

“Leftover Women” on Social Media in China: A Text Mining Approach (“Wanita Lebihan” dalam Media Sosial di China: Pendekatan Berbantuan Korpus)

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have primarily examined media and public representations of women labelled as “leftover women”, while comparatively less attention has been given to how women negotiate this label and construct their identities through social media self-narratives. To address this gap, this study extends the feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) framework by incorporating positive discourse analysis (PDA) to analyse self-narratives posted by women who use or negotiate the label “leftover women”. After posts retrieved using the search term “剩女” were manually filtered to include those that referred to the authors’ own personal experiences in relation to the label, the dataset finally consisted of 111 first-person posts (23,097 Chinese characters). Text mining, specifically co-occurrence network analysis conducted in KH Coder (version 3.07), was used to identify recurrent lexical patterns. These computational patterns were then interpreted through close reading of concordance contexts, with attention to gendered evaluation. The analysis identifies three interrelated themes: “the KPI-ization of life”, “life with weak ties”, and “from being evaluated to self-recovery”. These findings diverge from traditional media portrayals that depict “leftover women” as highly accomplished women who actively choose singlehood because of their exceptional qualities. Theoretically, the study extends the FCDA framework by incorporating PDA to examine gendered discourses while highlighting women’s agency in negotiating, resisting, and redefining the label “leftover women”. Methodologically, it also demonstrates the value of text mining for analysing short and fragmented social media texts and contributes to broader discussions of the links between gendered expectations, intimate relationships, women’s lived experiences, and contemporary marriage and fertility trends in China.

Keywords: Feminist critical discourse analysis; Gender discourse; Leftover women; RedNote; Self-narratives; Text mining approach

ABSTRAK

Kajian terdahulu yang meneliti representasi wanita yang dilabel sebagai “wanita lebihan” dalam media dan wacana awam. Namun begitu, perhatian yang diberikan terhadap cara wanita merundingkan label ini dan membina identiti mereka melalui naratif sendiri di media sosial masih agak terhad. Bagi mengisi jurang ini, kajian ini memperluas kerangka analisis wacana kritis feminis (FCDA) dengan menggabungkannya dengan analisis wacana positif (PDA) untuk menganalisis naratif sendiri yang dimuat naik oleh wanita yang menggunakan atau merundingkan label “wanita lebihan”. Setelah hantaran yang diperoleh menggunakan kata carian “剩女” ditapis secara manual bagi memilih hantaran yang merujuk pengalaman peribadi penulis berkaitan label tersebut, set data akhir terdiri daripada 111 hantaran dalam sudut pandang orang pertama (23,097 aksara bahasa Cina). Perlombongan teks, khususnya analisis jaringan ko-kejadian yang dijalankan menggunakan KH Coder (versi 3.07), digunakan untuk mengenal pasti pola leksikal yang berulang. Pola pengkomputeran ini kemudiannya ditafsirkan melalui pembacaan teliti terhadap konteks konkordans dengan memberikan perhatian kepada penilaian berasaskan gender. Analisis ini mengenal pasti tiga tema yang saling berkait, iaitu “KPI-isasi kehidupan”, “kehidupan dengan ikatan sosial yang lemah” dan “daripada dinilai kepada pemulihan diri”. Dapatan ini berbeza daripada gambaran tradisional media yang menggambarkan “wanita lebihan” sebagai wanita berprestasi tinggi yang memilih untuk hidup membujang secara

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aktif disebabkan keistimewaan mereka. Dari segi teori, kajian ini memperluas kerangka FCDA dengan menggabungkan PDA untuk meneliti wacana gender, di samping menyerlahkan agensi wanita dalam merundingkan, menentang dan mentakrifkan semula label “wanita lebihan”. Dari segi metodologi, kajian ini turut menunjukkan nilai perlombongan teks dalam menganalisis teks media sosial yang pendek dan terpecah-pecah serta menyumbang kepada perbincangan yang lebih luas tentang hubungan antara jangkaan gender, hubungan intim, pengalaman hidup wanita dan trend perkahwinan serta kesuburan semasa di China.

Kata kunci: Analisis wacana kritis feminis; wacana gender; wanita lebihan; RedNote; naratif sendiri; pendekatan perlombongan teks

INTRODUCTION

Marriage patterns in China are undergoing a marked transformation. The mean age at first marriage rose from 24.89 years in 2010 to 28.67 years in 2020, an increase of 3.78 years over a decade (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Alongside this trend, women who remain unmarried beyond the age of 27 are often labelled “leftover women” (Li, 2023; Yu, 2019). The phenomenon is linked not only to later marriage but also to the rise of neoliberalism in China (Li, 2023). This shift has been accompanied by the growing presence of highly educated, financially independent, and self-reliant women (Luo, 2017; Stern, 2012). Compared with earlier generations, these women have greater autonomy over their own lives, and their financial and psychological independence has contributed to the increasing number of unmarried Chinese women in professional occupations (To, 2013; Wang & Abbott, 2013). Yet they are expected to be independent and financially self-sufficient while also conforming to traditional gender norms as wives and mothers, producing a clear role conflict (Gui, 2020). In contemporary China, partnership is still widely regarded as essential to a good and fulfilling life, a view shaped in part by Confucian thought that upholds patriarchy (DePaulo, 2023; Wang & Abbott, 2013). Patriarchal culture thus often attributes a woman’s continued singlehood in her late twenties, especially when she pursues a career, to her excessive expectations of a marriage partner (To, 2013), portraying her as inferior or deficient (DePaulo, 2023). The media further use the stigmatising term “leftover women” to represent highly educated career women who marry later, embedding this patriarchal ideology in media-based identity construction (To, 2013).

Previous studies have primarily focused on how women labelled as “leftover women” are socially and discursively constructed or have examined their experiences through structured interviews that may not fully capture women’s own self-narratives (see Anis Nadiah, 2024; Ji, 2015; Yu, 2019). As a result, insufficient attention has been paid to how this marginalised group actively resists dominant narratives, constructs its own identities, and negotiates societal pressures and stereotypes. Therefore, investigating how this group negotiates, resists, or redefines such labels is important. Without examining women’s own discursive practices, our understanding of the phenomenon remains incomplete. In this context, social media platforms emerge as crucial spaces where these women can express themselves freely, share experiences, and form communities outside traditional media frameworks (Nartey, 2023).

Analysing social media discourse offers a more complete understanding of their lived experiences and self-representation strategies that conventional research methods may miss. By analysing the self-expression of women who use or negotiate the label “leftover women” on social media, this study provides a valuable complement to traditional representation studies based on news discourse and offers a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of the phenomenon. To fill these research gaps and develop a more comprehensive understanding of the social and

cultural mechanisms underlying the “leftover women” phenomenon, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the main themes surrounding the self-narratives of women who use or negotiate the label “leftover women”?

RQ2: How are the identified themes discursively constructed, and what broader social practices do they reflect?

LITERATURE REVIEW

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON “LEFTOVER WOMEN”

In recent years, the phenomenon of “leftover women” has attracted widespread social attention, becoming an important research topic in the fields of journalism and communication studies (Hong, 2018; Wang, 2018) and sociology (Fincher, 2014; Gaetano, 2014). These studies have examined the phenomenon from different disciplinary perspectives, with particular attention to its media representation, social construction, and broader cultural implications.

In the field of journalism and communication studies, research primarily focuses on the role of news media in shaping the image of “leftover women”. Wang (2018) reports that news media typically portray the “leftover women” group in an attention-grabbing manner, frequently describing them as “academically accomplished and successful in their careers”. However, this positive portrayal conflicts strongly with traditional marriage beliefs in Chinese society. According to Hong (2018), unmarried or late-marrying women are often labelled as “failures” by society under traditional views. This contradiction makes the “leftover women” phenomenon a highly gendered social issue, as well as an important object of media construction and dissemination. Furthermore, media construction of “leftover women” images exhibits obvious gendered characteristics. For example, Yu (2019) discovered through critical discourse analysis that official media often describe “leftover women” as women with “three highs”, referring to high educational attainment, high income, and high career achievement, and portray them as too excellent to find suitable partners (p. 390). This representation further reinforces the so-called “leftover women myth”, simply attributing the phenomenon to personal characteristics while ignoring deeper structural social factors.

Sociological research places “leftover women” within a broader socio-cultural context. From a sociological perspective, Yan (2010) points out that in China’s modernisation process, the trend of individualisation leads people to pursue personal freedom on one hand, while remaining constrained by traditional family values on the other, and this contradiction is particularly evident in decisions about marriage. Through in-depth interviews with 14 highly educated women, Gaetano (2014) found that urban women with higher education and income often vacillate between family pressure and career pursuits, needing to respond to family expectations of marriage while pursuing career development. Additionally, economic and educational factors have largely influenced the marriage patterns of the “leftover women” group. Fincher (2014) indicates that highly educated and high-income women have greater autonomy in making marital choices because of their increased economic independence. However, they are frequently viewed as “troublesome transgressives” or even as a “third sex” because they disrupt these norms (Aiston et al., 2025).

Existing research predominantly adopts a top-down perspective, focusing on how “leftover women” are represented by authoritative media and cultural forms, such as official news media (Yu, 2019) or TV series (Ji, 2015). However, research on the self-narratives generated by women labelled as “leftover women” and on how they express themselves through social media platforms remains insufficient. Although some studies have conducted detailed qualitative analyses of the “leftover women” phenomenon based on interview data (e.g., Gaetano, 2014), the “leftover women” label itself carries social stigma. By contrast, social media platforms provide a relatively anonymous and spontaneous space for expression, allowing users to more freely share personal experiences and genuine emotions, thus offering new possibilities for researching “leftover women’s” self-narratives. More broadly, self-expression by marginalised groups constitutes a crucial site for studying discursive resistance and counter-hegemonic practices (Nartey, 2023). Self-narratives generated through social media can challenge stereotypes in mainstream discourse and reveal how women labelled as “leftover women” redefine their identities within broader sociocultural structures.

FEMINIST CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS (FCDA)

This study proposes extending the traditional feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) framework by incorporating positive discourse analysis (PDA).

Feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) is an approach that combines the critical perspective of critical discourse studies (CDS) with insights from feminist theory. It examines how gendered power relations and patriarchal ideologies are constructed, reproduced, and challenged through language and multimodal discourse (Lazar, 2007). At the same time, FCDA recognises that gender intersects with other social identities, such as race, class, and sexual orientation (Lazar, 2007). As a critical and emancipatory approach, FCDA is guided by the goals of “social emancipation and transformation” (Lazar, 2014, p. 182). However, as FCDA is rooted in the critical tradition of CDS, it also inherits some of its limitations.

CDS, formerly known as critical discourse analysis, conceptualises discourse as involving “the imbrication of speaking and writing in the exercise, reproduction and negotiation of power relations” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 94). CDS scholars generally maintain that language serves as a vital instrument for power holders to acquire and maintain power (Lu, 2026; Lu & Yu, 2024; van Dijk, 1993). Thus, CDS research represents “an attitude of opposition” (van Dijk, 2001, p. 96) and seeks to uncover the implicit ideologies and power relations inherent in language use. This critical orientation has been criticised for assuming that all discourses are inherently ideological and for focusing primarily on identifying and criticising problems (Widdowson, 1995). Such an emphasis may leave less room for examining positive discursive practices, the agency of marginalised groups, and possibilities for social transformation. Within FCDA research, although this critical orientation helps expose gender inequality, it may also risk contributing to the polarisation of gender issues, for example, by reinforcing binary gender divisions (see Gong et al., 2026).

As a complement to this critical orientation, PDA focuses on empowering and transformative discourses that promote social change and constructively challenge dominant ideologies (Martin, 2004). Accordingly, this study suggests incorporating PDA into the FCDA framework. This integration would enable the study to critically examine the reproduction of patriarchal ideologies through CDS, analyse how women who use or negotiate the label “leftover women” challenge and renegotiate dominant narratives through feminist theory, and develop more constructive interpretations and potential responses to the phenomenon through PDA.

METHOD

DATA COLLECTION

This research selected RedNote (Chinese: 小红书) as the platform for data collection, following the principle of representativeness in corpus studies (McEnery & Hardie, 2012). This is reflected in two aspects: (1) RedNote, as a female-oriented platform (Zhang et al., 2021), is widely regarded as a representative platform in discussions of female-related topics; and (2) the researcher collected all relevant posts from this platform, ensuring that the dataset is comprehensive and representative in terms of volume.

The search term used in this research was “剩女” (English: leftover women). The identified posts were copied and pasted into a plain-text file named “leftover women.txt”. After manual screening, the researcher retained only posts containing personal experiences, emotional reflections, and life perspectives shared by women who used or negotiated the label “leftover women” in their self-narratives, addressing singlehood, social pressure, and personal choices. The dataset included all relevant results displayed on RedNote and comprised 111 posts containing a total of 23,097 Chinese characters.¹ The data collection was limited to posts only and did not include comments, reposts, and metadata. This choice aligns with the principles of CDS, which focuses on how marginalised groups respond to and resist mainstream power structures through discursive practices. Focusing exclusively on first-person narratives allows for examination of how these women construct their identities in relation to broader social expectations.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND PROCEDURES

This study adopted a text mining approach to identify structural patterns in social media texts. After importing the data, KH-Coder was employed to conduct automated analysis, given that social media discourse is usually short and highly fragmented in expression. In recent years, this method has started to be used in (critical) discourse studies (Liu, 2024; Liu & Huang, 2026). More specifically, the selected posts were first imported into KH-Coder (version 3.07) and then processed through Chinese word segmentation and preprocessing (Higuchi, 2024). After that, the software calculated word frequencies and co-occurrence relations and generated a co-occurrence network. These computational patterns were then interpreted through close reading of concordance contexts, with attention to gendered evaluation.

The analytical framework of this study involved two main parts: theme extraction and discourse interpretation. First, the theme-extraction stage involved identifying major themes by categorising the co-occurrence network visualised in KH-Coder. In this network, node size shows the relative frequency of a word, links show co-occurrence relations between words, and different colours show different subgraphs or clusters in the network. Based on this network and the semantic relatedness among the words, the study grouped related subgraphs into three main discursive strands. For each of the three identified themes, the analysis followed a consistent pattern: it began with textual analysis, continued with interpretations of discursive and sociocultural practices through keyword-in-context (KWIC) analysis, and was finally supplemented by PDA to achieve a more balanced interpretation (Figure 1). Second, in the discourse interpretation stage, the study returned to the concordance lines of the relevant words and expressions in order to interpret how each discursive pattern was articulated in context based

¹ Anonymized dataset available at OSF: https://osf.io/dfaen/overview?view_only=5bbbe8af6532446794da33fd8e6715f8

on Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional framework (i.e., 3D model). The framework proposes that each discursive event comprises three important elements: (1) text, (2) discursive practice, and (3) sociocultural practice. Textual analysis involves examining and describing the linguistic features of a text, including vocabulary, grammar, and discourse structure. Discursive practice focuses on elucidating the communicative processes of discourse production, transmission, and reception. Sociocultural practice entails analysing discourse within the context of ideology and power relations.

This study focused on all three dimensions of Fairclough's framework because it aimed to analyse how the self-narratives of women labelled as "leftover women" are constructed. At the textual level, attention was paid to recurring lexical patterns, salient co-occurrences, and the wording through which these women represent themselves and their life situations. At the level of discursive practice, the focus was on whether women labelled as "leftover women" demonstrated autonomy in their self-narratives or were constrained by societal discourses and reproduced certain dominant social perspectives. Lastly, at the sociocultural practice level, the study aimed to analyse the ideologies and power structures underlying the "leftover women" phenomenon and explore how their self-narratives both reflect and act upon broader social relations.

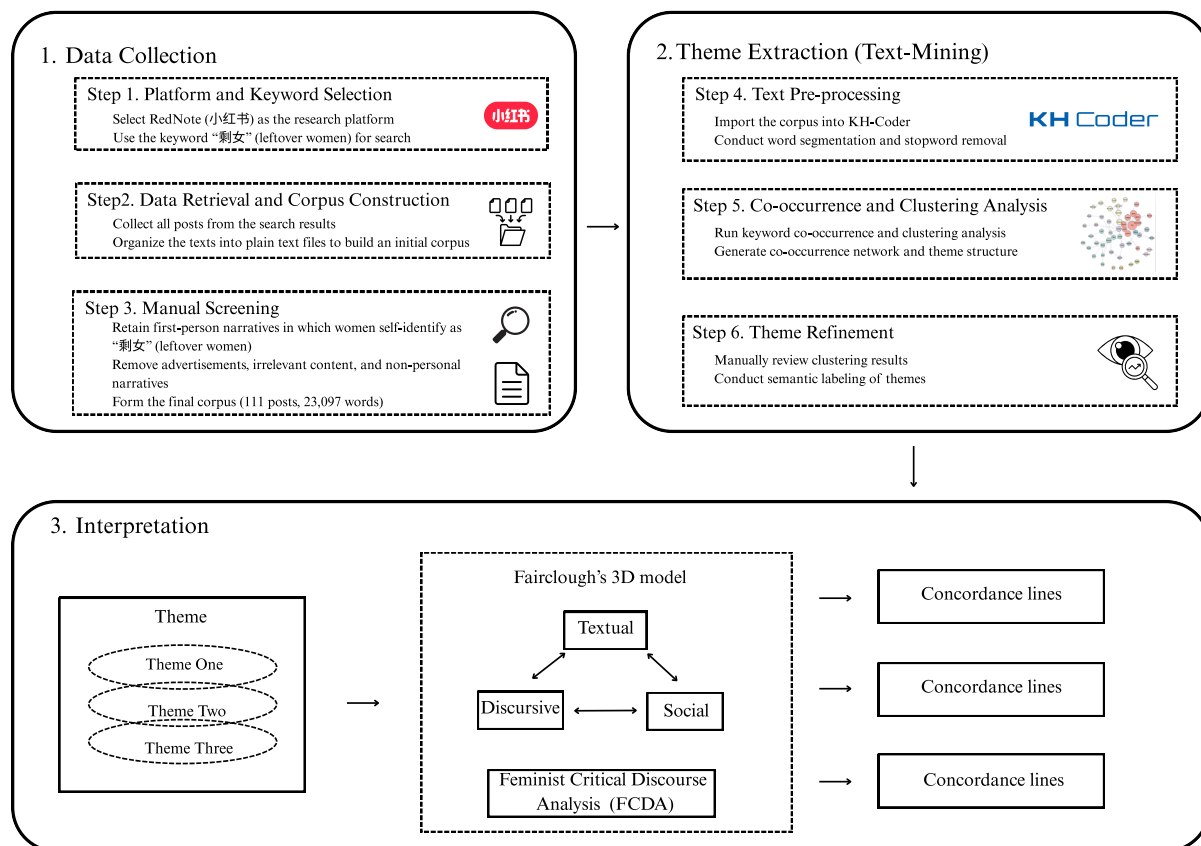


FIGURE 1. The Procedures of the study

FINDINGS

The co-occurrence network consists of nine subgraphs (01–09), as shown in Figure 2. It should be noted that rather than being treated as isolated clusters, the subgraphs were interpreted in relation to both their internal lexical composition and the concordance lines of the relevant words. Consequently, the nine subgraphs were further grouped into three broader themes based on their semantic relatedness and contextual interpretation.² On this basis, Subgraphs 04 and 05 were grouped under the first theme, “The KPI-ization of Life: Work, Housing, Marriage, and Childbearing as Sequential Tasks”, as they collectively highlight how employment, economic conditions, housing, marriage, childbearing, and family pressure are constructed as sequential indicators of adulthood.³ Subgraphs 02, 03, and 08 were grouped under the second theme, “Life with Weak Ties: The Absence of Romantic Relationships and the Thinning of Social Support”, because they collectively foreground the narrowing and fragility of interpersonal connections. Subgraphs 01, 07, and 09 were grouped under the third theme, “From Being Evaluated to Self-Recovery: The Reconstruction of Female Subjectivity”, as they reveal a shift from external evaluation based on appearance, education, age, and family expectations towards the redefinition of self-worth through ability, independence, and happiness.⁴

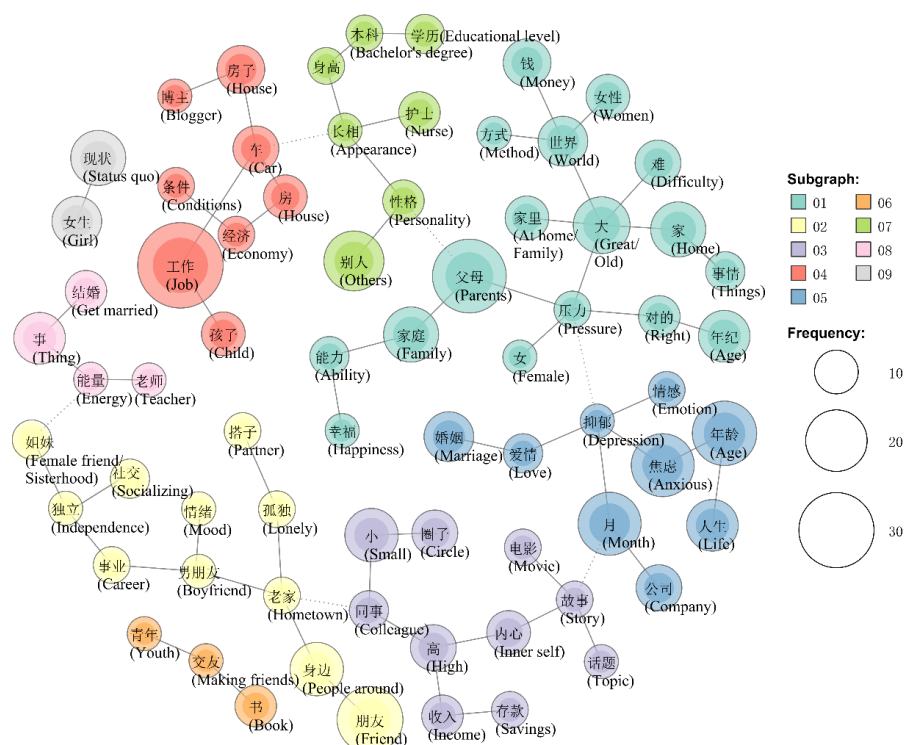


FIGURE 2. Co-occurrence network of key terms in the dataset⁵

² This study does not pursue absolute reproducibility. It accounts for the researcher’s subjectivity only at the stage of sub-theme development, thereby resonating with recent scholarly emphasis on reflexivity in qualitative research.

³ It should be noted that the term “theme” here is different from the results generated through thematic analysis. In this section, “theme” refers to a higher-level discursive pattern interpreted from the co-occurrence network, lexical associations and concordance-line analysis.

⁴ Following the concordance analysis, the 6th subgraph was not assigned to any theme.

⁵ The figure 1 presented in this study was produced by manually adding English translations to the original Chinese co-occurrence network.

THE KPI-IZATION OF LIFE: WORK, HOUSING, MARRIAGE, AND CHILDBEARING AS SEQUENTIAL TASKS

The first theme reveals how unmarried women's lives are organised into a continuous chain of tasks, moving from work to cars and housing, from conditions to age, and then to children. In the posts, these stages are rarely presented as separate life choices. Instead, they appear as successive checkpoints that women are expected to complete in order (Examples 1-5).

Example 1: 我现在找工作已经不是为了什么梦想了, 就是得先有个稳定收入。不然别人问起来, 你连工作都没有, 后面的事都不用谈。(I'm no longer looking for a job because of any dream or passion. I just need to have a stable income first. Otherwise, when people ask about you, if you don't even have a job, there is nothing more to talk about.)

Example 2: 相亲的时候大家也不问你喜欢什么, 基本上就是工作怎么样、工资多少、有没有车房。好像人本身不重要, 条件才重要。(During blind dates, people don't really ask what you like. Basically, they ask what your job is like, how much you earn, and whether you have a car or a house. It feels as if the person themselves doesn't matter; only the conditions matter.)

Example 3: 我爸妈也说, 不是他们现实, 是现在没有房子真的很难结婚。别人家女儿凭什么跟你一起吃苦? (My parents also say that it's not that they are being realistic, but that nowadays it is really hard to get married without a house. Why would someone else's daughter go through hardship with you?)

Example 4: 我不是特别想结婚, 但到了这个年龄, 身边人都结了, 家里也一直催。感觉不结婚就像哪里没完成一样。(I don't particularly want to get married, but at this age, everyone around me has already married, and my family keeps pushing me. It feels as if not getting married means that something in life has been left unfinished.)

Example 5: 结了婚之后又开始问什么时候要孩子。好像人生每一步都有人帮你排好了, 你只要按时间交作业。(After getting married, people start asking when you are going to have children. It feels as if every step of life has already been arranged for you, and all you have to do is hand in the assignment on time.)

At the textual level, "job" is first constructed as a basic threshold for entering adult life and the marriage market. One participant says that she is no longer looking for a job "because of any dream or passion", but because she needs "a stable income first" (Example 1). Similarly, in Example 2, "job" appears again and, together with salary, cars and housing, becomes one of the primary criteria assessed during blind dates. This shows that work is no longer only a personal occupational identity. It has gradually become a form of marriage capital that can be evaluated alongside other material resources. This suggests that work has become incorporated into the Chinese marriage evaluative system, where it, together with material resources, constitutes a central standard for assessing marriageability, commonly referred to as "conditions" (Chinese: 条件). The word "conditions" is not neutral here. In traditional marriage culture, it refers to a broader assessment of a person's economic capacity, family background, stability and future security. In other words, people with stable work, income, cars and housing are more likely to be seen as reliable marriage partners, while those who lack these conditions may be considered unstable or not worth committing to. Housing has been institutionalised as one of the necessary conditions for marriage. A marriage without a house is often constructed as unimaginable or even irresponsible (Example 3). On this basis, "age" further turns marriage pressure into a timed issue. When "at this age" and "everyone around me has already married" become points of reference, not getting married is experienced as falling behind in life, as if an important task remains unfinished (Example 4). "Children" mark the continuation of this task chain. Marriage is not the end of life's tasks, but the beginning of the next stage, which is childbearing. Life is therefore

described as a process of “handing in assignments on time”, in which individuals are expected to complete the cycle from growing up, forming a family and reproducing the next generation (Example 5).

From the perspective of discursive and social practice, these words together form a dominant theme of the KPI-ization of life. “KPI” originally refers to key performance indicators used to measure performance in the workplace. In this context, it is used to describe the process through which individual lives are quantified, ranked and assessed. Work, income, cars, housing, marriage and children are turned into indicators for measuring whether a person is normal, mature and successful. This theme is produced and reproduced through family questioning, blind date evaluations, parental persuasion and peer comparison. Within this theme, women are placed within a broader system of evaluation in which their marital status becomes one of the criteria used to assess their life progress. A woman’s life status is judged by whether she has a stable job and economic foundation, whether she has reached the socially expected age for marriage, and whether she marries and has children on time. At the level of social practice, this KPI-ization of life reflects a broader patriarchal order in which women’s life trajectories are regulated through marriage and reproduction. It continues the belief that marriage and childbearing are central to women’s life value, and it also continues the management of women’s bodies, age and life choices by the family and kinship networks.

LIFE WITH WEAK TIES: THE ABSENCE OF ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS AND THE THINNING OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

The second theme shows how single women’s lack of romantic relationships is shaped by limited social opportunities and weakened support networks. In these posts, singlehood is rarely explained as a simple preference to remain alone. It is more often linked to restricted chances for meeting others, depleted emotional energy, and thinning everyday support (Examples 6-9).

Example 6: 也不是不想谈恋爱，就是认识新人的机会太少了。每天公司和家两点一线，能遇到的人基本就是同事。(It’s not that I don’t want to be in a relationship; it’s just that there are too few opportunities to meet new people. Every day, my life goes back and forth between the company and home, and the people I can meet are basically just colleagues.)

Example 7: 下班之后真的不想再社交了，回消息都觉得累。可是一个人待久了又会觉得很孤独。(After work, I really don’t want to socialise anymore. Even replying to messages feels exhausting. But after spending too much time alone, I still feel lonely.)

Example 8: 朋友也不是没有，但大家都很忙。很多话发出去之前会想，算了，别人也有自己的压力。(It’s not that I don’t have friends, but everyone is busy. Before sending out many messages, I would think, forget it, other people have their own pressures too.)

Example 9: 后来我也不太期待别人了，一个人吃饭、看电影、回家，好像也没什么不好。只是偶尔会想，是我真的独立了，还是已经习惯没人陪了。(Later, I stopped expecting much from others. Eating alone, watching movies alone, and going home alone all seemed fine. But occasionally I wonder whether I have truly become independent, or whether I have simply become used to having no one around.)

At the textual level, singlehood is not framed as a personal choice. In one post, a user writes that she has “too few opportunities to meet new people”. Her life centres on work and home, leaving her social circle largely confined to colleagues (Example 6). In this way, singlehood is discursively constructed as structurally constrained rather than individually deficient. Building on this structural constraint, work further consumes emotional energy. After work, even replying to

messages feels tiring, but being alone for too long still produces loneliness (Example 7). Emotional resources are therefore gradually depleted. This depletion extends beyond romance to friendship and everyday support (Examples 8 and 9). In Example 8, the participant has “friends”, but everyone is busy, so she hesitates to seek comfort because others also have their own pressure. Under these conditions, being alone gradually becomes routine (Example 9). Eating alone, watching movies alone and going home alone seem acceptable. However, the poster questions whether this reflects genuine independence or merely adaptation to the absence of companionship.

From the perspective of discursive and social practice, these expressions together construct a theme of “life with weak ties” among single women. In this theme, singlehood reflects the weakening of social ties. Urban life and work routines compress social time and drain emotional energy, leaving relationships low in frequency, depth, and emotional support. In Chinese society, young women are still expected to enter relationships and marriage at the proper age, while also being required to remain stable, independent and self-responsible in a high-pressure work environment. Society expects women to marry at the proper age, yet it does not necessarily provide the social conditions that enable them to build intimate relationships or sustain meaningful emotional lives. As a result, women’s loneliness is often individualised and attributed to personal shortcomings, such as a lack of initiative or excessive demands, rather than understood as a consequence of work pressure, atomised urban life, and insufficient social support. At the level of social practice, these narratives connect expectations of timely marriage with the realities of urban work life. They show that loneliness and singlehood are shaped by social conditions rather than personal failure. By making this visible, women move from being judged to explaining their own situations.

FROM BEING EVALUATED TO SELF-RECOVERY: THE RECONSTRUCTION OF FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY

The third theme shows how women move from being evaluated by external standards to rebuilding their own sense of self. Rather, the posts first show how women are repeatedly measured by education, appearance, age and relationship status, and then how they begin to redefine value on their own terms (Examples 10-14).

Example 10: 女生好像从毕业开始就一直被比较: 学历怎么样、工作稳不稳定、长得怎么样、年纪多大了、有没有对象。(It seems that girls are constantly compared from the moment they graduate: what their educational level is, whether their job is stable, how they look, how old they are, and whether they have a partner.)

Example 11: 以前觉得长相、身高这些没那么重要, 后来发现别人评价女生的时候还是会提。再加上年龄, 好像你必须一直保持在某种标准里。(I used to think that appearance and height were not that important, but later I realised that people still bring them up when evaluating women. Together with age, it feels as if you have to constantly remain within a certain standard.)

Example 12: 读了本科, 工作也还可以, 但家里还是会说, 女生差不多就行, 太挑以后不好找。(I have a bachelor’s degree and a decent job, but my family still says that, as a girl, it’s enough to be about average, and if I’m too picky, it will be hard to find someone later.)

Example 13: 后来我开始想, 我到底是真的想按父母说的生活, 还是只是害怕被说不正常。比起赶紧结婚, 我现在更想把工作做好, 把自己的状态养回来。(Later, I started to wonder whether I truly wanted to live the way my parents said, or whether I was just afraid of being seen as abnormal. Compared with rushing into marriage, I now care more about doing well at work and getting myself back into a better state.)

Example 14: 现在我觉得幸福不是别人觉得我条件好、嫁得好,而是我能养活自己,能选择要不要进入一段关系,也能接受现在的自己。(Now I think happiness is not about other people thinking that I have good conditions or that I married well. It is about being able to support myself, being able to choose whether or not to enter a relationship, and being able to accept who I am now.)

At the textual level, Examples 10 and 11 show that women are placed under continuous comparison after graduation. Through repeated references to education, appearance, age and relationship status, women are discursively positioned within an evaluative framework that normalises constant comparison. Their education, job stability, appearance, age and relationship status all become criteria for judgement. In Example 11, “appearance”, “height” and “age” suggest that women are expected to remain within a narrow standard of femininity. Example 12 further shows how this evaluation is shaped by patriarchal discourse. Although the participant has a “bachelor’s degree”, her family still tells her that “as a woman, it is enough to be about average”. This implies that, under traditional patriarchal discourse, women’s education and career achievements are recognised only when they do not challenge the existing gender order. Once a woman appears too accomplished, selective, or independent, she is often warned that it will be harder to find a partner. In this sense, female value is still pulled back into marriageability. Examples 13 and 14, by contrast, constitute a rebuttal of this traditional notion. In Example 13, the participant begins to question whether she truly wants to live according to parents’ expectations, or whether she is only afraid of being seen as abnormal. Instead of rushing into marriage, she chooses to focus on work and “getting herself back into a better state”. Example 14 develops this further by redefining “happiness”. “Happiness” is no longer about having “good conditions” or “marrying well,” but about being able to support oneself, choose whether to enter a relationship and accept oneself. From the perspective of discursive and social practice, this theme challenges the patriarchal discourse that evaluates women through appearance, age, marriage and family expectations. At the level of social practice, these narratives reflect ongoing negotiation with gender norms that regulate women’s life trajectories through comparison, timing and marriage-centred value systems. These narratives show that women are not passive. They respond to these standards in their own ways.

RETHINKING THREE THEMES: A POSITIVE DISCOURSE PERSPECTIVE

The preceding analysis revealed how single women are incorporated into a performance-oriented life logic, weak social ties, and a system of continuous comparison. These texts also contain moments of reflection and reconstruction. First, in the metaphor “life is like handing in assignments on time” (Example 5), the ironic expression reduces the seriousness of the norm itself, making it an arrangement that can be parodied and examined. Second, within the theme of weak ties, posters attribute loneliness to “too few opportunities” (Example 6), “work draining emotional energy” (Example 7), and “everyone being busy” (Example 8), rather than to personal inadequacy. This self-account disrupts the individualised blaming of single women and relocates the issue within social conditions. The label “leftover women” is placed within a social context shaped by urban work rhythms, housing pressure, social networking structures, and gender norms, and is understood as a structural issue reflecting social organisation and gender order rather than an individual marital deficiency. Finally, in the self-questioning statement “Do I really want to live the life my parents expect, or am I just afraid of being seen as abnormal?” (Example 13), women examine internalised norms and shift the meaning of life from responding to external evaluation

to responding to their own needs, marking a movement from living for others to living for themselves.

From a PDA perspective, these reflective self-narratives constitute important resources of subjectivity. Within existing social structures and evaluative systems, women negotiate the meaning of marriage by rearranging value priorities and adjusting the focus of life choices. By revealing how rules operate, reconstructing the attribution of loneliness, and redefining standards of happiness and success, they move from passive objects of judgement toward subjects capable of interpreting their own situations and making choices.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Drawing on an FCDA framework extended through the incorporation of PDA, this study analyses 111 posts containing 23,097 Chinese characters collected from RedNote. These posts comprise self-narratives by women who use or negotiate the label “leftover women”. To address the research questions, this study used the co-occurrence network generated by KH-Coder to group related lexical patterns into three main themes: “The KPI-ization of Life: Work, Housing, Marriage, and Childbearing as Sequential Tasks” (Theme 1), “Life with Weak Ties: The Absence of Romantic Relationships and the Thinning of Social Support” (Theme 2), and “From Being Evaluated to Self-Recovery: The Reconstruction of Female Subjectivity” (Theme 3). By foregrounding women’s own self-narratives, this study provides a closer understanding of their lived experiences and the ways in which they negotiate social expectations and redefine their identities.

The first theme reveals how unmarried women’s lives are organised into a continuous chain of tasks, moving from work, income, cars and housing to age, marriage and childbearing. In this theme, “leftover women” are not pressured merely because they remain unmarried. Rather, they are placed within a broader evaluative system in which stable employment, economic capacity, housing, marriageable age and timely marriage and childbearing become indicators for judging whether a woman is successful. This finding differs from previous studies on the representation of “leftover women”, which often suggest that they are highly accomplished women who actively choose to remain single because of their exceptional personal qualities (e.g., Wang, 2018; Yu, 2019). By foregrounding women’s own self-narratives, this finding challenges the so-called “leftover women myth”. In this sense, the theme reveals how evaluative life-course norms and marriage-centred standards function as underlying causes of the “leftover women” phenomenon.

The second theme highlights “forced independence”, showing how single women’s loneliness and lack of intimate relationships are shaped by urban life, work pressure and shrinking social spaces. Rather than presenting singlehood as the result of women’s unwillingness to enter relationships or their personal inability to build intimacy, the self-narratives on RedNote show that women’s relational lives are constrained by long working hours, emotional exhaustion, limited opportunities for social interaction and the atomised nature of urban living. This finding complicates previous studies that frame single women mainly through stereotypes of excessive independence, selfishness or career orientation (Himawan et al., 2022; Li, 2023). While some studies suggest that singles are often viewed as prioritising personal freedom and self-development (Shi & Liu, 2025), the present study shows that independence is not always freely chosen. In many cases, it is produced under structural conditions where women are expected to remain economically stable and emotionally self-sufficient, while lacking sufficient time, energy and social support to develop intimate relationships. Therefore, this theme challenges the traditional

negative evaluations that attribute women's single status to being "too picky", "not active enough", or "too independent". Instead, it reveals how work systems, urban lifestyles and weak social support networks contribute to women's loneliness and singlehood. From a PDA perspective, this discourse is significant because women do not merely accept the stigma attached to singlehood. By narrating the social and structural conditions behind their loneliness, they shift the explanation of singlehood from personal failure to broader social constraint. These narratives therefore suggest that structural work arrangements, urban lifestyles, and weak support networks are key social mechanisms shaping women's single status.

The third theme shows how single women move from being evaluated by external standards to rebuilding their own sense of self. This theme reveals that women are continuously judged through education, job stability, appearance, age and relationship status, and that their value is often pulled back into marriageability despite their educational and occupational achievements. However, this issue should also be situated within traditional Chinese marriage values, family responsibility, and mechanisms of social recognition (Gui, 2020; Li, 2023). Traditional norms often construct marriage and childbearing as important life tasks for women, linking them to filial piety, family continuity and social respectability (Ji, 2015). Thus, the pressure exerted by parents and surrounding them is not only a matter of concern for women's personal happiness, but also reflects family expectations regarding social recognition, class stability and intergenerational responsibility (Zheng & Xu, 2022). In this context, remaining unmarried is no longer treated as a private life status, but is easily interpreted as a delay in completing life tasks, a failure to fulfil family responsibility, or a deviation from the dominant life timetable. This theme therefore provides a more positive and agentic understanding of single women's subjectivity. Rather than interpreting singlehood only as marginalisation, these narratives show how women construct alternative forms of value through self-support, choice, self-recovery and self-acceptance. In doing so, they challenge the patriarchal discourse that evaluates women primarily through appearance, age and marriageability, and contribute to a more diverse understanding of women's life possibilities in contemporary China. At the same time, continuous comparison, marriage pressure and self-redefinition emerge as central manifestations of how the "leftover women" phenomenon is experienced and negotiated.

These three themes tell a broader story about how unmarried women in contemporary China negotiate their lives within the overlapping forces of family expectations, social evaluation and structural constraint. Their experiences show that the label "leftover women" is not simply a description of marital status, but a gendered mechanism through which women's lives are measured, timed and disciplined according to dominant expectations of work, marriage and childbearing. In the Chinese sociocultural context, where family responsibility, filial duty and social respectability remain closely tied to women's marital and reproductive roles, single women are often positioned as individuals who have failed to follow the expected life course. However, the self-narratives on RedNote also reveal that women are not merely passive recipients of this label. By reflecting on pressure, loneliness and external judgement, they make visible the social norms that organise their lives and begin to redefine value beyond marriageability. From a feminist perspective, these narratives demonstrate women's agency in questioning patriarchal expectations and reconstructing alternative ways of living, relating and understanding the self. Therefore, the three themes collectively show both the constraints imposed on unmarried women and their ongoing efforts to negotiate, resist and reshape gender norms in contemporary China.

The implications of this study are mainly reflected in two aspects: methodological and theoretical. Methodologically, this study applies text-mining techniques to short social media texts and combines them with qualitative discourse interpretation informed by the FCDA framework and extended through PDA. Although previous studies have explored the integration of text mining and CDS, this study further extends this approach to short social media texts, where gendered meanings are often dispersed and embedded in everyday, affective and personalised self-narratives. Therefore, this study demonstrates the potential of combining text mining with discourse analysis to examine the everyday production of gendered meanings on social media platforms. Theoretically, this study proposes incorporating PDA into the FCDA framework to complement its critique of gender inequality and patriarchal power relations with greater attention to women's agency and possibilities for social transformation. Rather than intensifying gender polarisation, this extended framework seeks to provide a balanced perspective that recognises both the structural constraints faced by women and their capacity to negotiate and reshape gender norms.

It is worth noting that this study has certain limitations, primarily stemming from the inherent characteristics of social media platforms. Since RedNote users are mainly urban residents with relatively high levels of education, these data may contain certain biases and fail to fully reflect the diversity of the "leftover women" group. A second limitation is that this study does not treat the posts and comments (including first-level and second-level comments) as an integrated discursive space. In particular, it cannot fully account for the processes through which users collectively produce, negotiate, and rework the symbolic meanings of gender, marriage, and singlehood. Future research may consider examining original posts and first- and second-level comment threads as an integrated discursive space to capture the interactive and dialogic processes through which meanings are produced, negotiated, and reworked on social media.

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