women’s reproductive roles. The notion that ‘women should get married’ continues to pervade modern China and even professional women, such as Weiwei and Na, still accept the ‘most traditional path’ (To, 2015a). Otherwise, they risk feeling anxious or uncomfortable in social contexts because their unmarried status

\(^{\text{32}}\) I think she means ‘attractive’ here.
cannot fulfill traditional expectations. Additionally, the traditional roles of Chinese women are linked with their ‘responsibilities’, for instance, being a kind mother is treated as an important step in a woman’s life (Cheung and Tang, 2017).

Several comments about single women’s age can be found among the reviews of I Do on the Douban Movie website. One user called Ming (2012) writes that, ‘ages are important to single women. As you get older and older, you will find love should be a realistic thing, not only romance’. Ming’s idea does not express the same kind of worries that Na has in the film, but provides another explanation of Na’s choice to marry a ‘less qualified’ husband; Na has moved towards a ‘realistic’ view of love. Ming involves ageing issues in her review of I Do, which implies that Weiwei or Na’s ageing issues do not only exist in the film, but are experienced in real life as well. Finally, Ming’s attitude can be an example of how some Chinese women facing age pressure do not question the status quo, but accept such ageing issues in their private life. From Ming’s perspective, ageing equals unattractiveness and the lost potential for pure love. Ming’s review is linked with women’s expectations for a partner as well (which I will discuss more detail in Chapter 6). I also found one man’s “honest” idea about women’s age on the Douban website: Su (2012) writes, ‘although I am an ordinary (average level) man, I would like to find a girlfriend below 25 rather than over 30’. While Su’s words show men’s discrimination against single women over 30, he also acknowledges that his “ordinariness” may make his demands for a younger girlfriend unusual. His words also express ‘common sense’ for many Chinese men, and reflect that he is not exempt from socially gendered ideas about choosing a partner.

1.1.3 The Last Woman Standing

In The Last Woman Standing, Ruxi’s ageing issues are mentioned several times by her, her friend and her mother. I will discuss her own ideas in this chapter, and those of her friends and family in Chapter 7.

The Last Woman Standing uses Ruxi’s monologue at the beginning to express Ruxi’s eagerness to find her true love:

I am dying to have someone to love me who can be with me,
accompany me through my whole life. Love is a principle that I persisted with for so long, why should I compromise? … True love? Where the hell are you? Who exactly are you? Are you dead or alive?

Figure 5.2 [Screenshot] Ruxi drives back alone from a wedding ceremony, The Last Woman Standing (00:01:48).

Ruxi drives back to her self-owned company in a dark car asking herself philosophical questions about love. Compared with the dark atmosphere around Ruxi, there is light outside the window. This contrast implies that Ruxi is full of sadness because of being single: sitting in a dark car while the rest of the world basks in the light. Considering a textual analysis of the lines above, Ruxi uses the word ‘principle’ to describe ‘love’. This choice of words shows that love is supposed to be unbreakable and unchangeable code of belief in her private life. The last thing she wants to do is to compromise in love. Then she uses a series of rhetorical questions to express and emphasise her confusion, her anxiety in love and her eagerness to find love. On a discourse level, Ruxi’s words occur after she has attended a wedding ceremony. There is a contrast between the lively wedding party and Ruxi’s loneliness. At that party, her mother expresses her wish that Ruxi should find a boyfriend and think about marriage. From a sociocultural perspective, Ruxi’s words represent ‘leftover’ women’s innermost thoughts and feelings. From the beginning, the audience is aware that although Ruxi is labelled as a ‘leftover’ woman, she is not leftover by others. She chooses to be single because she wants to marry for love, not just marry for the sake of it.
Another scene about Ruxi’s ageing issue is a conversation between Ruxi and her close friend Yu:

Yu: Do you really like that young boy [Sai]?

Ruxi: 25 is not too young … but younger than me!

Yu: Age gap is not a problem …

Ruxi: This is unrealistic and impossible.

Ruxi talks with Yu about her boss (Lan Wang’s) new assistant Sai. On a textual level, when Ruxi addresses her feelings for Sai, she mentions Sai’s age as not being ‘too young’, but then she rejects the idea of dating Sai because he is ‘younger’ than her, and uses two negative words (‘unrealistic’ and ‘impossible’) to emphasise her thoughts. Ruxi’s words sound as if she is trying to persuade herself as well as the audience. On a discourse level, this conversation occurs during a girls’ night, where Yu hears that Ruxi has a new handsome and cute colleague, and she asks Ruxi if there is any chance of getting a date with him. Ruxi may have a crush on Sai but the love line is not clear. On the sociocultural level, Ruxi’s answer conveys several elements. First, women have some doubts about the ‘older woman-younger man’ relationship, because the male being older than the female is the usual marriage pattern. In the film, Ruxi is around 35 years old, 10 years older than Sai. The age gap makes her immediately reject the idea of dating Sai. Second, Ruxi’s negative attitude also implies her insecurity in an ‘older woman-younger man’ relationship. Similar to Yajuan and Su’s relationship, Seskin and Ziegler (1979) propose that the age gap raises some insecurity and doubts for single women surrounding to their attractiveness in a romantic relationship. The age gap does not play a large role in daily life, but it may be ‘brushed under the carpet’ (Proulx et al., 2006). For instance, Ruxi dates Sai, and they break up in the latter part of the film because of their age gap and different marriage prospects. When Ruxi thinks they should consider marriage seriously, Sai thinks he is still young, and he should focus on his career development.

Ruxi’s anxiety about ageing and marriage is represented when she talks about the future with Sai, having fallen in love with him. They enjoy their time together, but
when Ruxi talks with Sai about their relationship, Sai cannot provide her with a certain answer about marriage:

Ruxi: But I don’t have time to be in love with you without thinking [other things] … If I was 23 years old now, even in my mid-twenties, I would keep a free relationship with you … But now I want to have a family. There are a husband and children … So … can we have a family? Will you marry me? Not in the future, I mean now. Can you marry me?

Sai: I do want to get married. But now, I want to make an improvement in my career. Now I am…

Ruxi: I understand … Bye.

Figure 5.3 [Screenshot] Ruxi and Sai talk about their future, The Last Woman Standing (01:06:56).

Ruxi thinks about their relationship and the potential of marriage carefully. In the image above we can see from their faces that Ruxi looks heart-broken while Sai looks confused. Sai is not aware until that point of Ruxi’s serious hope of marriage. On a textual level, it looks like Ruxi is dominating their conversation because she says a lot in the dialogue. At the start, she uses a hypothetical sentence to explain her ageing anxiety and her wish to have a family: ‘If I was 23’. In her mind if she was much younger, she would love to try a romantic relationship without considering marriage.
However, she says she does not have enough time currently and Ruxi makes it clear that she is looking for a spouse to start a family with in her mid-thirties. At the end, she asks Sai a set of questions which show her willingness for marriage and love. Although Sai uses an empathic sentence at first, expressing his willingness to marry in principle; he then rejects Ruxi in a soft way, by explaining that his career development is more important at present. On a discourse level, their conversation occurs after Ruxi’s mother expresses that she is worried about Ruxi’s marriage prospects and wishes Ruxi to find a husband soon. Her mother’s wish seems to contribute to Ruxi’s idea that it is the proper time to get married.

Finally, on a sociocultural level, the conversation between Ruxi and Sai presents several “truths” about ‘leftover’ women’s anxieties about ageing and marriage. First, their ageing anxiety increases their aspirations to get married on a personal and a societal level (in terms of other’s expectations). On the one hand, I have shown through their words and actions that single women in the three films are afraid they are not young any more, and that a marriage will provide some security in love going forward. Single women may have their biological clock in their mind such as Ruxi. When referring to ‘enough time’ Ruxi also assumes that she would like to have children in marriage. On the other hand, their parents’ worries are another heavy burden. ‘Leftover’ women’s parents hope their daughters will find a good partner to live with when they are too old to care for their “little girl” and may also indicate their concerns about being looked after in their old age by their only child. Therefore, the above personal and familial factors lead to Ruxi’s ageing anxiety. Second, Sai’s words in the last quotation act as an example to explain how men’s time or energy spent on paid work may also lead to a late marriage. Sai’s answer about making ‘an improvement in my career’ demonstrates how work limits his chances of settling down. With an increase in invested time and concerns about progressing at work, the film appears to indicate that men prefer a delayed marriage. In contrast to this idea, Sai is Ruxi’s colleague in the film portraying that work can be a source of romance. Third, as previously discussed in the introduction of this section, while men’s perceived attractiveness increases as they build a better career, women’s perceived beauty or youthful appearance decreases.
Most reviewers agree that *The Last Woman Standing* represents the ideas and choices of some single women in the real world; for example, ‘ageing’, ‘anxious’ and ‘helplessness’ are frequently used words in the film’s reviews. The audience’s reviews take several approaches. First, some reviewers argue that ageing issues are significant when considering romantic relationships. For example, Wan (2015) mentions that ‘love is a competition with age for women’. This figurative sentence is a vivid way to present ageing issues in love. Wan writes that no matter whether Ruxi or Sai are both representations of real people, Ruxi’s ageing issues are realistic for a single woman in her thirties. Thus, on a sociocultural level, Wan agrees that it is impossible to avoid obstacles of age when women consider love.

Second, many single women express through their reviews that they not only feel anxious about their unmarried status, but also feel helpless in love—just like Ruxi’s monologue at the start of the film (SASA, 2015; Sea, 2015; Tang, 2015). For example, Sea writes that Ruxi’s story is quite similar to hers.

> Facing ageing issues, I feel that I need to find a man who is nice to me and satisfies my parents’ requirements, not to waste time finding true love. I think Ruxi is brave to start a relationship with Sai and breaks up with him decidedly. But I don’t think I have the same courage. (Sea, 2015)

Sea’s idea agrees with many other reviewers, who combine their own stories with Ruxi’s experiences. On the textual level, Sea agrees, at first, that the representation of Ruxi’s marriage pressure is accurate. Sea places ‘ageing issues’ at the forefront of her review, implying that this is a primary obstacle when considering her own situation. Then she uses the words ‘I need to find a man…’ not ‘I want to’, when describing the ‘nice’ partner she has in mind. Finally, she compares Ruxi’s story with her own and links the filmic representation with her real life, but in doing so she uses a negative sentence to tell others that Ruxi’s choice is an ideal one, but quite difficult for her to make. On the discourse level, Sea’s words indicate that she agrees with the content of the film, at first, then she writes about her own ageing issues and compares them with Ruxi’s. On the sociocultural level, Sea’s idea is an example of ageing issues and
worries among unmarried women in their thirties. Moreover, the “norm “of marriage is so strong that although they would like to ideally find true love, the cruel reality of their increasing age and parental expectations offer them no courage to seek the “perfect partner”.

Third, some reviewers agree that ageing issues exist but should not be obstacles in love; in that, single women should have more agency when choosing a partner. For example, Serenade (2016) thinks that ‘the story is to encourage single women to seek for true love, no matter how old she is’. Unlike other reviewers who focus on the bitter side of ageing, Serenade thinks the whole story expresses a positive idea for single women: that ageing issues are not always inevitable difficulties in love. Serenade’s idea is an example of how such films shape an audience’s perceptions of reality; in this instance, getting old is normal and should never be an unacceptable problem in love.

Based on my analysis of selected films and UGC, the age limit for ‘leftover’ women keeps changing over time. In Desire of the Heart (2008), Ying Zhang is afraid to be called a ‘leftover’ woman when she is 28. Later in I Do (2012), Weiwei Tang makes a joke of herself as a ‘leftover’ woman when she is 33. Then in more recent, The Last Woman Standing (2015), Ruxi Sheng is constructed as a 35 years old single woman bearing much marital pressure. Until now we have no clear age limit to define a single woman who is called ‘leftover’; but most discussions cite as elite midlife women (late twenties to forties) with a good sociocultural status in urban China.

1.2 Shame

Shame, arising from their singlehood, is another emotion felt by ‘leftover’ women and their family. From Scheff’s perspective, shame is both an individual and a social phenomenon in family conflicts. Shame is as emotion within individuals that signals that social bonds are threatened as shame relates to alienation in social interaction (Scheff, 1997). For instance, a single woman may feel alienated at a neighbours’ gathering when talking about marriage, such as Ying in Desire of the Heart, or at a wedding ceremony, such as Ruxi in The Last Woman Standing. Simultaneously,
hidden shame may cause family conflict. I will touch on this further when I explain family interventions in Chapter 7. Here I focus more on the daughter’s standpoint and emotions. The first example of shame is from *The Last Woman Standing*:

![Screenshot](Ruxi and her mother quarrel about singlehood and marriage after her blind date with Doctor Bai, The Last Woman Standing (00:19:08).)

Ruxi’s mother: How do I treat you? I treat you as, a thirty [five] year old girl that doesn’t have partner until now. What? Don’t you know your own condition? Be real! Miss! ... When you get older it will be more difficult to find a partner!

Ruxi: Will I be punished if I don’t get married? Society has discriminated against me enough! You don’t question the world but join them to discriminate against me! Did I make you embarrassed?

[Ruxi’s mother leaves the car, slamming the door.]

This conversation is the fiercest conflict between Ruxi and her mother in the film. It concerns Ruxi’s marriage. Ruxi and her mother are in narrow space in the car, which implies their close relationship; moreover, being in a car provides an isolated space for them, cut off from others, and the director uses close-up shots to present full-face expressions and display their angry emotions. This positioning also enhances the actor’s decisions about where to look when they are both facing forwards: Ruxi’s mum turns to face Ruxi every time she speaks to Ruxi; whereas Ruxi chooses to face the windscreen, not her mother. The setting implies that Ruxi does not want to have a confrontational fight with her mother.
From a textual dimension, Ruxi’s mother first mentions Ruxi’s age, then several questions paired with commentary to enhance her tone, building towards asking Ruxi to be “realistic” in finding a partner. Finally, she uses an imperative sentence to emphasise that Ruxi’s increasing age will be an obstacle in finding a partner. Ruxi uses rhetorical questions to answer her mother which shows her negative attitude and expresses her anger towards her mother and others’ discrimination. From a discourse dimension, their conversation happens after Ruxi’s first meeting with Doctor Bai is arranged by her mother. Ruxi has no interest in Doctor Bai, while her mother thinks he is a good dating choice. Meanwhile Ruxi is unsatisfied with her mother’s attempt to push her into a relationship, which is the reason for their confrontation. From a sociocultural dimension, their conversation presents several messages. First, the age of ‘leftover’ women is a prerequisite when considering their romantic relationship, a belief rooted in different generations in China, such as Ruxi’s mother in the film. The mother agrees that women’s attractiveness and marriage prospects decrease as their age increases. Second, their quarrel and anger are linked with further shame. In Scheff’s (1997) work, shame signals alienation in social reactions. Furthermore, alienation and hidden shame contributes to interminable family conflicts. For instance, Ruxi and her mother attend a wedding at the start of the film and among the married couples and with others’ asking questions about Ruxi’s non-married status, Ruxi and her mother both feel alienated. Therefore, the mother’s shame of having a single daughter around 35 and Ruxi’s shame of being single causes their confrontation. Third, through representations of a strong mother and an impatient daughter the film reminds reviewers to consider parent-child relations, and this may “normalise” parents’ interventions in their children’s personal matters. Viewers may not criticise Ruxi’s actions and concerns at that time; they empathise with her.

The shame and conflict of being single is not only an issue that exists in films, it also occurs in the real world among single women in China as many reviews mention this aspect. For instance, many reviewers write that Ruxi’s conflict with her mother is very similar to their own experience; for instance, the representation of anger and shame by Ruxi and her mother is ‘exactly my own story’ or ‘the same quarrel with my mother’ (Amour, 2015; C. Liu, 2015; Nida, 2016; Tree, 2015). Furthermore, Tree writes that while conflict, anger or shame no doubt exists in ‘leftover’ women’s families, the mother only wants her daughter to be happy and she does everything for the daughter’s
own good. Although Ruxi’s mother chooses the wrong way to show her concerns about Ruxi’s marriage status, her concern originates from love (Tree, 2015).

1.3 The gendered double standard

Alongside personal and familial anxiety or shame, the gendered double standard is another reason for single women to worry about their single status and ageing. *Desire of the Heart, I Do and The Last Woman Standing* contain several scenes about single women’s ageing concerns, marriage pressures, and insecurity related to age. However, they reveal little engagement with single men’s ageing, indicating a gendered double standard of ageing in Chinese society.

According to *Desire of the Heart*, most characters state that the perfect time to be married is during her 20s for women, but there is no similar representation for men’s perfect marrying age. The different endings for the women in the films imply that younger women in their 20s find it easier to get married, in that they experience more happy endings compared to older single women. While Ying Zhang and Cong Lin marry their boyfriends and Xiaomei has some possibilities with Yang Zong at the end, the stories of Yajuan and Shengying are tragedies. Even though Yajuan helps Su with his debt, she loses Su because he is caught by the police and sent to prison. Mang leaves Shengying without any message and, to make matters worse, Shengying is worried because she is pregnant with Mang’s child. When comparing the younger single women’s happy endings to the older single women’s tragedies, the audience will have an impression that older women will face disadvantages when dating because of their age. However, all the selected films tell us nothing about men’s age issues.

In *Desire of the Heart*, even though Mang is not a young or handsome or rich single man, he is constructed as a man who successfully cheats several single women. Also, in *I Do*, there is no explicit representation of ageing issues for Nianhua or Yang, although they are not young or charming single men anymore. In *The Last Woman Standing*, Ruxi’s mother introduces a 45 year old doctor to Ruxi, and says ‘Doctor Bai is more popular than you’. From her words, it is easy to see the gendered double
standard between men and women. Single women over 30 are called ‘leftover’ women or ‘old maids’, while single men over 40 can still be ‘popular’.

This gendered double standard of ageing exists in many societies, especially in the “marriage market”. Some sociology scholars argue that men intend to choose to ‘marry down’ in age; moreover, the older they are, the larger the age discrepancy they typically seek (England and McClintock, 2009; Ji, 2015). They also claim that women are judged by their youthful looks or physical attractiveness when compared with men. Therefore, the double standard of ageing affects women more negatively under sociocultural conditions. England and McClintock (2009) point out that this is derived from people’s preferences when looking for a partner. In addition, men’s earning power is the significant aspect when women are looking for a husband; whereas a younger women’s primary expectation of a partner is the capability of being a breadwinner, older women may choose to compromise on men’s earning power, such as Na in I Do marrying a man from a lower socioeconomic level than her, because older women are already financially secure. Ji’s research finds that although some Chinese women have an advantage in socioeconomic mobility, they find their age is an obstacle to finding a husband (Ji, 2015), just like Ying’s helplessness and Yajuan lack of confidence in Desire of the Heart, Weiwei or Na in I Do, and Ruxi in The Last Woman Standing.

Overall, conversations in Desire of the Heart, I Do and The Last Woman Standing present some general issues about single women’s inner ageing issues, the related anxiety or shame concerning being single, and social pressure such as the gendered double standard. The directors use characters’ own experiences (Desire of the Heart and The Last Woman Standing) and others’ words (I Do) to express how ageing affects single women’s lives and relationships at different ages and/or situations. Ying is constructed as a traditional girl feeling embarrassed and speechless when others realise her age and her single status, whereas Yajuan is constructed as a powerful and confident woman, except in her relationship with Su as when facing their relationship, she is still apologetic about their age gap. Weiwei and Ruxi are constructed as charming professional women, although they are still afraid to be an ‘old maid’ or to have no chance of meeting the perfect spouse. Yoshida (2017: 40) argues that opportunities for romantic encounters are severely limited and meeting a suitable
partner at the right time is a challenge for many people. At the same time, shame and anger about being single not only exist in the film, but reflect some single women’s family conflicts in the real world, according to reviewers of the film.

Some reviewers’ discussions about Yajuan’s life and relationships in *Desire of the Heart* use the phrase ‘age norms’ not ‘ageing anxiety’. Although some of the audience point out that Yajuan’s story is a fairy tale according to Chinese traditional ‘age norms’ concerning women around 50, other reviewers suggest that Yajuan can be a role model for other women, as her story communicates that age should never be an obstacle to love. Reviewers of *I Do* agree that ageing issues are significant elements when considering marriage. In fact some reviewers argue that women’s confidence and independence can also be part of their attractiveness over the age of 30. In contrast, there are some different voices about ageing in reviews of *The Last Woman Standing*. Some agree with the women’s and their parents’ concerns about ageing issues, while others are proud of their identity (as will be discussed in a latter section). The different readings of film representations above describe how film plays a social role in understanding single women and love. Following this discussion about women’s anxiety or the shame of being single, I explore why being single or marrying late is so common in contemporary China, because if women feel anxious to be single why do they not get married at a younger age? In Section 2, I explain this by examining two factors: education and work.

### 2. Education, work and love

Historically, people got married, usually through arranged marriages, at a very young age in pre-modern China (Xu and Whyte, 1990); however, the age of entering a first marriage for men and women has increased over the last few decades (more detail in Chapter 2). According to census data on unmarried rates among different age groups, researchers find that the late marriage rate among both men and women has increased significantly over the past 30 years (Xu et al., 2017). For example, the rate of getting married between 20–24 years old decreased from 47% to 26.3% between 2005 and 2015. These statistics reflect a late marriage trend. Considering this marrying-late
trend and my three sample films, I find that educational attainment and work are two primary attributes for women that impact marriage prospects, and the films and their reviews address both issues.

2.1 Education and love

Education is a crucial factor when talking about marriage (Ji and Yeung, 2014). In The Last Woman Standing the audience is not told how long Ruxi spent at university. And in I Do, the only message the audience is given about Weiwei’s education is that Yang was her boyfriend at college. Here filmmakers take the fact that the main figures have a high educational attainment for granted; going to college is understood to be a necessity before entering the job market, especially well-paid jobs with a prosperous future. Under the Chinese education system, students normally graduate from university at around 23 years old with a bachelor’s degree. They need another two or three years to finish a master’s degree. So, graduates are normally at least 25 when obtaining a master’s degree.

I find that some reviewers of I Do make a clear association between the length of time spent in education to the likelihood of singlehood in one’s 20s, and connect their own experiences with Weiwei’s. For example, Yuan writes that,

We are expected to be good students and focus on study in university. My parents did not let me have a boyfriend when I was in university, even during my master’s. After the master’s, I’m around 30, similar with Weiwei, who is with a good educational background but still single. (Yuan, 2015)

Another reviewer Peng comments,

Weiwei is a reflection of me after 25 years old. I studied hard to get good education results, to find a great job to realise my dream. I did not have any boyfriend before. Although I had some chances to have
one in university, I chose to be single to concentrate on my studies.
(Peng, 2012)

Yuan and Peng mention a particular age (‘around 30’ or ‘after 25’) that makes readers aware of the connection between education, ageing and singlehood. Also, they highlight that they ‘did not have a boyfriend’ due to parental or personal reasons during their early 20s. Peng also explains that her concentration on education is related with ‘a great job’. Both of them combine their own experiences with Weiwei’s in *I Do*, making their words more reliable and convincing to others. In other words, they also identify with Weiwei’s characterisation, indicating that the film’s audience is convinced that her portrayal is realistic. From a sociocultural perspective, educational constraints to love are involuntary and voluntary to some extent. Education allows less time for relationships (that might lead to marriage) in an involuntary way, such as in Peng’s example. At the same time, reviewers’ experiences support that people’s voluntary decision to postpone marriage decisions relates to their increasing educational attainment (Guo et al., 2015; McClendon et al., 2014).

Overall, existing research alongside audience reviews support the argument that women’s education level results in a postponement of marriage in their early 20s. Paradoxically, school/university enrolment delays entering marriage, yet educational achievement is regarded as a prerequisite for marriage in Asian societies (Raymo, 2003; Yang and Yen, 2014). Meanwhile, the effect of education on marriage is gendered. Education for women makes them less marriageable because of male preference for a less educated wife. Men’s ‘marry down’ preferences and women’s ‘marry up’ preferences also lead to late marriage. With women’s educational levels increasing, it has become inevitable for well-educated women and less-educated men to face the marriage issue (Jones, 2005; Yang and Yen, 2014). Although educational attainment delays an individual’s marriage in their early 20s, it also provides some other benefits to women. For instance, women with better educational backgrounds have a better capability of earning and cultural attractiveness which are also major components of a person’s attractiveness in a marriage (see Chapter 2). Notwithstanding, while education postpones an individual’s marriage and, thus, influences marriage timing to some extent, overall an educated individual’s chances
of marriage exceed those of the less educated over their life course both in China and the United States (Ji and Yeung, 2014; McClendon et al., 2014).

2.2 Work and love

Educational attainment is not simply a factor in the postponement of marriage, it influences individuals’ likelihood of obtaining better-paid jobs. On the one hand, sociologists argue that economic factors are positively associated with marriage for men and women (McClendon et al., 2014). On the other hand, because of much time or energy spent on their career, some women may leave no space in their free time for dating or developing a romantic relationship. Simultaneously, work itself is an opportunity for romance, such as for Weiwei in I Do and Ruxi in The Last Woman Standing.

Weiwei is constructed as a professional woman who has no time or energy to find a boyfriend since her last break-up seven years ago. The film uses Weiwei’s own words to express her job and relationships. For example, at the beginning of the film, Weiwei is on a blind date with Nianhua and says, ‘Hardworking. [I would like to] Get a higher position and salary … The men I met had bad qualities.’ This conversation is between Weiwei and Nianhua at a café. The director uses restricted spatiality and close-up shooting, which provides their conversation with a quiet and private environment, and casual clothing (compared with suits and workwear); this positioning provides a relaxing and close space for their conversation and gives the audience the impression that they will say something “true”. In the scene below in Figure 5.5, Weiwei leans in and looks at Nianhua as Nianhua leans back in a relaxed way and laughs. Weiwei’s words above are the answer to Nianhua’s question about why she is single after her last relationship. From a textual analysis dimension, the use of a declarative sentence makes her words reliable and shows she is not joking. Weiwei puts ‘work’ before the men she met when explaining her singlehood. Her two reasons for being single are disconnected per se, but imply the close connection between work and Weiwei’s love life.
From a discourse analysis dimension, their conversation happens on a first date. Their dating pattern is matchmaking/blind date via a dating website. They know some basic information about one another in advance, so they need to ask for some more details. That is why Nianhua asks about Weiwei’s previous romantic relationship experiences. From a social practice level, her words show several assumed characteristics about ‘leftover’ women: their work is important to them, and some choose to focus on hard work and getting a better position after a break-up, rather than stepping into another relationship; thus, by placing more and more energy into their work, they have no time for finding a new boyfriend.

In an office scene, Weiwei updates a post on her personal Sina Weibo profile (a popular Chinese social network website). Here the film uses Weiwei’s own words to mention her job and lack of free time while she is working overtime.

Do you know why others call us ‘leftover’ women? Because we have nowhere to go after work, then we are left in our office.

Weiwei does not say she has been working all day or focusing on a project; however, her post shows that she has nothing to do but work. As for textual analysis, this is the only time when the term ‘leftover women’ appears in the film. It is used by Weiwei in a joking way, because the film shows her in a peaceful mood, not an anxious one, and Weiwei tells us that the term comes from other people not herself: ‘others call us leftover women’. On the discourse level, she has not started a romantic relationship
with Nianhua at this time, but they have become closer after several encounters and meetings. Weiwei gives Nianhua a three month ‘probation’ before they enter a ‘real relationship’, which gives the audience the impression that Weiwei has the agency in her relationship as she is setting her boundaries and asserting herself. On the sociocultural level, first, Weiwei’s words represent that single women over 30 experience social pressure. Even though they want to be ‘cool’ and do not want to recognise they are ‘leftover’. For example, Weiwei treats the term ‘leftover’ like a funny thing; they know they are called ‘leftover’ women by others. Second, some single women prefer to contribute more time to work if they do not meet a nice guy, rather than try to meet new friends after work. In which case, their career focus indirectly delays their marriage because if they choose to devote more time and energy towards work, they have less time for dating.

There are also some similar statements from audience reviews on Douban Movie. Ju claims that,

We choose to realise our dream and aims in our career first when finishing education. We are ‘leftover’ because we spend less time and energy in love. Moreover, that is why we become a single woman with a high-paid job but remain single. (Ju, 2012)

Ju shares her own experiences of being a ‘leftover’ woman facing a job or marriage dilemma. She compares single women’s good performance at work with their single identity. These real stories help the audience to know more about the stigma of ‘leftover’ women. From Ju’s example, it is evident that people think spending most of their time on paid work reduces single women’s chances of finding a partner and delays their marriage.

In The Last Woman Standing, Ruxi is constructed as a professional woman, the Marketing Director of the company. The film uses several lonely Valentine’s Day experiences for Ruxi (2008, 2011, 2013, 2015) at the beginning, to generate the impression that work occupies her free time even when she was in a relationship. Ruxi

33 There is no exact date for when the Western tradition of Valentine’s Day became popular in China, but it is popular among the Chinese population in the 21st century.
spent most Valentine’s nights at the company in those four years.

On Valentine’s Day in 2015 she attends a wedding with her mother, then drives back to the company to deal with work stuff alone.

Figure 5.6 [Screenshot] Ruxi doing some printing work in her office on Valentine’s Day in 2015, The Last Woman Standing (00:03:34).

The camera shows a close-up shot of Ruxi’s face, as the audience hears only the sound of her flicking through work files. The dark light around Ruxi implies that it is not a usual working time and she is the only one at the company. The silent atmosphere and dark light enhance her loneliness on Valentine’s Day. Moreover, Ruxi’s choice to work suggests that she has no partner or any potential date choices. Work is an important component of her singlehood.

Figure 5.7 [Screenshot] Ruxi working on Valentine’s Day in 2008, The Last Woman Standing (00:03:47).
Then the film rewinds to Ruxi’s Valentine’s Day in 2008 when Ruxi is in a relationship. There is a short conversation between Ruxi and her boyfriend over the phone to discuss their date, because Ruxi is still working. She tells her boyfriend, ‘I will finish soon…’. The film only represents Ruxi, she is alone in the scene. It looks like a kitchen scene in her apartment, but she is in the kitchen at work. From Ruxi’s words and her interaction with her boyfriend, Ruxi is presented as choosing to contribute personal time to her job even though she is in a relationship. It also may suggest to viewers the tension between Ruxi’s professional success and her love relationships. Yan (2010) argues that under the impact of individualism Chinese youth seek for self-development, similar to Ruxi’s attention on her paid work; while it may take over her social life and limit her dating activities.

Later in 2011, Ruxi is single and busy working on Valentine’s Day, calling a client from a meeting room.

Ruxi: Hello, Sa Jie! I’m Ruxi Sheng. Can you give me half an hour more, please? I will send you a new document.

For the 2011 Valentine’s Day, there is no representation of Ruxi’s relationship, only her endless work alone. Her conversation with a client indicates that neither have any social arrangements planned.
The last Valentine’s Day’s shot is in 2013. Ruxi is still in the company at work and receiving a call from a dating company to ask if she has found a partner, but she impatiently hangs up the phone.

Dating company: Here is the matchmaker net customer service hotline. We found you haven’t logged in for more than half a year. May I ask if you have…

[Ruxi hangs up the phone] So annoying!

Figure 5.9 [Screenshot] Ruxi's lonely Valentine's Day in 2013, The Last Woman Standing (00:04:20).

The sterile, empty background implies that Ruxi is alone again at the company on Valentine’s Day, without any date. The short call from a matchmaker company conveys several pieces of information: first, Ruxi registered with a matchmaker company before, seeking to meet some potential partners; second, Ruxi has not logged into the website for more than half a year. There could be a number of different explanations for this: Ruxi has found a partner and does not need the matchmaker service; or Ruxi found the service was not helpful, or she does not like this supermarket-dating strategy; also, she might not have time to pursue matches. Finally, Ruxi’s impatient face, her words (‘so annoying’), and her office Valentine’s Day, indicate that the matchmaker service did not work well: Ruxi is single and she chooses to contribute her free time to work, not the matchmaker service.

It is more than apparent from Ruxi’s four Valentine’s Days that work is an important component of her life, and she contributes lots of free time to her work. According to
Luo and Zhou’s (2019) research, overtime is common in Chinese professional working culture. They state that the Chinese average working hours are 8.66 per day that is 0.66 hours over the legal working time; 47.3% of people work over 8 hours a day and 30.3% of people work over 10 hours a day. Generally, women’s job or employment opportunities affect their marriage (Yang and Yen, 2014), such as Ruxi who has chosen her job over developing relationships on Valentine’s Day since 2011. From Ruxi’s monologue at the beginning, the audience understand that she is not rejecting all thoughts of dating. It is difficult to summarise whether Ruxi’s endless work causes her single status or whether because she is single Ruxi devotes herself to work even on Valentine’s Day.

Based on the examples above, education and work seem to contribute to women’s marrying-late phenomenon. On the one hand, women prefer better and higher educational achievements to obtain a job with good prospects and, thus, work hard to achieve promotions; on the other hand, education and work occupy their spare time and might limit their chances to find romance. Nevertheless, workplaces or working events are another source of romance in recent Chinese romcoms (see Chapter 4), such as I Do and The Last Woman Standing. It is true that Weiwei and Ruxi spend lots of time at work, but they meet their ideal partner at the workplace as well. After Weiwei’s café date with Nianhua, they encounter one another at a conference, leading to further developments. Ruxi meets Sai at the company, because he is the new assistant of Lan, Ruxi’s boss.

Overall, I argue that single women over 30 are not ‘leftover’ women as such, with the connotation of not having been chosen, empty, or worthless, but very busy investing in their education and professional lives. Moreover, their working experiences may also bring romance to their daily lives. In that sense, being single is not always a bitter experience but relates to achievement. In the final section of this chapter, I discuss the more joyful aspects in a single women’s life.
3. Being single: Pride and joy

Single women express that they feel anxious in films and reviews, while they also enjoy their single lives and feel proud of being independent women. The earlier films, *Desire of the Heart* and *I Do*, represent this pride and joy less, but *The Last Woman Standing* has a small section representing single women’s joys and celebrations with successful work and good friends.

3.1 Single women’s joys in *The Last Woman Standing*

In the film, Ruxi breaks up with Sai because of his hesitation about marriage, but she reaches a compromise with her parents, who decide to support her no matter what she chooses (see Chapter 7). One year later, near the end of the film, there is a scene with Ruxi and her friend Yu in a café talking about new guys in their lives.

![Figure 5.10](Screenshot) Ruxi is showing handsome young men's pictures to Yu, *The Last Woman Standing* (01:28:43).

When Yu says she has not met any new men, Ruxi shares some young men’s photos she has in her phone. After that they talk about these new guys together. The film does not show their whole conversation, but lots of laughter. Moreover, their happy faces indicate that they enjoy their current singlehood. This scene happens at the very end of the film and lasts only 3 minutes. However, it presents a message that single women are enjoying their singlehood and have many joys in their lives, and friends’ companionship is a component in their social lives (see Chapter 7). They are not ‘leftover’ by men, on the contrary, single women have much freedom to find a partner and perhaps even play the field, such as Ruxi and Yu who prefer a younger boyfriend.
Anxious emotions may enter their minds sometimes, but not always. The film ends with Ruxi and Sai’s kiss but no more information. We do not know if it is a reunion kiss or another goodbye kiss. It is an unusual ending for a romcom, but alternative endings are a feature of the Chinese ‘leftover’ women romcom genre that I summarised in Chapter 4. Based on the ending of Ruxi’s love story, the film constructs a new ideal Chinese woman, wealthy, independent, well-educated with much autonomy, leading an individualised life.

When I read the reviews, I find some support for this viewpoint. First, many reviewers mention that as ‘leftover’ women, they enjoy life and are proud of being an independent and well-educated woman. For example,

I’m proud of being an independent woman! As for love, if I cannot find someone I really love, just let it go. (Lisa, 2016)

I’m economically independent and have the capability to live a good life. If I don’t love that guy, I won’t marry him! (Quinn, 2017)

The reviewers above prefer to use exclamatory sentences to express their opinion that they are proud of their independent single life, and emphasise that ‘love’ should be the most important part in any marriage. These women are seeking more autonomy and put themselves first when considering love, not familial or social impact. Additionally, being single is presented as a positive choice, even if they see it as a temporary one. They are eager for love and never claim that they reject marriage, but they do not want to marry just for the sake of it. For example,

Age should not be the reason for marriage, while the only motivation to get married is love. (Nida, 2016)

Nida’s words contrast with ageing worries or realism in love. She mentions age at first here but uses a negatively formed sentence to enhance her idea that love should come first and be the ‘only motivation’ when considering marriage. On the discourse level,
Nida refers to her anxieties about ageing from the early part of her review, however, she agrees with Ruxi and recognises that ageing should not be the sole reason for marriage. On the sociocultural level, Nida’s idea presents the single women’s quest for marriage; her ideas also show a shifting of emotions about being single: from anxiety to enjoyment.

**Discussion and conclusions**

Single women’s anxious but joyful emotions concerning their singlehood are represented in different ways in Desire of the Heart, I Do and The Last Woman Standing. Ageing issues and anxiety are the obvious topics in films that widely exist among single women of different ages. Regarding personal issues, women are worried that their charm and attractiveness will decrease with increasing age, such as Ruxi, Weiwei, and Ying. Some women are afraid to be too old to be loved or picked in the marriage market, such as Yajuan. Meanwhile, familial pressure and the social gender double age standard intensifies women’s worries. Anxieties about women’s ageing are a central theme of the films, alongside self-shame and family shame about not being married. This is explained in relation to men’s ‘marrying down’ norms (marrying younger women with less education) and the imperative of marriage as a “good” daughter, as not marrying brings personal and family shame.

In terms of gendered norms, the idea that young women are more likely to get to choose their husband while older women must settle for whomever they can get, or remain unmarried, also circulates. However, there are also direct representations of ruptures to these norms. For instance, examples of older woman-younger man couples assert that an age gap is not a problem and refuse the norm that older women are not attractive to men. In the films, ‘leftover’ women assert that they can choose and do not have to settle; indeed, their financial autonomy and independence enables a greater choice of marriage partner.

Moreover, anxiety or shame is not the only theme of ‘leftover’ women’s lives; there are also celebrations of ‘leftover’ women’s pleasure and joys shown in the films, belying the idea that ‘leftover’ women are to be pitied as helpless victims of the
marriage market. Being single, professional and independent also bring much delight and some romantic chances into their daily lives.

Both films and reviews (UGC) convey that heterosexual monogamy and marriage are still social norms in China. ‘Leftover’ women are presented as marrying late but not rejecting marriage. Education, career and love can work in two opposing ways in terms of explaining ‘leftover’ women’s marrying-late situation. On the one hand these factors can be framed as limiters that hold women back from opportunities of love and marriage. Gigy (1980) points out that education impacts an individual’s marriage timing; and Yoshida (2017) argues that work limits the chance of romance for men and women. Many women choose to put their self-development and career first at a younger age, leaving little time or energy for developing a romantic relationship. Additionally, men’s preference to focus on career development before marriage is another cause for women marrying late. On the other hand, these factors can be framed as enablers that provide women with the financial autonomy and independence to make positive choices about their love and marriage. Overall, women’s single status, education and occupation contribute to their personal growth (Gigy, 1980). Better education will increase a person’s attractiveness on the dating market, and the rate of marriage is higher among college-educated graduates than less-educated individuals (Ji and Yeung, 2014; McClendon et al., 2014). I argue that work also presents new chances for love, such as for Weiwei and Ruxi. With more focus on work, single professional women have opportunities to encounter an ideal partner in the workplace or at events.

As Kitzinger et al. (1998) highlight, media play a central role in the process of reproduction and transformation of the ideologies and beliefs of contemporary society. Media can provide representations, introduce new information, shape audience’s ideologies and thinking. Thus, audience’s readings or consumption of media products will lead to transformation in society, to some extent. In terms of films and reviews (UGC), these contribute towards changing an audience’s understanding of love and marriage culture through presenting ‘leftover’ women’s stories and reviewers’ comments. Professional single women are embracing ‘work and love’ ideas recently; at the same time, enjoying singlehood is another shift of Chinese culture occurring due to the presence of ‘leftover’ women. While, anxious moments cannot be removed from
‘leftover’ women’s minds, a new ideal single woman is being constructed through Chinese media: a wealthy, professional, independent, well-educated woman with much autonomy and an individualised life. Alongside changes in the media constructions of Chinese single women, women’s expectations for a partner are shifting as well. In the next chapter, I will discuss Chinese single women’s various choices in love and marriage.
Chapter 6 The architecture of ‘leftover’ women’s choices in love

Introduction

Finding a suitable partner and getting married are two significant themes in media representations of ‘leftover’ women in China. Aside from people’s own experiences with dating and marriage, people are bombarded by representations in the Chinese media depicting ideals of ‘romance’, ‘dating’, ‘the perfect partner’ and ‘marriage’. Yet in Chinese traditional values, marriage is more a familial affair than a celebration of two individuals’ love (Yan, 2014). Arranged marriages and parental intervention have a long history in pre-modern China, so that marriage is more like a responsibility to improve the family’s social status or to have offspring than a personal choice (Xu et al., 2014; Yan, 2014). Whilst free choice marriages and wives’ rights have been protected under Marriage Law since 1950, older traditions retain some cultural weight. However, under the influence of modernity and individualisation (see Chapter 2), individuals’ dating patterns and partner selection preferences are changing. The idea of romantic love is a means to single out one individual among other possibilities and to constitute one’s individuality in the romantic choice, but it is also a social ritual where to ‘love someone is to be confronted with questions of choice: is s/he the right one?’ (Illeouz, 2012: 18–9). Illeouz (2012) argues that analysing choice is ‘the most fruitful way’ to understand and illustrate the transformation of love in modernity. Women’s varying expectations of an ideal partner and dating practices are represented widely in my three selected films and their reviews. The architecture of ‘leftover’ women’s choices in love, dating and marriage are shown to be an elaborate process comprised of internal decisions and cultural norms—as ideas and practices are shaped by modernity and tradition.

This chapter analyses ‘leftover’ women’s expectations and practices in love as represented by three films and their related reviews. Illeouz (2012) proposes that the routes of making romantic choices follow specific cultural pathways. Several cultural components of Illeouz’s (2012: 20) ‘architecture of romantic choice’ are represented to be salient in ‘leftover’ women’s choices in love, such as the remote consequences of
one’s decisions; cultural norms and techniques; the process of consultation and so on. I start by analysing romantic choice associated with the remote consequences of one’s decision (e.g. economic factors, future companionship, children, family backgrounds, etc.). I argue that ‘leftover’ women are represented as attaching great importance to a potential spouse’s social attributes rather than passion or romance. In the following section, I illustrate that cultural norms are likely to shape the course and outcome of decisions in love, and that while some flexibility is represented in the films, there are limits to the extent that cultural norms are shifting. Thus an older woman-younger man relationship is represented as invoking women’s insecurities, and premarital cohabitation continues to be rejected by some characters. In the final section, I discuss the process of consultation (e.g. seeking dating advice from family, friends or a matchmaker) which formalises ‘leftover’ women’s love decisions, using various blind dates as examples. Overall, I propose that the individualisation and complexification of “searching for love” demonstrates how far marriage culture, dating practices and gender relations have transformed from a traditional pattern to one with more possibilities—which is also more individualised—in modern China.

1. The remote consequences of one’s decisions

The remote consequences of the decisions taken towards love are represented as significant factors in ‘leftover’ women’s love and marriage choices. When considering future plans for intimacy, several factors are considered important in the films and reviews, such as economic status, companionship, children and family backgrounds.

1.1 Economic status

When considering an ideal partner, the man’s economic status and earning power are mentioned by lots of single women in my research samples, demonstrating that such materialism is part of current dating culture in China. Desire of the Heart, I Do and several reviews include representations of women’s expectations of their future partners’ economic power. In Desire of the Heart, Xiaomei’s and Cong Lin’s romantic stories offer two contrasting examples about the importance of a man’s wealth. Xiaomei informs the audience of her dating “rules” at the start of the film: ‘I would
only find a rich boyfriend’. Then later in the film, when Xinzi (Xiaomei’s friend) suggests a blind date to her, they have a conversation about who is the perfect “Mr Charming”.

Xinzi: What does it mean to be a rich guy?
Xiaomei: Three yeses and one no. Have money, car and house, but no wife. Also, he would tell me to buy whatever I want and not mind about money. [Xiaomei leaves, smiling. Xinzi shows an impatient face at her words.]

On the textual level, Xiaomei makes her intentions clear to the audience from the beginning of the film: ‘three yes and one no’. She uses several short terms like making a task list when finding a boyfriend, which gives the audience the impression that finding a man with a good economic status is a vital principle for Xiaomei. Her smile implies she is satisfied with her created dating rules. Moreover, Xiaomei answers Xinzi’s question smoothly and rapidly, suggesting these dating rules are rooted in her mind. On the discourse level, in this scene Xiaomei rejects a date introduced by Xinzi because the man was not wealthy, and then explains her opinions to Xinzi without any hesitation. On a sociocultural level, Xiaomei’s words reflect that a man’s economic power is a significant element for her when considering starting a relationship. Xiaomei’s example may reflect the impact of rising consumerism, living expenses and housing prices on the daily lives of ordinary Chinese people, as well as the cultural expectation that the husband will be the primary economic provider to meet these expenses.

Cong Lin is a friend of Xiaomei who takes the opposite attitude concerning her future partner’s economic power; the only thing she is seeking is ‘the right feeling and romance’. However, in my opinion, Cong Lin’s attitude is relevant to her socioeconomic background. As the only one to inherit her father’s estate, Cong is wealthy and has no material worries in her life. The character’s setting is worth discussing because it implies that pure romance comes to you only if you are wealthy, so that romantic love seems like a rich person’s game. In this sense, Cong’s story
proves that economic elements remain essential for the majority of women choosing a partner.

There are many discussions about Xiaomei’s dating principles in reviews on Douban Movie. Although some reviewers criticise Xiaomei as a ‘money-minded’ woman or a ‘gold digger’ in love (Angle, 2009; Ewe, 2008; Tree, 2008; Yoyo, 2009), a few reviews support Xiaomei’s dating preferences. For example, Aini (2015) states that Xiaomei’s choice is practical:

Xiaomei’s salary is 6000 Chinese Yuan (around 600 pounds) per month to cover the necessities of daily life. Moreover, she needs to send some money back to support her family in the hometown. It means that her family cannot provide any financial support to her, and she has to fight everything by herself, not like Cong with a sizable legacy. When Xiaomei thinks about the money for the car, housing, her future kids, her parents and her necessities, Xiaomei feels stressed to provide those things all by herself. Therefore, she loves money. She believes that she can have a rest when she finds a rich husband.

Aini’s words maintain that Xiaomei’s money-minded choice should not be criticised because she was born into a low-income family and she hopes to marry a wealthy man, and consequently improve her livelihood. On the textual level, Aini explains Xiaomei’s situation from her standpoint, not like a criticising outsider. For example, Aini uses figures and examples to explain Xiaomei’s stress and insecurity. She also contrasts Xiaomei and Cong to explain their different attitudes to money and love: a wealthy girl seeking pure romance with no economic worries and an ordinary girl bearing life’s economic stresses, even in her dating choices. On the discourse level, Aini’s words link Xiaomei with real women in cities and also explains the practicalities of Xiaomei’s romantic choice. On the sociocultural level, Aini’s ideas legitimate Xiaomei’s aspiration to marry a rich guy. Aini points out that Xiaomei is different from some real ‘gold diggers’ in love who look for a ‘sugar daddy’ because Xiaomei is also a hard-working girl with a well-paid job. Most single women in urban
cities are not born with a silver spoon; therefore, they expect potential partners to have a better economic status to be able to offer them a better life as well as love. Compared with earlier critical reviews of Xiaomei’s motives and behaviours, Aini’s review is a recent one (2015) posted seven years after the film was released (2008). It conveys a message that economic factors in dating are still popular and preferable for a male partner in contemporary China.

In *I Do*, Weiwei and her colleague Lisa have a conversation about Lisa’s relationship with an older but wealthy man with high social status. The film uses Lisa and Weiwei as examples to present women’s varying ideas about love and money. Weiwei encounters Lisa and an older man being intimate at the entrance of the company. The conversation starts as follows:

Weiwei: Who is that guy?

Lisa: [smiles] He has a project which will invite bids next month.

Weiwei: You sacrifice yourself so much to the job!

Lisa: [keeps smiling] You call that a sacrifice? Killed two birds with one stone!

[They walk into a crowded lift.]

…

Weiwei: [laughs] I cannot stand you. I am telling you, you and him. It is definitely no future!

Lisa: Who wants future with him? His future is an old and bad man. I need him now: money, strong power of networking and sex. I can make love with him as much as I like. Don’t need to make funeral arrangement for him. How wonderful!

Weiwei: [in a lower voice] Lower your voice!

Lisa: Am I wrong?

[People in the lift chuckle.]
The analysis separates their conversation into two parts, one before entering the lift (only two of them), the other in the lift (surrounded by their colleagues). Lisa is a young single woman in her 20s, a newbie in the company. She is constructed as a woman who uses her relationship with an older man as a method to get promoted or gain profits. Weiwei thinks Lisa is “sacrificing” her emotions, implying that Weiwei thinks starting a relationship for material benefits is a shame. However, Lisa answers Weiwei with a rhetorical sentence and a proverb ‘kill two birds with one stone’, which means that Lisa receives benefits in terms of her job and the relationship. On the discourse analysis dimension, the first part of the conversation happens at the entrance of their company where Weiwei observes Lisa and the older man having a goodbye kiss. Their discussion of relationships happens directly after that scene. It is also near the start of the film, to illustrate different single women’s dating preferences. Finally, according to the sociocultural dimension, this conversation is comprised of Lisa and Weiwei’s different values. It is evident that Lisa is either less conservative or more naïve than Weiwei, the film leaves the audience to judge which one. Lisa thinks she is young, and her beauty and attraction can be used as capital to win everything she wants, while Weiwei suggests that any relationship should be based on love, not utility. The character of Lisa reflects some young women in the Chinese workplace who use their youth, beauty or relationships to gain benefits. In their eyes, a relationship can be based on love or money or resources. Comparable to Lisa, her lover is more experienced in business and holds in his power her access to a new project, so Lisa seeks to use their intimacy to attain the project.
The next part of their conversation happens when they enter a lift full of other colleagues. In the scene, Weiwei speaks to Lisa in a lower voice, while Lisa speaks as usual, even when talking about sex and intimacy. Lisa’s actions hint at her naivety about what is appropriate behaviour in the workplace. Additionally, the dialogue shows Lisa’s attitude towards her future complicated relationship with men. On the textual level, Weiwei links the current relationship with ‘future’ and commitment, using several short but negative sentences in a persuading tone to show her disagreement with Lisa’s attitude. Lisa uses another rhetorical sentence to answer Weiwei, mentioning material and sexual benefits from the relationship with her older man. Finally, she ends with an exclamatory sentence that implies her satisfaction with her current relationship. The facial expression of others in the lift is also an interesting element. Their colleagues smile quietly when Lisa talks about her relationship and sex. Most of them are men; some sardonic facial expressions hinting that they treat Lisa’s words as jokes and some of them are amused. The only other woman is looking at her cell phone and smiling as well.

On the discourse level, their conversation happens at the workplace, surrounded by colleagues. In Lisa’s world, the significant factor of a relationship is the benefit she obtains from it. Those benefits can be money, enlarging social networks, or sexual satisfaction. Lisa is not concerned about commitment or the future. However, Weiwei holds a contrasting opinion which emerges through her words to Lisa. Weiwei mentions ‘future’, which informs the audience that Weiwei treats a relationship as a lifelong plan. She will think about the prospect of a relationship when dating, while a relationship aiming at material benefits seem inconsequential, distasteful even.

On the sociocultural level, several messages about money and love are presented through this scene. First, economic and non-economic benefits are always involved in a romantic relationship. Although Weiwei is constructed as a single woman seeking pure love, her rejection of a poor and infamous director, Jun Liu, in the earlier part of the film shows Weiwei’s consideration of men’s economic statuses. Her ideal partner does not have to be a financial giant; however, not a poor guy either. Second, even though the default condition of a relationship is love, relationships are complicated in contemporary society. Single women from different age groups may have various perspectives on dating and relationships. For example, the younger generation may be
less conservative than the older. Third, women from different age groups may also have similar attitudes to relationships in China. Hsu claims that a person’s emotions usually form a network with others in Chinese cultural tradition. Therefore, when talking about relationships, individuals’ emotions are weakened to some extent (Hsu, 1981; Karandashev, 2017). For instance, money or benefits are other components in the relationship, alongside emotional intimacy. Finally, the reactions of Weiwei’s colleagues (mainly men) to the conversation illustrate the “hidden curriculum” of the film, whereby the audience can learn about changing ways of doing gender through film representations, such as men can be listeners and learn intimacy during a close conversation between women and men’s interest in how women think about them. Thus, the gender relations presented in this scene concur with the central theme of a romcom: the relations between men and women.

On Douban Movie, several reviewers write that people talk about a person’s material conditions or estate instead of an emotional connection when looking for a partner. For example, Littlesheep (2012) writes,

> After watching the film, I got the point that marriage is for two suitable persons to live together. Additionally, the material basis is essential in love. Otherwise, why did the director make Nianhua a wealthy boss, not a normal working-class man?

Littlesheep writes his/her opinions about the representation of a good marriage in the film I Do. On the textual level, Littlesheep uses ‘suitable’ to describe the reason for marriage, not romantic or emotional intimacy. Then she/he uses Nianhua’s case as an example to prove the idea: love needs a material base. On the discourse level, Littlesheep mentions his/her opinion about marriage at the start in the whole review: love is the foundation of marriage. Yet based on the film, he/she clarifies that love needs a sound economic base. On the sociocultural level, Littlesheep’s shifting idea suggests how a romcom might impact the audience’s opinion about relationships. An ideal marriage without any consideration of the partner’s economic status is rare both in the media and real life due to potential future economic consequences.
1.2 Companionship

A sound economic base is not the only aspect to consider relating to the remote consequences of a romantic choice. Companionship is not mentioned much in the three films and reviews when detailing women’s expectations of a partner, yet I think it is a significant factor when ‘leftover’ women are making choices in love. Most protagonists in the selected films are younger therefore companionship may not be their first consideration. However, with increasing age, the capability of providing care and companionship becomes more and more significant, which is referenced through Yajuan and Su in *Desire of the Heart*. Su takes good care of Yajuan when she is sick, and Yajuan is touched; he also reverses traditional care work in a family through his actions. Afterwards, even though she is told Su is a liar, Yajuan still chooses to believe in and support him. When other women, who claim Su has cheated with them, tell her that Su will not treat her as a true lover, Yajuan tells them,

I believe him, and he will not love any of you. Because we are friends, sister and brother, family... No one can destroy this.

Yajuan’s words are short but show her belief in him. On the textual level, Yajuan defines her relationship with Su, using the word ‘family’ rather than boyfriend to show their kinship. Then she uses a negative sentence to strengthen her attitude: ‘No one can destroy this’. On the discourse level, her words are in response to other women who ask her if she believes in Su. Her words reflect that Yajuan feels that Su treats her sincerely even though he is a liar. Moreover, her confidence and belief also connect with Su’s meticulous care when she was ill. Yajuan defends Su in front of others, and later in the film she decides to leave her legacy to Su. On the sociocultural level, Yajuan and Su’s relationship presents that companionship is more useful than money or romance to some single women when dating. Existing research concludes that even though Chinese people agree that rich emotional lives, romance and feelings are essential in a relationship, they are not the only fundamental factors for social relationships; mate selections often depend on social context, values and expectations (Karandashev, 2017: 250). Yajuan and Su’s story is not a regular romantic or passionate one. However, it displays another type of women’s expectations in a
relationship; in that, Yajuan believes that Su loves her because he provides what she needs the most at that time: his companionship and special care.

Discussions of Yajuan and Su on Douban Movie are focused on women’s insecurity (as explained in Chapter 5) and questions of ‘cheating and honesty’ (which will be analysed in the next section). I only find several sentences mentioning Yajuan’s romantic choice relating to care and companionship. For instance, Yajuan needs care and companionship in love (Ben, 2009; Uncle He, 2008), she falls in love with Su because of his thoughtful care (Fish, 2008) and she seeks emotional intimacy or kinship more than romantic love (Akira, 2008; Cindy, 2011). From these reviewers’ scattered sentences and Yajuan’s story in the film, I propose that the capability of a man to provide future care and companionship impacts women’s love choices. It may not be regarded as so essential for younger women like Ying or Cong or Xiaomei in *Desire of the Heart*; but as women’s age increases companionship is presented as a more important component of a relationship. Of course, young partners can be friends and older ones can have sex; however, with increasing age the capability for companionship becomes more and more significant for a single woman.

### 1.3 Children

As well as company, considerations about children (taking care of existing children or intentions for a future baby) are another element relating to the remote consequences of women’s spouse selecting decisions, shown both in *Desire of the Heart* and *I Do*. Shengying is a divorced woman with a child in *Desire of the Heart*. She hopes to find a man who will treat her child well. When dating Mang, he asks about her further plans:

Mang: What do you think [about starting a relationship]?

Shengying: I would like to get married again, but he has to accept and love my son too. Then it will be possible for us to continue the relationship.
Shengying explains her primary principle about dating and marriage to Mang on their first date: her son. Their dialogue happens in a Chinese hotpot restaurant, building a relaxing atmosphere. The restaurant is a crowded, folksy one, not a fancy high-end restaurant and this hints that Mang’s economic background may be ordinary and he is not a rich guy; so perhaps he chooses the restaurant because he is expected to pay the bill for both of them. On a textual level, Shengying answers Mang’s question to confirm she would like to develop a new relationship towards marriage. Then she uses ‘has to’ to emphasise that loving her son is an unbreakable principle. Moreover, she uses ‘he’ not ‘you’ when answering Mang’s question. Her words show that loving her son is the dating precondition she applies to every potential partner. Additionally, when she talks to Mang about her ideas, Shengying does not look in his eyes directly, indicating her uncertainty about a new relationship. On the discourse level, this conversation happens on their first date. Shengying knows nothing about Mang, but Mang has her profile from the dating agency. Shengying’s insecurity and uneasy feelings before Mang implies their relationship might be a tragedy by the end of the film. On the sociocultural level, her opinions reflect that single mothers generally attach great importance to a man’s concern for her children before entering a new relationship. Additionally, Shengying’s lack of confidence or uncertainty also reflects a feature of her insecurity. Within the Confucian system of cultural norms and values, women are expected to maintain a family’s harmony and coherence (Choy and Moneta, 2002). Divorce is treated shamefully for a woman because it is considered to show her lack of true womanhood (Bond and Kwang-kuo, 1986; Choy and Moneta, 2002; King, 1999).
Na in *I Do* is another example of a woman who cares more about having children than a man’s personality in a marriage. While Shengying prefers a man who cares for her child, Na intends to marry a man to have a baby. Weiwei’s colleague Na marries Jun Liu, a young, unknown and poor director, in the film. Jun attends a blind date with Weiwei at the beginning of the film and Na meets Jun when he tries to chase Weiwei by sending roses to her workplace.

Weiwei: Is he reliable? He seems younger than you.

Na: Weiwei, I understand what you are thinking. When I was your age, I was afraid that the men cheated me. But now, at my age, I mostly am afraid that I am not useful to men. Life has several stages. After 50 years old, will I still need a man? I need a son more.

*Figure 6.3 [Screenshot] Na’s sharing experiences in love with Weiwei before her wedding ceremony, I Do (01:03:57).*

On the textual level, Weiwei uses a question to start her conversation with Na, expressing her worries about the young bridegroom. Na uses a comparison to show how her values about relationships and marriage are changing with time. She was similar to Weiwei in her 30s, but now she is satisfied with settling in a marriage rather than being alone. Na uses the word ‘afraid’ to describe her current status, showing Na’s worries about her attractiveness to men. Finally, she mentions age again. Using a rhetorical sentence predicting her attitude to men after 50, Na considers that she would care for a son more than a husband. Although she does not say she is not young anymore, the audience can realise she is not as young as Weiwei from her words and
her tone. When Na talks to Weiwei, it is hard to see her delightful happiness as a bride through her calm facial expression and the lower tone of her voice.

On the discourse level, this conversation happens before Na’s wedding ceremony. Weiwei meets her in the powder room and Na’s words sound like the “background stories” for her choice of marriage. Na reveals her insecurity about her relationship. Moreover, she does not say if she loves Jun Liu or not, only expresses her desire to be married and have a child. In this scene, marriage is represented as a “tool” rather than an enjoyable thing for Na, to some extent. Weiwei says nothing after Na’s words, implying her acceptance of Na’s opinions. Finally, on the sociocultural level Na’s words reflect that some single women want a husband and marriage because of their wishes to have a child. It is not easy to be a single mother in China; therefore, most women hope that they will marry first, then become a mother.

1.4 Family backgrounds

The last component relating to the future consequences of a woman’s romantic choice is the partner’s family background. *Men dang hu dui* (a compatible family background) is represented as an important element in a marriage. *Men dang hu dui* was a significant criterion of arranged marriages in early China. Literally *men dang hu dui* means that two families should have a compatible decoration of their house gates, which hinted at similar socioeconomic levels in the feudal era (Ji, 2015). Although individuals seek more autonomy in marriage in contemporary China because of the spread of individualisation and de-traditionalization, the notion of *men dang hu dui* and homogenous marriage is still widely accepted (Carter and Duncan, 2018; Mu and Xie, 2014; Qi and Niu, 2012). In Ji’s (2015) research, most of the informants agree that a stable marriage should be built on two compatible families. However, with the influence of transformations of social structure and globalisation, marriages from different families are playing significant roles in Chinese society (Qi and Niu, 2012). In *Desire of the Heart*, Cong Lin and Xiang Guan’s marriage is an example.

Cong and Xiang come from two contrasting families: Cong is a rich, urban, well-educated girl, while Xiang is from a low-income, rural family. Their love story begins
with a ‘meet cute’ scene (see Chapter 4) and they get married at the end of the film. However, the director avoids talking about their families’ attitudes, which makes their story an inverted fairy tale. Cong is presented as a girl whose parents died, leaving her a huge inheritance; however, Xiang is from a low-income family that needs his financial support in a rural hometown. Maybe the director wants to use such a story to give Chinese youth a signal that compatible family background is not the only principle to find a spouse with. Xiang uses various strategies to show his love to Cong, such as considerate behaviour when Cong is unwell and using all his savings to make the down-payment on an apartment.

Reviews on Douban Movie present supportive and critical opinions of their love story, including the discussion about family backgrounds and pure romance in love. For example, some think Cong’s story is the only one based on pure love, romance and passion (Ben, 2009; Jialuo, 2008). However, more reviews mention that Cong and Xiang’s relationship is a fairy tale which is rare in the real world (Angle, 2009; Feng, 2008; Memory, 2008; Tian, 2009; Yoyo, 2009). Additionally, Hua (2008) provides another perspective on Cong’s relationship, linking her lack of expectation about her partner’s family background to her wealth:

What if Cong is not a princess, but another Cinderella? Will it be a happy ending again? Charcoal and gold may create some golden sparkles together, but how about just two charcoals? (Hua, 2008)

Hua uses questions, hypothetical sentences and metaphors in this review. He/she uses ‘princess’ and ‘gold’ to describe Cong, ‘charcoal’ for Xiang and ‘golden sparkles’ for their love. For Hua, the reason for their ‘golden sparkles’ is Cong’s wealth and her ‘princess’ status. On the discourse level, Hua uses the sentences above at the beginning of his/her review, which shows her confusion with Cong and Xiang’s story in the film. Later in the review, Hua expresses direct dissatisfaction with the story, ‘it is the least favorite story in the film’. On the sociocultural level, Hua’s idea conveys two messages: an individual’s family background is still worthy of consideration in dating.

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34 Cong and Xiang’s story is not a traditional Prince Charming and Cinderella one, but that of a wealthy, beautiful woman and an ordinary man.
culture; moreover, the economic status of a person plays a significant role in choosing a partner. Cong has free opportunities to seek pure love because she has no worries about money or life stresses.

Overall, relationships and marriages focusing on *men dang hu dui* and on pure romance both exist in the films; and *men dang hu dui* still maintains a significance in individuals’ marital choices. Even though *Desire of the Heart* presents a pure love story and the idea that love can overcome any differences, most of the reviews mention the economic gap between Cong and Xiang, which makes their relationship a fairy tale because there is no mention of the tricky issue of incompatible family backgrounds.

To summarise, when considering a partner, ‘leftover’ women are represented as women with complicated expectations because of the remote consequences of their love choice. They also pay more attention to social elements over romance or passion. Economic wealth, companionship, concerns about having and raising children and family backgrounds are all shown to be important components of an ideal partner, leading to a happy future. Simultaneously, with the shifting of social structures and globalisation, greater diversity in dating/marriage and some de-traditionalization in partner selection are emerging in China, as discussed in the next section.

### 2. Shifting cultural norms

Cultural norms not only effect individuals’ expectations of an ideal partner but also influence their decisions about love. With the development of individualisation, Chinese youth from the mid-1980s have sought more freedom over their personal matters and less constraints from tradition (Yan, 2010). The three selected films represent several new possibilities for dating and relationships, suggesting more individual freedom or, at least, that cultural norms about appropriate partners and relationships are starting to shift. They also highlight non-traditional gender relations.

At the same time, tensions and problems associated with new relationship possibilities in the films illustrate the current state of flux in intimate relations and gender relations, and uncertainties about the appropriate balance between individual choice and tradition.
2.1 Older woman-younger man relationships

The films present several older woman-younger man couples and their problems or worries around the age gap (fully explored in Chapter 5). Moreover, in all samples, older women are presented as professional women who have a better socio-economic status than younger men. This is the reverse of the traditional patrilineal system, where the husband is at the centre in the conjugal relationship (Hu and Scott, 2016), and such representations are progressive in terms of gender relations. Simultaneously, however, it is the older women who are represented as insecure in an older woman-younger man relationship, even though the younger man is of lower socio-economic status. Older women are represented as feeling untraditional and lacking in confidence when dating a younger man, such as Yajuan or Na (Desire of the Heart) and Ruxi (The Last Woman Standing). Meanwhile, the emotions of the male characters are largely missing; there is no information about whether Su, Jun and Sai feel uncomfortable when dating women of higher socioeconomic status. As I discussed in Chapter 5, women’s anxiety and insecurity are fully presented in the films and reviews, while the men’s feelings are incomplete. This undercuts the progressive elements of these non-traditional relationships and suggests that cultural norms have not fully shifted in their favour.

2.2 Premarital cohabitation?

The cultural norm that opposes sexual intimacy before marriage is also both reinforced and brought into question by the films. In Desire of the Heart, Ying and Da have a quarrel and a temporary break-up because of their disagreement about cohabitation. Many Chinese people hold traditional viewpoints about marriage and cohabitation without which marriage is not fully protected by Chinese law. Although children of an unmarried couple have the same rights as those of married ones, if the unmarried couple have any other issues, their rights cannot be guaranteed (Xu et al., 2017: 151). For example, if one has an affair or an accident, one’s unmarried partner does not have the same rights as a married partner would. Nonetheless, many young people are willing to accept premarital cohabitation, just like Da Zhao in Desire of the Heart. He takes Ying to his apartment and asks her to live with him.
Da: My parents advise we should first live together for some time, then go for marriage later. In order to avoid any conflict during the marriage. Honey, go have a shower and get changed.

[Ying considers Da’s advice for a long time in the bathroom. She even calls her friends for suggestions. Finally, she rejects Da’s idea.]

Ying: For those one-night stand stuff, it is outdated.

Da: Most responsible men, they do not like one-night stands.

Ying: But it does not mean that they will not slip away after that. Why should we be so easy to sleep with each other? It is hard to avoid that [having sex] when living together. I am not ready yet.

This is the couple’s first argument about pre-marital cohabitation. Ying and Da are wearing pyjamas not daily outfits here, implying their intimacy. The light is dim/grey building a sexy and private atmosphere; the low lighting quality in the scene functions to make the two characters visually salient (O’Halloran, 2004). Ying disagrees with Da’s suggestion to live together before marriage. In her words, Ying is rejecting premarital sex rather than premarital cohabitation. As for dialogic organisation, the director uses a turn-taking pattern which makes their conversation tense. Ying uses
double negative terms (‘does not’, ‘will not’) to express her insecurity and worries. She also tries to persuade Da to accept her ideas through a question: ‘Why should we be so easy to sleep with each other?’ At the end, Ying uses another negative sentence to emphasise her decision, no sex and no cohabitation. On the discourse level, this conversation occurs after Ying takes a shower and gets changed. Her behaviour presents her internal uncertainty because it seems as though she will probably agree to live with Da, but then she rejects it.

Da’s and Ying’s dialogue also reflects some sociocultural issues. First, premarital cohabitation has become morally acceptable to some Chinese youth (Yang, 2017). According to Yu & Xie’s (2015b) research, cohabitation has been increasing among Chinese people who were born after 1970. Da is representative of them; he supports living together to know each other better, just like a trial marriage. Second, overseas migration experience has some positive impact on attitudes to cohabitation for both men and women (Yu and Xie, 2015b). In the film, Da returns from overseas with an open mind about love relationships and considers premarital cohabitation as a method to know each other better; however, Ying is a traditional woman who currently lives in her hometown with her parents. Third, Ying’s rejection of and fear about premarital sex may relate to the virginity obsession in Chinese traditional culture. Some people still emphasise women’s virginity as an essential element for marriage selection (Wang and Ho, 2011). Conflicts about sexual intimacy between lovers would be an obstacle on their way to marriage. Breaking up after having sex is perceived as a “loss” for women because premarital sex is related with losing female chastity (Davis and Friedman, 2014; Farrer, 2014; Farrer et al., 2012). Fourth, the contrasting attitudes of Da and Ying link with their family’s influence to a large extent. Da tells Ying that cohabitation before marriage is his parents’ suggestion, and they live overseas. However, when Ying tells her parents about Da’s advice, her parents highly object to premarital cohabitation. Moreover, they think it is irresponsible of Da to suggest it. Family intervention is also a significant characteristic of Chinese marriages (see Chapter 7). Finally, Ying’s hesitation, their conflicts and different attitudes to premarital cohabitation signify the coexistence of tradition and modernity in dating. Although the film is more than 10 years old, this kind of conflict still exists in modern China.
Ying’s traditional family and her choice to reject cohabitation elicit many responses on the Douban Movie website. Ying informs the audience her parents did not let her form a close relationship with men until she had graduated from university, and many reviewers mention that they have similar traditional parents. Lots of dissenting voices from parents are relayed second-hand, few from the reviewers themselves. For example, Kitty (2009) mentions that her mother always emphasises she cannot have any sexual experience before marriage. However, in her mind, Kitty thinks if two individuals both agree, there is no need to forbid premarital sex, just go with the flow. Another reviewer, Crazyguy (2008), writes that he/she and his/her mother support premarital cohabitation, but this is the only example. Both Kitty and Crazyguy use personal examples to support their opinions about premarital cohabitation, which makes their words seem more reliable to the audience. Moreover, Kitty separates parental opinion and her own opinion on sexual intimacy, which implies an intergenerational gap between the younger generation and their old-school parents. This is reinforced by Xiong (2014):

It was impossible to have a premarital cohabitation in earlier years, but current Chinese youth start to accept cohabitation as a necessary step to know the partner before marriage.

Xiong does not use ‘I think’ but says ‘Chinese youth’ here to show a larger acceptance of cohabitation in younger generations. The different opinions of the reviewers highlight some sociocultural points. First, even though young people might accept premarital cohabitation or sex, it is still unacceptable to most of their parents. Second, the acceptance of cohabitation is greater among young Chinese people as time goes by. Nonetheless, based on the film and reviews, attitudes to sexual intimacy before marriage can be obstacles in romantic relationships. For some single women, when they are looking for a partner, traditional cultural norms may create conflicts when dating.

Overall, I argue that the remote consequences of one’s decisions and cultural norms are significant influential components in individuals’ choice in love. Compared with pure romance or passion, individuals place more importance on the sociocultural
aspects of a potential partner, and they still experience some restraints from cultural norms or family traditions when dating in a modern China.

3. The process of consultations in love

Finding a partner through a matchmaker or xiang qin (a blind date) has a long history in China, since feudal times. At that time, the notion of a “perfect match” was mainly associated with an individual’s family background and social status (Qi and Niu, 2012; Wei and Guo, 2017; Yan, 2014). Blind dates were viewed as the start of a relationship and marriage before the popularity of “free love” emerged. After the reform and opening-up policy in 1978, individuals’ lives and values were more influenced by Western culture, individualisation and the process of urbanisation, and there has been an evolution in romantic relationships and marriage (Xu et al., 2017). There has also been a resurgence of the blind date over the last decades, such as the diverse types of blind dates popular among unmarried people both in films and reviews. My thesis argues that the blind date is a good example through which to show the coexistence of pursuing individual choice and following traditions in ‘leftover’ women’s dating practices. Also, the blind date is a kind of social consultation contributing to the architecture of ‘leftover’ women’s choices in love.

In the selected films and many of the reviews, blind dates are commonly represented as a meet up device. While different types of blind dates are shown in Desire of the Heart, I Do and The Last Woman Standing, all the films share a common discourse that blind dates are an efficient practice to meet someone and stop being single. In my following discussion, blind dates are categorised as follows: consultation with parents or friends; paid services such as matchmakers and digital online dating. Additionally, I will discuss the audience’s responses to blind dates in the final part of this section.

3.1 Parental direction and consultation with friends

Blind dates arranged by parents or friends are common and socially acceptable among ‘leftover’ women, if also sometimes unwelcome—both in the media and off-screen
world. It usually occurs within one’s own group which is horizontal. In *The Last Woman Standing*, Ruxi’s parents arrange a blind date without informing her until the last minute, the only date arranged by parents in the three selected films. Doctor Bai is the “perfect man” for Ruxi, in her mother’s eyes, because he has a stable, well-paid job in a hospital and is well-behaved and polite in daily life. Ruxi’s mother arranges their first meeting when she returns her regular physical check report to the hospital where Doctor Bai works. The film presents Ruxi and Doctor Bai meeting each other but having no conversations at that time. Ruxi’s attitude to the blind date is represented through her conversations with her mother: she is unsatisfied that her parents are always on the lookout for eligible men for her (I will develop more detailed analysis about this in the following chapter). Later in the film, Ruxi meets Doctor Bai in the hospital because of her mother’s health issues. Doctor Bai shares his ideas about blind dates and relationships with Ruxi:

> Blind dating is always like this; normally we do not have an excited feeling. You really do not need to give me that kind of strong love, because I can’t give you the same feeling. But I think sweet talk is not more romantic than making a phone call to ask your husband to receive the parcel. It is steady. What do you think?

Ruxi answers:

> I normally ask the caretaker to help me to receive the parcels [laughing].

[Doctor Bai shrugs his shoulder and leaves.]

In the words above, Doctor Bai expresses his willingness to develop a closer relationship with Ruxi and admits that their relationship will not be founded on falling in love at first sight or passion, but calm commitment in their daily lives instead. On the textual level, he uses negative sentences, at first, to explain that blind date patterns do not need to be linked with romance or strong feelings of love. He uses an example
of receiving parcels from couriers, which is quite common in an urban Chinese family’s daily life because of the popularity of online shopping. Bai tries to persuade Ruxi that having someone to live with is better than being alone by using a contrastive sentence; to this end, he chooses a question, inviting Ruxi to agree with him. However, Ruxi refuses this invitation to imagine him in their house receiving the parcel, asserting that she already has a solution to this; if there is a gap in her life then he does not fill it.

On the discourse level, their conversation occurs after Ruxi’s mother’s health issues due to gas poisoning. Additionally, the conversation serves to summarise the outcome of their blind date and represents Ruxi’s intentions to find a man to love, rather than finding a man to live with. On the sociocultural level, Doctor Bai and Ruxi have different expectations for a blind date, as people generally might. Some will accept a blind date and try to give the relationship a chance to develop, others if they have no interest in the date at the start will reject them immediately.

While there are no more representations of parents arranging a blind date in the selected films, there is one scene in *Desire of the Heart* when Ying’s mother asks her to go out, make more friends and find a boyfriend. The different types of intervention by Ruxi and Ying’s parents might relate to their daughter’s age. As a single woman of 28, Ying’s parents choose to persuade their daughter to find a partner by herself. Whereas Ruxi’s parents of a single woman of 35 use another, apparently more efficient, way; they arrange a date for their daughter. Arranging a blind date is certainly not the only parental intervention represented in relationships and marriage in the films (as I will demonstrate in Chapter 7).

In *Desire of the Heart*, blind dates arranged by friends are represented several times, and more positively than those arranged by parents. This is because both men and women are shown to receive more relevant information about their date from their friends, who are in the same generation and have similar tastes to them. For example, in *Desire of the Heart* Yajuan and Su are introduced by Yajuan’s co-worker. Moreover, Yuanzi and other friends introduce some single men to Xiaomei and Cong. Nevertheless, none of them finds a boyfriend this way. In *I Do*, Xiaoling also arranges several blind dates for Weiwei. Most of these blind dates fail, but Weiwei meets
Nianhua and starts dating through online dating that has been facilitated by Xiaoling, a friend who helps Weiwei to register for an online dating account. I will discuss this example in more detail under ‘digital consultation: online dating’.

3.2 Matchmaker consultation

Asking a matchmaking agency to arrange a date has been a common type of blind date in China, especially before the popularity of online dating. Compared with family or friends’ horizontal consultation, asking for a matchmaking agency and online dating are modern dating practices which have become both horizontal and vertical. They still occur within one’s social group but is also quite common outside of it and open to everyone. Most traditional matchmaker agencies are small, and a little bit old-fashioned in contemporary China. Single people pay a membership fee and then the company will match them with someone. However, an agency categorises members into different groups, and the more money you pay, the more attractive men/women you will ostensibly meet. For example, in Desire of the Heart Shengying asks the Si Wei Matchmaker Company to find her a new partner and pays 300 Chinese yuan (around 30 pounds). When she first walks into the agency, the staff use the example of a billionaire man to promote the agency to her:

Staff: Now we are living in such a fast tempo world. The lives of those rich people would be isolated. They won’t have the chance to get to know others. You pay 300 Chinese Yuan and then you can see the one in person…

Shengying: 300 Chinese yuan?

Staff: For those people who don’t want to pay the 300 [Chinese Yuan] fee, the rich guy won’t give you a glance!

On the textual level, the staff member explains the importance of joining the agency before telling Shengying the membership fee. She uses some keywords, like ‘a fast tempo world’ and ‘isolated’ to persuade Shengying that it is difficult to find a suitable
guy by herself. This reduces any stigma—it is not Shengying’s fault that she is alone; it is the changing world that makes it hard to find a partner—and serves as a sales pitch for the agency. On the discourse level, Shengying hesitates to pay for the matchmaker service at that moment, so the staff use an example of a billionaire man, and assert that a woman who cannot afford the fee will be of no interest to such a man. On the sociocultural level, the member of staff’s attitude also assumes that the economic status of a man is a top criterion for Shengying. There is no doubt that men’s earning capability is likely to be a consideration. However, the matchmaking agency links money and a person’s value together; thus, in this case, the marriage market is stratified and divided into different niches and measures single people’s worth by their ability and willingness to pay.

Nevertheless, Shengying’s story is not a successful one. Her date, Mang, is a liar and receives her information from the agency, so Shengying knows nothing about Mang until he drops by her workplace. *Desire of the Heart* also shows other failed blind dates, not just effective ones, which implies the risks of deception in blind dates, as people may hide information or their personality; liars exist in the dating market and some matchmaking agencies can be a con.

### 3.3 Digital consultation: Online dating

The final type of blind date is online dating through which the pool of potential partners has enlarged. This uses online matching techniques with people who register for an account, and pay a membership fee, so they meet virtually first and perhaps not face-to-face. Unlike a traditional matchmaker agency, the dating website has another matchmaking method, although there is no clear explanation of how it works there are some clues during Weiwei’s date with Nianhua in *I Do*. When she dates Nianhua, Weiwei gives him a paper folder containing her personal information and they look like printed webpages. One can assume that the dating website summarises the documents and provides them to its customers. Simultaneously, this works as a filmmaker’s device to make Weiwei’s online profile filmable.
The camera shows a close-up of Weiwei’s information to the audience. The picture above suggests that the dating website provides a standard form for registered users to fill in their personal details. Additionally, it requires registration and a membership fee before providing access to other’s information. Weiwei’s information is a list of individual characteristics, including her age, height, job, educational background, salary per month, marital status, having a car or not, having a house or not, having any children, etc., with nothing about her family background. Alongside all this detailed information, there is a section called ‘the romantic relationship pattern’ on the form, and Weiwei is listed as a person who prefers to take care of others. The second page contains Weiwei’s introduction and other additional information. Weiwei’s personal folder shows that the dating website has created a set of standards for all participants following to add their personal information, and suggests that some tests may be used to analyse the person’s preferences and uses an algorithm to match people up. Unlike traditional matchmaking, this is presented as more detailed, advanced and individualistic.

Weiwei’s first impression to the audience is as a single woman with a well-paid job who has attended several blind dates but is frustrated in love. The setting of Weiwei’s blind date in I Do conveys a message that a dating website is a better option to find a partner currently, because it is modern and more efficient. Finding a partner is presented as an urgent task for ‘leftover’ women and since the main characters in the film do so through online blind dates, this method is presented positively. Compared
with other failed blind dates across all the stories, the most modern one (online dating) is represented as the most effective method.

3.4 Discussions of blind dates on the Douban Movie website

Discussions about blind dates are quite popular in the reviews of every film. As reviewers are talking about blind dates, in general, it is difficult to match reviews into the three different types discussed above. For supporters of blind dates, they think that it is a good and effective way to meet new friends. For example, Gan (2016, *The Last Woman Standing*) writes:

> As our social circle is quite small and fixed, a blind date maybe is the most appropriate way to find some new friends, especially for those single women who prefer staying at home always. Even though I think the blind date is a good way to find a boyfriend or husband, love is still the only reason for marriage.

On the textual level, Gan uses some words to emphasise and persuade readers, such as ‘quite’, ‘the most appropriate’, ‘especially’. Gan chooses a comparative sentence to explain that the chance to find a boyfriend will be higher for women who accept a blind date than those who always stay at home. On the discourse level, Gan links Ruxi’s blind date with reality. Also, she recognises that the blind date presented in the film is a good route to potential marriage in China. Gan’s words also reflect some sociocultural information about blind dates. First, the popularity of the blind date is relevant to single people’s small social group. As they do not have enough ways to meet new friends, choosing a blind date is not a bad choice. Second, Gan highlights that a blind date is just a way to find a boyfriend and not necessarily the prelude to marriage; love is still the primary key to unlock marriage.

There are, however, more opponents of blind dates than supporters among reviews of all the films. Several shortcomings of using blind dates to find “true love” are discussed. First, many point out that blind dates separate emotional intimacy from
Blind dates are result of our fast-paced modern lifestyles. They are more like cooperation between men and women who are in similar conditions. From a blind date, people are looking for a partner who is a match with them. The relationship begins with people’s ‘conditions’ rather than emotional appeal.

Chen mentions his/her current understanding of blind dates. On the textual level, Chen uses ‘cooperation’, ‘conditions’, and ‘match’ to describe blind dates. These words make a blind date sound more like a product than an opportunity for romance. At the end, Chen also expresses the contradiction between blind dates and emotional appeal, by using a negative sentence. On the discourse level, Chen’s words are part of the feedback about Weiwei’s blind date experiences. Chen provides a rationale for the blind date; that is, a response to a speedy and efficient world. Finally, on the sociocultural level, Chen connects blind dates with an economic process, not a romantic and emotional one. This idea implies that blind dates and people who choose blind dates share some similarities with products, in the sense that they have conditions and principles to follow, unlike “normal” dates that are driven by desire and attraction. The blind date transforms finding a partner into an economic transaction based on demand and supply rules (Illouz, 2007). Thus, even though the blind date looks like an efficient way to date someone in a fast-paced society, it is also perceived as sacrificing the uniqueness and romance of a relationship. Heels (2016, The Last Woman Standing) feels strongly about this:

It makes me disgusted to accept any love with utility inheritances! Could it be said that it is time to give up my principles to find someone who is only matched for marriage, but there is no love in our relationship? Could it be said I need to marry someone like to finish a task and give up seeking for ‘Mr. Right’? Could it be said I should forget the last romance about love merely for finding someone to take care of me when I am old?
On the textual level, Heels uses several rhetorical questions to express his/her thoughts about blind dates. A rhetorical question sets a challenge which is often difficult to answer. Heels’ question shows a negative assertion: the blind date is like a compromise with “cruel” reality, which suggests we should accept that it is okay to marry someone only for living with them. However, he/she also suggests that we should not give up seeking love even if it seems tough. On the discourse level, these words about a blind date link his/her personal experience with the film’s representation. In the latter part of the review, he/she points out that he/she would not accept a blind date. On the sociocultural level, Heels’ idea conveys a message that blind dates lack romance and emotional intimacy when compared with pure authentic love. Romantic love has been linked with spontaneity and unexpected epiphany (Illouz, 2007), such as the ‘meet cute’ in romantic comedies; whereas, most blind dates are arranged and treated as a prelude to a utilitarian marriage. The reason for blind dates is presented not in terms of romantic feelings or having a crush on someone, but to finish a task.

Alongside lacking romance, some reviewers think blind dates are not reliable and trustworthy. For example, Tim (2009, *Desire of the Heart*) writes that,

Shengying and Mang’s case is an example to show finding a partner by the matchmaker agency is unreliable. Because they use social factors in love, such as blind dates, the dating agency, etc. Any romantic love with a clear aim is impractical. True love should be spontaneous and developed gradually, such as Cong and Xiang’s love in the film.

Tim expresses unwillingness to use a blind date to find a partner. On the textual level, Tim chooses negative words or sentences such as ‘unreliable’ and ‘any romantic love … is impractical’. In the end, Tim chooses a declarative sentence to summarise the idea that blind dates are not proper methods to find true love. On the discourse level, Tim mentions Cong and Xiang’s relationship, explaining that they have ‘true love’ because they meet by accident and develop the relationship ‘gradually’. Tim uses Shengying and Wang’s example as an unsuccessful case. On the sociocultural
level, Tim’s words have several meanings. First, Tim points out that love cannot be arranged and that a reliable relationship often comes only after a long period. Moreover, Tim conveys a message that romantic relationships should not involve any instrumental actions, such as a dating agency’s arrangement. Unlike blind dates, love shouldn’t rely on ‘social factors’, which means one does not need empirical knowledge of the other before dating (Illouz, 2007).

Furthermore, blind dates lack some private space between the two parties, especially those which are arranged by friends and family members. Wind (2008, Desire of the Heart) writes that when attending a blind date it is as though everything about the relationship is on the table. Every person who knows that you are having a blind date asks about it. Chang (2016, The Last Woman Standing) echoes this:

Most of us do not reject a ‘blind date’ itself. It is a good way to know someone new and make friends. We dislike the way that they put every condition on the table to everyone, not only me and that man but the whole family.

For Chang, there is a clear reason for single people to reject blind dates. In their minds, dating is okay, while questions accompanying dating are more complex. On the textual level, Chang uses ‘us/we’ not ‘me/I’ when talking about attitudes to blind dates. This reflects that Chang’s idea is generated from his/her social circle, and it is not just a personal opinion. Moreover, Chang argues that there is nothing wrong with dating or meeting new friends; it is the utilitarian date that is unpleasant. On the discourse level, Chang’s words above indicate his/her feelings after listening to friends complain about blind dates. Using personal experience in the statement makes the idea seem more believable and real. On the sociocultural level, Chang’s words also display several common thoughts of a blind date in reality: it is nothing to do with romance, and it is more like a social reaction to pressure; moreover, a blind date is a way to judge and weigh the pros and cons of finding a partner, individually and collectively amongst friends and family, which makes dating a job not an interaction between single people. Finally, single people do not have enough autonomy in the blind date.
Following this analysis of types of blind dates, and representations and readings of them, some findings can be summarised. First, as well as traditional blind dates organised by family, friends or a small dating agency, new forms of online dating and dating websites have emerged. Website and matching algorithms are related to individuals’ demands for speed-matching in a fast-paced world, as well as a preference for individual choice. Second, blind dates are reflections of consumerism in romantic relationships. Traditional blind dates and dating websites are placing a “value” on single people themselves and others in a dating market. Illouz’s (2007) statements about internet dating resonate here as blind dates conform to the law of supply and demand and contribute to finding oneself the best “bargain”. Third, based on the analysis of Douban movie reviews, many single people express a negative attitude towards blind dates. Although some point out that it is a good way to meet new friends, more reviewers focus on the shortcomings of the blind date, such as losing romance, unreliability and a lack of privacy.

Overall, the blind date is becoming a common element among unmarried Chinese people’s consultations regarding love; moreover, consultation is part of an intricate dating pattern with several factors to consider, not only romance. Given the marriage imperative, dating is a form of practice for individuals to look for a potential spouse, rather than the chance of friendship ‘in the form of extended play with the opposite sex’ (Jankowiak, 2013; Karandashev, 2017: 252). Although the blind date is an old and traditional dating pattern, it has been updated with new elements making it popular again in China.

**Discussion and conclusions**

This chapter discussed several components of ‘leftover’ women’s choices in love, utilising Illouz’s (2012) architecture of romantic choices. Through analysing ‘leftover’ women’s romantic search, I argued that gender relations, love, marriage and intimacy have become more individualised and complex in contemporary China. Overall, the remote consequences of one’s actions, shifting cultural norms and the consultation process are key elements in ‘leftover’ women’s partner selection process.
Several conclusions can be drawn from the analysis in this chapter. First, when considering the remote consequences of one’s choices in love, the man’s social context (such as economic wealth or the capability for companionship) is important to many ‘leftover’ women, and to urban women more generally. There is no doubt that chemistry and passion are represented as part of love: Ruxi falls in love with Sai in The Last Woman Standing; Ying has a crush on Da after a dance in Desire of the Heart and Weiwei is fascinated by Nianhua’s personality in I Do. However, the faculty of choice is not based on pure emotionality, but ‘entails a complex affective and cognitive apparatus’ to evaluate a suitable partner (Illouz, 2012: 90). For many single women, desiring love does not run counter to their material benefits (Karandashev, 2017: 251). Based on the films and reviews of this study, an individual’s economic status, capacity for companionship, concerns about having and raising children, and a compatible family background are also of concern among unmarried people in contemporary China.

Second, pursuing more autonomy and individual choice are key elements in today’s relationship culture, and the films represent some important shifts and new possibilities in gender relations, love, marriage and intimacy; however, traditional cultural norms are also shown to be resilient. For example, some ‘leftover’ women are represented as feeling insecure in an older woman-younger man relationship because of the age gap and the reverse of traditional gender roles. Moreover, women’s continued rejection of premarital cohabitation/sex is a reflection of the enduring virginity obsession in Chinese traditional culture.

Third, the blind date is a common practice in the love consultation process. It is also a suitable example through which to represent both continuity and change in dating/marriage practices. The modern blind date retains some traditional patterns, such as consultations with family or friends which are horizontal, in that they usually occur within one’s own group. However, the modern blind date has become both horizontally and vertically structured, within one’s social group but also typically outside of it and open to everyone. Therefore, the pool of potential partners has enlarged, and dating desirability is simultaneously defined in more individualised terms (Illouz, 2012: 52), such as in the popularity of online dating.
Fourth, compared with arranged dates, the ‘meet cute’ is seen as more effective and ideal in the films. Although the blind date is represented as one strategy through which ‘leftover’ women could find a suitable partner, this method is not always shown to be workable. While two authentic accidental meetings between the characters Cong and Xiang, Ruxi and Sai have a happy ending, overall blind dates are criticised as lacking romance and emotional passion. Singles going on blind dates also bear pressure from family members or friends, and such dates can be unreliable in terms of suitable partners.

Finally, I argue that men dang hu dui (compatible family backgrounds) remain significant when considering marriage, although the meaning of men dang hu dui has broadened. Homogenous and heterogeneous relationships are represented in the films and based on this diversity men dang hu dui has shifted to convey more of a compromise or an agreement between two individuals, rather than a combination of two similar families. In such a marriage, individuals share their happiness and vulnerabilities, and tolerate and solve their conflicts together. At the same time, the role of parents and familial impact on romantic relationships are still significant in the films, as I will explore in Chapter 7.
Chapter 7 Romantic relationships never exist in isolation: 
Intergenerational and social ties in Chinese marriage

Introduction

Getting married is associated with finding oneself and self-actualisation in contemporary Western culture (Smart and Shipman, 2004). However, marriage is a family issue in the context of Chinese culture. There is an old saying in China: love is between two individuals, but marriage is between two families. So when investigating love and marriage in China we cannot avoid considering the impact of family. After the reform and open-up policy of the 1980s, China’s economic growth, urbanisation and individualisation proliferated over a couple of decades; yet some social norms have not changed at the same pace, and Confucian traditions such as filial piety still play essential roles in Chinese families. For many Chinese families, marriage does not only concern who to marry, but also when to marry. The option of young generations marrying late evokes a set of familial interventions and worries, especially concerning ‘leftover’ women’s parents in my research. As I discussed in previous chapters, ‘leftover’ women’s marriage issues may lead to family conflicts. Also when considering marriage, the partner’s family status is a significant factor to consider. Therefore, family invention and influence occupy key positions in an individual’s love life. I develop a deeper analysis with the examples in this chapter, into the representation of parental intervention in ‘leftover’ women’s romantic relationships, which is quite common in *Desire of the Heart*, *The Last Woman Standing* and relevant film reviews, but is featured less in *I Do*. Additionally, I reveal that friends are represented as playing necessary roles in ‘leftover’ women’s love lives which is a more recent development in all the selected media products.

In this chapter, I start by exploring different types of family interventions, such as arranging a date, the ‘meeting the parents’ moment in a serious relationship, and parents’ influences on starting or ending a relationship. Thereafter, I investigate parents’ shifting emotions about their daughter’s single status in more detail: the transformation from worried parents to supportive parents. Simultaneously, I argue that intergenerational relations in Chinese families are changing with the emergence
of a more communicative intimacy. In the final section, I demonstrate the significance of friends and peer support in single women’s personal and love lives. Overall, I argue that the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon is related with conflicts between traditional family values (such as filial piety) and the implications of rapid social changes and individualisation in contemporary China.

1. Parental interventions in daughters’ dating and marriage

Marriage remains an overriding aspiration and pressure for young people and their families in China (see Chapter 2). Individuals are expected to obey their parents’ expectations in their lives, especially regarding their marital choices (Davis and Friedman, 2014). Listening to parents’ suggestions about spouse selection is a way to demonstrate filial piety (To, 2015b). Additionally, Ji’s (2015) research on educated and unmarried women in Shanghai observes that family influence contributes to a couple’s harmonious relations. Common parental strategies represented in the three case study films involve arranging a date, the ‘meeting the parents’ moment, and parental influence on daughters starting or ending a romantic relationship.

1.1 Arranging a date

The desire or action to arrange a date for their children is a common phenomenon in many Chinese families, especially in a ‘leftover’ woman’s family. Although some ‘leftover’ women do not like this kind of intervention, most of them accept it to fulfil parents’ expectations and release their worries to some extent.

I found several representations of Ruxi’s mother’s ideas and actions regarding arranging a date for Ruxi in The Last Woman Standing. I begin with a scene where Ruxi’s mother is sending a message that she would like to arrange a date for her single daughter. At the start of the film, Ruxi and her mother attend a wedding and, when others ask about Ruxi’s love life, her mother says that Ruxi is single, and
She doesn’t feel anxious, but I’m worried about this. If this matter happened before the liberation\(^\text{35}\) it would be easy to deal with. She has to listen to parents. She has to marry anyone we choose for her … As she is getting old, at least she got someone to be [accompanied] with.

\[\text{Figure 7.1 [Screenshot] Ruxi sits alone silently while her mother talks with neighbours at a wedding, The Last Woman Standing (00:01:42).}\]

The camera focuses on Ruxi’s unhappy and impatient face as her mother speaks. The bright light around Ruxi and others’ happy faces contrasts with her uninterested facial expression, showing Ruxi’s loneliness and disagreement with her mother’s ideas. Ruxi is wearing a red dress, in China red is a colour often used in happy and joyful moments (such as a wedding, Chinese New Year or a birthday party), and her bright-coloured dress offers another contrast to her sombre expression. Ruxi’s unsatisfactory mood also foreshadows a confrontation with her mother later in the film.

On the textual level, the words Ruxi’s mother use to express her worries about Ruxi’s single situation contrast with Ruxi’s relaxed attitude. Ruxi’s mother uses several hypothetical sentences to express her wish Ruxi will marry. For example, she mentions “arranged marriage” in pre-modern China, and that in those times it would have been easy to insist on Ruxi’s marriage. In the end, Ruxi’s mother uses a subjunctive sentence to explain her expectations of marriage; she hopes Ruxi will not be lonely in the future and that someone will take care of her “little girl”. On the discourse practice

\(^{35}\) Here ‘liberation’ means the foundation of the PRC.
level, this conversation is between Ruxi’s mother and other guests at the wedding dinner. When her mother talks with others about Ruxi’s singlehood, Ruxi says nothing and looks lost in thought; she later leaves the table. This behaviour displays Ruxi’s disagreement with her mother’s ideas. There is no overt conflict between Ruxi and her mother, at this stage, because it is inappropriate and disrespectful at another’s wedding dinner; however, the tense atmosphere between them is growing and hints at a future confrontation.

Ruxi and her mother’s difference of opinion about finding a partner also highlights some sociocultural issues. First, the mother’s ideas about her daughter’s marriage are a reflection of filial piety values in Chinese family life. Existing literature supports the fact that filial obligations are a surviving social practice, even in urban China (Hu and Scott, 2016; Whyte, 2003). The mother states that Ruxi should listen to her parents’ ideas, obey them and meet their expectations in various aspects of her personal life, especially in finding a partner and marriage. If not, she risks being labelled as an ‘unfilial’ or ‘immoral’ person, which are some of the worst titles in Chinese society (Hu and Scott, 2016; To, 2015b). Simultaneously, Ruxi’s attitude and silent disagreement suggest she has mixed feelings about asserting her own choice, or fulfilling her filial obligations. Her ambivalent ideas and struggles show the conflict between filial traditions and the impact of individualisation among ‘leftover’ women in China. Ruxi’s reactions send a message that individuals are seeking freedom and mutual emotional care from intergenerational relations, rather than obligations or duty (Yan, 2003). Even though Ruxi is a modern professional woman, she is also a family-oriented daughter when facing marriage issues, and seeks a balance between fulfilling her filial piety whilst contending to assert her personal choice.

Later in the film, Ruxi’s mother takes action and arranges a blind date between her daughter and Doctor Bai—a doctor in the hospital with a stable job and a good social status. Although Ruxi prefers a romantic encounter in love, she still meets Doctor Bai and talks with him for a while, but with no signs of the potential for their relationship to develop. Her mother disagrees with Ruxi’s unwillingness to date Doctor Bai again, and they have a fierce confrontation about it. I discussed part of their conversation earlier in Chapter 5, focusing on the mother’s anxieties about Ruxi’s age and how their quarrel links to feelings of shame about Ruxi’s single status. Here I focus more on
aspects of Ruxi and her mother’s relationship. When Ruxi complains that her mother always pushes her towards a relationship and arranges dates for her, her mother replies,

Then mommy tell you this, I don’t care about all your future. I don’t want to care about it [Ruxi’s marriage]. At worst, when I’m old, your father and I, we two stick together. My life will be the same to have you or not. I can’t count on you. I’ve never expected you at all.

On the textual level, the mother uses strong words related to her feelings about Ruxi’s marriage: ‘I don’t care’ and ‘don’t want to care’. However, based on her previously verbalised worries and the action of arranging a date for Ruxi, Ruxi’s mother actually cares a lot about her only daughter’s marriage. Here, she indicates that she does care but it is very difficult, untenable even, to keep caring. Then the mother says she is indifferent to having a daughter or not, that she ‘can’t count on’ her and will instead rely on her husband in old age. These words are hurtful; in that, they express the conditionality of her love for her daughter. On the discourse level, the conversation happens soon after Ruxi’s first meeting with Doctor Bai (before she encounters Sai in person), when she shows no further interest in the doctor. Her mother is displeased that Ruxi chooses to be single and will not date Doctor Bai again. Finally, on the sociocultural level, the mother’s sentences and concern for Ruxi conform to ideas about the imperative of marriage and the importance of filial piety. The concept of filial piety and children’s respect or obligation towards their parents are the focal points in Chinese family life (Wu et al., 2016). Although individualisation is occurring in Chinese society and has led to the transformation of social structures, to some extent, the tradition of filial piety remains a central point of many families (Han and Shim, 2016). Also, the mother’s care and love for her daughter imply their close mother-daughter relationship. In their earlier conversation that I analysed in Chapter 5, Ruxi expresses that she hopes her mother will defend her and take her side when she is being criticised by others. These representations in the film, of a mother’s care and a daughter’s expectations support the idea that filial strategies are changing from obligations to closeness, intimacy and intimate communications in current Chinese families.
Desire of the Heart has no obvious representations of parents arranging a date, however, there are some discussions around this in reviews of Desire of the Heart and The Last Woman Standing on the Douban movie website. Reviewers’ experiences are similar to Ruxi’s, such as parents’ arranging a blind date or advising them to find a boyfriend (Bubble, 2015; Amour, 2015). For example, Ann (2012) writes,

All of a sudden, I found that I am one of the ‘leftover’ women. Then, maybe I would accept a partner who is arranged by parents or matchmakers in the future and get married.

On the textual level, Ann uses hypothetical sentences to express her potential acceptance of parents ‘arranging’ a partner, because she is one of the ‘leftover’ women. Ann uses the words ‘maybe I would’, not ‘I will’ in the hypothetical sentence above, expressing that the acceptance of a boyfriend through arranged dates does not suit her at present but that might change should she find herself older and unmarried. From a discourse perspective, Ann’s comment demonstrates that parents arranging a date or looking for a partner for their daughter through matchmakers is a social practice in modern China. Finally, on the sociocultural level, Ann’s choice not only informs us that she would listen to her parents’ suggestions and try to fulfil their marriage expectations, but also shows that arrangements by parents are another means for ‘leftover’ women to enter into marriage.

Another reviewer Yisi (2015) explains that,

Conflicts are unavoidable in families. As parents, they may arrange a date for the daughter or hurry her into marriage. But whatever they do, they hope their daughter will have a better life in the future.

Instead of expressing his/her attitude to family conflicts as a son/daughter, Yisi writes his/her opinion from the parents’ standpoint. Yisi confirms family conflicts arise around marriage expectations, then uses ‘they’ or ‘their daughter’ which shows her/his positive interpretation of parents’ inventions or conflicts. Children should also
understand their parents’ kindness to them because their actions are done in the hope of ensuring ‘a better life’ for their child. In a broader sense, Yisi affirms that parents’ who arrange dates for their daughter is a real-life practice, that does not only occur in media representations. Also, that arranging a date is a reflection of parents’ love for their children, and the tie between parents and children is close and inseparable. Parents use dating interventions to show their care for their child; maybe it is not always appropriate, but an intervention does not equal an arranged marriage in pre-modern China as it did in the past. Today when parents arrange a date for their daughter, it is more likely to provide their daughter with an opportunity to meet someone new and encourage her to date someone. As Yisi states, it is intended to show the love and intimacy between parents and daughters, but it may not be taken as such by the daughter.

In summary, an arranged date by parents is unavoidable for many ‘leftover’ women both in media representations and offline. On the one hand, the phenomenon demonstrates the tradition of Chinese filial piety and its conflict with individuals’ emotional needs and the search for autonomy in their personal matters; on the other hand, it also demonstrates the close relationship and intimacy between parents and children in current Chinese families. I will now discuss an essential step of dating in most Chinese families: the ‘meeting the parents’ moment in a serious relationship.

1.2 The ‘meeting the parents’ moment

Introducing your partner to parents is a stage in a love relationship that means the relationship is serious in Chinese culture. In Farrer’s (2014) research, most interviewees admit the cultural importance of meeting parents whether they have already done so or not. Usually, it is not necessary to meet parents in a relationship unless the couple consider getting married. Farrer (2014) argues that meeting parents and gaining parental approval means ‘sealing a deal’ in the relationship and is sometimes connected with wedding plans. Out of my three case studies, only Desire of the Heart has a ‘meeting the parents’ situation. There is also only one review that refers to ‘meeting parents’, mentioning that meeting parents is part of dating culture in China, but the comment provides no further explanation (Crazyguy, 2008).
In *Desire of the Heart*, Ying brings Da to meet her parents, then they have dinner together:

Ying’s mother: Da Zhao, you two have been going out for a couple of months. I have something to discuss with you. I will let you marry my daughter. Next coming Chinese New Year, you two should prepare for your wedding.

Da: [Laughs awkwardly] It’s not good for a wedding next year. This year will be a bit of a rush…

Ying’s mother: Getting married earlier is better! You can help each other [in life].

[Da is too drunk to answer her questions.]

This conversation happens at Ying’s home, between Ying’s parents, Ying and Da. However, the dialogue is mainly between Ying’s mother and Da. In the film’s dialogic organisation, the director uses two sets of sentences from the mother, but only one response from Da. Ying and her father remain silent, but their silence and no objection to her mother indicate that both agree with Ying’s mother’s opinions. On the textual level, the mother uses a set of narrative sentences, not questions, when she asks for Da’s opinion about his relationship with Ying, almost demanding that he marry her. Da does not say no to her directly, but expresses his wish to delay marriage. When Ying’s mother asks him again, he lies down on the table with an open shirt, too drunk to respond. The representation of a drunk man is comical in the film, but not ordinary. It is not polite for a man to drink too much at a first dinner with his girlfriend’s parents in the real world. However, some similar scenes also occur outside of the screen to some extent. There is an old saying in China: alcohol is the best thing to know one’s real personality. People believe that men always reveal some “real” words or truth that they would not tell you without alcohol. Da’s behaviour and replies to Ying’s mother show that he is not interested in marriage at that moment; also, he is perhaps not suitable or mature enough due to his bad manners.
On the discourse practice level, this representation of ‘meeting the parents’ occurs after Ying and Da get together. Da visits Ying’s parents first and has dinner at their house, before Da invites Ying to his apartment and suggests living together. Da’s inappropriate behaviour and lack of interest in marriage, caused by his nervousness, also foretell a later confrontation with Ying about living together, and the rejection of this by Ying’s family. From the characters’ conversation at dinner, some sociocultural points emerge about ‘meeting the parents’. First, introducing a partner to one’s parents is a way to relieve parents’ anxiety about a partner’s suitability. So a daughter will not take her boyfriend to meet her parents until she is quite sure of their future plans (Farrer, 2014). Second, permitting parents to get involved in a love relationship is part of children’s marital filial strategies. Children hope to obtain parental approval of their love choice. Furthermore, parents’ recognition is also relevant to the quality of a romantic relationship and is an important step towards further commitment in China (Chan and Chan, 2007; Farrer, 2014). Third, Da meets Ying’s parents in the film, but Ying does not meet Da’s. This reflects that meeting a woman’s parents is more important than a man’s, and also reflects that Ying is the focus of the story as she is the ‘leftover’ woman. Finally, the active mother and silent father in the scene imply a gendered division of communication in Chinese families. As explained in Chapter 4, the ‘soft and gentle’ characteristic has been recognised as a significant ideal for Chinese women for a long time, and the mother in a family is expected to fulfil a caring role. The norm is that the mother specialises in the realm of emotional matters, while the father is ‘authoritarian’, and largely absent from parent-child communications (Evans, 2010). This example at the dinner table conforms to that norm, but later I will argue that the father is starting to be represented in a more active and caring way in relation to his daughter’s marital status.
Overall, ‘meeting the parents’ is an inevitable part of a serious relationship, both in the film and the real world. It is also a chance for men and women in a couple to negotiate and consider their relationship or marriage. Parental approval is not guaranteed, however, and parents’ opinions maybe pivotal in children’s relationships, as I explore in the following section.

1.3 Parents’ voice and control in their children’s relationships

There are two examples of parents’ impact on ‘leftover’ women’s relationships in Desire of the Heart, both concerning Ying. In the first example, a suggestion is made that parental control has limited Ying’s opportunities to meet men.

Ying’s mother: Why are you always staying at home? Why don’t you go out and make some friends?

Ying: Since I was small you just put me in grandma’s place in Nanjing; then you told me to stay away from women and to keep a distance from men. [With a questioning tone:] Now, you tell me to make friends?

Figure 7.3 Screenshot of Ying’s mother complains that Ying does not have many friends, Desire of the Heart (00:02:31).

In this scene, her mother stands at the door of her room, while Ying sits on her bed. Their distance hints at the distance between their ideas. Ying’s mother talks to her in
a homiletic tone, to ask Ying a set of questions; Ying answers her mother defiantly. On the textual level, Ying uses two narrative sentences to inform the audience that Ying and her mother were not close when Ying was a little girl because she was raised by her grandma, mostly, at a distance. Also, Ying stresses her mother’s previous attitude to her making friends, was to ‘stay away’ and ‘to keep a distance from men’ when she was young. On the discourse level, the background of their conversation is that Ying’s mother hopes Ying can make more friends so as to find a partner (this is before she attends a dating event and meets Da). However, Ying is angry because she thinks being single is not her fault, it is because her parents did not let her meet boys when she was younger. On the sociocultural level, their short conversation conveys the way that parents can influence their children’s friendships, especially when they are younger. Friends and family are important elements that influence an individual’s personal life (Surra and Milardo, 1991).

The second example is when Ying tells her parents that Da suggests premarital cohabitation, and her parents completely reject the idea.

Ying’s father: I object that you two live together! This would be an insult [to you and the family]. This is what those irresponsible men would think. He will complain about us for not being Zhang Ziyi (a superstar in China). I will just complain that why he’s not Ka-shing Li (one of the richest men in China)!

Ying’s mother: The parents of Da are too rude! How can they do such things? If they don’t like the result (after cohabitation), will they ruin their son’s relationship? Tell him that you would break up rather than to promise it.
Ying’s parents object strongly to her cohabitation. In this scene, Ying holds a cushion and hides her face behind it, implying her unwillingness to speak or her shyness to talk about this topic with her parents. Holding a cushion also signifies that Ying feels under “attack”; she uses a cushion to defend herself, literally to cushion the verbal blows. Ying remains silent, even though this conversation is between Ying and her parents. Her behaviour has two possible explanations: one is that she accepts and agrees with her parents’ ideas; the other is that she disagrees but dare not say so, that demonstrates her parents’ control.

Her father uses several narrative sentences in an imperative tone to express his rejection of Da’s suggestion, using strong words such as ‘object’, ‘an insult’, ‘irresponsible’, to express his anger. While her mother uses several questions to express her unsatisfaction with Da’s parents. Like Ying’s father, she ends her words in a demanding tone, choosing an imperative sentence to stress her point: ‘Tell him that you would break-up’. On a discourse level, their dialogue occurs when Ying is reconsidering her relationship with Da, but before their break-up. Earlier in the film, Da tells Ying that his parents agree with them living together before entering marriage. This maybe the reason that Ying’s mother is angry with Da’s parents. After this discussion with her parents, Ying decides to formally break up with Da. Therefore, parental influence on their daughter’s relationship is represented as significant here.

Some sociocultural competition also lies behind Ying’s parents’ words. First, her father mentions Ka-Shing Li, who is the 23rd richest person in the world (2018). The
implication seems to be that if Da was as wealthy as Ka-Shing Li, it might be possible to compromise on the principle of no cohabitation before marriage. Although the father does not seriously mean that Da should be a rich guy to compromise their family values, this information shows that economic conditions are a factor when considering a spouse for their daughter. Second, different family opinions about cohabitation suggest that exposure to Western culture is associated with a more positive attitude to cohabitation. The film informs us that Da’s parents live abroad, while Ying’s family is based in China and Ying’s parents’ attitude to premarital cohabitation are more conventional. Simultaneously, important gender differences also exist regarding cohabitation. Ying’s parents’ behaviour relates to the virginity obsession of Chinese traditional culture. Breaking up after having sex is perceived as a loss for women because some people think that premarital sex relates to lost female chastity (Farrer, 2014; Farrer et al., 2012). Thus, Da’s parents may be more relaxed because their son does not face such a risk. Third, Ying’s parents’ influence on her decision is a consequence of arranged marriage traditions in pre-modern China. Arranged marriages have declined and are rare now; however, children’s respect and obedience are still common when discussing marital filial strategies (To, 2015b). Finally, both father and mother use their voice in that scene, rather than one parent’s voice being heard in the household. As Evans (2010) argues, a gender difference exists in family communication, with fathers only occasionally involved in matters concerning their children. Getting married or premarital cohabitation is an important decision; so that may be why Ying’s father gets involved. He also does so in an authoritarian manner, which accords with gender discussions of family communication. Even though Evans (2010) summarises that the father is not party to lots of parent-child communications, things are changing in urban Chinese families. Both parents are starting to share children’s emotions and have more intimate family relations. There is another example in The Last Woman Standing of father’s care that I will discuss in the next section.

Reviewers on the Douban Movie website under Desire of the Heart cite similar experiences of parental influence, Carrot (2012) writes,

I share the same experience with Ying. [I] always listened to my parents’ words and never had a boyfriend before, because they
required from me to have no boyfriend in school and college. But when it’s time to think about marriage, my parents ask me that ‘why you have no boyfriend?’ They never gave me any chance to fall in love before and never told me how to love someone.

From a textual dimension, Carrot connects her personal story with Ying’s in the film. She uses some “negative” terms to express her parents’ strong attitude and intervention in her love life, such as ‘no boyfriend in school’, ‘never give me any chance’ or ‘never tell me’. Carrot positions herself as a passive individual in her family, always doing what her parents say. From a discourse dimension, Carrot shares her own story to let others believe that Ying’s story is not inauthentic but exists in the real world. Carrot agrees with Ying’s words, such as Ying complaining that her parents asked her to keep a distance from men: ‘They never give me any chance’. Finally, from a sociocultural dimension, Carrot’s story is another example to prove parents’ influence on their children’s romantic relationships. Her example reminds me of a Chinese expression: ‘a Chinese mother does not allow her daughter to have a boyfriend in school, but she wants a perfect son-in-law immediately when the daughter graduates’. There is an element of exaggeration in this, of course, but it reflects reality to some extent. Parents may hope to protect their daughter from being hurt by men when they are younger, but this limits women’s opportunities to find a boyfriend as well.

I have described Ying’s experience in *Desire of the Heart* in detail. In contrast, there is no representation of parents’ intervention and control in the daughter’s relationship in *I Do*. While, Ruxi’s mother intervenes in her relationships through arranging a date with Doctor Bai in *The Last Woman Standing* (which I discussed in an earlier section). Some of the above examples suggest that parental attitudes are changing in film representations, this is also the case for reviews. Some parents are very supportive of their daughters, like Ruxi’s father in *Desire of the Heart*, and give their daughters freedom in love and hope they will be happy (I will return to this point in Section 2).

In summary, parents’ control over their children’s relationships is shown through two dimensions in *Desire of the Heart*. On the one hand, their intervention will influence children’s attitudes or their chance to enter a romantic relationship; on the other hand,
their opinions are also important to children when considering giving up a relationship or marriage. Both of these aspects are practices of filial piety in the context of the family. Recent research finds that the younger generations in contemporary China exemplify equally strong, if not stronger, proclivities towards filial piety as the older generations (Hu and Scott, 2016; To, 2015b; Whyte, 2004). ‘Leftover’ women are urban women with good education who have been taught to be good daughters and be filial to their parents since they were little girls by their families and their schools. However, if they cannot marry as their parents wish, they are called ‘unfilial’ towards their parents in contemporary society. These women want to be good daughters, but they also want to choose the timing of their marriage and marriage partner. Furthermore, the gendered dimensions of family communication and the role of a “powerful” father still endure, but are represented in the films with several subtle changes: the father is less authoritarian and participates more in parent-child communications.

2. Parents’ attitudes towards single daughters: From worried to supportive?

The theme of worried parents certainly recurs in media presentations of ‘leftover’ women’s families. However, an attenuated theme of more supportive parents is also found in recent films or reviews. These changing representations chime with several new trends noted in family studies in urban China, such as a closer parent-child relationship and a more visible role for a father’s influence in their daughter’s love life.

2.1 Worried parents

Desire of the Heart and The Last Woman Standing present parents worrying about their daughter’s single status. In the last section I discussed Ying’s mother compelling her to make more friends and to find a boyfriend in Desire of the Heart; therefore, here I choose to analyse scenes from The Last Woman Standing. This is a more recent film making it, at least in timescale, more comparable to today’s Chinese familial relations. I will show how Ruxi’s mother is presented as a typical worried mother and
how as a ‘leftover’ woman Ruxi has to face her mother’s anxieties and hope she will ultimately let Ruxi make her own decisions. Similar to Ruxi’s parents, in many Chinese parents’ eyes marriage is a responsibility (both for the child and the family) rather than a choice; thus, as parents they also think that they should help their children to find a partner.

In one scene Ruxi’s mother is sent to hospital because of an accident at home: she has carbon monoxide poisoning because she forgot to turn off the gas. Later, doctors diagnose her mother with Alzheimer’s. The film represents the mother’s declining abilities to remember; however, she always remembers and worries about Ruxi’s unmarried status.

Ruxi’s mother: Mommy’s just worried about you. After your father and I pass away, who is going to take care of my baby?

Ruxi: Mom, don’t worry. I’ll get married for sure and you will see it.

Figure 7.5 [Screenshot] After Ruxi and her mother's conversation about future and marriage, The Last Woman Standing (01:14:48).

After this conversation, her mother kisses Ruxi and hugs her. The narrow space and warm light of the scene implies Ruxi’s intimacy with her mother who is low on energy and feeble; however, her only daughter’s future life is still a preoccupation. In this scene, conflicts disappear, permitting closeness and a moment of peacefulness. From a textual perspective, Ruxi’s mother uses a rhetorical question, which implies that the question about who will care for her daughter is difficult or impossible to answer. She
uses ‘baby’ as a nickname for Ruxi, who is 35 and not a baby anymore; this affectionate term illustrates the intimate relationship between a mother and her adult daughter. Ruxi’s reply is like a promise as she reassures her mother. From a discourse level, their conversation occurs after some representations are shown of Ruxi’s mother’s symptoms of Alzheimer’s. The mother forgets many things, but not Ruxi’s single situation. Also, this scene happens before Ruxi’s break-up with Sai. I think Ruxi’s marriage or break-up decision may be interpreted as a sign of her wish to get married quickly to reassure her mother as soon as possible that she will be taken care of. Finally, her mother’s worries hint at some sociocultural competition. First, the mother’s worries derive from her love for Ruxi, as previously mentioned above some parents see it as their responsibility to help their daughter to enter marriage. Second, I argue that Ruxi’s mother’s worries relate to the one-child policy in China. Ruxi has no siblings, she is an only child. Hence, if her parents get ill or pass away, she must bear all the pain and responsibility by herself. Ruxi’s mother cares about her daughter’s marriage so much because as the only child she is the “only hope” for the family to continue. Parents may seek to intervene more in the lifestyle choices of only children, especially marital choices, than they would if they had more children (To, 2015b). With a marriage commitment, the mother thinks that she will not worry because her ‘baby’ would be taken care of when her parents pass away.

There are also some discussions about worried parents in reviews of The Last Woman Standing on the Douban Movie website. Tang (2015) writes,

When my parents found their friends have grandchildren already, I’m still single. They feel extreme anxiety about my marriage. On the one hand, they really want to have their own grandchildren; but what is more important is that they worry about if they pass away, who will take care of their only daughter?

Tang’s example is similar to Ruxi’s story in the film. On the textual level, Tang uses the words ‘extreme anxiety’ and ‘worry’ to describe her parents’ attitude to her

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36 For more detail about ‘the one-child policy’ see Chapter 2.
singlehood. The term ‘their only daughter’ indicates that she is also a woman born under the one-child policy which was launched in 1979 and abolished in 2015. Tang uses a rhetorical sentence at the end to highlight her parents’ worries about her future, similar to Ruxi’s mother’s ending sentence in the previous quotation. On the discourse level, Tang’s words about parents are part of the opinions she has formed about Ruxi’s parents after viewing the film; thus, she agrees with the film’s representation of parental worry and shares her own experience to evidence this idea. On the sociocultural level, Tang’s opinion connects parents’ anxiety, worries and care. It shows that an individual’s marriage is not seen only as a personal choice but as a family issue as well. A family’s worries are also strengthened due to peer pressure and social norms.

Yi’s and Yang’s film reviews also link parents’ worries with the one-child policy in urban China. Yi (2015, The Last Woman Standing) writes,

> Our moms always think we are still their little princess no matter how old we are. In their mind, because we have no siblings, if we cannot get married with someone, we will be lonely after they pass away. Also, being the only child in the family makes us feel guilty if we cannot get married.

Yi uses ‘we’ not ‘I’ here when expressing her ideas about family and being single, suggesting these are group worries among her only-child friends rather than just a personal issue. Yi stresses ‘only child’ and uses ‘guilty’ to describe her feelings about her non-married status, which goes against her parents’ wishes and suggests a lack of filial obedience. She acknowledges that her parents see marriage to be in her best interests, given that they are likely to predecease her. Individuals are taught to be filial from a young age in China. While contemporary Asians reject the oppressive aspects of filial piety, such as absolute obedience to parents, they accept the expectations that they should be respectful and filial towards their parents (Ho, 1996; Ikels, 1993; Zhang and Kline, 2009). Yang (2015, The Last Woman Standing) makes a similar point in her review:
My father once told me that ‘actually we don’t want you to marry so quickly and we prefer staying with our daughter forever. However, you are the only child. What if anything happens to me and your mother in the future? We won’t be reassured unless you have a nice partner with you’.

Here Yang quotes her father’s words. Writing in the first person, Yang’s father’s words are more believable. Her father expresses that he does not want his daughter to have a quick marriage, except as an only child he does not want to risk her being alone when he and her mother die either. With the impact of the one-child policy, parents worry their only daughter could be lonely in the future. Their worry and care reflect a more intimate connection between parents and children. The caring words are also from a father’s mouth, not a mother’s. Unlike the traditional father’s role as a “dictatorial” person who determines important household issues, Yang’s father provides emotional care for his child in the film. Parent-child communication may be shifting from a mother’s role to parental sharing in contemporary China. Certainly, single women may not always be lonely in society, they have their friends and work colleagues; however, unlike parents, siblings or partners, friends have no legal responsibility for each other, which may concern ageing parents.

Overall, the representation of worried parents in The Last Woman Standing conveys several meanings. The one-child policy contributes to ‘leftover’ women’s parents’ worries. Moreover, parental worries reflect their love and care for their only daughter and a more intimate parent-child relationship. Parents hope their daughter will have a happy family life when they cannot take care of her. The portrayal of fatherly care also reminds me of changes in masculinity that I discussed in Chapter 4: a caring father image is emerging that links with my analysis about Ruxi’s father below; additionally, the ideal husband is presented as a caring, sharing man with egalitarianism ideas, not just a breadwinner.
2.2 Supportive parents

In the last part of this section, I discuss representations of ‘leftover’ women and parental support. This is good news for ‘leftover’ women and may reflect recent social changes. Perhaps because these changes are still underway, there are no representations of them in the two earlier films and their reviews. Only in *The Last Woman Standing* and its associated reviews. In the latter part of *The Last Woman Standing*, the director uses around five minutes of close-up shots to present Ruxi’s father’s monologue. This part of the film has generated much discussion and praise in film reviews, reflecting support for a shift in parental attitudes towards daughters’ marriages. Ruxi’s father says,

I wish her happy, to get true happiness, to get married with no regrets. So that I can put her hands with no regrets in another man’s hand in the future… She shouldn’t get married for parents, she shouldn’t listen to anything outside any comments from others … Maybe someday suddenly [Ruxi would] take a man in front of me and say, ‘Daddy look! I found him, it’s him. I will never get married unless the bridegroom is him!’ I can imagine the scene… there is no reason for me not to wait for her. I’m not sure what time the day will come, but I will stand with her. Because I’m her father. She can only be happy nothing else.

Ruxi’s father’s words are very moving and make the audience tearful (G. Liu, 2015; Mango, 2016). From a textual aspect, his words can be divided into three parts. First, Ruxi’s father expresses his attitude towards Ruxi’s marriage status. He chooses declarative sentences to convince the audience of his central point: Ruxi should be happy in love. Two negative sentences beginning with ‘she shouldn’t’ stress this opinion. Later, he uses a subjunctive form to imagine the scene when she finds someone she wants to marry. Finally, he uses the words ‘stand with’ and ‘can only be happy’ to highlight his support for Ruxi. On the discourse level, this conversation is between Doctor Bai and Ruxi’s father. He does not say these words to Ruxi directly, yet Ruxi hears her father’s touching words indirectly from Doctor Bai. However, the
director mixes scenes from the conversation between Ruxi’s father and Doctor Bai, and the conversation between Ruxi and Doctor Bai, so it looks as though Ruxi’s father is talking to Ruxi face to face. At that time, Ruxi has broken up with Sai because of their different plans for their relationship and she decides to date Doctor Bai again.

Finally, on the sociocultural level, the father’s attitude reflects a shift in ‘leftover’ women’s parent-child relations, from traditional obligation to closeness and intimacy. Ruxi’s father is trying to understand his daughter’s viewpoint and emotional needs; then support her decision. Her father’s words and care demonstrate that family communication and the father’s role in the family are changing. Therefore, it is an example of changes in masculinity in familial relations: a softer concept of a father figure is emerging. Like Yang (2015) mentioned in her review about her father, Ruxi’s father is also an example showing a caring father figure in contemporary China. Considering parent-child communication, Evans (2010) demonstrates that in Chinese culture the mother typically cares a lot about children’s emotional and social matters and the father is usually absent. However, in the film Ruxi’s father has transformed into a caring parent concerned with his child’s emotions, hence sharing the mother’s role of emotional care to experience a close relationship with his child. Notwithstanding, this father-daughter relationship is still represented as different from, or not as close as, the mother-daughter relationship. Referring back to the scene in Figure 7.5, Ruxi talks a lot about her ideas around marriage and love, even has conflicts with her mother—the mother-daughter relationship simultaneously includes tensions, conflicts and deep love (Evans, 2010)—but finally hugs her mother and takes comfort. However, her father’s way to show his care and love is more indirect, through talking with Ruxi’s date not Ruxi herself.

Many reviews mention these speech and parental attitude changes on the Douban Movie website. They share their families’ and their parents’ changes in the reviews, which make their words persuasive and convincing. For example, Chen (2015) mentions that her parents never put any pressure on her to get a boyfriend, and Eva (2015) writes that Ruxi’s father’s words remind her of her own father:
I’m reminded of my father, who knows me well and now is getting old. He accompanied me when I broke up, felt puzzled in life or was powerless. I think he also expects that I will get married someday.

In connecting Ruxi’s story with her own Eva makes the film representation seem more reliable and trustworthy. Her father is an example of a supportive parent who gives his daughter freedom and autonomy in arranging her own life, and from her words they appear to have a close parent-child relationship.

I also found one review written from a parent’s perspective that supports this idea of parental transformation, of a parent who does not need a ‘perfect’ daughter but a ‘happy’ daughter on her ‘way to marriage’, one who understands children’s emotional needs and who respects their personal space. G. Liu (2015) writes,

The most touching part in the film is Ruxi’s father’s words above. Our children don’t have to be perfect daughters in others’ eyes. If they feel happy, that’s enough. As mature individuals, they can have their own choices and judgment on the way to marriage. Parents’ wishes are important but not crucial, while our daughters’ happiness is the most considerable one indeed.

Simultaneously, some reviewers were critical of Ruxi’s father as an unrealistic figure. For example, Miss O (2015) writes,

The father in the film is a wonderful parent, but quite few in reality. Few parents would have the patience and understanding like Ruxi’s father. Most of our parents think they know what we need in our lives and if they can accept something, so must we. For example, in parents’ eyes, everyone can accept a blind date or arranged marriage like they did when they were young.
Miss O compares Ruxi’s father with other parents in real life. In her mind, parental transformation is not very common. On the textual level, she uses several negative words to negate the film’s representation, such as ‘quite few’, ‘few parents’. Then she compares Ruxi’s father and her parents, and uses different attitudes to a blind date to show the intergenerational gap that exists in Chinese families. From a discourse aspect, she agrees with most of the content of the film early in the review, such as family conflicts around Ruxi’s marriage. However, she points out that the ‘agreement’ between Ruxi and her parents is an idealistic representation, not common. Miss O’s words convey some sociocultural challenges; although individualisation is occurring and a closer parent-child relation is appearing, at least among the urban middle-class, the intergenerational gap in Chinese families does still exist. Therefore, the transformation of social norms will be slow.

Overall, the representation of Ruxi’s father and other reviewers’ parents’ supportive attitudes reflect ongoing individualisation and social transformation in contemporary China; at the same time, media representations can play a role in accelerating changes to social norms. These changes are good news for ‘leftover’ women because their personal choices are more likely to be respected, they can enjoy closer familial relations, and possess more autonomy regarding marriage timing. However, such transformations do not indicate the full picture as many families still experience intergenerational gaps, and not every ‘leftover’ woman has a supportive parent.

In summary, I have discussed different aspects of ‘leftover’ women’s family and intergenerational ties and find that filial piety and traditional parents occupy a fundamental position in most Chinese families, but the connotation of filial piety and women’s filial strategies are changing. As individuals seek more emotional care from families a more intimate parent-child relationship is emerging in contemporary urban China. The one-child policy contributes to parents’ worries to some extent, yet under the influence of individualisation and modernity, some parents are changing their attitudes towards their daughters. Some Chinese fathers are starting to share children’s emotional matters with mothers, and establish closer relations with their daughters. Additionally, they are trying to understand their daughters and provide them with more space in their personal lives. In the next section, I will examine another important social element in ‘leftover’ women’s lives: their friends and peer support.
3. Friends and peer support in marital issues

Friends are an important part of an individual’s social network, especially for the one-child generation. As they have no siblings, friends accompany and support each other a lot in their personal lives, also in romantic relationships. Previous research finds that an individual’s friendship circle or social network functions as ‘sounding boards’ in a love relationship, providing information about partners’ behaviours (Parks and Adelman, 1983); friends can also affect one’s perception of the state of the love relationship (Parks et al., 1983). Martinussen (2018) demonstrates the significance of women’s friendship in early midlife (late twenties to late forties). Also, she argues that friendships are constructed as necessary ‘bonus entities in relational life’, which are supplementary to one’s long-term sexual partnership and familial relations. In China’s case, under the wide acceptance of the one-child policy, most urban single women born in the 1980s or 1990s are from the one-child generation. When discussing being single or their love lives, their friends and peer support group become a focus point. I only found a small number of Douban reviews mentioning friendship and peer support as inevitable elements in a ‘leftover’ woman’s life. For example, Seven (2012, I Do) mentions that ‘as close friends, we share everything [in daily life] and support each other’. However, women’s friendship and peer support are common topics for ‘leftover’ women’s romantic relationships in all my selected films. Friendship is represented though three approaches:

First, ‘leftover’ women’s friends want to introduce new male friends or arrange blind dates for each other. It is seen as easier for women to accept a date arranged by friends than parents as friends are in the same generation and have similar ideas about marriage or partner selection rules. Men and women can gather some basic information in advance about their would-be date from their friends, then consider meeting up or not. In Desire of the Heart, Yuanzi introduces some single men to Xiaomei and Cong Lin the film, and Yajuan and Su are also introduced by Yajuan’s co-worker. In I Do, Weiwei meets Nianhua at a blind date that is arranged by Xiaoling. Also, in The Last Woman Standing, Ruxi expresses her wishes to help Yu Zhang meet some new single men and shows some men’s pictures to Yu, asking her if she has any interest.
Second, ‘leftover’ women prefer to talk about their romantic relationship issues with their friends and ask for their advice. For instance, in Desire of the Heart, when Cong Lin dates a new boyfriend, she lets her friends meet him to judge whether he is a good man in their eyes. Ying phones her friend for advice because she cannot decide whether to accept premarital sex and cohabitation or not. In I Do, when Weiwei dates Nianhua, she asks for Xiaoling’s advice about whether to develop the relationship or not. Also, in the same film, when Weiwei attends her friend Na’s wedding, they discuss their attitudes to marriage and relationships (I have discussed their conversation in Chapter 6). Briefly, Na shares her ideas about husbands and marriage with Weiwei before her wedding. Finally, in The Last Woman Standing, Ruxi talks with Yu about Sai soon after their first meeting and Yu encourages Ruxi to date him.

Third, ‘leftover’ women support each other and try to protect their friends from hurt. For example, in I Do Xiaoling’s husband, Wei Qian, has an affair when she is pregnant. This is an ironic setting because Xiaoling thinks her marriage is perfect and is busy with Weiwei’s dates and potential marriage. Weiwei finds out about Wei’s affair first, but she does not tell Xiaoling immediately. At Na’s wedding, Weiwei meets the couple:

[Xiaoling accompanies Wei Qian to see Weiwei.]

Wei Qian: Weiwei, I know I was wrong. I vowed to Xiaoling. I will not touch other ladies from now.

Weiwei: [Weiwei slaps him in the face.] If Xiaoling cannot hit you, I will do that for her. Remember your promise!

[Xiaoling hugs Weiwei and cries.]

Their dialogue is quite short, but it contains much information. The dialogue occurs in the bride’s fitting room at Na’s wedding. It is an elaborate scene as a fragile marriage is revealed and saved at the wedding ceremony, which implies that marriage may start with happiness and joy, but not always. As for their conversation, on the textual level, Wei Qian uses short but forceful words to admit his fault and promise he will never cheat again. Weiwei’s slap shows her anger; her sentences are in the future
tense indicating that she will keep an eye on Wei Qian, and support and protect Xiaoling. Xiaoling’s tears reveal she is heart-broken because of her husband’s cheating. Moreover, her hug with Weiwei presents their support to each other. On the discourse level, the conversation happens after Weiwei complains about Wei to Nianhua. Weiwei’s earlier complaint hints at her anger. Their short dialogue implies Xiaoling’s marriage is not perfect, but Xiaoling and Wei would like to face it and solve it efficiently, instead of giving up at once. Furthermore, on the sociocultural level, it shows that ‘leftover’ women’s friendship is closely related to their romantic relationships, even marriage issues. From Weiwei and Xiaoling’s friendship, we can observe that being a friend means always being on each other’s side, but also defending each other or being angry for each other.

To conclude this section, ‘leftover’ women’s friendship is presented linked with their romantic relationships in various ways in the films: finding dates, giving advice, defending each other, etc. An individual’s social network might influence their mate selection. As a wide body of research confirms (Parks and Adelman, 1983; Zhang and Kline, 2009), romantic relationships are not isolated from other relationships. The films show various benefits of having close friends. Zhang and Kline (2009) contest that Chinese people tend to place more weight on family and friends’ opinions of their partner rather than their own ideas. However, individuals also need to manage a triad of relations (self-partner-friend) in their daily lives. For instance, Martinussen (2018) explores that although early midlife women (late twenties to late forties) enjoy friendship benefits, they need to do much work to maintain a close friendship alongside a long-term sexual partnership.

**Discussion and conclusions**

This chapter has discussed representations and readings of different aspects of intergenerational ties and women’s friendship in ‘leftover’ women’s romantic relationships. Besides film representations, I find audience readings also contribute to the production of representations about changing love and marriage culture in China through reviewing the film, critiquing the plots, or sharing their own experiences. Several findings can be drawn from my discussion about the research materials of this
chapter. First, I argue that the younger generation seek a balance between fulfilling parents’ expectations, freedom in personal matters and emotional care in parent-child relations. Their struggles emerge through various stages of parental intervention in ‘leftover’ women’s romantic relationships. Many parents are shown in the films to be eager to introduce some men to their daughter (e.g. by arranging dates). The disagreement between parents and daughters about arranged dates signifies a conflict between traditional parents and an individual’s desire for autonomy in their personal life. Notwithstanding this, most Chinese viewers agree that parents’ approval and opinions are worthwhile and significant determinants when considering a partner. Therefore, the ‘meeting the parents’ moment is a remarkable step in Chinese dating culture. For men and women, meeting the parents is a signal that the couple are developing a serious relationship and links with future marriage plans. Getting parents’ approval brings benefits in terms of a more stable and supported relationship. Respecting parents’ opinions also links to a family’s influence on their daughter with regards to developing or ending a relationship. What is more, ‘leftover’ women hope to receive support and understanding from parents. As Nini (2016) writes in her review of The Last Woman Standing, ‘the only thing we need is understanding’.

Second, I find that representations of parents’ attitudes towards their single daughter are changing from being worried to expressing support. At the same time, intergenerational relations are shifting from principles of filial piety and obligation, or obedience, towards mutual care and a more intimate parent-child relationship. As a one-child generation, parents worry that their daughters will not be taken good care of if they pass away without any siblings or a husband. Simultaneously, we find a group of parents are supportive of their daughter’s decisions in love under the influence of social transformations. Although some reviewers think it is too idealistic to have a father or mother like Ruxi’s father, I find some support for such a parental figure existing in reality on the Douban Movie website. This media representation of a new parenting style conveys a message that the intergenerational gap is narrowing, and a more intimate familial relationship is forming.

Third, while I agree that gendered familial communication is widespread in China it is worth recognising that the image of the “dictatorial” father is transforming into a softer figure. This new father figure is concerned about his daughter’s emotional and
social life, as well as her love relationships, as exemplified by Ruxi’s father. Gendered familial communication may be transforming into a shared interaction between parents and daughters.

Fourth, friends and peer support are represented as important to a ‘leftover’ woman’s love life. They support each other and get involved in one another’s romantic relationships. ‘Leftover’ women prefer listening to friends’ suggestions about a relationship rather than their parents, and always support each other in various ways, such as finding dates, giving advice, defending each other. As mentioned in the existing literature, although not represented in the films or mentioned in the reviews, women need to manage a triad of relationships (friends, family and their partner) in everyday life. Martinussen (2018) summarises that ‘women’s friendships are constructed as important, but ancillary, in the quest for fulfilment in personal life’. Overall, parents and friends play inevitable roles in ‘leftover’ women’s romantic relationships, which do not exist in isolation from others.

In conclusion, films and reviews (UGC) reflect the continuing changes in Chinese love and marriage culture, which foretell a more hopeful future for parent-child relationships; additionally, they also hint at other ways for a woman to manage her relationships with her partner, family, and friends. On the one hand, the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon reflects conflicts between traditional, Confucian family values, individualisation and rapid social transformations in contemporary urban China. On the other hand, widespread discussions and media representations of ‘leftover’ women cause and accelerate future social changes, such as leaving individual’s more agency in personal matters, further mutual emotional care between parents and their adult children, and the father’s changing role in parent-child communication.
Chapter 8 Conclusions

Introduction

A starting point for this research was to discuss media representations and audience readings of Chinese ‘leftover’ women. More than four years have passed since I first searched online for the term ‘leftover’ women (*sheng nü* in Chinese). Searching again today, some of the articles I saw then are still on the first page of the search results. However, compared with their online presence in 2015 the popularity of ‘leftover’ women topics has decreased, although they have not disappeared. Additionally, there are fewer films using the term ‘leftover’ women. It is thus possible that the key moment of the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon has now passed, although this of course does not make it any less important as a focus of research. At the same time, researching the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon has enabled me to analyse wider sociocultural changes in gender relations, love, marriage and intimacy that remain very central in urban China today. It has also raised important questions about the tensions between individual choice and wider, collective traditions, issues at the heart of debates about modernity, individualisation and consumerism in contemporary China. In this final chapter, I review the main findings of my thesis and reiterate my answers to the research questions. I then illustrate the implications of my findings and the contribution to knowledge that I am claiming. In the final part of the chapter, I address the limitations of my thesis, and the prospects for further research.

1. Main findings of the thesis

The central focus of this research has been to discuss how ‘leftover’ women are constructed and read in Chinese media, and through that endeavour I have also been able to analyse changing gender relations, love, marriage and intimacy in contemporary China. In the introduction to the thesis, I nominated four overarching research questions to explore:

1. How are ‘leftover’ women represented in contemporary Chinese film?
2. How are these representations read by the audience?
3. What do these representations and readings tell us about gender relations and gender norms in contemporary China?

4. To what extent are these representations and readings linked with wider social change in China?

I now delineate the main findings of the thesis with respect to the complex aspects of the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon and related sociocultural context, referring to my research questions which underpinned the whole study.

1.1 Representations and readings of Chinese ‘leftover’ women

The first two research questions are investigated together, through genre analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA). Unlike existing studies focused on different types of ‘leftover’ women (Chapter 2), I recognise that every ‘leftover’ woman in the media and society is complex and hard to divide into clear groups. Therefore, I discuss ‘leftover’ women beyond typology by investigating their issues of singledom as social phenomena. At the same time, the representations of ‘leftover’ women in the selected films do conform to the concept in the literature, in that they are midlife professional women (late twenties to forties) with a good sociocultural status in urban China. It is also interesting to note that the age limit for ‘leftover’ women seems to be changing. Considering the films sequentially, In Desire of the Heart (2008) Ying Zhang is afraid to be called a ‘leftover’ woman when she is 28; in I Do (2012) Weiwei Tang makes a joke of herself as a ‘leftover’ woman when she is 33; while more recently in The Last Woman Standing (2015) Ruxi Sheng is constructed as a 35-year-old single woman bearing much marital pressure. I will now summarise some similarities of Chinese ‘leftover’ women romcoms before focusing in more detail on ‘leftover’ women’s self-identities, choices in love, and intergenerational and social ties with family and friends.

In Chapter 4, I examined three selected films through genre analysis to summarise some characteristics of the Chinese ‘leftover’ woman romcom genre. I argued that Chinese ‘leftover’ women romcoms continue the conventions of Hollywood romcoms in terms of visual characteristics and narrative patterns, while attaching more distinctive Chinese characteristics to them. Chinese love and marriage traditions are
applied to the visual characteristics of these films, such as traditional red weddings. Also, concerning narrative patterns, the ‘work or love’ puzzle has been replaced by tight relations between work and love; family interventions become a key element in ‘leftover’ women’s romantic love rather than being placed in marginal areas; and happy endings have alternative representations and understandings—the films do not all end with a wedding ceremony. Thus, single women are represented as enjoying more freedom and have more confidence and autonomy in love, which can also be understood as a “happy ending”. However, the ideologies of ‘leftover’ women’s romcoms do not deviate from Hollywood traditions. Romantic love, heterosexual monogamy, consumption and gender relations are still key elements in Chinese romcoms. When considering the constructions of Chinese ‘leftover’ women in romcoms, I organised my analysis around three central themes: self-identities, choices in love and intergenerational and social ties with family and friends.

1.1.1 Self-identities

I have addressed the complexities of ‘leftover’ women’s self-identities through an investigation of representations of their singlehood and women’s emotions about and understandings of their singlehood, in the selected films and UGC (online reviews). In Chapter 5, I argue that ‘leftover’ women are constructed with ambivalent emotions towards being single and being in love. Personal ageing issues, familial stress and social pressure contribute towards women’s anxiety; anxiety that women’s ageing makes their being ‘leftover’ more likely is a central theme of the films and UGC, alongside self- and family-shame about not being married. Moreover, the gendered double standard of ageing and gender norms mean that while young women are more likely to choose their husband, older women are represented as more likely to be chosen, which intensifies ‘leftover’ women’s marriage anxiety (see Section 1.2). However, ‘leftover’ women are also enjoying being independent, professional women and represented as appreciating the benefits of being single, particularly in the later films. In summary, ‘leftover’ women suffer from personal, familial and social pressure when facing marriage issues, yet also enjoy their independence and aspire to freedom and autonomy in their love lives.
When questioning ‘leftover’ women’s potential reasons for marrying late or being single, I find education and work are represented as significant elements. Based on my analysis of films and UGC, I find that the younger generations—especially born after the one-child policy and impacted by individualisation—enjoy more resources and prefer obtaining, at least, a bachelor’s degree before entering the job market. Many individuals (men and women) also prioritise work over love to obtain a better position or promotion, and in the process postpone marriage. So the representations in the films conform with existing research about women’s employment affecting their marriage timing (Yang and Yen, 2014). They also confirm to some extent Yoshida’s (2017) idea that work may limit marriage prospects. However, at the same time workplaces and working events are represented as sites of romantic possibilities for single women. This complicates the ‘work or love’ principle; women seek both work and love in modern China. Professional single women over 30 are not lonely, worthless or empty ‘leftover’ women, but busy investing in their education and professional lives.

Most of the audience reviews concur with the experiences of ‘leftover’ women shown in the films, such as single women’s ageing anxiety, shame and multifarious pressure. ‘Ageing’, ‘anxious’ and ‘helplessness’ are common words in the reviews describing women’s emotions about being single. Earlier reviewers of Desire of the Heart write that Yajuan’s love story is an uncommon one because it is too late to divorce and seek a new lover for a woman in her fifties. However, I also find supporters for Yajuan’s actions who consider her as a model for other single or divorced women over 50 to learn from. More recent reviews support the idea that ageing issues should not be an obstacle in love, and single women should have more freedom to choose a partner; they express that getting old is normal and should never be an unacceptable problem in romantic love.

Ideas of singlehood have transformed from feelings of worry to pride in recent UGC; an occurrence which concurs with the films’ representations and implies a future trend. Taking pride in being an independent woman belies the idea that ‘leftover’ women are to be pitied, or unattractive, helpless victims of the marriage market. While anxious moments are certainly represented, the films and UGC are constructing and circulating a positive single woman image: one who enjoys being single, independent and anticipating love, as well as having choices in love.
1.1.2 Choices in love

There is no doubt that the idea of pure chemistry between couples, ‘love at first sight’ and ‘meet cutes’ feature in the films and impact ‘leftover’ women’s love decisions; at the same time their actual romantic choice is far from based on passion or pure emotionality. Referring to Illouz’s (2012) theory of the architecture of love, individuals’ romantic choices, expectations and practices are impacted by complex cultural components which vie with ideas of pure romance or passion when choosing their ideal partner. How choices in love are categorised is ‘one of the most fruitful ways to understand the transformation of love in modernity’ (Illouz, 2012: 18). In general, considering the remote consequences of one’s decisions, cultural norms and processes of consultation with family and friends are represented as significant components in ‘leftover’ women’s choices in love.

First, when considering the remote consequences of their decisions, women in the films place firm significance on a man’s social context (such as economic wealth, the capability for companionship, concerns about having and raising children, and family background). An ideal partner does not need to be a billionaire, but women are represented as preferring a husband who is at least equal to them in socioeconomic status. This element concurs with Karandashev’s (2017: 251) statement that desiring love does not run counter to material benefits. Second, cultural norms continue to effect individuals’ romantic relationships. Although pursuing freedom and autonomy are significant to ‘leftover’ women’s love lives, some women remain burdened by traditions or cultural norms; for instance, women’s worries in an older woman-younger man relationship and their uncertainty about premarital cohabitation. Third, direction/consultation is another inevitable element in ‘leftover’ women’s romantic choices. The blind date is a common example of social direction and consultation in love and is also it is represented as a common practice for ‘leftover’ women to “make progress” in love. Various types of blind date are represented in the films, including dates arranged by parents; in consultation with friends and through digital technologies (online dating). Representations and audience discussions on Douban Movie of all three films suggest the blind date’s popularity in urban China; however, this social practice is also criticised for lacking privacy and reliability.
Audience reviews on Douban Movie support the idea that love needs a material base, emotional intimacy, companionship, suitable family backgrounds and compromise. Many reviewers point out that Cong and Xiang’s love story in *Desire of the Heart* is rare and nearly impossible in reality because of their huge economic gap and incompatible family backgrounds. Moreover, despite blind dates being a common narrative device and dating practice in the films, the audience has contrary opinions towards blind dates. Supporters think that blind dates are a good and efficient way to meet new friends. However, there are more opponents than supporters of this dating method. A list of shortcomings includes too much exposure of personal matters to family members or friends; a lack of privacy, romance, autonomy and reliability; and that they bear more social pressure than a ‘meet cute’.

### 1.1.3 Intergenerational and social ties with family and friends

The last aspect of ‘leftover’ women’s representations concerns multifarious intergenerational and social ties with family and friends. These intergenerational ties include familial interventions, relationships and communications related to ‘leftover’ women’s love stories. Based on my analysis of the research data, ‘leftover’ women seek individuality in familial communications as well as a balance between fulfilling parental expectations and finding more autonomy and space in their personal lifestyles, and in the parent-child relationship. On the one hand, ‘leftover’ women respect parents and agree that parental approval is necessary in a serious relationship; on the other hand, the ‘unwilling blind date’ presents a conflict between traditional parents and individualised daughters who desire autonomy in personal matters. At the same time, ‘leftover’ women desire more emotional care and understanding in their parent-child relationship. I propose that parents’ attitudes towards single daughters are transforming from being worried to being supportive. Although this transformation is not presented in many media products (of the study), it is still a notable shift. When I investigated the effects of peer support and friends in ‘leftover’ women’s romantic relationships this revealed that, compared with parents, ‘leftover’ women prefer to accept friends’ advice and arrangements for dates. Women’s friendship and support involves intervening in each other’s romantic relationships and protecting each other from hurt. The research is more about single women’s friendships, but also includes
some married friends. This finding provides some inspiration for potential further research, such as how to maintain a good friendship and love relationship at the same time.

The audience share some similar experiences in their reviews, such as parents’ interventions, and parents’ worries and support. Most of the reviews agree that representations of ‘leftover’ women’s parents reflect their real family experiences. Marriage issues are seen as family issues rather than personal choice in contemporary China. However, some reviews indicate that the compromise between Ruxi’s father and Ruxi in *The Last Woman Standing* shows an optimistic future for familial relations, even if it is unrealistic in many Chinese families at the moment. Some reviewers write that although a closer parent-child relation is appearing, it is still a slow ongoing social transformation. Hence, the films provide a model for the audience to learn about new representations of parent-child relations.

Overall, ‘leftover’ women in Chinese films and UGC are represented as elite middle-class women with mixed emotions about singlehood and expectations for future love. Their choices in love are impacted by sociocultural factors rather than passion or pure chemistry; simultaneously, Chinese ‘leftover’ women’s love stories are tightly connected with intergenerational and social ties with family and friends. The discursive representations of ‘leftover’ women convey messages that a new, ideal middle-class single woman is emerging in urban China: a wealthy, professional, well-educated, independent woman with much autonomy, who leads an individualised life concerning romantic love and familial relations but is subject to family and societal pressures at the same time.

### 1.2 Gender relations and gender norms

Analysing representations of ‘leftover’ women also provides a method to study gender relations and gender norms in contemporary China. Some traditional gender norms continue to impact individuals’ lives. For instance, the gendered double standard of ageing and gender norms that young women can choose their husband while older women will be chosen, intensify ‘leftover’ women’s marrying anxiety (Chapter 5).
Men are inclined to ‘marry down’ in age and place women’s youth and beauty as significant elements (England and McClintock, 2009). Even successful professional women with high socioeconomic mobility treat ageing as an obstacle in love (Ji, 2015). However, several older women-younger men relationships in the films rupture those norms and refute the stereotype that older women are unattractive to men. Also, men’s ageing issues or marriage pressure is ignored in the research samples which provides another direction for further research.

Representations of Chinese femininities in the films and UGC attach new characteristics to romantic love (Chapters 4 and 6). First, being ‘gentle and soft/wenrou’ is no longer women’s only characteristic in gender relations as women are given more agency and confidence in a love relationship, rather than being represented only as obedient to, or weaker, than men. Instead the characteristics of a charming single woman are enriched: she is professional, confident and independent—a glamorous woman in contemporary China. Second, instead of being subservient or speechless in a heterosexual relationship, most of the women escape this cultural norm and are shown as having agency in their love relationships. For instance, they can control the pace of their love relationships, not just follow the man’s lead. Third, representations of ‘leftover’ women shift from seeking a partner to take care of them (Yajuan) and/or relying on a partner for economic or social security (Ying, Xiaomei, Na) in the earliest film, to that of an independent and confident single woman who can take care of herself and does not need a love relationship to complete her identity (Weiwei and Ruxi) in more recent ones. Also, I think that ‘leftover’ women are looking for partners to share emotions, pressure or responsibilities with, rather than seeking a person to rely on (Ruxi).

Meanwhile, constructions of masculinities in the films also embrace new features (Chapter 4). On the one hand, men are not always represented as the “bread-winner” or the “supporter” in a romantic relationship; in contrast, several men are constructed as younger or in a lower socioeconomic class than their female partner, or would-be partner. On the other hand, a new ideal image appears for men, constructed as a caring, considerate, sharing partner espousing an egalitarian version of masculinity in 21st century China, which concurs with Hansen-Miller and Gill’s (2011) idea of the ‘new man’.
In Chinese familial lives, filmic representations of gendered familial communication have started to change (Chapter 7). I agree with Evans’ (2010) argument that gendered familial communication widely exists in China; at the same time, I argue that the father’s image and role is changing. The traditional dictatorial father who only cares about children’s “big issues” is transforming to a softer individual who is concerned about his daughter’s emotions, social matters and love relationships. When facing daughters’ romantic relationships, the films and UGC show that gendered familial communication is starting to transform into more joint communication and shared work between parents and this new representation of a softer father may contribute to shifts of Chinese masculinities in familial relations.

Overall, I argue that the investigation of ‘leftover’ women in Chinese films and UGC shows that gender relations and gender norms in romantic love and familial relations are changing. Fixed stereotypes about being a woman/man are decreasing, and more possibilities are emerging in gender relations alongside alternative understandings of Chinese femininities and masculinities.

1.3 The ‘leftover’ women phenomenon and wider social changes

The last research question emerged as it became clear that my analysis of ‘leftover’ women films and UGC was enabling me to address wider sociocultural changes in urban China. I will discuss three aspects of these changes: 1) dating, love and marriage, 2) intergenerational ties and family intimacy, 3) modernity, individualisation, and consumerism.

Representations and readings of different ‘leftover’ women’s love stories provide some traditional continuities, but more changes and new possibilities emerge concerning dating, love and marriage in urban China (Chapter 6). First of all, I argue that even though “pure love” is seen as preferable by some characters and the audience, *men dang hu dui* (compatible family backgrounds) remains a significant factor in women’s decisions about love and marriage. Meanwhile, the concept of *men dang hu dui* is broadening, from being only focused on family background to incorporating individuals’ personalities and value. Thus, a *men dang hu dui* marriage has shifted to
convey more of a compromise or an agreement between two individuals, rather than a combination of two similar families. Second, while the marriage pattern of women “marrying up” and men “marrying down” still exists in urban China, based on my analysis of recent film reviews, I contest that there is an emerging trend for individuals to prefer more “equal” relationships. Here women and men share their responsibilities, happiness and vulnerabilities, in both emotional and economic capacities, and tolerate and solve their conflicts together. Third, the blind date is a perfect example to represent the tensions between tradition and change in Chinese dating practices. Blind dates include traditional patterns (e.g. consultation with family and friends) that are horizontal and usually occur within an individual’s social circle, and also the modern blind date (matchmaker consultations and online dating), which is both horizontal and vertical, where desirability is simultaneously defined in more individualised terms (Illouz, 2012: 52). According to film representations, the authentic accidental meeting is seen as more effective and ideal, compared with blind dates; however, a ‘meet cute’ is hard to predict or workable for women seeking marriage. Fourth, even though some Chinese women may still feel constrained and insecure because of traditional cultural norms, gender roles or age differences in love, representations of the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon provide new ideas and possibilities for being a couple, such as an older woman-younger man relationship, and a higher socioeconomic woman with a lower socioeconomic man. Finally, I propose that analysing representations and readings of ‘leftover’ women provide the audience with new possibilities and understandings in the execution of gender relations. For instance, men can learn about romantic relationships through women’s close conversation (Chapter 6) and also—as my answer to the third research question—alternative understandings of masculinities and femininities are emerging in contemporary China.

Researching the Chinese ‘leftover’ women phenomenon inspired me to investigate changes in intergenerational and social ties, and Chinese family relations. The Chinese younger generation still struggles with fulfilling parental expectations while they desire more freedom in personal matters, especially love decisions. However, I argue that the films and the reviews suggest that the intergenerational gap is narrowing in contemporary urban China as children seek mutual care and emotional intimacy with their parents. Meanwhile, familial relationships are shifting from notions of filial piety, obligation and obedience, towards mutual care and more intimate parent-child
relations. Moreover, a softer father is replacing the traditional “dictatorial” father in some Chinese familial communications. This father figure cares for his daughter’s emotions and provides support for her daughter’s love decisions. Finally, friendship occupies a necessary position in single and married women’s lives. Being friends means to help each other in daily life and to protect each other from hurt. The films and UGC reflect enduring changes in Chinese families and foretell a more hopeful future for the parent-child relationship, but also hint at other ways for women to nurture relationships with their family, partner and friends. Widespread representations in film and UGC about ‘leftover’ women and their families may also accelerate future social changes. For example, leaving individuals more freedom in love and marriage matters, furthering mutual emotional care between parents and their adult children, fostering fathers’ more gentle roles in familial communication, and leading to more intimate familial relationships.

Researching the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon has provided new ways to examine the connections between modernity, individualisation, consumerism and love in urban China. Illouz (2012: 18–9) states that love choices are one of the most fruitful ways to understand changes of love in modernity; and choice is one of the most significant cultural and institutional vectors to shape modern selfhood. Consequently, the analysis of people’s romantic choices is crucial to address love as an experience of modernity. I argue, through my analysis of ‘leftover’ women’s choices in love, that Chinese love and marriage culture have experienced many transformations in modernity. For example, the partner searching process is becoming more and more individualistic and complex; the pairing process in dating embraces generalised competitiveness; emotions and personal values are transforming to commodities in the love consultation process, such as online dating, etc. Meanwhile, the impact of individualisation can be found everywhere in individuals’ personal matters, love stories and marriage choices. Picking a partner involves complex considerations because it is may be the only choice an individual can make regarding his/her legal ties. The ‘leftover’ women phenomenon reflects collisions between traditional Confucian values, the impact of individualisation and rapid social transformations in contemporary urban China. An ideal woman is constructed as an independent woman who has agency and autonomy in her lifestyle, partner selections, romantic relationships and familial relations. Representations and readings of Chinese ‘leftover’ women support the idea that
individuals seek more individuality and freedom over their existing marital or family obligations (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Yan, 2010).

Finally, I propose that there is a tight relationship between self-identity, romance and consumerism in contemporary China. Love stories in the selected ‘leftover’ women romcoms include different associations between ‘leftover’ women figures, their love and the consumption of goods (Chapter 4). This association concurs with Schreiber’s (2011) statement that a woman’s identity is represented as inseparable from her purchase of goods, services and experiences. Consumerism is an inevitable element of the analysis of marriage markets in the thesis, such as online blind dating in I Do. Online dating stratifies the marriage market and divides it into different niches. It also transforms individuals into packaged products ‘competing with others on an open-ended market regulated by the law of supply and demand’; therefore, consumerism is presented as improving the quality of the ‘romantic bargain one will get’ (Illouz, 2007: 86-88). Meanwhile, consumerism attaches economic factors to people’s value. In these films romantic relationships are not only structured within the market but have also been transferred to commodities (Illouz, 2007: 91).

To summarise, I argue that the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon and its related media representations are at the intersection of the tensions between asserting individual choice, seeking individuality and autonomy (in love prospects, love choice, familial relations), and following Confucian traditions. Researching the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon has provided an approach through which to examine wider changes, such as modernity, individualisation and consumerism, in 21st century urban China.

2. Contributions of the thesis

This thesis contributes to the knowledge, theories and methodologies of film and audience research, contemporary China studies, family and marriage studies, gender studies, and the empirical and theoretical studies of ‘leftover’ women. Some of this knowledge contribution has been considered in the previous section: an analysis of media representations and UGC has allowed me to evaluate the literature on ‘leftover’
women, gender relations and gender norms, love, marriage and intimacy, and familial relations in new and interesting ways.

Apart from the contributions to knowledge elaborated on in the main findings (Chapters 4 to 7), this thesis also extends sociological research by situating discussions in the Chinese film industry and UGC studies, as well as including audience readings as media representations. Existing research has mainly focused on particular aspects, mostly commercial factors, such as film ratings or box-office revenue. Meanwhile discussions about the interconnections between audience readings and social transformations are limited: for example, the influence of audience readings on future love and marriage culture. Through a multi-dimensional approach, my research contributes towards addressing this research gap by investigating media content (films) and UGC (Douban reviews) and associating them with wider social practices and discourses. These include love and marriage culture in urban China, the intimate relationship between parents and their adult daughters, and the changing understanding of what constitutes the ideal single woman.

Addressing the theoretical contribution of my thesis, my study uses Hollywood romcom patterns to investigate Chinese romcoms and summarises continuities and distinctions between a ‘leftover’ women romcom and a traditional Hollywood romcom (Chapter 4). Through a discussion of masculinities and femininities in the context of urban China, and gendered family communications, this thesis enriches our understanding of gender and gender norms in action. What is more, the study contributes to a better understanding of Chinese love, marriage and intimacy culture. I agree with the empirical research stating that a partner concurring with men dang hu dui is seen as both popular and practical (Carter and Duncan, 2018; Mu and Xie, 2014; Qi and Niu, 2012). However, I also propose that men dang hu dui is a broadening concept that is shifting from a sole focus on families’ socioeconomic status to focus also on individuals’ socioeconomic status and personalities. More egalitarian and sharing romantic relationships are forming and becoming popular in urban China (Chapter 6). The thesis also enriches Chinese family studies, through the analysis of intergenerational ties in a ‘leftover’ woman’s family, I substantiate the argument that the parent-child relationship involves intimacy and desires for ‘emotional expressivity’, accompanied with traditions of filial piety (Evans, 2010; Yan, 2003).
concur with Evans’ (2010) idea that gendered familial communications are widespread in China; while I argue that the traditional “dictatorial” father is being replaced by a softer father figure who concerns himself with his daughter’s emotions in some urban Chinese families (Chapter 7).

Overall, my research suggests that new romantic relationships and more intimate familial relations are forming in contemporary China. I agree with Lakoff and Johnson’s (2003: 142) statement in *Metaphors we live by* that ‘love is a collaborative work of art’ and love should allow lovers themselves to decide what love looks like. I developed Lakoff and Johnson’s idea to argue that romantic and familial love involve caring and shared responsibilities. Women expect a caring partner with egalitarian values to share pressure and responsibilities. Meanwhile, these women are eager to form more intimate relationships of mutual care with their parents (in familial love).

From a methodological standpoint, I have combined media content and audience readings to obtain a comprehensive image of the ‘leftover’ woman phenomenon, how the existence of ‘leftover’ women relates to the wider sociocultural context, and how it might be provoking social change. In Chinese ‘leftover’ women media studies, there has been a lack of analysis of representations and readings of ‘leftover’ women, so my thesis has methodological implications for future qualitative and quantitative research.

### 3. Limitations and further research

My research is situated in Chinese media studies and UGC analysis. However, the dynamic and complex readings of the audience receptions cannot be entirely captured. This and other limitations of the research are discussed below.

First, it was not my intention to generalise the ‘leftover’ women examined in the selected research samples as a fixed category that applies to all ‘leftover’ women or single women in China. The experiences or daily lives of a ‘leftover’ woman might vary over time. Even simultaneously, the experiences of ‘leftover’ women in big cities, such as Beijing or Shanghai, can differ from those in smaller cities. Also, a middle-class elite single woman may hold differing perspectives from a working-class single
woman. Additionally, I would like to avoid reproducing the negative term ‘leftover women’; however, there are no other suitable words to describe elite single women with good educational attainment and a well-paid job in urban China.

Second, my research is mainly about ‘leftover’ women in media products, women’s attitudes to a romantic relationship, women’s experiences in Chinese families and women’s same-gender friendships. Male figures, single men’s experiences and men’s marriage issues are absent, to some extent. Additionally, ‘leftover’ woman in the offline world need to be analysed to provide an integrated study.

Third, film reviews on Douban Movie are part of my research samples, however, reviews can be added any time after a film is released. I have gathered all reviews from the oldest to September 2019, but it is difficult for me to include the most recent ones if they were added after finishing the research. Moreover, I have used online film reviews to explain audience readings of ‘leftover’ women in films rather than conducting interviews. Alternative and more complicated answers to the research questions might emerge if interviews were also combined with CDA. Further research might also interview Chinese elite single women and men about their perceptions of singlehood, gender relations, love, marriage and intimacy in urban China. In addition, the thesis leaves the door open for related studies in other sectors. For example, as mentioned in Chapter 4, commercial culture impacts individuals’ romantic love in modern China, and I found that familial relations are becoming more intimate, however, little research addresses how consumerism impacts parent-child relations in contemporary China. It would be worth conducting further research around social network sites, UGC and relationships in order to examine the influence of consumerism on familial relations. Moreover, I analysed different women’s friendships in Chapter 7 and it would be worthwhile to conduct more analysis on friendships among different groups of women, such as the friendship between single women, single women and married women, and married women. Additionally, how women maintain a love relationship and, at the same time, a good quality friendship, merits further discussion.

Recently, much media coverage has replaced the term ‘leftover’ women with ‘single women’ or ‘unmarried women’, thus reducing the negative impact of the terminology.
This shift may reflect an official change in the Chinese government’s position and/or the effect of feminist analysis critiquing the term. Instead of criticising unmarried women, current discussions focus more on explaining the reasons why women are unmarried, representing family attitudes to this phenomenon, and displaying single women’s lives in a more neutral and balanced way. Optimistically speaking, with decreasing media representations of ‘leftover women’, more intimate familial relationships and more critical discussions about Chinese marriage trends and different lifestyles, single women’s anxieties and tensions with families may be relieved to some extent. This may make the term ‘leftover women’ a thing of the past; however, traditions and sociocultural changes alongside the ‘leftover’ women phenomenon never cease, and keep influencing Chinese individuals and Chinese families. I would be delighted to see the term ‘leftover’ women consigned to history if it meant that women had agency and autonomy in their personal lives, and there was no discrimination based on age or being single. It is my hope that this thesis might serve as a catalyst to change the situation of everyday Chinese woman for the better.
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**Appendix 1. A list of Douban Movie reviewers’ pseudonyms**

*Desire of the Heart 2008*

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*I Do 2012*

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*The Last Woman Standing 2015*

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Appendix 2. Ethical approval

Extract from upgrade document, May 2016

ETHICAL ISSUES

The research will follow BSA guidelines on ethics, paying special attention to anonymity, privacy and confidentiality. The audience comments data are all available on public internet sites and it is assumed that those posting are aware that others will be able to access and process their comments, including analysing them. However, given potential sensitivity in the Chinese political economy, all the posts will be treated with strict confidentiality. Many participants use a nickname on ‘Douban movie’ website and most of those names are not their real names but may still be familiar to others. In order to protect their privacy, I will create pseudonyms for their nicknames and use the pseudonym in my research to avoid any potentially identifying information disclosure.

This is the main ethical issues to address, but I have also been thinking about the potential for my research to ‘reify’ and reproduce the negative ‘leftover’ women term. So as the research proceeds, I will consider using another non-stigmatizing term to describe the women, at least in part.

Ethical approval, June 2016 (screenshot from the examiner’s feedback)

Have ethical considerations been adequately addressed by the student?

Yes

Reviewer Signatures