Delaying Childbearing: Navigating Temporal Structures and Agency in Contemporary China



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To our lives lived with constraint, and to all who have sought to live their own:

May this thesis bring a spark of courage and light.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the postponement of childbearing in contemporary China through the lens of temporality. Rather than focusing on biological limits or socioeconomic preconditions, it foregrounds delays beyond normative timelines – socially defined periods within which individuals are expected to conceive. China provides a compelling case, shaped by a legacy of strict birth regulation, a pronatalist and temporally attuned culture, and the recent trend of declining and delaying fertility. The study asks three questions: what temporal norms govern fertility in China, what challenges arise when individuals exceed them, and how do people navigate pressures of non-conformity when delaying?

The research draws on 64 life story interviews with adults aged 27-36 in Shenzhen, a rapidly urbanising migrant city bringing together diverse experiences from across China. Analytically, it develops a comprehensive temporal framework that extends beyond age norms to encompass sequence and duration dimensions, prescribing life course transitions. It then identifies four strategies – Accommodation, Transformation, Strategic Redirection, and Identity-Based Strategies – through which individuals negotiate normative time. These strategies unfold within the broader context of migration, affording spatial distance, economic leverage, and new identity resources that enable such negotiations.

The thesis makes three theoretical contributions. First, it establishes a comprehensive temporal framework mapping normative life course expectations in China while offering analytical tools extendable beyond this case. Second, it develops the concept of *temporal structuration*, building on Giddens' structuration theory and Flaherty's time work to show how temporal practices – including strategic negotiation and the act of delaying itself – constitute ongoing engagements with social structures. Third, it advances understanding of micro-level spatio-temporal agency by providing a concrete examination of how agency is enacted in the postponement of childbearing. Ultimately, delaying childbearing is not merely a private deferral but a social diagnosis: it reveals how time disciplines, how gender stratifies, and how agency survives under constraint.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Do you plan to have children? When? Do you feel expected to reproduce at particular life stages or ages? What happens if you cannot – or choose not to – meet these expectations? Do you face pressure from family, society, or peers regarding reproductive timing? How do you feel if you pass those expected timelines? And most crucially, how do you respond – whether by compliance, negotiation, concealment, or resistance – when normative reproductive expectations confront your personal life course? These are the questions at the heart of this thesis. In this study, I focus on the phenomenon of *delaying childbearing* as a lived process: the everyday negotiations, compromises, and strategies through which individuals engage with, contest, or accommodate normative reproductive timelines. Delaying, in this sense, is not just about *when* people have children, but about *how* they actively navigate the social, cultural, and familial pressures that shape when childbearing is deemed appropriate.

These individual struggles are situated within broader social transformations, where the pursuit of new life opportunities collides with reproductive expectations that remain deeply entrenched. In today's era of rising educational attainment and labour market participation, young adults appear to have more options and possibilities in shaping their lives beyond traditional trajectories (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010; Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011). Meanwhile, childbearing presents increasing challenges, situated at the intersection of competing pressures: the pursuit of individual aspirations, the obligations of family and society, and the limitations of biological time (Bongaarts & Sobotka, 2012; McDonald, 2000a; Mills et al., 2011). The phenomenon of postponing childbearing has become an experience many adults in early adulthood have encountered, are currently negotiating, or anticipate in the near future.

This phenomenon resonates with broader dilemmas that characterise contemporary young adulthood across many modernising societies. This is not simply a phenomenon exclusive to a particular society, nor is it confined to any particular social group. Unlike research problems that focus on specific group interests, for instance, inequality research studying economically disadvantaged populations, life course transitions are embedded in cultural understandings of personhood that potentially affect many young adults across gender, class, and cultural background. The tensions between individual aspirations and cultural expectations around timing, between personal life course preferences and family obligations, between career development and reproductive planning, represent universal challenges of navigating adulthood within societies that maintain strong normative frameworks whilst providing new possibilities for individual development. These create concentrated normative pressures and limited flexibility, making reproductive timing an especially revealing lens into how social norms are both maintained and contested, and thereby into the broader social transformations unfolding in contexts of rapid change.

1.1 The Global Expansion of Delayed Childbearing and the Paradox in China

Childbearing postponement has become increasingly common across diverse societies, emerging as one of the most significant demographic transformations of the twenty-first century. This pattern evolved from an initial concentration in high-income countries to a broader global phenomenon. In most OECD countries, the mean age at first birth has risen steadily since the 1970s, reaching or surpassing 30 years in many Western and Northern European states by the late 2010s (Beaujouan, 2020; Mills et al., 2011). In demographic scholarship, this phenomenon is often framed as “delayed childbearing,” the past-participle form highlighting its treatment as an outcome rather than a process, measured through rising averages or the growing prevalence of first births after age 30 (Mills et al., 2011; Sobotka & Beaujouan, 2018). Within this outcome-oriented framing, research often focuses on the

determinants of this trend, such as educational expansion, labour market uncertainty, rising housing costs, and evolving family formation patterns that prioritise individual development before reproduction (Ní Bhrolcháin & Beaujouan, 2012; Sobotka & Beaujouan, 2018).

However, most research on delayed childbearing has concentrated on Western societies embodying individualistic ideologies with relatively flexible life course patterns and weak extended family involvement in reproductive decisions, limiting understanding of how postponement operates across different cultural and institutional environments (Gee, 1990; Lapinski & Rimal, 2005; Peterson, 1996; Zang, 2024). Yet some of the most pronounced delayed childbearing patterns globally are occurring in East Asian societies such as Japan, South Korea, and China, where demographic transitions intersect with distinctive cultural and institutional contexts that differ markedly from Western settings (Chen, 2024; Y. Wang et al., 2024). Research across the region documents exceptional postponement patterns alongside persistently low fertility rates and policy concerns about population decline.

Contemporary China exemplifies these regional patterns whilst presenting distinctive cultural characteristics that create particularly strong temporal constraints. China displays systematic postponement trajectories, with demographic data from 1990-2020 revealing delays in both marriage and childbearing timing led by urban residents and highly educated cohorts (X. Zhang & Sheng, 2023). Between 2013 and 2019, the share of pregnant women aged 35 and over rose from 10.7% to 15.2%, representing postponement patterns that exceed those observed in some developed countries (Y. Wang et al., 2024). More importantly, China presents cultural characteristics including rigid socio-biological clocks derived from collectivistic values and filial piety obligations (Zang, 2024), strong temporal consciousness around life course milestones rooted in traditional Confucian age-graded expectations (Slote & Vos, 1998; Yao, 2000), and collective rather than individual frameworks for reproductive decision-making where extended families retain significant influence (Lee & Feng, 1999).

Despite these dramatic demographic patterns and distinctive cultural characteristics, systematic research examining how delayed childbearing operates within Chinese normative contexts remains limited, particularly from a sociological perspective. Whilst studies document the existence of temporal pressures and postponement trends (Billari, 2008; L. J. Martin, 2021; Nathan & Pardo, 2019), a comprehensive understanding of specific fertility norms, expected timelines, and the challenges individuals face when delaying beyond these expectations requires investigation. This represents a significant gap given China's combination of pronounced postponement patterns with exceptionally strong temporal consciousness and family-centred decision-making systems. It also points to a deeper paradox: how do individuals sustain reproductive delays within cultural contexts that maintain exceptionally strong temporal expectations and family-based normative pressure?

1.2 From Fragmented to Integrated Understanding: The Convergence of Temporal Frameworks

Understanding this paradox requires examining how different research approaches have contributed to our knowledge of reproductive timing whilst revealing the need for integrated analytical frameworks. Current research has approached delayed childbearing through three distinct conceptual frameworks, each illuminating important dimensions of the phenomenon and contributing to a broader understanding of how temporal expectations shape reproductive experiences.

First, biomedical approaches have concentrated on biological constraints and age-related fertility risks, documenting fertility decline patterns, optimal reproductive windows, and the biomedical consequences of later motherhood (Beemsterboer et al., 2006; Leridon & Slama, 2008; Macintosh, 2015; Schmidt et al., 2012; Z. Yi & Vaupelly, 2004). This research has established important foundations for understanding physiological aspects of reproductive timing, revealing how biological factors create temporal constraints around

fertility. Critical work by scholars such as Amir (2006) and Yopo Díaz (2021) has advanced this understanding by examining how biological timing intersects with cultural expectations, revealing the biological clock as both a physiological reality and cultural construct. However, biomedical frameworks emphasise physiological constraints, obscuring individual agency in temporal decision-making. Crucially, Bledsoe's (2010) ethnographic work provides an important counterpoint by demonstrating how reproductive timing can be understood as "contingent time" that is socially mediated and recalibrated across life courses, challenging assumptions about fixed chronological timelines of childbearing.

Second, demographic research has focused on identifying structural factors that produce delay and on describing postponement trends across different populations and contexts. This literature mainly employs large-scale quantitative datasets to identify statistical relationships between delayed childbearing and educational expansion, economic conditions, labour market changes, and policy environments (Balbo et al., 2013; Ní Bhrolcháin & Beaujouan, 2012). Whilst demographic research has been essential for documenting the scope and drivers of postponement patterns, it necessarily abstracts from lived experiences and the ongoing processes through which reproductive decisions are negotiated in everyday life.

Third, socially optimal timing approaches focus on milestone achievement and resource accumulation that enable "readiness" for parenthood (such as Buckles, 2008; Mills et al., 2011). This research illuminates work-family conflicts, economic constraints, and life course coordination challenges that shape reproductive timing decisions. Critical research within this tradition has examined how readiness frameworks are culturally constructed, with studies revealing how "good motherhood" ideologies embed specific temporal requirements into moral evaluations of maternal identities (Perrier, 2013; Shelton & Johnson, 2006). Yopo Díaz's (2019) concept of "moral economy of postponing motherhood" demonstrates how

women strategically delay reproduction when optimal conditions prove difficult to achieve, revealing postponement as active moral labour rather than passive responses to constraints.

These research streams have collectively advanced understanding of reproductive timing from a purely demographic phenomenon to complex social processes involving biological realities, structural constraints, and individual strategic responses. Their insights have progressively revealed how temporal expectations are shaped by physiological factors, socio-economic conditions, and cultural meanings, demonstrating the multidimensional nature of reproductive timing decisions. Most importantly, biomedical and socially optimal approaches have together established the foundation for understanding how they converge in shaping cultural expectations about appropriate reproductive timing.

This convergence points toward the significance of socially normative timeline frameworks, which examine reproductive timing through its prescriptive dimensions – the culturally sanctioned timetables that define not simply when reproduction is possible or optimal, but when it *should* occur. Foundational work by Neugarten (1976: 16) established the concept of the "social clock", defining temporal expectations as "prods and brakes upon behaviour". European research demonstrates prescriptive norms with concrete sanctions enacted through social networks and relationships, including gossip, persuasive attempts, parental disapproval, and withdrawal of support (Liefbroer & Billari, 2010). Billari et al. (2011) provide cross-national evidence for "social age deadlines" of childbearing that create normative judgements of being "on time" or "too late." Other cross-national studies also reveal significant variation in normative strength, with collectivist societies showing more pronounced temporal pressures around marriage and childbearing linked to family reputation and intergenerational obligations (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005; Zang, 2024).

The normative approach reveals how biological and socially optimal considerations become embedded within cultural expectations that individuals must actively and

continuously negotiate with family members, social networks, and institutional frameworks. This perspective demonstrates that reproductive timing operates through dynamic cultural frameworks where multiple temporal considerations may interact within processes of social regulation and individual agency. However, whilst normative research has established the existence and operation of temporal expectations, it has primarily focused on identifying what normative timelines exist and whether they have influenced reproductive behaviours, with limited attention to the lived experience of navigating these expectations over extended periods (Lazzari et al., 2024; Liefbroer & Merz, 2009). Research documents temporal pressures and cultural deadlines but provides insufficient understanding of how individuals actually sustain delay whilst managing ongoing normative pressures, family negotiations, and strategic positioning within temporal frameworks (such as Settersten and Hägestad, 1996; Liefbroer and Billari, 2010). This gap will be further elaborated on from the following two perspectives: temporality and the interactions between norms and agency.

1.3 From "Delayed" to "Delaying": The Centrality of Temporality

Building on socially normative timeline frameworks, understanding reproductive timing requires recognising temporality as an active cultural indicator rather than a neutral chronological background. Theoretical work demonstrates that time operates as a socially constructed institution (Adam, 1995; Zerubavel, 1989). A body of qualitative research on motherhood decision-making further reveals timing as a constitutive dimension of reproductive experience where temporal positioning becomes central to motherhood identity construction and social evaluation (such as Sevón, 2005; Donath, 2015).

Manifested in this literature, time functions as a multidimensional cultural indicator through which reproductive decisions are evaluated for social appropriateness, moral legitimacy, and identity positioning (such as Budds et al., 2016). In pronatalist contexts where the "whether" question is culturally foreclosed, "when" becomes the primary arena for

reproductive agency and strategic navigation (Donath, 2015). This body of research also reveals how temporal pressures manifest in lived experience through concrete mechanisms that shape everyday reproductive decision-making. Individuals experience temporal constraints through biological clock anxiety, family pressure around age-specific milestones, social comparisons with peers, and anticipatory stress about approaching perceived deadlines (Earle & Letherby, 2007; Datta et al., 2023).

Important to note in this literature, illuminated in qualitative research materials, these pressures operate not as abstract cultural expectations but as embodied experiences involving regular reminders, explicit conversations, and ongoing monitoring of temporal positioning relative to normative expectations. This highlights a crucial analytical shift: rather than treating "delayed" childbearing as a retrospective demographic classification, it is important to examine "delaying" as an ongoing temporal process. Time itself operates simultaneously as a constraint and a resource: whilst temporal expectations create pressure and limitation, individuals also strategically manipulate timing, reframe narratives, and reposition themselves within temporal structures to carve out alternative possibilities (such as K. J. Daly, 2001; Budds et al., 2016). In this sense, delaying becomes an active temporal practice requiring sophisticated strategic management rather than passive adaptation to normative constraints.

However, existing research primarily conceptualises reproductive timing as a discrete temporal point subject to various constraints and influences. This approach treats timing decisions as moments when individuals choose specific ages for reproduction based on biological, economic, or cultural factors. By contrast, examining "delaying" reveals reproductive timing as an extended temporal period during which individuals must continuously navigate competing expectations whilst managing ongoing pressures. This shift from temporal point to temporal process in this research opens analytical space for

understanding how individuals actively work with time during postponement rather than simply adapting to temporal constraints at decision moments.

1.4 From Demographic to Sociological Inquiry: Norms, Agency, and Social Change

The temporal shift from "delayed" to "delaying" thus highlights the sociological significance of childbearing postponement, as it entails ongoing interactions between individual agency and structural constraints. Understanding the interactions requires theoretical frameworks that can capture how individuals exercise agency within structural limitations through the strategic coordination of available resources and opportunities. Giddens' (1984) structuration theory provides foundational insights by revealing that individuals operate as "knowledgeable human agents" who possess situated capacities to interpret, negotiate, and potentially transform structural conditions they encounter. Sewell's (1992) conceptualisation of agency as the capacity to "transpose and extend schemas to new contexts" proves particularly relevant for understanding reproductive timing, as it highlights how individuals might reconfigure normative age expectations to reconcile competing temporal demands while sustaining a sense of cultural belonging.

Research on micro-level strategic practices demonstrates how agency operates through specific, observable strategies, particularly in contexts of constraint. Goffman's (1959, 1967) work on impression management reveals how individuals sustain social acceptance whilst preserving space for alternative practices through information control, strategic ambiguity, and audience segregation. Scott's (1985) analysis of "everyday resistance" shows how subordinate groups employ subtle strategies that avoid confrontation whilst creating space for alternative practices. These insights prove directly relevant to reproductive timing contexts, where individuals must navigate normative expectations whilst pursuing alternative timing patterns.

While existing agency research has primarily focused on temporal dimensions (see Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Hitlin and Elder, 2007), Giddens' (1984) framework emphasises that agency operates through both temporal and spatial contexts that simultaneously constrain and enable action possibilities. Research building on this insight examines how individuals employ temporal and spatial strategies to navigate structural constraints (May & Thrift, 2003; Robertson, 2015). Given the lack of research analysing agentic interactions with structural constraints on reproductive timing, and the absence of spatio-temporal agency frameworks in reproductive studies, this research identifies the coordination of temporal and spatial resources as particularly crucial for understanding delaying childbearing. As reviewed above, reproductive decisions are inherently embedded in place, shaped by local socio-economic and cultural contexts, while being inherently temporal.

Thus, we can now see delaying childbearing as a fundamentally sociological phenomenon that illuminates broader social dynamics. Rather than treating reproductive timing as a demographic outcome determined by structural factors, sociological inquiry examines how individuals actively coordinate temporal and spatial strategies to navigate competing demands within transforming social contexts. Understanding these strategic coordination processes provides insights into fundamental questions about agency, structure, and social transformation in contemporary societies where traditional normative frameworks persist whilst social realities rapidly change.

1.5 Thesis Overview

1.5.1 Research Focus and Questions

The theoretical analyses above converge on a central question: how do individuals exercise agency within strong normative frameworks through strategic coordination of temporal and spatial resources during extended periods of reproductive postponement?

The paradox identified earlier – sustained reproductive delays within exceptionally strong temporal consciousness and family-based normative pressure – makes contemporary China particularly valuable for examining this theoretical question. China exemplifies systematic postponement trajectories while maintaining exceptionally strong temporal norms shaped by cultural expectations of filial piety, age-graded milestones, and family-based decision-making (Hong Fincher, 2014; Shen & Jiang, 2021; K. Xie, 2021; X. Xie, 2023). What makes China particularly valuable for this research is the intersection of three forces: enduring cultural timelines that compress reproductive opportunities, massive internal migration that reconfigures spatial and social contexts, and rapid socioeconomic transformation that extends preparation periods and creates new life-course possibilities (Ji, 2015b; Ye, 2016; Z. Zhao et al., 2025). This combination produces acute temporal disjunctures that render strategies of delay both necessary and empirically visible.

By situating the study in Shenzhen, a migrant metropolis where these dynamics converge, this research investigates three interrelated questions regarding specific research gaps. First, what are the expected fertility norms and timelines in contemporary China? While studies document strong temporal pressures and pervasive temporal consciousness in the context of China (Horta & Li, 2024; Qiu, 2022), a comprehensive account of fertility timelines remains underdeveloped. Mapping these timelines provides not only a crucial case-specific analysis but also a paradigmatic example of how fertility norms are culturally constructed and socially enforced in global studies. This gap necessitates a systematic analysis of the normative frameworks shaping reproductive timing in the Chinese context.

Second, what challenges arise when individuals delay childbearing beyond these normative expectations in China? Most existing studies of delayed childbearing have been conducted in Western societies, where life course frameworks are relatively flexible and family involvement in reproductive decisions is limited (Liefbroer and Billari, 2010). Yet far

less is known about what happens when postponement occurs in contexts like China, where temporal norms are far more rigid and reproductive decision-making remains deeply embedded in family and collectivist frameworks (Lee & Feng, 1999; Peng, 2020; Slote & Vos, 1998; Yao, 2000). In such settings, delay may generate distinctive forms of pressure. Examining these challenges goes beyond a context-specific account, offering insights into how normative pressures around delaying childbearing operate under especially stringent conditions.

Third, how do Chinese young adults navigate and negotiate these pressures in the process of delaying? Whilst global research has documented various challenges that individuals face when delaying reproduction, most studies focus on mapping these challenges rather than examining how individuals actually respond to and manage them over time (Cooke et al., 2012; Dion, 1995; L. J. Martin, 2021; S. P. Martin, 2000). This represents a significant gap in understanding the strategic practices through which people sustain delay whilst navigating ongoing normative pressures. Furthermore, existing research has primarily examined temporal or spatial dimensions of agency separately (Bakewell et al., 2012; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Hitlin & Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2015), with limited attention to how individuals coordinate temporal strategies with spatial strategies, particularly in the context of reproductive postponement. Utilising the context where both temporal norms and spatial opportunities are concentrated to understand these coordination processes provides crucial insights into strategic practices within strong normative frameworks of fertility.

1.5.2 Research Methods

To address these questions, this thesis employs an in-depth qualitative approach. This thesis adopts constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). This approach examines reproductive timing as an ongoing practice of temporal negotiation embedded within cultural and institutional frameworks. Constructivist grounded theory is particularly appropriate for

this research because it enables inductive theory development about temporal norm negotiation processes that remain underexplored in existing literature. Given the limited research on how individuals navigate temporal expectations during extended delaying processes, especially within Chinese normative contexts, grounded theory's emphasis on theory generation from empirical data rather than testing predetermined hypotheses proves essential.

Shenzhen, a metropolis in southern China, provides a unique empirical context for analysing temporal norm negotiation due to its distinctive combination of demographic diversity and social transformation. As a rapidly urbanising migrant society where migrants comprise 63% of the population (Statistics Bureau of Shenzhen, 2019), Shenzhen attracts diverse populations from across mainland China and ranks as the most attractive city in China for young migrants (G. Y. Wang, 2022). This demographic composition generates conditions where spatial mobility intersects with temporal norms in reproductive decision-making. Shenzhen's rapid transformation from rural area to first-tier metropolis over the past three decades (Ye, 2016) creates dynamic contexts where traditional and modern fertility ideas coexist and interact, enabling examination of how fertility norms transition within rapidly changing social environments whilst revealing how internal migration intersects with life course planning and reproductive decision-making.

The study is based on 64 life story interviews conducted with 60 young adults aged between 27-36 in Shenzhen across two fieldwork phases (March 2023 to July 2024). Life story interviews were chosen as the primary method because they situate reproductive timing within broader biographical contexts rather than reducing it to isolated decisions. This approach enables the examination of temporal negotiation as an ongoing process across life trajectories, encompassing both fertility planning and migration history. By inviting participants to narrate their life experiences, the interviews captured both the temporal

structuring of individual lives and the strategic practices through which personal trajectories intersect with normative timelines whilst avoiding direct questioning about social norms that might prompt socially desirable responses. Data analysis employed constructivist grounded theory principles, combining open and focused coding through constant comparison to develop theoretical frameworks emerging from participants' lived experiences. The analysis integrated computer-assisted coding with manual techniques whilst maintaining reflexive awareness of researcher positionality, revealing strategic practices through which individuals navigate temporal expectations within constraining normative contexts.

1.5.3 Research Significance

This research makes three primary theoretical contributions. First, it enriches demographic and life course research by providing an in-depth qualitative account of delaying childbearing as a lived process rather than a demographic outcome. This research systematically proposes a temporal framework for analysing life course transitions, particularly in relation to childbearing in China, thereby conceptualising delaying childbearing as a widely shared yet nuanced life stage that has seldom been formally articulated in previous scholarship. Because of its prevalence, many individuals pass through this stage; yet because of its subtlety, its oppressive temporal weight often remains invisible unless brought to light. Throughout this thesis, references to childbearing norms in China are grounded in the empirical context examined and are intended to capture how normative expectations are experienced, articulated, and negotiated by participants, with analytical implications that extend beyond the case without presuming uniformly applicable national patterns.

Second, it contributes to time studies by examining how temporal constraints operate as lived, negotiated realities rather than abstract structural impositions. Whilst temporal research has established that time is socially structured, this research demonstrates how

individuals actively engage with temporal structures, negotiating timing expectations rather than simply adapting to them. Building on this, it introduces the framework of *temporal structuration*, which highlights how individuals actively engage with and rework temporal structures, thereby demonstrating that reproductive timing is shaped not only by constraints but also by the creative possibilities generated through interaction with normative temporal frameworks.

Third, it contributes to sociological research on agency by adding reproductive timing as a particularly vivid context for observing how micro-level, spatio-temporal agency operates in practice. Reproductive decision-making provides an ideal arena for studying agency because it involves multiple intersecting constraints – biological timelines, social expectations, family pressures, economic requirements – that necessitate sophisticated strategic coordination. The intimate and consequential nature of reproductive decisions, combined with their embedding within strong normative frameworks, creates conditions where agency processes become highly visible and researchable. This context enables examination of strategic practices that may remain invisible in other social domains, contributing concrete, empirically grounded insights about how individuals navigate complex structural interactions through coordinated strategies in contemporary societies.

More broadly, this research recognises delaying childbearing as an interdisciplinary social phenomenon that requires an integrated analytical approach. Reproductive timing decisions simultaneously involve biological constraints, economic considerations, cultural norms, family dynamics, spatial opportunities, and temporal expectations – dimensions that have typically been examined separately within different disciplinary traditions. By focusing on how individuals navigate temporal norms during the process of delaying, this research demonstrates how insights from demographic, temporal, and sociological research can be

productively brought into dialogue to understand a complex social phenomenon that cannot be adequately captured through single-disciplinary approaches.

1.5.4 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis develops these insights through seven chapters that systematically build the analytical framework and present empirical findings in logical progression. Following this Introduction, **Chapter 2** provides a comprehensive literature review that addresses the conceptual fragmentation in childbearing postponement research by identifying and systematically comparing three distinct conceptualisations of childbearing postponement that have implicitly structured existing research. The chapter identifies the socially normative approach as the most promising entry point for understanding delaying childbearing as an interdisciplinary window into broader social transformation processes. It also analyses the theoretical frameworks centred on temporal-spatial agency that reveal timing decisions as involving strategic coordination of temporal and spatial resources within structural constraints. The chapter concludes by examining contemporary China as an ideal empirical context for studying temporal norm negotiation processes.

Chapter 3 presents the methodological approach, justifying the selection of constructivist grounded theory and life story interviews as particularly appropriate for examining temporal norm negotiation as a socially constructed, lived process. Conducted in Shenzhen, the study's design draws on the city's distinctive characteristics as a migrant society, which create ideal conditions for analysing spatio-temporal coordination in reproductive decision-making. To capture diverse experiences of temporal norm navigation, this research employed a theoretical sampling strategy and provide comprehensive demographic information on the 60 participants. Finally, the chapter outlines the analytical strategy – combining computer-assisted and manual coding techniques – that generated

theoretical development, while also addressing reflexivity considerations and research quality measures throughout the process.

The following three chapters are the empirical analyses, each engaging with particular strands of scholarship. **Chapter 4** introduces Shenzhen as the research site and situates the participants within its migration history. It outlines three identity positions – local residents, second-generation migrants, and independent migrants – that shape belonging and intersect with socio-economic status, lifestyle aspirations, and fertility ideologies. The chapter then analyses migrants' motivations for moving to Shenzhen, highlighting aspirations for career advancement, the pursuit of urban inclusiveness, and the desire to maintain distance from family. By linking place, identity, and agency, it argues that migration is more than spatial mobility: it is also a form of life planning that shapes how individuals conceive of childbearing and negotiate normative timelines. The chapter contributes to internal migration studies by complicating the rural–urban dichotomy, diminishing the centrality of *hukou*, and highlighting urban-to-urban trajectories, while establishing the contextual grounding for fertility decision-making in this migrant society.

Chapter 5 addresses the first two research questions by establishing the temporal framework that prescribes the normative timing of childbearing within the empirical context examined in this study in contemporary China and examining the challenges that arise when individuals fall outside of it. Grounded in participants' narratives, the analysis demonstrates that fertility expectations are embedded within broader life course transitions structured along two interlinked lines: a productive line including education, career, and housing, and a reproductive line culminating in childbearing, which is widely constructed within this normative framework as an unavoidable and central component of adult life. By identifying how age, sequence, and duration together structure normative timelines, this chapter highlights the severity of temporal expectations that restrict young adults' flexibility in

planning their lives centred around childbearing. This mapping is crucial: without it, "delay" cannot be meaningfully understood, since what counts as postponement, lateness, or deviance depends on these normative frameworks. The chapter contributes to China studies by revealing the rigidity of prescriptive timelines across life stages, and to broader scholarship by illuminating how social clocks operate under especially stringent conditions.

Chapter 6 responds to the final research question by examining how individuals sustain delay in the face of normative pressures. The chapter identifies four types of strategy – Accommodation, Transformation, Redirection, and Identity-based approaches – that go beyond compliance or resistance, demonstrating how participants creatively navigate expectations. Building on these insights, the chapter develops the concept of *temporal structuration*, extending existing theories of time and agency by showing how the negotiation is simultaneously temporal and spatial. Migration emerges not as background but as a constitutive element of agency, providing resources of distance, independence, and alternative identities for negotiating childbearing norms. This chapter contributes to sociological scholarship both empirically, by revealing the everyday practices through which delay is actively sustained, and theoretically, by advancing a spatio-temporal understanding of agency under constraint.

Chapter 7 concludes the thesis by drawing together the empirical findings to reveal their broader implications and limitations. This chapter shows that the complex strategies in Chapter 6 highlight not individual strength, but the structural difficulty of delaying childbearing. Rather than serving only as a summary, this chapter develops substantive analysis through two analytical lenses. First, it reveals how delaying childbearing exemplifies gendered inequality by bringing to the surface gender dimensions that were implicit throughout the empirical chapters. Second, it examines how time itself becomes a mechanism of constraint that transforms lived experience through chronic anxiety and strategic burden.

The conclusion situates the Chinese case within wider theoretical debates on temporality, reproduction, and social regulation, highlighting its significance for both China studies and global scholarship. Ultimately, delaying childbearing in China is not a private deferral but a social diagnosis: it reveals how time disciplines, how gender stratifies, and how agency survives under constraint.

CHAPTER 2

A Literature Review of Reproductive Timing as Temporal Norm Negotiation

Childbearing postponement has become one of the most salient demographic trends of the twenty-first century (Nathan & Pardo, 2019). This shift has attracted significant scholarly attention, particularly in demography and sociology. Demographic research has largely focused on structural explanations of this phenomenon, such as prolonged education, rising female labour force participation, and economic uncertainty (such as E. Beaujouan, 2020; Lazzari et al., 2024; Maxwell, 1987; Sobotka & Beaujouan, 2018; Yopo Díaz & Abufhele, 2024). Meanwhile, sociological scholarship has examined how fertility timing is embedded in social constraints, gendered expectations, and temporal orders (such as Cooke et al., 2012; Datta et al., 2023; Mills, 2010; Yopo Díaz & Abufhele, 2024). This chapter reviews these strands of literature, situating them within the Chinese context, and highlights the conceptual gaps that motivate this thesis.

This chapter reviews the literature across five interconnected dimensions. First, I summarise global research on the trend of delaying childbearing to understand how this phenomenon has developed both temporally and geographically, and to situate the case of China within the broader global trend. Second, I develop an original analytical lens that examines how "delayed" childbearing has been conceptualised with three distinct frameworks – biological, socially optimal, and socially normative – that have implicitly structured research in this field. By making these frameworks explicit, I demonstrate how each shapes different research questions, methodological approaches, and findings, while highlighting that the socially normative framework offers a significant entry point for understanding delay as a window into broader processes of social transformation, revealing how individuals navigate changing temporal expectations in contemporary societies.

Third, building on this conceptual clarification, I shift analytical focus from "delayed" as a retrospective outcome to "delaying" as an ongoing process, reviewing qualitative research that reveals timing decisions as sites of continuous negotiation with structural constraints and moral evaluations. While this literature establishes timing as a domain of agency, it has yet to examine the concrete strategies through which such agency is exercised over time. Then, I review the research on temporal-spatial agency, drawing on structuration theory and mobilities research to understand how individuals navigate normative constraints through strategic manipulation of time and place. This framework provides analytical tools for understanding delay as an active practice rather than passive postponement.

Together, these four dimensions establish the theoretical foundation for understanding delaying childbearing as a complex process of temporal-spatial negotiation that reveals broader dynamics of agency, structure, and social change in reproductive lives. Finally, I argue that contemporary China provides an ideal empirical context for studying these dynamics, combining strong temporal norms, sophisticated governance mechanisms, family-centred decision-making, and extensive spatial mobility in ways that make the interaction between time and space in the exertion of agency visible and researchable.

2.1 Globally Expanding Trends of Childbearing Postponement

The postponement of childbearing has evolved from a pattern first consolidated in high-income countries to a broader global phenomenon that is increasingly evident across diverse socio-economic contexts. Within developed countries, this trend has not only persisted but intensified over the past four decades. In most OECD countries, the mean age at first birth has risen steadily since the 1970s, reaching or surpassing 30 years in many Western and Northern European states by the late 2010s (Beaujouan, 2020; Frejka & Sardon, 2006; Mills et al., 2011; Sobotka & Beaujouan, 2018). Alongside this upward shift in central tendency, the prevalence of later motherhood has expanded: in several low-fertility countries,

births to mothers aged 35 and over now account for more than 20% of all live births, and the share of births at 40+ has risen to between 3% and 5% in the most advanced cases, such as Spain, Italy and Ireland (Beaujouan, 2020; Beaujouan & Toulemon, 2021; Billari et al., 2011).

Yopo Díaz and Cabib (2025) show that childbearing postponement is emerging systematically across successive cohorts, thus suggesting an entrenched pattern of postponement rather than a temporary fluctuation. Furthermore, the age distribution of first births has widened, with some high-income settings displaying an emergent bimodal pattern, where highly educated and economically advantaged women disproportionately cluster at later ages while other groups maintain earlier fertility schedules (Nathan & Pardo, 2019). Together, these trends point to both an elevation and a diversification of childbearing timing in developed contexts, underscoring the salience of postponement as a structural feature of contemporary family formation.

While initially concentrated in high-income settings, the postponement of childbearing has progressively extended to middle-income regions, albeit at different paces and magnitudes. In Latin America, recent studies document a gradual rise in the mean age at first birth alongside persistent early fertility among disadvantaged groups, producing a marked polarisation in reproductive timing (Nathan & Pardo, 2019). In Chile, for instance, the age profile of childbearing has shifted markedly: between 1990 and 2017, the share of total births to women aged 30–34 rose from 18% to 26.2%, while those to women aged 35–39 increased from 10.2% to 17.2% (Yopo Díaz & Abufhele, 2024). Similar trajectories have been observed in other parts of the region, such as Uruguay and some post-Soviet countries (Nathan & Pardo, 2019). These regional patterns indicate that the logic of postponement, once confined to developed countries, is now diffusing globally.

East Asia exhibits some of the most pronounced postponement patterns. In 2022, the median age at first birth reached 32.7 years in Hong Kong and 32.8 years in South Korea, the highest recorded among high-income societies globally (Chen, 2024). In 2021 – 2022, approximately 21% of all first births in Singapore and Japan were to women aged 35 and over, with the proportions rising to 25% in Taiwan, 27% in South Korea, and 28% in Hong Kong (Chen, 2024). Although mainland China does not fall within the high-income category, it displays a parallel trajectory of postponement within East Asia, with demographic data from 1990 – 2020 revealing systematic delays in both first and higher-order births, led by urban residents and highly educated women cohorts (X. Zhang & Sheng, 2023). Between 2013 and 2019, the share of pregnant women in China aged 35 and over rose from 10.7% to 15.2%, representing an average annual growth rate of 5.95% – a pace exceeding that observed in some developed settings (Y. Wang et al., 2024).

In sum, the postponement of childbearing has transformed from a distinctive feature of high-income societies into a global demographic shift, encompassing diverse economic and cultural contexts. While the trajectory differs across regions – deepening in Western Europe, stratifying in Latin America, and intensifying in East Asia – the underlying dynamics point to a shared reconfiguration of the reproductive life course. This sustained and geographically expanding trend of delayed childbearing deserves close attention, as it raises fundamental questions about how reproductive timing is structured, contested, and lived across different social contexts. The following chapter will start from the conceptualisation of late childbearing.

2.2 Conceptualising "Delayed" Childbearing: Three Distinct Temporal Frameworks

Delayed childbearing has become an important interdisciplinary research topic, encompassing demography, sociology, public health, economics, and related fields. However, this broad scholarly attention has produced a conceptually fragmented field where research

proceeds from different temporal assumptions without explicit recognition of these underlying frameworks. While "delayed" childbearing is often reduced to a numerical deviation from the mean or median age at first birth for individuals (such as Budds et al., 2016; S. P. Martin, 2000; Perrier, 2013) or an increase of the mean first-birth age for a population (such as Frejka and Sardon, 2006; Cooke et al., 2012), the temporal frameworks that structure scholarly treatments vary fundamentally, shaping not only how "delay" is defined and measured, but also what mechanisms and solutions are emphasised.

Many existing studies implicitly operate within one of these frameworks – or inconsistently blend several – without acknowledging how their chosen temporal reference point shapes their findings. This conceptual ambiguity has prevented cumulative knowledge building and obscured the theoretical stakes involved in how we understand reproductive timing. To address this fragmentation, this section systematically identifies and compares three distinct temporal frameworks that have structured research in this field: the biological clock, the socially optimal timeline, and the socially normative timeline. Understanding these different temporal frameworks is crucial because they fundamentally shape how "delay" is conceptualised, what counts as evidence, and what theoretical conclusions can be drawn – ultimately determining how and to what extent delayed childbearing can be understood.

2.2.1 Biological Clock Conceptualisation

The biological framing defines delay primarily in relation to physiological fertility decline and the age-related risks of conception and childbirth. In biomedical and demographic literature, advanced maternal age is conventionally marked at 35 for women and around 40-45 for men (Leader, 2006; Macintosh, 2015). Empirical studies document the biological basis for this threshold: female fecundity declines steeply after the mid-thirties, with higher rates of anovulation, miscarriage, and complications in pregnancy and delivery (Beemsterboer et al., 2006; Schmidt et al., 2012; Y. Wang et al., 2024). These risks have been

widely popularised through public health messaging and popular discourse, producing the now-familiar metaphor of "ticking biological clock" (I. Daly & Bewley, 2013).

Alongside clinical research, sociological studies examine the perception of a "ticking clock" as a subjective motivator and constraint in reproductive decision-making. Amir (2006) offers a critical account of the biological clock as a biopolitical mechanism that entwines culturally specific gender norms with ostensibly objective biological facts. She argues that the clock functions as a temporal regulatory principle, positioning women's bodies as sites of self and social surveillance, narrowing acceptable life-course possibilities to fit an ideologically idealised family model. Yopo Díaz (2021) advances this line of analysis and argues that the clock regulates reproductive time by defining it as quantitative, standardised, linear, and irreversible, framing fertility decline through the idioms of pressure, risk, and burden. This framing not only determines when it is biologically possible to have children but also when it is socially desirable to do so, thus linking the biological clock to culturally embedded norms about the appropriate sequencing of the female life course. While such cultural codings overlap with what is later discussed under socially normative timelines, the biological conceptualisation remains anchored in the premise of physiological fertility limits and the risks associated with surpassing them.

The prominence of the biological clock in public discourse intersects with the rapid expansion of assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs). Techniques such as in vitro fertilisation (IVF) and oocyte cryopreservation have been promoted as strategies for mitigating age-related infertility and "extending" reproductive time (Goold & Savulescu, 2009). Proponents frame ARTs as empowering tools that decouple reproductive timing from chronological ageing, enabling women to synchronise childbearing with other life-course priorities (Myers & Martin, 2021). Yet empirical data show that ARTs' success rates decline sharply with age, particularly beyond the late thirties (Beemsterboer et al., 2006; Wyndham et

al., 2012). Recent research further demonstrates how ARTs are negotiated within specific normative and institutional contexts rather than simply expanding individual choice. For example, Cai and Choi (2025) show how lesbian couples in China engage in "reproductive curation" through ARTs under conditions where same-sex marriage and parental recognition remain legally restricted.

Critical analyses caution that the framing of ARTs as a solution to postponement risks reinforcing existing inequalities. ARTs are disproportionately accessible to affluent women, and the technologisation of fertility responsibilises individuals for managing biological time, while diverting attention away from structural constraints such as gendered labour markets and inadequate family policy (Amir, 2006; Carroll & Kroløkke, 2018; I. Daly & Bewley, 2013). Becker (2000) and Martin (2010) further show how fertility industries commodify reproductive time, hope, and even anticipated infertility, embedding them within neoliberal logics of self-management.

It is against this background that Bledsoe's (2010) ethnographic work in West Africa offers a striking counterpoint. This research unsettles the dominant Western model of time as linear, uniform, and irreversible in relation to fertility. It shows that ageing and reproductive capacity in this context are understood less through fixed chronological thresholds than through contingent life circumstances, kinship obligations, and episodic opportunities. Here, reproductive time is relational and situational – what she calls "contingent time" – and fertility potential is socially mediated, recalibrated, and even redefined across the life course. This challenges the universality of the "ticking clock" metaphor and reveals that what counts as "late" or "early" motherhood cannot be reduced to biomedical limits alone. By demonstrating that reproductive timing is culturally constructed as well as biologically bounded, Bledsoe's work opens conceptual space for shifting from a strictly physiological

framing towards a broader sociological analysis of how time itself is defined, organised, and lived.

2.2.2 The Socially Optimal Timeline

A second major conceptualisation situates "delay" concerning the conditions deemed socially and materially optimal for becoming a parent. In this view, reproductive timing is evaluated by when individuals are sufficiently prepared to take on parenthood. Martin (2017) captures this logic by distinguishing biological fertility from social fertility: while the former concerns the physiological capacity to conceive, the latter concerns the structural arrangements that make parenthood feasible and desirable. From this perspective, childbearing is often deferred until prospective parents secure stable income, adequate housing, a reliable partner, and a level of emotional readiness deemed sufficient for raising a child (I. Daly, 2011; Goedeke et al., 2022; L. J. Martin, 2021).

This framing is closely connected to human capital theory, which treats education and career development as investments that yield long-term economic returns (Buckles, 2008; L. J. Martin, 2021). The expansion of women's educational attainment and labour market participation has consistently been identified as a major driver of delayed motherhood across high-income countries (Mills et al., 2011; Ní Bhrolcháin & and Beaujouan, 2012). Higher levels of education often correspond to later entry into stable employment and longer periods of career establishment, which in turn postpone the timing of family formation and parenthood (Buckles, 2008; Maxwell, 1987). Economic uncertainty also plays a vital role. In contexts of insecure labour markets, unaffordable housing, and rising living costs, prospective parents may postpone reproduction until they feel sufficiently buffered against financial risk (Balbo et al., 2013). Cooke et al. (2012) demonstrate that women often perceive that they have limited control over key prerequisites that define social readiness for parenthood, such as relationship stability, financial security, and career establishment. In

many middle-income contexts, aspirations for middle-class lifestyles collide with precarious means of attaining them, intensifying delays (Chen, 2024).

In addition to high-income settings, Yopo Díaz's work on Chile provides an important extension of the socially optimal timeline perspective on childbearing postponement (Yopo Díaz, 2019; Yopo Díaz & Abufhele, 2024; Yopo Díaz & Cabib, 2025). Their earlier research demonstrates that women's decisions to delay motherhood are deeply shaped by socio-economic logics that define what constitutes "good motherhood." Within this framing, becoming a mother requires meeting socially defined conditions of readiness – securing stable income, adequate housing, and emotional maturity – before childbearing is considered legitimate or responsible. Women thus strategically postpone motherhood until they feel able to fulfil these expectations as a way to align with socio-economic standards of responsible parenthood.

They later engage delayed motherhood with the research of "waithood", and frame "reproductive waithood" (Yopo Díaz & Cabib, 2025). The perspective of waithood highlights the involuntary nature of delay when structural conditions – such as extended education, insecure employment, and unaffordable housing – block young people's transitions into marriage and parenthood (Inhorn & Smith-Hefner, 2021; Mclean, 2021; Shah et al., 2025). In this sense, delay is experienced less as planned postponement than as being trapped in prolonged waiting, suspended between dependency and adulthood. The waithood perspective aligns with the nature of socially optimal conceptualisation of childbearing timing in situating reproductive postponement within broader socio-economic arrangements that define when parenthood is feasible, appropriate, and legitimate.

Work-family conflict represents a central mechanism within socially optimal framing. Kemkes-Grottenthaler (2003) contributes a crucial theoretical lens, arguing that motherhood postponement functions as a temporary conflict-solving strategy, allowing women to avoid a

forced either/or between work and family under constrained conditions. This insight reveals postponement to be a strategic response to structural incompatibilities rather than a simple rejection of parenthood. The work-family conflict framework receives extensive theoretical development through gender studies research. McDonald (2000a, 2000b, 2006) situates the conflict within gender equity theory, demonstrating that low fertility emerges when high gender equity in education and employment is not matched by equivalent equity within the family sphere. Mills (2010) demonstrates systematic relationships between gender systems and fertility behaviour, emphasising the role incompatibility between work and childbearing for women as a central constraint. Hochschild and Machung's (2012) concept of the "stalled revolution" illuminates how household gender role persistence creates ongoing temporal coordination challenges despite women's advancement in education and employment.

Compared with the biological conceptualisation centring on physiological deadlines, the socially optimal approach foregrounds the alignment between reproduction and life-course achievements. Daly (2011) highlights that the "social clock" of readiness and the "biological clock" of fertility are rarely synchronised. The pursuit of social readiness – through career consolidation, partnership stability, or other milestones – can create a misalignment, whereby the point of optimal social readiness arrives after biological fertility has begun to decline. Billari et al. (2011) interpret such cases as the outcome of competing temporal logics, in which social and biological schedules exert contradictory pressures.

Moreover, these "optimal" conditions are unevenly distributed. Better-educated, higher-income women are more likely to attain social readiness before age-related fertility decline becomes a significant concern, while disadvantaged groups may face prolonged delays or foreclosed opportunities altogether (Dion, 1995; S. P. Martin, 2000). This unequal distribution of readiness contributes to the reproduction of socio-economic stratification

through reproductive timing, a dynamic that overlaps with the "stratified reproduction" argument (Colen, 2009).

Research with the socially optimal conceptualisation thus focuses on socio-economic factors that cause delayed parenthood, temporal coordination challenges in life-course decision-making, and class-based differential access to optimal timing conditions. However, this framing implicitly assumes rational planning capabilities and milestone-based life course organisation while potentially obscuring how structural inequalities limit strategic temporal capacity for different social groups. While socially optimal framing recognises structural constraints, it tends to individualise solutions through strategic planning, raising questions about the normative frameworks that define "optimal" conditions and shape temporal expectations.

2.2.3 The Socially Normative Timeline

If the biological and socially optimal framings establish *reference points* for when parenthood is physiologically possible or materially advantageous, also framed as descriptive norms (Jensen & Bute, 2010; Lapinski & Rimal, 2005; Settersten & Hägestad, 1996), the normative framing prescribes when it *should* occur. It introduces a prescriptive dimension to temporal expectations based on the previous two understandings of childbearing timing. As Billari et al. (2011) note, biological deadlines and socially optimal milestones converge in shaping normative judgements of being "on time" or "too late" in the reproductive life course. This approach builds on the "social clock" concept (Hagestad & Neugarten, 1985; Neugarten, 1976; Neugarten et al., 1965), a culturally defined timeline for major life milestones that operates as a system of social controls through age norms and age expectations. These norms function as "prods and brakes upon behaviour" (Neugarten, 1976: 16), hastening some events while delaying others, creating shared cultural understandings of appropriate timing for major life transitions, including childbearing.

The operation of socially normative timelines is illuminated by life course research, which demonstrates how temporal expectations remain institutionalised within social structures despite narratives of individualisation. Settersten and Hägestad (1996) identify "age deadlines" for major life transitions that operate as cultural timetables backed by social sanctions. This institutionalisation of temporal expectations persists even as societies undergo broader social transformation. Brückner and Mayer (2005) provide evidence for both standardisation and de-standardisation trends, yet emphasise that temporal constraints continue to structure life course planning. Similarly, Mortimer et al. (2016) further demonstrate that age and life course stages remain socially constructed categories that create systematic constraints on individual planning.

Life course studies often draw on sociological theories of norms to evaluate the prescriptive power of such norms in life course transitions, distinguishing them from merely descriptive guidelines. Horne (2001) has defined norms as expectations of individual behaviours with a certain level of group consensus with enforcement. Coleman (1994) articulated the importance of enforcement mechanisms, arguing that norms require some form of external sanctions to maintain their social power in disciplining individual behaviours. These sanctions can be both positive (rewards for compliance) and negative (punishment for violation), and they serve as the social infrastructure that gives norms their regulatory force. Family transition studies similarly emphasise the centrality of sanctions in transforming expectations into prescriptive norms (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005; Lawrence, 1996; Lazzari et al., 2024; Liefbroer & Billari, 2010; Marini, 1984; Settersten, 2003). Situated with this line of work, Posner and Rasmusen (1999) provide a comprehensive typology of norm enforcement mechanisms, ranging from internalised sanctions such as guilt to external punishments imposed by communities.

From this perspective, delay is not only a departure from biological deadlines or optimal conditions but also a deviation from culturally expected timetables, carrying the potential for social sanctions. Research on delayed childbearing from this perspective examines how temporal norms exert prescriptive influence on childbearing decision-making. Studies in European contexts have identified perceived "deadlines" for motherhood, often concentrated in the late twenties or early thirties, with deviations prompting social disapproval, gossip, or even reduced familial support (Liefbroer & Billari, 2010). In collectivist societies, these pressures can be more pronounced, as marriage and childbearing are tightly linked to family reputation and intergenerational obligations (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005; Zang, 2024). This normative framing also draws attention to how public discourse and morality reproduce prescriptive timetables – for example, the popularisation of the "biological clock" as both a biomedical fact and a moral injunction to reproduce "on time" (Amir, 2006; Yopo Díaz, 2021).

These norms are often embedded in broader cultural narratives about appropriate life-course sequencing and gendered responsibilities. Perrie (2013) shows that motherhood undertaken outside the culturally sanctioned window – particularly after the mid-thirties – is frequently subject to moral scrutiny, irrespective of whether individuals meet all other socially optimal conditions. Such judgements underscore that, in normative framings, timing is not simply a matter of feasibility but of cultural propriety. Billari et al. (2011) describe these perceived "age deadlines" as structuring life-course sequencing in ways that often override personal preference. In this sense, the social clock acts as a form of temporal regulation, rewarding compliance and penalising deviation through moralising discourses, social stigma, or institutional barriers.

Within this framework, delayed childbearing is not simply a shift in statistical averages but a socially situated deviation from culturally endorsed life-course sequencing.

The prescriptive nature of these norms makes them particularly consequential: they not only influence personal decision-making but also shape the reception of those decisions by family, peers, and institutions. Unlike the biological and socially optimal framings, which establish reference points for when parenthood is physiologically possible or materially advantageous, the normative framework reveals how temporal expectations operate as sites of social regulation and potential resistance. This framework demonstrates that fertility timing involves ongoing negotiation with culturally sanctioned life course sequences. Crucially, this negotiation process provides a window into how reproductive norms themselves are maintained, contested, and potentially transformed through everyday practices.

To summarise, while all three frameworks have contributed important insights to understanding delayed childbearing, they approach temporal "delay" from fundamentally different premises and thus generate different types of knowledge. The biological framework treats delay as deviation from physiological optima, leading to research focused on medical risks and technological interventions. The socially optimal framework treats delay as temporal misalignment between readiness and biological capacity, leading to research on structural constraints of fertility and life course planning. The socially normative framework treats delay as negotiation with cultural expectations, opening space for research on how temporal norms operate in everyday life and how it is a field full of coercion, contest and struggle.

Among the three, the socially normative timeline offers a promising entry point for understanding delayed childbearing as a lens for examining wider social transformation – how normative expectations, particularly those about fertility and life planning, are contested, negotiated, and potentially reconfigured through everyday practices. This framework shifts attention from treating delay as a problem requiring solution to understanding it as a process

through which individuals navigate competing reproductive and temporal logics, thereby revealing broader dynamics of social change.

From this perspective, in this thesis, "delaying childbearing" is conceptualised in relation to socially normative timelines rather than individual fertility intentions or future-oriented reproductive plans. Delay therefore does not presuppose that individuals intend to have children at a later stage. Instead, it refers to a relational temporal positioning in which individuals are located beyond culturally prescribed expectations for childbearing and are subject to normative pressure as a result. From this perspective, individuals who do not plan to have children are not analytically excluded from the category of delaying, insofar as they continue to be positioned by family members, peers, or broader social discourses as having exceeded expected reproductive timelines. Including such cases enables the analysis to foreground how normative temporal expectations operate independently of personal reproductive intentions, and how individuals navigate, resist, or reinterpret these pressures in the present.

2.3 Qualitative Research Mapping out the Temporal Constraints of Childbearing

While the literature on delayed childbearing reviewed above, mostly situated in the social demographic paradigm, has shed light on the influence of social norms on reproductive timing, the normative influences are typically treated as variables to be measured and correlated with fertility outcomes (such as Liefbroer and Billari, 2010), rather than as dynamic cultural frameworks shaping lived decision-making. Explicit engagement with the normative frameworks – the cultural, moral, and institutional definitions of the "right time" for motherhood – has been presented more in qualitative research on motherhood that will be reviewed below. The following body of literature reviewed draws more heavily from a sociological paradigm, in which reproductive timing is analysed through the lens of lived experience, meaning-making, and cultural construction.

The relatively small but methodologically focused body of research on reproductive timing provides essential insights into the lived processes of temporal negotiation that demographic studies cannot capture. These investigations reveal three interconnected dimensions of temporal experience: the choice-constraint dynamics that shape reproductive decisions, the moral economies that embed timing within broader frameworks of "good" motherhood, and the theoretical significance of temporality itself as a constitutive dimension of reproductive experience.

2.3.1 Motherhood as Choice or Constraint

Research on decision-making of reproductive timing reveals fundamental tensions between discourses of choice and experiences of constraint that illuminate how temporal norms operate as lived pressures. Early foundational work by Sevón (2005) demonstrated that decisions about motherhood seldom follow linear, rational-choice logics. Instead, they are embedded in multilayered processes shaped by social and cultural narratives about appropriate life courses. In this framing, timing is a socially situated dimension intertwined with identity construction and moral evaluation, thus requiring analytical approaches that account for emotional and normative dimensions as well as structural constraints.

Cooke et al. (2012) extend this analysis demonstrating that childbearing postponement rarely constitutes a conscious choice, emerging instead through what they term "drift into delay" – complex factor interactions often beyond women's direct control. Their findings reveal how women experience temporal delay in reproduction as constrained by external factors rather than personal preference, with many participants describing themselves as "running out of time" despite never having made explicit decisions to delay. Donath (2015) advances this thread of research by dismantling the dominant binary in Western reproductive discourses between "no choice" (rooted in biological determinism) and "free choice" (aligned with neoliberal individualism). The analysis of maternal regret in this

research reveals that women's reproductive decisions occur under multiple intersecting pressures, including pronatalist expectations, pervasive "biological clock" urgency, and cultural assumptions about womanhood (Donath, 2015).

Building on a socially normative conceptualisation of reproductive timing, Budds et al. (2016) show how negotiations around delayed childbearing are mediated through shared interpretive frameworks. They identify two dominant repertoires through which women make sense of later motherhood: "older motherhood as circumstance," which frames delay as the result of constraints beyond individual control, and "older motherhood as readiness," which presents delay as the achievement of socially sanctioned conditions for "good" mothering. Crucially, these repertoires function not merely as narrative accounts but as mechanisms of normative positioning, enabling women to render their reproductive timing socially intelligible and morally legitimate. By foregrounding timing as both a site of constraint and interpretive agency, this analysis reframes childbearing postponement as a dynamic process of negotiation between individual circumstances and culturally prescribed expectations.

2.3.2 "Good" Motherhood and Temporal Requirements

Research on motherhood ideologies demonstrates how temporal requirements become embedded in cultural definitions of appropriate parenting, revealing the moral economy through which timing decisions are evaluated. This literature elaborates how temporal choices become constitutive elements of maternal identity and moral positioning.

Perrier's (2013) research offers a critical foundation for understanding the moral dimensions of reproductive timing. This analysis reveals that temporal choices become a key resource in maternal identity construction: both younger and older mothers draw upon distinct temporal frameworks to establish their moral positioning, situating themselves as "good" mothers despite deviation from normative age expectations. Crucially, this analysis demonstrates that timing itself operates as moral currency within maternal identity work –

women use their timing decisions to claim moral authority rather than simply adapting to temporal constraints.

Shelton and Johnson's (2006) UK-based research identifies how women's accounts of the "right time" for motherhood are shaped by deeply institutionalised temporal scripts, which specify not only an age range but also a sequence of life events – education, employment stability, housing, and relationship security – before parenthood is considered legitimate. These scripts reflect and reproduce classed and gendered expectations that can place women who deviate from the script under moral scrutiny. Goedeke et al. (2022) provide contemporary evidence from New Zealand, showing how readiness frameworks consistently link motherhood legitimacy to middle-class lifestyle milestones. By defining legitimate motherhood through socio-economic resources, these discourses disadvantage women with fewer resources, whose reproductive choices are more easily delegitimised as "not right" or "irresponsible." In this way, time becomes both a moral regulator, operating through economic logics, constraining reproductive freedom and potentially turning childbearing into a form of production tied to social class.

Yopo Díaz's (2019) DPhil thesis introduces the concept of the "moral economy of postponing motherhood" in the Chilean context, showing how structural precariousness, relational insecurity, and intensifying standards of "good" mothering combine to produce strategic delays in childbearing. Her analysis demonstrates that women postpone motherhood in order to accumulate the resources, stability, and relationship quality they perceive as necessary to meet socially valued maternal ideals. While this framework shares the present thesis's understanding of delaying as a meaningful and strategic practice, it focuses primarily on the socioeconomic conditions that generate postponement, rather than on how temporal norms themselves are navigated and negotiated during the postponement process. This distinction creates space for extending her insights by examining how delay unfolds through

ongoing engagement with normative timelines and social expectations, a dimension that lies at the core of this thesis's analytical contribution.

Collectively, these studies deepen our understanding of how "good motherhood" operates as a temporal project. Research with the conceptualisation of social optimal timeline underscores material readiness through milestone achievement and resource accumulation, whereas normative timeline perspectives highlight cultural scripts and moral evaluations of appropriate timing. Together, they show that reproductive timing is not merely a matter of resources but also a mechanism for claiming and maintaining maternal legitimacy, making timing an active form of identity work alongside structural coordination processes.

2.3.3 Temporal Experience and Control

Understanding how individuals experience and negotiate time in relation to reproduction requires recognising that time itself is not a neutral backdrop but a socially organised structure. Daly's (2001) influential work conceptualises time as both a structural condition and a medium of action, positioning reproductive timing within broader gendered temporal orders where control over time functions as a form of power. Building on this structural view, Earle and Letherby (2007) demonstrate how women navigate socially recognised distinctions between "good," "bad," and "right" times for conception, while remaining acutely aware that time may be "running out."

Research on "renewed" motherhood by Jarvie et al. (2015) reveals how women recalibrate temporal narratives across different relationships and life stages, sometimes feeling compelled to produce children with new partners whilst dealing with criticism for "wrong-aged" motherhood. Their analysis illustrates that temporal navigation involves ongoing recalibration rather than single decisions, highlighting how reproductive timing remains embedded in evolving relational and social contexts. Datta et al. (2023), drawing on interviews in England and Wales, complement previous analysis and show that chronological

age is often less salient than life stage when participants assess "readiness", yet age frequently becomes the ultimate arbiter in the decision to attempt pregnancy. Their analysis – framed through Bourdieu's (1990) notions of *habitus* and *field* – documents how social expectations about the "right time" are internalised and negotiated, with women experiencing sharper biological-clock pressures than men, and with mismatches between social and biological clocks producing "messy" temporal trajectories rather than linear sequences.

Taken together, the three sections above demonstrate that temporal control and experience are not simply background conditions to reproductive decision-making but active sites of negotiation, constraint, and resistance. They show that time is both structurally imposed and individually navigated, with reproductive timing choices functioning as a means of managing, accommodating, or subtly challenging gendered and normative temporal structures, which the following section will further explore.

2.3.4 Summary: Why Temporality Matters in Childbearing Studies

Scholars of social time have long argued that time is not simply an objective, physical measure but a socially constructed institution, which has set a solid theoretical foundation for childbearing discussions. Zerubavel (1985, 1989), first, demonstrates how calendars, schedules, and cyclical rhythms institutionalise temporal patterns, embedding them into collective life and everyday routines. Elias (1989, 1992) adds that shared temporal standards function as symbolic social regulatory mechanisms, guiding self-regulation and aligning individual behaviour with collective rhythms. Adam (1990, 1995) further theorises time as a multidimensional construct – collectively produced, institutionally maintained, and culturally variable. Nowotny (1992) integrated these perspectives, showing how biological cycles, social expectations, and physical time interlock to form a coherent temporal order. Together, these accounts reposition time as a social institution that structures life courses, disciplines behaviour, and shapes the conditions under which reproductive decisions might be made.

Within this theoretical frame, research on the temporality of motherhood offers critical insights into how such temporal structures operate as a central arena in which agency, constraint, and identity are negotiated. Sevón's (2005) research shows that in women's narratives of becoming mothers, timing is central to discussions as a constitutive element of maternal subjectivity. Donath's (2015) conversations with Israeli-Jewish women who regret becoming mothers offer a compelling theoretical rationale for prioritising "when" over "whether" in reproductive decision-making studies. This discursive emphasis on timing sustains the cultural presumption in pronatalist societies that all women will eventually become mothers, thereby foreclosing the possibility of non-motherhood as a legitimate choice while appearing to offer flexibility in the timing. In such settings, the ability to decide *when* – to postpone, accelerate, or sequence childbearing – becomes the principal and limited arena in which women can exercise discretion, negotiate expectations, or quietly resist them. This recognition aligns with Earle and Letherby's (2007) argument that control over time operates as a form of power in reproductive contexts. Women may use timing decisions to align with, subvert, or reframe societal expectations, making temporal control a key site for resistance as well as compliance.

Taken together, the qualitative literature on timing motherhood makes an important conceptual move by foregrounding the temporal dimension of childbearing decisions. Through methods that capture lived experience in depth, these studies demonstrate that "when" is not a mere chronological marker but a site where agency, identity, and social regulation converge. Their unpacked analyses reveal that such decisions are rarely made in unconstrained circumstances; instead, they are saturated with normative pressures, moral evaluations, and structural frictions. In doing so, they highlight the centrality of time to understanding reproductive agency and make visible the struggles, negotiations, and

justifications that surround the act of deciding *when* to become a mother in particularly pronatalist contexts.

However, current research on the temporality of entering parenthood largely stops at mapping the constraints and struggles that shape timing decisions. It tells us that temporal choices are regulated, but less attention has been paid to how individuals actively engage with these regulations once postponement is underway. Existing studies, such as interpretative work on fertility intentions (Budds et al., 2016), illuminate important aspects of meaning-making, yet they tell us little about the interactive processes through which people negotiate, accommodate, or contest normative timelines in relation to others and institutions across the unfolding course of delay.

In other words, the temporal field has been established as socially structured, but the micro-processes through which actors navigate that structure remain underexamined. This thesis addresses this gap through shifting analytical attention from the moment of deciding *when* to the sustained practice of *delaying* – an ongoing, situated process embedded in temporal negotiations and strategic decision-making. This thereby opens space for an interactional and agency-focused account to explore the lived processes through which timing is negotiated in everyday life.

2.4 Theorising Agency: Strategic Practices within Normative Constraints

2.4.1 Situating Agency in Relation to Structure

Agency, defined as the capacity for purposive action within structural contexts, has been central to sociological theory's attempts to understand how individuals navigate constraint whilst maintaining possibilities for meaningful choice and social change (Giddens, 1984; Sewell, 1992; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Classic sociological literature provides the foundational framework for understanding agency-structure relationships. Giddens (1984) established the foundational discussion of agency by proposing structuration theory amidst

previous dominant sociological theories of functionalism and structuralism with naturalistic overtones. These approaches attribute primacy to social structures over individual actions. Durkheim's (1897) influential study on suicide exemplifies this approach, demonstrating how seemingly personal decisions reflect social integration and regulation patterns, with little room for meaningful individual agency. This perspective positioned individual choices as largely determined by external social structures and circumstances, establishing a research tradition that emphasised structural causation over individual action.

Centring around the duality of structure and agency, Giddens (1984) challenges this determinism by recognising that social realities are recursively produced through human agency while simultaneously constraining that agency. Norms, defined as rules that form part of social structure by Giddens (1984), exert power via enforced sanctions. However, Giddens (1984) argues that these sanctions can only have fully compulsive effects on individuals entirely incapable of resisting; most individuals, framed as "knowledgeable" human agents, are capable of using their situated and structured capacities to enact and negotiate with structure, forming as a necessary part of structuration as a dynamic process.

Building on this foundation, Sewell (1992) synthesises the duality of structure and agency with Bourdieu's (1990) theory of habitus, which pinpoints that structure has been internalised and reproduced through individual practices. Habitus refers to the deeply ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that individuals develop through their social experiences (Bourdieu, 1990; Sewell, 1992). While Bourdieu (1990) often emphasises how habitus leads to the reproduction of social structures, Sewell (1992) draws on this concept to explain how individuals might develop strategies to navigate and negotiate with external constraints, including norm enforcement. Sewell (1992), then, clearly defines agency as the ability to mobilise situated resources to transpose and reinterpret arrays of structure, including norms. This definition clarifies the duality of structure and agency by emphasising

that agency is not opposed to structure, but is constituent of and emerges within it; agents are not merely constrained but also empowered by structure (Sewell, 1992).

Moreover, Sewell (1992) complements the argument of Giddens and believes that agency is inherent in all humans, differing in the ways and extent of agency exertion among individuals. This conceptualisation of the relationship between structure and agency provides a solid and referential framework for understanding how individuals, in this research context, might actively engage with the temporal norms in childbearing, rather than simply accepting or rejecting them outright – highlighting the negotiated nature of agency within normative constraints.

Contemporary scholars have refined this understanding through concepts of "bounded agency" and "constrained agency". Evans' (2007) proposition of "bounded agency" recognises how individual action operates within socially situated boundaries and temporal constraints, while acknowledging that individuals actively utilise available resources to navigate complex normative systems. Drawing on the restrictive context in north-west India, Madhok (2013, 2014) develops the concept of "constrained agency" that challenges the equation of agency with resistance or free choice. This framework of "reflective judgments" emphasises how agency can exist even when choices are severely limited, focusing on how individuals maintain ethical autonomy and make meaningful decisions within highly restrictive contexts. These perspectives emphasise that individuals can exercise agency through strategic engagement with the rules, resources, and values that shape their social contexts.

Zooming into the agency in life course transitions, Elder (1994) provides a foundational perspective by emphasising that individuals construct their life course through choices and actions within historical and social constraints. This life course paradigm highlights how timing, linked lives, and human agency interact in shaping life trajectories,

recognising that individuals make choices within the opportunities and limitations of their social contexts. Building on this foundation, Settersten and Gannon (2005) conceptualise "agency within structure" in life course research, emphasising that agency operates not against structural constraints but through and within them. Their framework helps understand how individuals navigate institutionalised pathways while creating personalised life trajectories.

These theoretical developments prove particularly relevant for understanding delaying childbearing, where individuals can exercise agency within multiple intersecting constraints. The central question becomes how agency operates through ongoing interaction with normative expectations, and what strategies enable individuals to manage tensions between personal aspirations and socially sanctioned timelines.

2.4.2 Agency in Micro-level Interaction Strategies

Understanding how agency operates in practice requires attention to the micro-processes through which individuals navigate normative pressures in everyday encounters. Goffman's (1959, 1967) pioneering work on impression management demonstrates that agency can operate through subtle and strategic performances that allow actors to sustain social acceptance whilst preserving space for alternative practices. This analysis reveals specific tactical approaches: information control (selectively revealing or concealing information), defensive practices (avoiding threatening topics), strategic ambiguity (maintaining plausible deniability), and audience segregation (presenting different versions of self to different audiences) (Goffman, 1959, 1967). Through these micro-level interaction strategies, individuals can appear to conform to social norms while creating protected spaces for alternative practices and beliefs.

This micro-level analysis of agency was further developed in Scott's (1985) influential work on "everyday resistance," which documented how subordinate groups

employ subtle, disguised, and low-profile strategies to resist domination without direct confrontation. Scott's (1985) framework reveals how individuals might appear compliant while engaging in covert resistance through foot-dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, and strategic ignorance. These "weapons of the weak" represent forms of agency that avoid open contestation while still creating space for alternative practices. Collins (1990) contributes to this understanding through their analysis of how Black women create "safe spaces" for resistance, engage in self-definition against controlling narratives, and develop collective strategies to navigate oppressive structures.

These insights prove directly relevant to research on reproductive norms. Riessman's (2000) study of childless women in pronatalist India identifies specific strategies for resisting stigma: resistant thinking and strategic avoidance (internally rejecting normative expectations while avoiding confrontation), speaking out and acting up (directly challenging stigmatising comments), and explicitly rejecting the motherhood mandate by articulating alternative life narratives that value other forms of contribution and fulfilment.

More recently, Madeley (2023) examines how women navigate non-normative childbearing medical choices within UK maternity systems. This research focuses on women who make choices outside clinical guidelines, decline routinely offered care and interventions, or request care that falls outside sociocultural norms across the childbearing continuum (Madeley, 2023). Through grounded theory research, she identifies specific strategies, including "playing the game" (performing compliance while covertly pursuing their preferences), selectively evaluating information (weighing evidence, privileging embodied knowledge over institutional advice), seeking supportive communities aligned with their reproductive identities, and engaging in complex negotiations with healthcare providers (Madeley, 2023).

These studies demonstrate how individuals navigate normative pressures through interaction strategies that create space for reproductive agency within constraining institutional systems. Applied to reproductive timing, these insights suggest that delaying childbearing may involve sophisticated strategic practices that enable individuals to manage temporal expectations whilst pursuing alternative timing patterns.

2.4.3 Agency as Temporally Situated Practice

Another influential layer of Giddens' (1984) structuration theory is the particular emphasis that agency operates within specific temporal and spatial contexts that both constrain and enable action possibilities. This analysis notes that different locales have different rules and resources available, creating varied contexts for the exercise of agency; similarly, temporal contexts – including both historical periods and individual life timing – provide different structural conditions that individuals must navigate (Giddens, 1984). For reproductive timing, temporal structures are locally defined and varied across different cultures as we reviewed above (Lizzari et al., 2024; Zang, 2024). Attending to the particular temporal and spatial dimensions of agency exertion is therefore crucial for understanding delaying childbearing. Both "when" and "where" determine the strategies through which individuals negotiate normative pressures.

Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 970) explicitly centre temporality in their conceptualisation of agency, defining it as "temporally constructed engagement" in which actors both reproduce and transform structures through iterative responses in changing temporal-relational contexts. Their "chordal triad" framework distinguishes three interlinked dimensions. First, the iterational element draws on past patterns and incorporates habitual aspects of action, explicitly building on Bourdieu's (1990) insights on how habitus shapes present action through past experiences. Second, the projective element encompasses the imagination of future possibilities and alternative trajectories. Third, the practical-evaluative

element involves judgments and decisions made in response to emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of present situations. Complementing this, Hitlin and Elder (2007) add a psychological perspective, elaborating how people process and prioritise competing temporal horizons when making life-course decisions. Their work demonstrates that agency is not simply about having options in an abstract sense, but about how individuals perceive, value, and act upon possibilities across different time frames.

Based on these insights, Daly (2001) advances a recursive model of the relationship between time and agency. This research conceptualises agency as only meaningful within the context of temporal structures, while also recognising that these structures are continuously reproduced and reshaped through everyday temporal practices. This framework proves particularly relevant for reproductive timing by demonstrating how individual temporal choices both respond to established temporal norms and potentially contribute to their gradual transformation. This recursive perspective reveals the potential of delaying childbearing as simultaneously constrained by temporal norms and capable of contributing to their evolution.

Flaherty's (2002, 2003, 2013) work on "*time work*" adds another layer of analysis by focusing on micro-level mechanisms through which individuals actively modify temporal experience. Flaherty (2002, 2003) demonstrates that time is not merely endured but can be actively produced, manipulated, and reinterpreted through everyday practices. The concept of "time work" as an effort to promote or suppress particular temporal experiences, slowing down, speeding up, or reordering event sequences, provides analytical tools for understanding how individuals respond to, adapt, and occasionally subvert temporal demands. Crucially, Flaherty's (2013) notion of *temporal agency* highlights that such agency operates interstitially within existing cultural and organisational structures rather than in overt opposition to them. Rather than direct resistance to temporal norms, temporal agency may operate through subtle manipulations of timing, strategic reframing of temporal narratives, and tactical use of spatial

resources to create temporal flexibility – importantly denoting the intersection of time and place in agency exertion (Flaherty, 2013).

The analytical lens of temporal agency resonates with studies on agency in life course planning, together with a gender perspective. Leccardi and Rampazi (1993) describe a process of *temporal destructuring*, in which individuals search for alternative life paths no longer bound to uniform societal rhythms and timetables. Yet they note that biographical uncertainty makes it harder to commit to roles that demand stable, long-term trajectories, such as motherhood at an "expected" age. Bryson (2007) offers a more explicitly gendered account, contrasting the linear, goal-oriented time associated with masculine-coded public life with the relational, service-oriented time often expected of women. This asymmetry, they argue, underpins women's temporal subordination, structuring the moral evaluations of what counts as "too early" or "too late" to have children.

Taken together, these perspectives offer a layered theoretical foundation for this study and underscore that agency is inherently temporal: it is constituted through the interplay of past trajectories, present contingencies, and imagined futures. At the same time, individuals can actively work with and on time – reordering sequences, recalibrating rhythms, and strategically delaying – to navigate the constraints and opportunities they face. This dual recognition provides a crucial theoretical foundation for examining agency in the process of delaying childbearing, where timing itself becomes the primary arena of negotiation and individuals can use various tactics interacting with time.

2.4.4 Agency as Spatially Enabled Practice

Agency also operates through spatial arrangements. Lefebvre's (1991) seminal work argues that space is produced through the interplay of spatial practices, representations, and lived experiences, all of which condition agency. Massey (1994, 2005) establishes the concept of "power-geometry" further emphasising that spatial arrangements create unequal

positioning, with different groups experiencing varying degrees of mobility, access, and influence across interconnected spaces. Studies have also shown that gender norms shape mobility opportunities and spatial autonomy, influencing not only whether women can move but also the terms on which mobility is negotiated (Hanson, 2010; Silvey, 2004).

At the micro-level, scholars have examined how individuals tactically navigate spatial constraints in everyday life, extending the insights about strategic interaction developed by Goffman (1959, 1967) and Scott (1985) into spatial domains. Certeau (1984) draws an influential distinction between strategies and tactics, which parallels Scott's (1985) analysis of everyday resistance by showing how individuals, lacking control over the dominant "strategies" of institutions, nonetheless carve out spaces of manoeuvre through everyday practices that subtly subvert or reappropriate imposed spatial orders. Cresswell's (2006, 2010) work on mobility extends this perspective, arguing that movement through space constitutes socially coded practice that can affirm or contest prevailing spatial norms, making mobility itself a vehicle for agency.

The concept of *emplacement* further highlights that spatial agency is not only about movement or relocation but also about the process of becoming situated within particular socio-spatial contexts. As Englund (2002) and Pink (2008, 2015) demonstrate, emplacement involves embedding oneself both physically and relationally in specific locales whilst navigating and negotiating attached normative and cultural structures. This perspective reveals that spatial agency operates through both mobility and strategic rootedness, with individuals actively recalibrating their position within alternative normative orders.

Following this approach, spatial agency has been richly examined in migration studies, where relocation becomes a key medium for negotiating social expectations and life trajectories. The mobilities turn (Sheller & Urry, 2006) reframes movement as a fundamental dimension of social life rather than a purely economic act, revealing mobility as form of

agency enacted through both movement and emplacement. Halfacree's (2004) study shows how relocation can serve as a tactic for evading normative pressures embedded in tight-knit communities, whilst Bailey (2009) demonstrates how migration decisions balance structural constraints with subjective aspirations, expanding "zones of possibility" for action.

Research explicitly linking spatial mobility and reproductive timing remains limited but offers suggestive insights. Boyle and Halfacree (1998) and Mulder and Wagner (2010) show that migration, especially for education or career opportunities, can disrupt established local timelines for marriage and childbirth, enabling delays that might be unattainable in more constrained spatial contexts. These findings suggest that spatial mobility may directly affect reproductive timing by providing access to alternative temporal norms and resource structures.

2.4.5 The Intersection of Temporal and Spatial Agency

Furthermore, there are some theoretical insights explicitly suggesting that temporal and spatial dimensions of agency rarely operate independently in practice, apart from Flaherty's (2013) theorisation of temporal agency. The classic point of departure of the integrated perspective is Hägerstraand's (1970) time-geography, which provides a foundational framework for understanding how individual possibilities are bounded by capability, coupling, and authority constraints that operate simultaneously across temporal and spatial dimensions. This perspective argues that agency often unfolds through tactical manipulations of time-space arrangements rather than through unrestricted freedom, making visible how people's opportunities are shaped by scheduling, institutional calendars, and coordination requirements with others.

May and Thrift's (2003) concept of "*timespace"* advances this understanding by emphasising the inseparability of temporal orderings and spatial configurations. Rather than treating time and space as separate dimensions, their framework shows how social practices –

such as commuting, waiting, or coordinating care – represent simultaneous temporal and spatial accomplishments. This perspective encourages understanding agency as an ongoing process of composing timespaces under constraint rather than discrete acts within fixed contexts.

Migration research provides compelling evidence of how spatio-temporal agency operates in practice. Cwerner (2001) demonstrates how migrants strategically reframe and endure waiting times, treating them as opportunities for learning, networking, or recalibrating aspirations, re-appropriating "dead time" to advance future projects, showing how temporal agency is deeply intertwined with spatial relocation. Similarly, Griffiths et al. (2014) reveal how migrants navigate multiple conflicting temporal orders – state, labour market, and family – through creative alignment or resistance practices, such as stretching household routines across borders or accelerating family formation in anticipation of uncertain legal status.

Robertson (2015) extends this discussion to the case of international students and young professionals, showing how mobility is motivated by aspirations for alternative futures. In constrained contexts – visa time limits, precarious employment, intergenerational expectations – young migrants exercise agency by re-sequencing education, work, and family plans, effectively "borrowing time" from one domain to open space in another. Yeoh et al. (2023) examines serial migration in Southeast Asia, where "care time" becomes intertwined with "time of migration" as competing temporal rhythms repeatedly collide and reshape priorities, leading families to develop adaptive temporal strategies such as delaying educational timelines or shifting caregiving roles across generations.

Theoretical frameworks reviewed so far highlight that agency is not merely an abstract capacity for action, but a situated practice exercised through concrete strategies embedded in temporal and spatial contexts. Rather than treating time and space as separate domains, this research examines how individuals strategically coordinate both to create

possibilities for action under constraint. Framing delaying childbearing as a spatio-temporal practice foregrounds the strategic manipulation of these dimensions, offering empirically grounded insights into processes of agency that often remain obscured in other domains of social life.

2.5 Research Positioning

2.5.1 Summarising Literature and Situating this Research

This review has systematically examined research on childbearing postponement across three interconnected analytical dimensions. First, the analysis of three conceptual frameworks of understanding "delaying" – biological clock, socially optimal timeline, and socially normative timeline – revealed that existing research approaches the phenomenon from different temporal premises. Among the three, the socially normative framework offers a promising entry point for understanding delay as a window into broader and multilayered social transformation processes. Additionally, most research on delayed childbearing, predominantly situated within demographic paradigms, employs quantitative approaches that focus on identifying factors that produce delay as an outcome rather than examining the lived processes through which delay is experienced and managed over time.

This limitation motivated closer examination of the smaller body of qualitative research on reproductive timing, which demonstrates that motherhood decisions involve ongoing negotiation with structural constraints through choice-constraint dynamics, moral economies of "good" motherhood, and temporal experience management. This literature establishes reproductive timing as a site of active meaning-making and practice, yet it focuses primarily on how women position themselves within existing temporal expectations rather than examining the concrete strategies through which they navigate these expectations during extended periods of delay.

Following through, agency theory provides sophisticated frameworks for understanding how individuals navigate structural constraints through concrete tactics and strategic coordination of temporal and spatial dimensions. They further reveal agency as a micro-level practice operating through embedded, specific, and observable strategies. However, these theoretical insights have rarely been applied to reproductive timing contexts, leaving the potential for spatio-temporal agency to illuminate reproductive timing processes largely unexplored.

These three bodies of literature together provide important foundations, yet each carries notable limitations. Demographic research focuses on outcomes rather than processes. Qualitative research has mapped the constraints and highlighted timing as a regulated site, but has not examined how individuals navigate these regulations in practice. Agency theory, meanwhile, lacks adequate application to reproductive timing contexts. This research addresses these gaps through a process-oriented analysis that examines "*delaying*" as an ongoing practice of temporal norm negotiation rather than "*delayed*" childbearing as a demographic outcome. These have shaped and enabled the research questions of this thesis: how do individuals navigate temporal expectations during the extended process of delaying childbearing, and what role can spatial strategies play in enabling temporal agency within normative constraints?

Understanding these processes requires a qualitative methodology capable of capturing strategic practices as they unfold over time. As the qualitative literature reviewed above demonstrates, reproductive timing involves complex meaning-making processes, interpretive work, and strategic positioning that are invisible to quantitative approaches. These insights emerged precisely because qualitative methodology enabled researchers to examine how individuals actively work with temporal structures in ongoing, situated ways. The research questions posed above require sustained engagement with individuals' accounts

of their experiences, which qualitative approaches make possible by illuminating ongoing negotiations and tactical coordination.

2.5.2 The Necessity of an Appropriate Empirical Context

Moreover, these research questions require empirical examination in a carefully selected context that can optimise observation of temporal norm negotiation processes. Understanding how individuals navigate temporal expectations during delaying requires settings where temporal norms are strong enough to necessitate strategic coordination, where spatial mobility provides genuine alternatives to local normative pressures, and where the intersection of temporal expectations and spatial opportunities creates observable negotiation dynamics. Contemporary China provides a pertinent context which combines strong temporal consciousness, sophisticated normative transmission mechanisms, and extensive possibilities for spatio-temporal strategic coordination.

Moreover, this case selection addresses a significant geographical gap in existing research: whilst the pattern of childbearing postponement is occurring and growing in East Asian societies, which are characterised by collectivistic cultures, strong intergenerational involvement, and rigid social clocks, less focus has been given to this context (Chen, 2024; Peng, 2020; Qiu, 2022; Zang, 2024). This geographical oversight limits understanding of how temporal norms and individual negotiation operate across different cultural and institutional environments, making the Chinese context both theoretically valuable and empirically necessary for advancing knowledge in this field. The following section demonstrates how contemporary China exemplifies these research requirements through its unique configuration of cultural temporal consciousness, institutional governance frameworks, family dynamics, and migration opportunities, respectively.

2.6 Contemporary China: An Ideal Case for Studying Temporal Norm Negotiations

Understanding why China provides a valuable context for studying temporal norm negotiation requires examining how its distinctive social configurations create conditions where delaying processes become highly visible and strategically complex. This analysis proceeds through four interconnected layers that together demonstrate China's analytical value. First, I examine how strong temporal norms embedded within pronatalist culture create the normative pressures that necessitate strategic navigation, establishing the cultural foundation within which temporal negotiations occur. Second, I examine how policy frameworks and institutional mechanisms systematically reinforce and operationalise cultural temporal values, providing the structural support and regulatory basis that make temporal norm compliance both feasible and enforceable in everyday reproductive decision-making.

Third, I explore how family-centred decision-making systems operate as primary sites where temporal norms are transmitted, negotiated, and potentially contested, demonstrating the interpersonal dynamics through which normative pressures are experienced and managed. Finally, I examine how the extensive internal migration and vibrant urban contexts provide spatial resources for temporal agency, creating opportunities for individuals to access alternative normative environments whilst maintaining cultural connections. Together, these four dimensions create a unique empirical setting where the research questions outlined above become observable and researchable in a concentrated form.

2.6.1 Strong Temporal Norms and Deep Cultural Consciousness

First, strong temporal norms and consciousness are operating through culturally embedded expectations on age, constraining childbearing timing in the context of China. Classical Confucian thought encoded life-course milestones such as "thirty to establish oneself" ("三十而立") and "forty without confusion" ("四十而不惑") (Slote & Vos, 1998; Yao, 2000), which gave semantic and moral weight to specific ages. These cultural legacies continue to provide culturally resonant language for temporal milestones and achievements,

guiding individual life planning and translating into contemporary age-based social markers with demonstrable normative force.

Qiu's (2022) research shows how "the age norm of turning 30 functions as a marriage deadline for women in contemporary China," creating what Hong Fincher (2014) identifies as the "leftover women" phenomenon where unmarried women in their late twenties face intensified social pressure due to crossing age-based thresholds. These age markers operate as powerful social labels that transform temporal transitions into identity categories with associated privileges and penalties.

The pervasiveness of Chinese temporal consciousness extends across multiple life domains. Horta and Li's (2024) study reveals pronounced age anxiety among Chinese doctoral students considering academic career planning, indicating deeply internalised age consciousness that shapes professional trajectories through institutionalised performance of age-appropriate achievements. This demonstrates the depth of temporal norm consciousness as a cultural orientation structuring diverse life transitions. Complementing this, Wang and Zhao's (2021) longitudinal analysis traces the standardisation of life courses across 20th-century China, documenting systematic increases in temporal regulation, especially in family transitions among urban cohorts, and showing how temporal expectations have become increasingly codified and predictable.

Comparative research confirms the distinctive strength of Chinese temporal frameworks, contrasted with findings from Western contexts, where age norms typically operate as flexible guidelines rather than prescriptive rules. Studies in Canada (Gee, 1990) and Australia (Peterson, 1996) consistently demonstrate that temporal expectations around family transitions function as general timelines rather than rigid normative structures, with only limited agreement on "non-forced" appropriate ages for major life events. Settersten and Hägestad's (1996) examination of the Chicago metropolitan area further questioned whether

family transition timelines could truly be considered "normative" age norms, finding that while general patterns exist, these operate as loose guidance rather than prescriptive frameworks backed by sanctions.

These findings contrast sharply with the Chinese context. Zang's (2024) China-US comparison identifies the more rigid social clocks in China derived from cultural foundations of collectivism and filial piety, whilst Lapinski and Rimal (2005) also demonstrate that collectivist cultures generally show stronger normative influences on individual behaviour than individualist contexts. The methodological insights from Western research also prove valuable: Settersten and Hägestad (1996) themselves acknowledged that their survey approach asking about generalised age timetables may have limited respondents' capacity to articulate socially embedded temporal norms, suggesting that more micro-level approaches anchoring discussions in personal experiences might reveal stronger normative influences – precisely the qualitative methodology employed in this research within the Chinese context where such influences are expected to be more pronounced.

2.6.2 Pronatalist Fertility Norms Eliminating "Whether" While Constraining "When"

These temporal norms have been potent in constraining the timing of childbearing as a key life course in the pronatalist culture of China. Chinese fertility norms indicate clear expectations about whether, when, and how many children to have, creating parallels to the pronatalist context in Donath's (2015) research where reproduction becomes compulsory rather than optional. Universal childbearing remains a foundational norm – the expectation that all women should bear children persists across contemporary Chinese society (H. Evans, 2002; McMillan, 2014; Xie, 2021). Childlessness remains very rare among married women due to Confucian family values, especially the importance of maintaining family lineage (Yu & Xie, 2022). Yu and Xie's (2021, 2022) research further documents the Chinese norm where marriage and childbearing remain closely linked and couples are expected to have children

only within marriage; non-marital childbearing remains unacceptable as childlessness. Their analysis reveals that almost all married couples in China are expected to have at least one child to carry on the family lineage, demonstrating the temporal linkage between marriage and childbearing together with the persistence of universal childbearing expectations.

Kailing Xie (2021: 112) argues that motherhood is far from a "choice" in the context of China, and that giving birth is perceived as "natural" and a woman's "duty", "social obligation" and "primary task" within society. This research has shown that given the impossibility of remaining childless, delaying pregnancy emerges as "a middle-ground solution", revealing the importance of researching the phenomenon of delaying childbearing as an arena of negotiation and resistance. Most importantly, this analysis innovatively proposed a precise temporal sequence for university-educated Chinese women: completing university at 22, facing the marriage deadline at 27, reaching the end of ideal pregnancy time at 30, and confronting an alarming deadline for risky pregnancy at 35 (K. Xie, 2021). Although simplified, this temporal specificity nevertheless highlights the shift in fertility decisions from open-ended life course planning to navigation of narrow windows of acceptable timelines.

These cultural temporal norms acquire institutionalised coercive power through their integration with state policies and scientific medical discourse. Xie's (2021) research reveals how participants' temporal anxieties become intensified through governmental promotion of "eugenic discourse" that frames reproductive timing as a matter of national "*suzhi*" (quality). Their analysis demonstrates how participants widely believe that "it is scientifically more reasonable to give birth before the age of 30" because "women's reproduction is understood as their responsibility towards Chinese society, so the *suzhi* of their children does matter" (K. Xie., 2021: 119). This notion reflects the combined effects of party-state eugenic policies and biomedical discourse. Consequently, individual reproductive timing decisions are

transformed from personal preferences into institutionalised requirements bearing moral and national significance, providing crucial context for understanding the complex mechanisms of Chinese biopolitical governance.

2.6.3 Policy Context and Biopolitics Governance

Institutionalised mechanisms for producing "good timing," "good mothers," and "quality reproduction" create enforceable temporal norms through self-disciplinary practices. Greenhalgh and Winckler (2005) identify three interconnected forms of modern power in Chinese population governance, including direct state control, organisational mediation, and internalised regulatory mechanisms. Their framework reveals how population governmentality operates through "calculated power over human life" that creates what Greenhalgh (2008, 2010) terms specific "biopolitical subjects" – the "reproductive woman," "quality child," and "good mother" – each embedded with temporal expectations about appropriate timing and sequencing.

Crucially, Chinese biopolitical governance operated through compulsory reproduction rather than simply restricted reproduction. While international discourse often characterises the one-child policy as limiting fertility, research by Milwertz (1996) reveals how it intersects "traditional pronatalism with state antinatalism" to create dual pressures: couples were not only prohibited from having more than one child but were also expected to fulfil their reproductive obligation by having exactly one child. It means that childlessness was as problematic as having too many children. Drawing on Xie's (2021) and Greenhalgh's (2008, 2010) research, the policy emphasis on "quality over quantity" has produced "responsible, autonomous, self-regulating neoliberal subjects" who internalise temporal constraints as performance of age-appropriate reproductive behaviours. These self-regulation mechanisms create temporal anxiety that persists beyond formal policy constraints as individuals

incorporate both reproductive obligation and age-based expectations into personal identity and planning processes.

Even though the one-child policy was formally abolished and replaced by the two-child policy in 2016 and the three-child policy in 2021 (Gao & Li, 2021; Greenhalgh, 2024), this historical shift from restrictive to pronatalist measures does not indicate a relaxation of state control. Rather, it reveals how institutional reproductive norms are recalibrated while the underlying regulatory logic remains intact. Feng et al. (2013) describe the one-child policy as an "extreme state intervention," and subsequent policy changes illustrate how the state continues to regulate fertility by transforming prohibitions into exhortations – maintaining fertility expectations while shifting their substantive content. Although numerical restrictions have evolved, norms governing fertility quantities have never escaped state control. Research shows that two children are now widely regarded as the ideal family size and social norms play a key role in individual fertility choices (Nie et al., 2025). At the same time, entrenched gender inequality and the unequal distribution of care responsibilities intensify temporal pressures on women, underscoring how institutional frameworks for fertility timing persist even as formal restrictions have been relaxed (Cai & Feng, 2021).

Taken together, this body of work illustrates that institutionalised frameworks of temporal appropriateness embed governance within everyday reproductive decisions, making norms instrumental and enforceable rather than merely cultural preferences. Yet these institutional norms are not experienced in isolation or merely in ideology. They are interpreted, contested, and enacted primarily within the family sphere. It is within intergenerational negotiations over appropriate timing, sequencing, and responsibility that the state's temporal logics are translated into concrete pressures on women's reproductive lives, providing the micro foundations for the broader biopolitical regime.

2.6.4 Family as the Enforcing and Negotiating Site of Childbearing Temporalities

Family systems constitute the primary institutional site where temporal and fertility norms are enforced and negotiated. As Lee and Feng (1999) demonstrate, Chinese demographic decision-making has historically been collective, with the extended family, rather than the conjugal unit, serving as the central decision-making body. This collective orientation allows state regulatory mechanisms to intersect with familial governance, creating layered and mutually reinforcing sources of pressure on individual life planning. Yan (2010) identifies this as a distinctive Chinese path to individualisation, shaped by strong state regulation and limited welfare provision, producing a paradoxical dynamic in which individuals gain apparent autonomy in life planning while becoming increasingly dependent on family resources, thereby constraining that very autonomy.

Central to this regulatory framework are the intertwined mechanisms of filial piety and the intergenerational contract. Croll (2006) characterises the latter as a deeply institutionalised set of reciprocal obligations that dictate both intergenerational support and the timing of major life events. Yan's (2016) notion of "descending familism" highlights how contemporary patterns intensify downward flows of resources, particularly around marriage, fertility, and childrearing, thereby further entrenching parental involvement in their children's intimate decisions. Ikels (2004) shows how the discourse of filial piety legitimises these obligations by reframing them as moral imperatives. Marriage, as Ji (2015a, 2015b) underscores through the concept of the "marriage package," crystallises these logics by bundling childbearing, caregiving, and intergenerational responsibility into obligatory sequences of normative life planning.

Within this moral system, marriage and childbearing are not individual choices but obligatory markers of filial duty. Kailing Xie (2021) illustrates that the deviation from expected temporal trajectory for middle-class women risks being read as a breach of the contract with one's parents and, by extension, as a failure of filiality. Within this framework,

mianzi (面子, "face") – the Chinese concept of social prestige and dignity (Ho, 1976) – emerges as a particularly salient mechanism. Parents urge their adult children to marry and bear children not only to ensure future care but also to uphold their social reputation and maintain familial honour in wider kinship and community networks (K. Xie., 2021). Thus, filial piety and the intergenerational contract function simultaneously as intimate moral obligations and as performative displays of collective respectability.

Xumeng Xie (2023) applies the framework of intergenerational contract into the queer domain, showing how the discourse of filial piety amplifies tensions for those who cannot or refuse to conform to heterosexual marriage and reproduction. The mechanism of filial piety and intergenerational contract in regulating normative life transitions intensifies the sense of indebtedness and obligation, positioning queer subjects as failing both at the intimate level of intergenerational reciprocity and at the public level of social recognition. Across these studies, delay emerges as a limited but significant strategy of negotiation. For middle-class heterosexual women, delaying childbirth represents temporal optimisation within the contract: aligning personal autonomy with eventual compliance to parental expectations. For queer-identifying individuals, delay functions as a more subversive manoeuvre: sustaining parental hope in the short term while carving space to resist heteronormative life trajectories altogether.

Finally, research on intergenerational negotiations around childbearing further underscores the regulatory force of these familial mechanisms. Zheng (2021) argues that reproductive decision-making is situated within webs of intergenerational, conjugal, and peer interactions in the context of China. Shen and Jiang (2021) demonstrate how decisions about a second child are shaped by patriarchal hierarchies and intergenerational bargaining. Peng (2020) conceptualises reproductive decision-making as a process of ongoing negotiation, marked by ambivalence and conflict among multiple stakeholders within families. These

dynamics resonate with Xie's (2021) observation that contemporary parents cultivate emotional intimacy with their only child, creating "economic and emotional interdependency" that intensifies rather than reduces reproductive pressure through care rather than coercion.

To summarise, this body of scholarship makes three key contributions laying the foundation for this research. First, it identifies filial piety and the intergenerational contract as the core mechanisms through which these norms operate, enforcing compliance by linking life transitions to moral duty, intergenerational reciprocity, and social reputation. Second, it establishes the family as the central site where temporal and fertility norms are enacted, transmitted, and negotiated. Childbearing norms are not abstract expectations but are concretely embedded in everyday family interactions. Third, it reveals delaying life transitions as a central tactic of negotiation and resistance, arising when individuals cannot or choose not to subscribe to normative expectations, thereby unsettling heteronormative trajectories.

However, existing literature has yet to map the specific and comprehensive temporal benchmarks that regulate childbearing in China. Nor has it adequately examined how negotiations with these norms unfold in practice. As a result, we lack understanding of the interactive processes through which individuals sustain delay, manage parental expectations, and navigate competing temporal logics. This thesis addresses these gaps by tracing the dynamics of resisting temporal and fertility norms through the everyday practice of delay.

2.6.5 Migration, Urban Contexts, and the Intersections of Temporality and Spatiality

Finally, China's contemporary socio-spatial landscape provides particularly fertile conditions for examining how agency is exerted at the intersection of temporality and spatiality. Rural-to-urban migration research illustrates how spatial mobility can reconfigure intimate and familial time. Sun (2019) shows that migrant women leverage urban relocation

to individualise intimacy practices and pursue relationships untethered from rural familial timetables, producing life trajectories that diverge from parental and community expectations. Similarly, Werwath (2011) demonstrates that migration creates freedom from parental surveillance, which allows young people to delay marriage and childbirth. These findings highlight how migration destabilises inherited temporal pressures and creates space for experimenting with alternative life transition timelines.

China's internal migration also intersects directly with reproductive timing patterns, with research documenting how spatial mobility affects marriage and childbearing schedules among migrant populations (such as Yi & Shangguan, 2024; Yin & Zheng, 2017). This intersection creates empirical conditions where spatial and temporal strategies naturally converge in reproductive decision-making, providing realistic contexts for examining how individuals coordinate spatial mobility with temporal planning to navigate normative expectations. Despite extensive research on Chinese internal migration and fertility patterns, significant gaps remain in understanding the temporal, micro-level dimensions of migration-fertility relationships. Limited research examines how internal migration among young adults creates opportunities for temporal norm negotiation. Little remains known about how geographic distance affects temporal norm compliance and how individuals use migration as a temporal planning strategy for reproductive decisions.

Other scholars document broader restructuring of life priorities. Yang and Xu (2018) as well as Yin and Zheng (2017) trace how mobility supports a shift from "family first" to "career first," underscoring that migration enables a temporal sequencing in which self-development precedes family formation. Song and Lai's (2021) research further illustrates how urban migration contexts foster greater acceptance of cohabitation, normalising non-traditional timing and sequencing of intimate relationships. In addition, Gong et al.'s (2023) research on Shenzhen identifies the city's "tolerance" and "urban amenities" as factors

attracting skilled migrants seeking environments accepting of diverse life course patterns whilst maintaining family connections. Together, these studies highlight how China's urban contexts, particularly migration hubs like Shenzhen, provide alternative social environments and normative possibilities that open space for diverse life course patterns while maintaining cultural continuity.

Migration, and particularly transnational mobility, provides a compelling vantage on how spatial contexts empower temporal agency. Fran Martin (2021) offers an ethnographic account of Chinese women studying in Australia, showing how these young women negotiate the tension between middle-class ideals of self-development and traditional expectations of marriage and motherhood. Studying abroad offers a "dream of flight," which creates "zones of suspension" – a liminal time and space where these women can individuate, pursue cosmopolitan aspirations, and critically renegotiate normative life timelines that dictate marriage by thirty. Fran Martin (2021) unpacks how this liminality allows for re-scripting the gendered life course. Away from the imposition of normative timelines and parental supervision, these young women temporarily suspend conventional gendered responsibilities and cultivate career ambitions or intimate identities that are otherwise stigmatised.

Extending this concern with temporality, Xu (2021) theorises "migration temporalities" as a framework for understanding how young Chinese migrants in the UK use cross-border mobility as a temporal resource. Xu (2021) shows that migration facilitates strategies of deferral, allowing individuals to postpone marriage and childbearing under the guise of educational and professional commitments, while simultaneously experimenting with alternative temporal rhythms unavailable in the Chinese familial context. Wang (2020) develops a "temporal gaze" framework to analyse early-career Chinese academics who return after overseas study. This research highlights how returnees actively recalibrate rhythms of daily work, project life courses around career trajectories, and deploy strategic delays or

accelerations to reconcile professional ambitions with cultural expectations of family formation. Taken together, these studies illustrate how migration produces not merely spatial dislocations but also profound temporal renegotiations, making China a valuable empirical site for understanding the intersection of mobility, temporality, and intimate life.

2.6.6 Summary: China as the Optimal Context for this Research

The analysis above reveals how China's distinctive configuration creates optimal conditions for studying the agentic negotiations with the normative temporal structures of childbearing. Strong temporal norms embedded within pronatalist culture ensure that delays create visible social responses requiring active management, providing the normative pressure necessary for observing strategic navigation. Sophisticated biopolitical governance demonstrates how cultural expectations become institutionally reinforced whilst creating self-regulating subjects who must navigate between personal timing preferences and state-supported temporal norms. Family-centred decision-making systems reveal how temporal norms are transmitted and negotiated through interpersonal dynamics within families, creating the micro-level sites where normative pressures are experienced, managed and observable. Extensive spatial mobility opportunities provide strategic resources for temporal negotiation, enabling individuals to access alternative normative environments whilst maintaining cultural belonging. This unique combination makes China exceptionally valuable for examining the shift from studying "delayed" to studying "delaying" by understanding how individuals actively navigate temporal norms in reproductive decision-making – precisely the processes that require qualitative examination to reveal the micro-level strategic coordination.

2.7 Conclusion

This literature review has established a clear analytical foundation for understanding delaying childbearing as an ongoing process of temporal norm negotiation and introduced the

context of contemporary China as an ideal empirical setting for such examination. Beyond establishing the theoretical foundation for this research, this literature review makes an independent contribution to the field by providing the first systematic categorisation of conceptual frameworks for understanding the temporal dimensions of childbearing postponement. By making explicit the three temporal frameworks that have implicitly structured existing research – biological, socially optimal, and socially normative – this review reveals how different temporal assumptions shape research questions, methodological approaches, and theoretical conclusions. This conceptual clarification also addresses the current fragmentation in the research of delaying childbearing whilst demonstrating how insights from demographic, temporal, and sociological research traditions can be productively integrated to advance understanding of reproductive timing as a complex social phenomenon.

Overall, the theoretical foundation and empirical context reviewed so far converge to establish the central research question: What are the expected timelines of entering childbearing in contemporary China? How do individuals navigate these temporal expectations within the distinctive normative constraints of Chinese pronatalist culture and family-centred decision-making systems during the extended process of delaying childbearing in contemporary China? Particularly, what role do spatial strategies potentially play in enabling temporal agency within this context of extensive internal migration and diverse urban environments? The following chapter develops the methodological approach for examining these processes before presenting the empirical analyses that address these questions.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

3.1 Research Methods

To address the research questions, this research is mainly guided by constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). The grounded theory approach believes that the data themselves generate the analysis and theory. As instructed by Charmaz (1988: 110), this approach stresses inductive discovery of theory through analytical observations and interpretations, rather than "logical deductive reasoning which relies on prior theoretical frameworks". Constructivist grounded theory belongs to the interpretive epistemology and views both the research and the researched problems are created by individuals and their shared experiences (Charmaz, 2006). This approach is suitable for the research for the following three reasons.

First, it aligns with the epistemological stance of this study and acknowledges social phenomena such as "normative timelines" as socially constructed and best understood through participants' situated meanings. Second, it enables the research to unpack the aggregate picture of "delayed childbearing" by attending to participants' narratives, thereby revealing delaying childbearing as an ongoing process of negotiation situated in everyday life (Miller, 2007). Third, constructivist grounded theory takes a reflexive stance towards the research process and acknowledges that producing knowledge is a co-constructive process between the researcher and participants in specific socio-cultural contexts (Charmaz, 2006; Timonen et al., 2018). The reflexive analysis of the researcher's role in both the data collection and analysis process will be closely revisited in a later section.

Life story interviews were the main method to collect the in-depth research data. Life story interview is a useful method for gathering participants' subjective and first-hand interpretations of their life experiences in biographical storytelling (Atkinson, 1998). It

perfectly fits the scope of the research in three respects. First, life story interviews enable the participants to account for detailed, contextualised, agentic and subjective sense-making of their life trajectories while enabling the researcher to capture individual differences and intra-cohort variations in life course transitions (Giele, 2009; Locke & Lloyd-Sherlock, 2011). By providing thick and in-depth information, life story interviews can complement the current major body of quantitative studies researching life course transition, which often focus on one-point analysis and overlook underlying factors or mechanisms.

The second advantage of adopting life story interviews is that it highlights the temporality component in individuals' biographical narratives. The biographical narrative entailing the chronological order of participants' life experiences can manifest how people's perceptions of time would influence their life planning, including the decision to enter parenthood, the main focus that this research seeks to capture. Furthermore, knitting the decision on childbearing into a full life trajectory, life story interviews can show the complete image of childbearing decision-making and allow participants to account for their decision with reference to previous life experiences and also future life planning. This is also consistent with the premise in life course research that individual life stages are closely interconnected (Settersten, 2003).

The last yet important reason for conducting life story interviews is their strength in researching social norms. When focusing on the temporal norms that guide life course transitions, directly asking participants about these norms in semi-structured interviews can lead to biased responses – either because the questions implicitly suggest socially desirable answers, or because participants may not be consciously aware of how such norms shape their decisions. In contrast, life story interviews offer a flexible and open-ended format that allows these influences to emerge more organically. This approach allows participants to narrate their experiences in their own words, revealing their interpretations, understandings or

internalisation of norms organically and without prompting (Turner & Bruner, 1986). Such naturalistic dialogues enable the researcher to discern the extent of participants' adherence to prevailing norms, without compromising the organic flow of conversation or revealing the research objectives.

3.2 Sampling and Participants

3.2.1 Research Site Selection

The research site was chosen to be Shenzhen, a rapidly urbanising migrant society in Southern China, for three key reasons. Firstly, Shenzhen's status as a migrant-dominated city provides access to a diverse population representing a wide range of cultural backgrounds and life experiences from across mainland China. With pulling factors such as higher wages, more job opportunities, good social services and facilities, it ranks top as the most attractive city in China and has been attracting young migrants across mainland China (G. Y. Wang, 2022). According to the Statistics Bureau of Shenzhen (2019), there are 8.49 million migrants in the city, composed of 63% of the total population. This horizontal diversity enables the capture of nuanced variations in fertility norms and values while also allowing the identification of recurring patterns and common pressures within a shared urban setting – patterns that form the basis for a broader analytical framework of reproductive norms.

Secondly, Shenzhen's rapid urban development creates a dynamic social context where traditional and modern ideas about fertility coexist and interact. Shenzhen is nowadays among the four first-tier cities in mainland China and has only become highly urbanised and modernised in the past three decades (Ye, 2016). This vertical dimension, encompassing both historical and contemporary influences, makes Shenzhen an ideal site to examine how fertility norms and values are being renegotiated in a rapidly changing society. In this way, the city's socioeconomic and cultural diversity provides both wide-ranging and in-depth perspectives essential for grounded theory development. Finally, the lack of ethnographic

research on this migrant society – particularly on how individuals experience and navigate everyday life in the city – underscores the significance of situating this study in Shenzhen, a task taken up in the next chapter.

Moreover, regarding the research focus on the interactions of space and time in agency exertion, Shenzhen provides a particularly revealing context. As one of China's most prominent migrant destinations, the city is characterised by a high concentration of newcomers alongside long-term local residents, making migration a defining feature of social life. This density of migrant experiences does not simply enable comparison, but also make it possible to examine how individuals draw on spatial resources to negotiate prescriptive reproductive timelines. Shenzhen thus offers a strategic vantage point for examining how temporal norms are sustained, resisted, or reconfigured in a society where migration is constitutive of everyday life.

3.2.2 Sampling and Recruiting Strategy

Case selection in this research follows the guidelines of theoretical or purposive sampling, an integral part of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006). In constructivist grounded theory, sampling aims to capture the most differentiated and accessible cases to facilitate theory development (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The paramount recruitment criterion in this research was participants being aged over 27, chosen for both demographic and normative reasons. Demographically, 27 was the national average age at first birth in China in 2020 (X. Zhang & Sheng, 2023), marking a threshold beyond which childbearing is already statistically "later than average." Normatively, prior research documents a culturally salient reproductive timeline in China in which 27 is framed as a critical threshold for family formation, the early thirties as the upper bound of "ideal" childbearing, and 35 as a medically and socially marked deadline (Y. Wang et al., 2024; K. Xie, 2021). Biomedical studies further highlight 27 as lying within the "optimal" window for

first births, with risks increasing thereafter (Z. Zhao et al., 2025). Taken together, 27 serves as a meaningful analytical entry point where demographic averages, cultural expectations, and medicalised discourses converge, providing a sharp lens for examining the negotiations around childbearing postponement.

A gender perspective in sampling is also essential because the timing of parenthood is deeply gendered in meanings, sanctions, and consequences. Research shows that motherhood is a powerful moral and identity construct shaping women's accounts and choices (Miller, 2005); that the "stalled revolution" in domestic labour continues to generate temporal incompatibilities between paid work and caregiving (Hochschild & Machung, 2012); and that low fertility emerges where high gender equity in education or employment is not matched by equity within families (McDonald, 2000a, 2000b, 2006; see also Mills, 2010). For these reasons, men were also included as participants in this research, enabling a comparative perspective on how reproductive timelines are differently experienced and negotiated.

To maximise heterogeneity in life situations and perspectives while delaying childbearing, I did not restrict selection by marital or relationship status, including married participants without children, those in relationships, and single individuals. Consistent with theoretical sampling principles (Charmaz, 1988; Timonen et al., 2018), I also included participants who were already married and had children. This group enriched the analysis by offering both retrospective accounts from those who had previously delayed childbearing and contrasting perspectives from those who had not, thereby enabling critical discussion of the dynamics of delay.

With the sampling objectives in mind, during the initial stage of recruitment I first advertised my research on WeChat, the most widely used social media application in China. Through this platform I was able to reach both strong and weak ties. Many friends with connections in Shenzhen further circulated my research advertisement within their own

networks, which provided multiple entry points for snowball sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Participants interviewed in the initial stage then introduced their friends, colleagues, neighbours, and partners to the study. Because I had few established networks in Shenzhen, I did not refuse to speak with anyone who expressed interest in participating. I assumed that even if some did not meet the inclusion criteria, they might be able to refer me to others who did, thereby helping me expand connections as widely as possible.

3.2.3 Demographic Information of Research Participants

After careful screening, I included only "qualified" participants who met the following criteria: long-term residential status in Shenzhen, aged over 27, heterosexual, and able to provide substantive life story narratives that engaged with childbearing. In total, the final sample comprised 60 participants. The sample size was determined according to the principle of saturation – that is, data had reached sufficient depth and breadth to address the research questions, and additional interviews were unlikely to yield new insights (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Small, 2009). Of the 60 participants, 20 were male (33.3%) and 40 were female (66.7%). Ages ranged from 27 to 36 years, with an average of 30.2. By birth cohort, 24 participants (40.0%) were born after 1995 (aged 27–28), 28 participants (46.7%) were born between 1990 and 1995 (aged 29–33), and 8 participants (13.3%) were born before 1990 (aged 34–36). In terms of education, 30 participants (50.0%) held a Bachelor's degree and 27 (45.0%) a Master's degree, reflecting a high educational profile.

Regarding marital and parental status, 8 participants (13.3%) were married and had at least one child at the time of the interview, comprising 4 female and 4 male participants. The largest group, 25 participants (41.7%), were married and childless, including 15 females and 10 males. There were 22 participants (36.7%) who were childless and in a relationship, consisting of 16 females and 6 males. Finally, 5 participants (8.3%) were single women without children, offering perspectives on childlessness outside marriage. In particular,

among the sample, I interviewed 6 couples, with half of them in a relationship and the other half being married. However, as the couples were aware of their partner's participation in my research, to protect their individual privacy and make sure that no participants can be identified by anyone else including their partners, I will only address them individually in the following text and will not indicate their pairing relationships, even with the pseudonyms.

A clarification is needed regarding the distribution of quotes used in this thesis. The majority of direct quotations come from the twenty-five married and childless participants, or from those in stable relationships with concrete marriage plans. This is because these individuals most directly confront childbearing as the "next step" to consider in their life course sequence and therefore articulate the most sustained negotiations with temporal norms. By contrast, participants who had already become parents largely conformed to normative timelines and thus rarely questioned them, offering fewer reflections on delay; their narratives, however, remained essential in confirming the temporal framework developed in this research. Similarly, single participants, while reporting strong pressures around marriage and fertility, primarily framed these around difficulties of finding a suitable partner rather than strategies of delaying childbearing, and were therefore cited less frequently. Their accounts nonetheless provided important context for understanding the preparatory pressures that precede and accompany delaying childbearing.

Lastly, as mentioned above, the research was conducted in Shenzhen, where migrants make up a significant portion of the population. Participants' migrating status was also identified in their life story narratives. Only 1 participant (1.7%) reported herself as a local resident of Shenzhen. 13 (21.7%) of them either grew up mostly in Shenzhen or were born in Shenzhen with parents who had migrated to Shenzhen before their birth. This group is defined as "Second-Generation Shenzhen Migrants". A majority of the sample (76.7%, n=46) migrated to Shenzhen independently from mostly smaller urban cities across mainland China.

These migrating identities will be further elaborated and contextualised soon in the next chapter. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in a format inspired by other qualitative studies (Peng, 2022), in Table 1. While precise numbers and proportions are provided, the emphasis remains on understanding the diverse experiences within these groups, rather than making statistical comparisons. Overall, the sample consisted of men and women aged 27 to 36, primarily holding undergraduate or graduate degrees, and representing various marital and parental statuses, all residing in Shenzhen.

Table 1

A Demographic Summary of Participants

	Number of cases (n)	%
Gender		
Male	20	33.3%
Female	40	66.7%
Age (Year of Birth)		
27~28 (Born after 1995)	24	40.0%
29~33 (Born between 1990~1995)	28	46.7%
34~36 (Born before 1990)	8	13.3%
Education		
Vocational School	3	5.0%
Bachelor's degree	30	50.0%
Master's degree	27	45.0%
Marital and Parental Status		
Married with Children	8	13.3%
Married without Children	25	41.7%
In a Relationship	22	36.7%

Single	5	8.3%
Migrating Status in Shenzhen		
Local Villager	1	1.7%
Second-Generation Shenzhen Migrants	13	21.7%
Migrants	46	76.7%
Total	60	

3.3 Data Collection

The data collection process comprised two fieldwork visits to Shenzhen spanning March 2023 to July 2024, yielding a total of 70 interviews, 64 of which were included in the final analysis. The primary data collection phase occurred during the first visit (March-September 2023). Among these interviews, the value of repeated engagement with participants was highlighted. In one notable instance, a follow-up interview revealed previously undisclosed infertility challenges as a factor in postponed childbearing, demonstrating how trust-building enabled access to more intimate narratives. This insight led me to adopt a flexible strategy of follow-up interviewing whenever deeper exploration was warranted. Among the six couples in the study, one unanticipated joint interview led to a subsequent individual interview with the female participant to ensure comprehensive data collection, as the presence of a partner may inhibit the disclosure of more personal experiences and perceptions.

The second visit in July 2024, designed to validate preliminary findings, produced seven additional interviews: five with new participants and two follow-up conversations with earlier interviewees. One new participant's narrative required a second meeting, as the initial three-hour session – held late in the day – proved insufficient to capture her life course transitions fully. The follow-ups with previous participants arose organically through ongoing

relationships, offering longitudinal insights into evolving reproductive decision-making. For example, one participant had married between the two visits, updating her account to reflect this transition, while another wished to share her revised perspectives on delaying childbearing. In total, the 64 analysed interviews incorporated five cases of repeated engagement: three clarifying initial narratives and two tracing life changes over time. This methodological flexibility allowed for deeper engagement with participants' life stories.

The life history interviews explored participants' experiences across key life domains, including childhood, education, career development, and, where applicable, migration, interwoven with narratives of relationships, marriage, and family planning. The open-ended nature of these interviews afforded participants considerable autonomy in shaping the narrative, resulting in rich and varied accounts. Consequently, interview lengths varied considerably. Interviews with participants who were less articulate or offered fewer reflections on their life experiences tended to be shorter, lasting approximately one hour. Conversely, some participants demonstrated a strong willingness to share their experiences and thoughts, providing detailed accounts of their life stages. These interviews extended beyond the anticipated one-to-two-hour timeframe, exceeding three hours in some cases. It proved challenging to predict interview length based on the life stage being discussed or its temporal proximity, as individuals might have limited recollections of earlier decades of their lives but possess extensive reflections on more recent decisions, such as marriage and childbearing within the past three years. Thus, the rhythm of the life history narratives often did not align with the pace of participants' actual life trajectories.

Interestingly, while some participants initially provided only brief overviews of their earlier life experiences, they often shifted to more detailed accounts of marriage and parenthood, frequently revisiting prior life stages to contextualise their current perspectives. Although the life story interviews covered a wide range of topics, discussions of marriage

and childbearing dominated much of the interview time. This emphasis may partly reflect the recruitment advertisement, which explicitly mentioned relationship, marital, and parental status as inclusion criteria, signalling the study's focus. In addition, several participants showed a strong willingness to share intimate details, a tendency also noted in previous reproductive research employing life story interviews, where narrating intimate experiences is understood as part of making sense of their own life trajectories and key decision-making (L. J. Martin, 2017; Yopo Díaz, 2019).

While participants' fertility preferences, including explicit intentions not to have children, occasionally emerged in the course of life story interviews, these were not treated as inclusion or exclusion criteria in sampling, nor as defining analytical categories. The methodological focus of this study is on individuals' experiences of normative temporal pressure surrounding childbearing and the strategies through which such pressure is negotiated, rather than on stated reproductive intentions or future fertility plans.

Rapport was successfully established with most participants (Miller, 2017). While initial apprehension was common, especially given their limited experience with formal interviews, participants generally became more comfortable as the conversations progressed, offering increasingly rich and detailed accounts in the later stages. Communication was also maintained through social media after the interviews, and in many cases these interactions developed into personal friendships.

This variability in narrative depth – shaped not only by participants' reflexivity but also by the rapport established during interviews and their willingness to share – directly influenced how their voices are represented in the thesis. Some individuals appear more frequently in the analysis not because their experiences were more important, but because they were more articulate, reflexive, and willing to explore complex dynamics in ways that directly illuminated the research questions. Others, while less extensively quoted,

nevertheless provided essential reference information. Their narratives often served as comparative cases or supplied contextual resources that helped frame questions later posed to more forthcoming participants. In this way, all participants contributed meaningfully to the development of the analysis, albeit in different forms and degrees of visibility. This variation in narrative depth and visibility is not a limitation but a methodological strength, as it broadens the analytic range and reflects the grounded theory principle that insights emerge through comparison of diverse accounts.

3.4 Data Analysis

The 64 interviews were recorded with a digital audio recorder and transcribed using a flexible verbatim approach. This involved transcribing the interviews verbatim in Chinese, the original spoken language, capturing idiosyncratic features of the conversations while omitting some non-verbal cues and filler words to improve readability. This naturalistic approach aligns with the constructivist paradigm (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997), which treats pauses, corrections, and repetitions as potentially meaningful expressions of participants' perspectives. Transcribing over 120 hours of recordings was a time-intensive task: a single three-hour interview, for instance, produced nearly 50,000 Chinese characters and required more than nine hours to transcribe. This detailed transcription formed an integral part of the analytic process, as suggested by Elliott (2005).

Following transcription, the data were analysed with the guidance of Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978), which emphasises the iterative development of theory from data. Coding, defined here as the process of identifying and labelling segments of data to which meaning is attributed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), was a key stage in this analysis. This research employed open coding to initially explore the data, followed by focused coding to synthesise salient codes into key themes (Glaser, 1978). This process involved constant comparison among the cases and codes, wherein codes were refined and developed through

iterative comparison across the dataset. The resulting themes, such as time and temporality, the decision of life course transition, migration and interactions with parents, form the basis of the grounded theory presented in this thesis.

In the two distinct phases of data analysis, I combined manual coding techniques with Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), specifically NVivo. This mixed-methods approach integrated the strengths of both coding strategies, maximising the extraction of meaningful information embedded within the data. This approach resonates with the general principles advocated by other researchers (Maher et al., 2018), although the specific implementation varied. During the open coding phase, I capitalised on the capacity of NVivo to organise, categorise and manage the extensive volume of open codes generated (Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012). Its structured presentation, including the quantifiable display of quotations under each code, facilitated comparison and pattern recognition. At this stage, temporality emerged as a recurring theme, spanning references to general notions of time, individual ages, and sequential life course transitions.

In the subsequent focused coding phase, I employed traditional manual coding methods, following researchers who have argued for their analytical value (Richards, 2005; Saldaña, 2009). The physical engagement with printed transcripts – through annotations, highlighting, and memo writing – facilitated deeper immersion with the data and enabled more nuanced interpretations. The discovery of the normative power of *duration*, that will be introduced in later chapters, exemplifies this process. Initially coded descriptively to capture references to relationship timing, *duration* evolved through iterative analysis into a core category that explained how normative expectations operate through temporal length requirements rather than simple age deadlines. This emergent concept exposed a gap between literature focused on age-based norms and participants' experiences of temporal regulation.

The analytic framework was refined across multiple iterations, reflecting the principle of "progressive focusing" (Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012).

After conducting the analysis in the original Chinese to preserve the nuanced meanings embedded in participants' language use, I then translated the excerpts quoted in the thesis. It is unavoidable that during the translation, some of the original meanings embedded in the language were lost. For example, the expression in Chinse, "别耽误她了" literally translates to "Don't stop/delay her", but it carries a connotation of "Don't keep her childless and waste her time given women's 'precious' reproductive window". This nuance is difficult to capture fully in English with one or two words, so I provided bracketed explanations to clarify the intended meaning where necessary. All research participants are referred to by pseudonyms, randomly assigned to ensure anonymity throughout the thesis.

3.6 Reflexivity

Grounded theory posits that knowledge production is a co-constructive endeavour between researchers and participants, with researchers playing an active role in shaping the data (Charmaz, 2013). A reflexive consciousness is therefore essential throughout the research process, from data collection to analysis. This section outlines my reflexive considerations across different stages. During the in-person interviews, I became aware that the formal research context itself, especially the presence of a recorder, could influence participants' responses. In one interview when talking about divorce and children, for instance, a participant gave a flawless liberal answer when asked, "Do you think they will divorce despite having children?" She stated that divorce was acceptable and that children should not be a reason to remain in an unhappy marriage. Yet later that evening, when we were chatting informally over dinner without the recorder and after greater rapport had been established, she expressed a very different view: "They can never divorce, you know, they

already have two kids!" This contrast revealed how participants might adjust their answers to present socially desirable viewpoints in formal contexts, while their more candid opinions emerged in informal settings.

Nevertheless, such potential social desirability bias does not compromise the validity of this research; rather, it strengthens the analysis in several ways. First, if participants felt pressure to present more liberal views during interviews yet still revealed highly restrictive normative frameworks and significant struggles with delaying childbearing, this suggests the actual constraints they face may be even more severe than initially indicated. The fact that participants revealed restrictive normative frameworks despite potential pressure to present more liberal views underscores the power of underlying structural constraints. Second, the extended duration of interviews and my practice of triangulating responses through multiple questions provided safeguards against sustained impression management. This approach enabled me to understand both what participants recognised as socially desirable responses and whether they genuinely held or practised these views. Even when participants might present idealised views on specific topics, sustained conversation across diverse themes revealed underlying patterns and contradictions that exposed more complex realities beneath surface responses. This dual insight enriched rather than compromised the analytical depth of the research with the reflexive approach.

Meanwhile, my identity as a young woman shaped the data collection process in subtle but significant ways. Male participants readily shared career experiences, often with enthusiasm, but treated personal experiences such as dating and marriage as routine matters, requiring more prompting to elicit detail during the interviews. Female participants, by contrast, spoke more openly about marriage, childbearing, and the pressures surrounding these issues. While this partly reflects broader gendered orientations that emphasise career for men and family for women (Acker, 1990; Blair-Loy, 2009), I recognise that my positionality

also played a role in shaping these narratives. Some male participants may have found it less comfortable to discuss intimate aspects of their personal lives with a younger female researcher. This dynamic was illustrated when one participant declined to be interviewed himself and suggested that his partner should speak to me instead, remarking: “Two girls talking about this will be better.” Such instances highlight how gendered expectations intersected with my identity as a researcher to influence the process of data collection.

Also, when male participants did speak about their wives or partners, their accounts often appeared carefully framed: “My wife definitely did the most difficult part with children,” or “We make all the parenting decisions together; I mostly go along with what she thinks.” While potentially genuine, these responses could reflect gender-conscious impression management. To gain a deeper understanding, I asked seemingly less sensitive questions about gender at different points during the interviews – household divisions of labour, decision-making processes of childbearing, and work-family balance views. This temporal and thematic triangulation created opportunities for cross-checking, which often exposed tensions between participants’ initial narratives and their underlying gender attitudes and power dynamics.

Conversely, my shared gender and similar age created rapport with female participants. As members of a similar generation facing comparable societal pressures, we often established greater connections, leading to more open and detailed conversations about reproductive pressure, family expectations, and strategic navigation of normative constraints. At the same time, my presentation of a highly educated, international study background may have prompted some participants to perceive liberal values as socially desirable answers. To mitigate this, I also revisited key research themes – gender, childbearing and time – through triangulated questions across different points in the interviews. Taken together, these dynamics illustrate that researcher positionality, rather than compromising data quality,

provided analytical leverage when reflexively and systematically integrated into the research process.

Reflexivity is equally important in the stage of data analysis, particularly when employing interpretive approaches like constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). In this approach, I do not merely discover codes but actively construct them, and this process is inherently shaped by my background, experiences, and perspectives. My training in sociology and gender studies has made me especially attuned to social norms and structural inequalities, enabling a heightened sensitivity to these issues within participants' narratives. This heightened awareness presents both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, my background allows me to readily identify subtle cues and implicit references to power dynamics, normative expectations, and systemic disadvantages that might be overlooked by someone less attuned to these issues.

However, this sensitivity also carries the risk of over-interpretation. My pre-existing knowledge could lead me to project my own assumptions onto the data. I am acutely aware of the danger of assuming that participants' narratives reflect their "underlying" ideologies. Individuals may not always articulate their thoughts and feelings precisely, especially during lengthy interviews when fatigue can play a role. A particular choice of phrasing might be unintentional, a slip of the tongue, or simply a reflection of the conversational context rather than deeply held beliefs. To mitigate this, I avoided relying on a single hint within a participant's narrative to understand their thoughts, instead triangulating my analysis. I paid close attention to instances where participants expressed seemingly contradictory views or used language that could be interpreted in multiple ways. Rather than forcing the data to fit my preconceived notions, I sought to understand the nuances and complexities of their experiences, acknowledging the possibility of ambivalence, ambiguity, and even

inconsistency. This reflexive stance ensured that the analysis remained grounded in participants' accounts while remaining critically aware of my interpretive role.

3.7 Conclusion

To conclude, this research is framed within the constructivist grounded theory approach to understand the temporality of fertility norms and how individuals navigate the norms in contemporary China. This study is based on 64 life story interviews with 60 participants in Shenzhen, a major migrant metropolis. Using purposive sampling, I included both women and men, participants holding Bachelor's and Master's degrees, and individuals representing varied marital and parental statuses. The choice of life story interviews as the primary data collection method was particularly appropriate for this research, as it allowed participants to articulate their experiences and perspectives on childbearing decisions within their individual life trajectories. This narrative approach is essential for understanding the complex interplay of personal experiences, social norms, and temporal considerations that shape these decisions.

Grounded theory, by its very nature, requires iterative adjustment of research focus as new insights emerge; a robust qualitative study should not merely confirm existing knowledge but open up previously overlooked dynamics (Flick, 2007). In this study, the initial focus on reasons for delaying childbearing quickly reached saturation: participants consistently cited career development, financial concerns, and relationship status, themes already well documented in prior research. Guided by grounded theory's emphasis on emergent discovery, analysis of these early interviews redirected the inquiry toward the normative timelines of parenthood and individuals' agentic responses to temporal norms. This shift proved far more analytically productive, uncovering complex dynamics of temporal agency, and structural constraints that existing literature had not systematically addressed.

The evolution of focus thus illustrates grounded theory's capacity to generate novel insights into social phenomena.

While the purposive sampling strategy – particularly the reliance on social networks and snowballing – may have produced a sample skewed toward participants with higher educational attainment, financial stability, and geographical mobility, this does not undermine the value of the findings. The study aimed to gather rich, in-depth narratives rather than statistically representative data, and participants' willingness to share detailed, reflexive accounts was crucial for exploring how individuals perceive and respond to temporal norms surrounding childbearing. Although such participants may be especially articulate and socially resourced, their experiences remain revealing: if even they report systematic difficulties and emotional burdens when delaying childbearing, it is reasonable to infer that individuals with fewer resources face still greater constraints and fewer options. Thus, the articulate and reflexive accounts offered here not only illuminate the nuanced ways temporal norms shape individual lives, but also provide valuable clues about broader social dynamics. These limitations and their implications for future research will be revisited in the final conclusion.

In reporting and disseminating qualitative research, "quality" extends to transparency, dependability, and credibility (Flick, 2007; Yopo Díaz, 2019). Throughout the research process, I engaged in systematic reflection and maintained a reflexive stance during both data collection and analysis. The substantive chapters transparently disclose the analytical process and empirical evidence, consistent with the principle of "thick description" (Geertz, 2008). Regular feedback from my two supervisors – both experienced qualitative social researchers – together with discussions with peers and colleagues, has been crucial for enhancing credibility. Given the interdisciplinary nature of this study, I also presented preliminary findings at academic conferences in sociology, demography, and China studies. This iterative

cycle of presentation, feedback, reflection, and revision has further strengthened the trustworthiness and reliability of the study.

In conclusion, this chapter has outlined the methodological choices and research process underpinning the study. While recognising the inherent limitations of any research design, it has argued that the selected approach – life story interviews combined with constructivist grounded theory – offers a robust and appropriate framework for addressing the research question. This design enables the generation of nuanced and valid insights into the complex temporal dynamics of childbearing decisions in contemporary China. The following chapter will then shift focus to the research context, presenting Shenzhen's diverse social fabric, its distinctive migrant society, and the study participants in a richer light that extends beyond basic demographic profiles.

CHAPTER 4

Setting the Scene in a Migrant Society

This chapter establishes the contextual foundation necessary for understanding delaying childbearing in contemporary China by examining the research site and participants through the lens of internal migration. As the first empirical chapter, it prepares the groundwork for subsequent analyses of temporal frameworks in Chapter 5 and strategic practices in Chapter 6 by addressing a fundamental question: who are the individuals navigating reproductive timing decisions, and in what social context do they make these choices?

Shenzhen offers a distinctive context for this investigation. As a migrant society where only 8% of residents were born locally (Ye, 2016), the city is defined by migration: people from across China converge here, bringing diverse regional values, family expectations, and life aspirations. Rather than treating migration merely as a demographic background, this chapter positions geographic mobility as analytically central. Both migration and reproductive timing involve negotiations between individual aspirations and social expectations, between personal preferences and family obligations. As such, migration experiences offer a revealing entry point into how people navigate major life course transitions.

Despite its prominence as a migrant society, Shenzhen remains relatively understudied as a social community. Over the past few decades, the city has undergone extraordinary transformation – from a fishing village of 358,267 people in 1979 to a global metropolis of around 10.3 million inhabitants in 2010, more than 90% of whom are migrants (Campbell, 2021; X. Wang, 2022; F. Yang, 2017; Ye, 2016). This dramatic trajectory has attracted substantial attention in urban planning and development scholarship (such as Gong et al., 2023; Hao et al., 2011; Tan & Nguyen, 2024; Tong et al., 2018). By contrast, far less

research has examined the city's socio-cultural dimensions (Du, 2025; Sun, 2019). The scarcity of studies on residents' lived experiences underscores the importance of exploring identity and self-identification as central aspects of community life. Life stories thus provide a crucial window into Shenzhen's underlying social fabric and allow us to see how migration shapes both self-understanding and reproductive decision-making.

In this context, identity emerges as the key mediating concept linking place and self, migration and fertility planning. Migration reshapes self-identification, and the transformed sense of self becomes a critical window onto micro-level agency in life planning, including reproductive timing. Accordingly, this chapter first introduces identity as its guiding concept, before presenting two empirical cases that illustrate the interconnections among place, identity, and life planning, including fertility decisions. It then develops an account of Shenzhen's identity system, followed by an analysis of migrants' motivations for moving to the city as a lens into its broader dynamics. The chapter concludes with a synthesis of how Shenzhen and its residents can be understood as the foundation for the analyses that follow.

4.1 Place, Identity and Life Planning

Identity, in its most general sense, refers to how individuals understand and define themselves (Giddens, 1991). At the individual level, it is closely tied to the notion of self-concept, the cognitive structures people use to organise information about who they are (Markus, 1977). These structures also include possible selves – the images of who one might become, who one would like to become, and who one fears becoming – which connect present self-understandings with future aspirations (Markus & Nurius, 1986). At the collective level, identity is shaped through group memberships and the social recognition they confer; as Social Identity Theory suggests, belonging to social groups provides individuals with a sense of meaning, belonging, and self-esteem, which in turn guide attitudes and behaviours (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Moreover, identity is not static but subject to

tensions: discrepancies between the actual self and one's ideal or ought self can produce motivational pressures, pushing individuals to act in ways that restore alignment (Higgins, 1987).

Taken together, these perspectives reveal that identity operates as both a cognitive and social construct that not only defines "who I am" in the present, but also projects "who I want to become." Identity provides a crucial foundation for life planning – influencing decisions about spatial mobility, career trajectories, and lifestyle choices that align with desired self-concepts. Understanding these identity processes provides a key analytical foundation for examining reproductive decisions, which similarly involve negotiating between current identity positions and desired future selves. Two empirical cases will illustrate these points as follows.

4.1.1 Place Indicating Mobility, Reflecting Life Planning Ideologies

Place drew my analytical attention in this grounded theory research because it consistently emerged as the starting point and connective thread of participants' life stories. In this migrant society where people from across China converge, place-based dynamics became particularly visible. Birthplaces, educational destinations, and work locations were not only biographical facts but also key sources of identity development that shaped participants' self-understandings and aspirations. Geographic positioning thus indicates mobility choices and reveals aspirational trajectories. This aligns with the theoretical insights reviewed in Chapter 2 on the intersection of space and agency, manifesting in the following empirical account.

Wan's account exemplifies how spatial positioning shapes life course possibilities in contemporary China, especially through discrepancies between his actual and ideal self. Born in 1990, he opened his narrative with a stark assessment of geographic determinism:

> I was born in a tier-4 or tier-5 city, a very small city in Central China. In this city, from a very young age, I realised that […] if you want to see what the world is like outside, if you want to have more gains or broaden your horizons, you *must* find a way to go out, you *definitely* have to go out.

Wan's framing reveals a key analytical dimension linking place and mobility in relation to life planning. His immediate reference to the city "tiers" as part of his self-introduction demonstrates how deeply he associates his identity with spatial positioning. By opening his life narrative with birthplace classification, Wan reveals the internalised connection between geographic origins and personal identity, showing how he understands himself fundamentally in relation to the hierarchical place system he was born into. He devoted considerable interview time to contrasting his hometown's limitations – poor transportation dependent on "an old and fragile bridge," restricted educational resources – with contemporary opportunities available to Shenzhen students. The constraints of lower-tier origins and the opportunities of higher-tier destinations, in his narratives, parallel the gap between who he was and who he wants to become.

For Wan, birthplace predetermined his life trajectory: to secure any meaningful future, he had to "go out." His description of climbing from "low-tier" to "top-tier" cities represented strategic emplacement (Englund, 2002) – using spatial mobility to access alternative identity resources and life course options. Implied in what he ironically termed the "impressive" inconveniences of his hometown, the migration decision reflects Wan's explicit refusal of the "self" born with underdeveloped conditions and limited resources in the "low tier" birthplace, coupled with his desire for a different and better life in a much more developed location. The migration decision thus represented both rejection and aspiration: rejecting predetermined pathways associated with underdeveloped regions while pursuing expanded possibilities available in more advanced urban contexts.

Having established the agentic nature of his migration decision, Wan's explicit articulation of this reasoning reveals deeper insights about how he understands strategic life planning under the place-based constraints:

> This situation is a reality; it is a fact, you can't change where you were born, right? There are no choices, no choices (of birthplace). Okay, what exists is reasonable, and based on this reality, for me personally, I have a firm belief that I *must* go out. You must go out, you must go out and see the world, right? Because life in my hometown is already predictable – going to an average school after high school, then doing an average job, and living an average life. That's it, that's the end (of your life). Ah, this doesn't align with my thinking.

This quote further reveals how Wan conceptualises migration as strategic life planning that extends beyond spatial repositioning to encompass comprehensive life course redesign. His rejection of the "predictable" trajectory – "average school," "average job," "average life" – demonstrates systematic resistance to normative life patterns that his birthplace identity would prescribe. Rather than accepting predetermined pathways, he uses spatial mobility to create opportunities for alternative timing patterns and lifestyle choices. His approach to migration reveals broader patterns of how individuals mobilise agency, navigating between structural constraints and personal aspirations.

Thereby, this case illustrates two ways in which migration matters for understanding fertility decision-making. First, migration can directly reshape normative life trajectories: as Wan, individuals might move not only to improve opportunities but also to resist predetermined pathways, thereby potentially delaying or altering the timing of childbearing. Second, migration provides a meaningful context for understanding fertility decision-making as a reflection of individual agency and life aspirations in personal life planning. Similar to fertility planning, migration encapsulates individuals' life ideologies, personalities, and strategies for navigating their social surroundings.

4.1.2 Place creates identity, indicating fertility planning

Mak's account offers a different yet equally revealing perspective, illustrating how identity associated with place can be specifically connected to fertility planning within the Shenzhen society. Mak, a local born in Shenzhen in 1995, vividly illustrated how local identity is associated with reproductive and lifestyle expectations in her perceptions:

> Yes, I am local here. … But I *must* tell you, I am quite different from other locals. Because around me, many locals never work, they have children and stay at home to care for them. And they haven't received much education, because they might not need to earn money through their own efforts, they just wait for their dividends [from the village committee associated with local land ownership that will be explained later in the section].

This narrative reveals how Mak uses the local identity category to define what she does not want to become (Markus & Nurius, 1986), establishing clear boundaries between her actual identity positioning and the lifestyle patterns she associates with local identity expectations. For Mak, being "local" in Shenzhen does not simply describe geographical origin but signals a package of lifestyle markers: early childbearing, limited education, and reliance on inherited economic resources rather than individual labour. In distancing herself from this configuration, she framed her own identity as both local and distinct. She explicitly differentiates herself from other locals, signifying a deliberate orientation toward independence and the postponement of marriage and childbearing. We will return to her account in Chapter 6, where it offers further insight into how identity claims are mobilised as strategic resources in negotiating normative reproductive expectations.

Mak's account demonstrates that place-based identities in Shenzhen function as normative scripts rather than neutral descriptors. Place identity, as theorised in human geography and migration studies, highlights how belonging is constructed not only through spatial attachment but also through the cultural expectations and social relations associated

with particular locations (Hernández et al., 2007; Massey, 2005; Pretty et al., 2003). Place is a constructed arena of social relations and identity reconfigurations (Massey, 2005). Seen in this light, place does more than locate individuals; it creates identities with prescriptive implications for fertility planning and lifestyle.

In Shenzhen, where migration and mobility are central to the city's development, place does not merely accommodate diverse populations but actively nurtures a distinctive identity system. These dynamics draw attention to the exploration of the identity system in this migrant city: how does identity formation revolve around migration and distinguish between locals and others? Who are the locals, and how do people's perceptions of local and non-local identities differ? And how are these identities tied to assumptions about appropriate reproductive timelines? These questions guide the following section, which explores the broader identity system of Shenzhen.

4.2 Migration and Identity: Come and You Become a Shenzhener?

Shenzhen is unusual in that it explicitly promises belonging through its well-known slogan, "*Once you come, You Become a Shenzhener*" (Du, 2025). This discourse appears to offer immediate identity recognition for newcomers in the city. To understand how identity and belonging are constructed in this migrant society, it is necessary to situate these narratives within the wider literature on place identity and integration.

4.2.1 Place Identity in Migration Theory

Identity in migration studies has often been analysed through the lens of place attachment and place identity, concepts that capture how belonging and self-definition are tied to particular locations (Hernández et al., 2007; Pretty et al., 2003). Most research on migrants' identity has typically focused on processes of integration into host societies (such as Lin et al., 2022), including socio-economic changes after the migration (Liu et al., 2020; Tian et al., 2019; Wang & Shen, 2023; Zou & Deng, 2022) and psychological home-making

transitions (Kochan, 2016; Lin et al., 2022; Lu et al., 2023; Qian J. & Zhu, 2014; Ralph & Staeheli, 2011). The concept of place identity is inherently connected to place attachment, which emphasises the psychological geo-social relationship between people and places; it is defined as a close affective bond that individuals wish to maintain with a sense of comfort and safety (Gilmartin, 2008; Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001).

Yet much of this literature tends to privilege place over people by treating the host community as the normative benchmark against which migrants are assessed. In this framing, integration into urban life is positioned as the ultimate marker of identity transition, while migrants' own perceptions, aspirations, and redefinitions of place remain marginal. As a result, identity is reduced to a binary of belonging or non-belonging, rendering migrants subordinate to place rather than active agents in shaping it (Hernández et al., 2007; Ujang, 2012).

Recent research recognises the importance of a humanistic approach, emphasising human subjectivity in producing the meanings of places (Qian & Zhu, 2014). Through in-depth biographic analysis, Du (2018) demonstrates how young, educated adults actively negotiate their identities across different places and mobility trajectories. Rather than treating integration into the host society as an endpoint, her life-history approach reveals how individuals themselves construct and reconstruct meanings of place through aspirations, relationships, and everyday practices. By situating identity formation within migrants' own narratives, Du (2018) places people – their voices, strategies, and self-understandings – at the centre of analysis in the mobilisation process. This literature reinforces the theoretical foundation of this chapter that understanding identity is inseparable from places on the ground, but always mediated through subjective experience. Accordingly, this chapter aligns with the shift from focusing on the host society to centring migrants' perspectives, grounding the analysis in their narratives and perceptions.

This humanistic approach that centres on individual subjectivity serves a dual analytical purpose: understanding personal identity formation while simultaneously revealing broader social dynamics. Examining how individuals construct and negotiate their identities within migrant societies provides critical insights into the social fabric of these contexts. Kochan (2020) argues that migrants' identity formation is an accumulative process during which individuals develop perceptual or emotional engagements with various urban locations. The process of identifying and positioning oneself in societies involves making internal connections between the city context and the subjective self, thus transforming the macro imagination of society into individual stories and life course decision-making.

This theoretical framework proves particularly relevant for understanding Shenzhen's distinctive approach to migrant identity formation. The city's well-known slogan – "*Come and You Become a Shenzhener*" (来了就是深圳人) – represents more than civic marketing; it embodies a specific model of place-based identity construction that directly engages with the identity formation processes Kochan (2020) describes. This slogan offers immediate group membership to newcomers while simultaneously creating expectations about what it means to belong in Shenzhen. Rather than requiring lengthy integration processes or demonstrating cultural assimilation, the slogan suggests that the act of arriving and staying – rather than birthplace, cultural background, or length of residence – constitutes sufficient grounds for local identity claims. However, this apparent inclusivity also raises questions about how residents – both migrants and locals – actually navigate these identity categories in practice.

4.2.2 *Hukou* is Not a Problem in Shenzhen

Talking about place identity in the context of China, those who have some background knowledge may ask: wouldn't it be simpler to refer to *hukou* as a solid criterion in defining a Shenzhener? *Hukou* is the household registration system in China, registering each citizen with one regular place of permanent residence where they can claim available

entitlements (L. Zhang & Wang, 2010). It is often regarded as the materialised institutional proof of one's place identity. Abundant research on rural-to-urban migration in China argues that the *hukou* system persistently deters rural migrants from being granted full urban citizenship, including benefits in education, healthcare, and housing ownership in the host societies (F. Cai, 2011; W. W. Wang & Fan, 2012; Wu & Treiman, 2004).

Some research has engaged the framework of identity integration with the *hukou* system, regarding it as a registered identity constituting migrants' personhood. Studies have shown that *hukou* conversion is key to migrants' urban identity transition and settlement intention (Tang & Hao, 2018; S. Xie et al., 2023). For example, in mega-cities like Beijing and Shanghai, both popular destinations for internal migrants in China, *hukou* has been proven significant to contribute to the formation of migrants' self-identity attached to the host community (W. Li, 2013; Rudolph & Lu, 2008). It means that migrants who have gained *hukou* in the host society tend to identify themselves as more associated with the host place. Moreover, in these cities, pathways to obtaining a *hukou* are highly limited in policies and strictly regulated through institutionalised mechanisms, yet *hukou* grants access to key living benefits such as housing purchase eligibility and quality education for children (L. Zhang, 2012). Thus, *hukou* becomes a valuable resource and can exert influence in broad social contexts in China (such as Fang et al., 2022; Y. Qian & Qian, 2017; Z. Qian et al., 2020; P. Zhao & Howden-Chapman, 2010).

However, in Shenzhen, *huko*u is neither a significant obstacle for migrants to acquire nor widely considered a means of recognising one's identity. During the fieldwork, no one mentioned *hukou* as a way of identifying themselves as a "Shenzhener" or attaching themselves to the city through this institutional identity. When asked whether they have a Shenzhen *hukou*, one respondent replied in a nonchalant tone, downplaying its significance and implying that it doesn't carry much weight or meaning for them: "It is easy to gain a

Shenzhen *hukou*." This is inseparable from the policy settings and the relaxed *hukou* regulations in Shenzhen (B. Li, 2020).

Compared with other major migrant-receiving societies, the criteria for acquiring Shenzhen *hukou* are much more relaxed (L. Zhang, 2012). There are fewer barriers, making it easier for migrants to obtain Shenzhen *hukou*, for instance, through marriage, compared to other major cities. In Shenzhen, a migrant can apply for *hukou* after being married to a Shenzhen hukou holder for two years, provided the spouse has held their *hukou* for the same duration. In contrast, Shanghai requires at least 10 years of marriage to a local *hukou* holder to qualify. These differences highlight the relative accessibility of Shenzhen *hukou* compared to other major cities in marriage-based applications (Tian et al., 2018). There are also many other accessible ways to achieve Shenzhen *hukou* with ease, such as through education and employment.

During the fieldwork, none of the research participants ever mentioned any difficulty in gaining a local Shenzhen *hukou*. But nor did they identify themselves as a Shenzhener. Thus, I argue that examining the indigenous identity framework of Shenzhen is crucial for challenging the institutional barriers that dominate current understandings of place identity, which often rely heavily on *hukou* in the context of China. Shenzhen's particular context disrupts this institutionalised view of place identity and further complicates the ways in which migrants' social integration into host societies can be understood, moving beyond the simplistic association with *hukou*. Kochan (2020: 147) critically commented on *hukou*, stating that "this fixed, stable and formally defined alignment between place and identity creates an exogenously imposed definition of belonging that is unrelated to migrants' personal practices and experiences". This comment criticises *hukou* as a bureaucratic identity and argues for an emphasis on subjective personal identities and the identity-building process along the lines of geographic migration, associated with individual everyday practices.

Building on calls for more nuanced research into migrants' subjective place identity, as well as the sociological perspective that views individual-level migration as deeply intertwined with broader social structures, I will now explore how migrants construct subjective self-identification in relation to the fabric of Shenzhen and how they conceptualise the place identity of "Shenzhener".

4.3 Constructing an Identity Framework in the Migrant Society: Who is Shenzhener?

If the identification of Shenzhener is not necessarily bonded with *hukou*, then what would be a practical criterion to specify a place-based identity in this migrant society? My investigation starts with considering who is a "Shenzhener", a question I had not expected to be difficult to answer before I started the fieldwork in Shenzhen. Long (male, born in 1996 in Shenzhen) was one of my very first interviewees and he "taught" me the indigenous meaning of "Shenzhener". When I asked the perceived "simple" question to start our conversation: "Are you a Shenzhener?" – a common way of greeting people when you have not known each other – he replied:

> Yes. But… I should say that my parents are... No, I guess I should be considered a 'Second-Generation Shenzhen Migrant'. My parents came to Shenzhen around 1991, 1992. Since then, we've always been here living in Shenzhen. I went to school here, and I shall be identified as locally born and raised up here.

When I further asked, "Then is your wife a Shenzhener?", he said:

> Yes! She's quite special and typical, (compared with himself) she is more of a... *true* local from Shenzhen. Both her parents are from local villages in Shenzhen. Her father is from Xingwei Village near the airport, and her mother is from Fenghuang Village, right at the foot of Fenghuang Mountain. So, she is a typical 'Local Shenzhener'.

With Long's introduction and subsequent fieldwork, I have gradually sorted out the typical identification system generated and shaped in this migrant city. It seems hard for Long

to define who is genuinely a “Shenzhener” without considering their families’ migration history. While he thought he might be considered a “Shenzhener” as he was born and grew up here, his hesitation reflected an understanding of place identity rooted in culture, “blood”, and family history, which left him uncertain about claiming this identity. Yet in terms of his lived experience, he did not perceive himself as an outsider in the city in the way many other migrants did.

The problem he experienced in identifying himself by place lies in the complex use of “place identity” in a migrant city such as Shenzhen. There is a complicated and particular system entailing the growing migration population and the migration histories of generations of families on the soil, representing the development history of the city. The short answer is that nearly no one in the city would describe themselves as a “Shenzhener”. The simplistic notion of place identity – that living in a place all in one’s most life automatically defines one as belonging to it – has been interrupted in Shenzhen during the course of its history of rapid transformation and continuous absorption of Chinese internal migrants. The separate ideas of identification and identity will be further explained with reference to three main identifications among residents in Shenzhen: “Local Villagers” (本地村民), “Second-generation of Shenzhen Migrants” (深二代), and the remaining migrants.

4.3.1 Both Interrupted and Consistent Imaginations of “Local Villagers”

During the fieldwork, Mak was the only one participant who explicitly identified herself as a “Local Shenzhener” and she was also aware of her “special” identity in Shenzhen. Mak, born in Shenzhen in 1995, introduced herself:

> Yes, I am local here. And we indeed, get dividends from the village (committees), truly locals. It’s quite rare to meet (locals), probably you would think.

In this quote, Mak proves her local identity by referencing the “dividends” that she receives from the village committees. As was the case in Long’s description about his wife, I

realised that who receives dividends from village committees was of symbolic importance in identifying who the "locals" are. During the rapid urbanisation of Shenzhen, the original fishing village was transformed into profitable blocks and buildings, while the local villagers were transformed from fishers to landlords. The village committees were reorganised into collective shareholding cooperative companies, responsible for selling and leasing the collective land of villagers (Tong et al., 2018). Thus, the local villagers receive "dividends" from the village committees when good businesses develop on their original village land.

This process of earning income was indicated in Long's description of the economic situation in his wife's "local village":

> Yes, local villagers are relatively… wealthy (as said by the public). Indeed, because the real local population in Shenzhen like her isn't very large, perhaps totalling only around 100,000 to 150,000 people [the population size of Shenzhen was around 18 million by the end of 2024, according to the Shenzhen Bureau of Statistics]. […] And indeed, because they own land, and with the village committee, and cooperative companies, they might have much better (economic) conditions relatively. She indeed receives a monthly dividend from the village committee's shares. But it might just be over 5,000 yuan (around £550) a month? Just like that.

He also provided further details about the "relatively" better-off economic conditions of the local villagers with reference to his wife's recent receipt of dividends as the locals:

> And just recently, her village happened to be… It is right one of the easiest opportunities in Shenzhen to become rich overnight. What's the reason the locals are rich? Demolition. Recently, a piece of land in her village was developed in collaboration with a developer to build a building, and the land compensation payments will be available for the villagers (who collaboratively own the land). […] And she just received over a million yuan (more than £110,000) in her account immediately.

The economic logic, "receiving dividends" and having "relatively better economic conditions", in distinguishing locals from others is so profound in this rapidly developed migrant city that it overrides the criterion of long-term local residence. This became clear in my conversation with Rabb, a woman born in Shenzhen in 1992. Having lived her entire life in the city, I asked whether she considered herself a "Shenzhener," and she replied:

> No! Of course not! Because my hometown is in Chaoshan, in the Shantou area. Our family has been in Shenzhen since my grandfather's generation. Then my dad and their generation also grew up here, and naturally, we continued to stay here. But I don't feel like I'm particularly Shenzhener, because the local people of Shenzhen... I am not one of the purebred locals, it's still a bit different. After all, we don't get *dividends* (laughs), we don't own the land.

The criterion of receiving dividends as a marker of being a "Shenzhener" was particularly evident in Rabb's case. Although her family settled in Shenzhen since her grandfather's generation and she herself had lived there all her life, she still did not identify as a Shenzhener, primarily because she was excluded from dividends and land ownership. This illustrates that local identity in Shenzhen is defined not only by non-migrant status but also by access to economic benefits generated through migration and urban development. In popular perception, it seems that only those who profit from these dividends are considered truly distinct from the migrant majority – recognised as the city's elite and its real owners.

In the discourse about who are the local residents of Shenzhen, people maintain the phrases "village" and "villagers" to indicate that these individuals are somewhat positioned on the rural side of the rural/urban divide. However, the impression of being financially well-off attached to the discourse of "local villagers" due to the receipt of dividends is incompatible with the general common-sense understanding of the conditions of those who are from rural areas. Given the broad rural-urban divide and the lagged development of rural

areas across China, conventionally, “traditional” villagers who have rural backgrounds have fewer financial resources compared with their urban counterparts (Sicular et al., 2008). In Shenzhen, though, swift urbanisation enriched the urbanised rural-origin locals in a short time frame and interrupted this conventional image. The public acceptance of the seemingly “conflicting” connotations of “local villagers” in the discourse reveals further the complexity of place identity in this new society built upon internal migration.

Another layer of the “local villager” identity in Shenzhen resonates with wider stereotypes of rural lifestyles. As Mak explained previously, while she acknowledges her entitlement to village dividends as a local, she distances herself from what she perceives as the normative patterns of local villagers: limited education, reliance on inherited resources, and a tendency toward early marriage and childbearing. Reflecting on her high school classmates, she observed:

> In Shenzhen, the common perception about the locals is that they marry early and also have children early. Most locals around me didn’t pursue higher education, to university or graduate school… Let’s say my high school classmates, if they finished high school and attended a college (instead of university) or did not receive education further, I’ve noticed they tend to marry earlier and have children earlier.

If we understand the lifestyle image of “local villager” in Shenzhen as Mak’s description, which is consistent with, or more similar to, the perceptions of people living in rural areas who have relatively more traditional childbearing ideologies and would have higher fertility intentions than urban residents (Werwath, 2011), the case of Shenzhen interrupts the binary rural/urban dichotomy in current research. Traditional migration studies that treat local residents of the destination city as fully “urbanised” should therefore pay attention to the rapid urbanisation of the city and, more importantly, to how individual people

may have experienced social dynamics and rapid transitions in large migrant cities such as Shenzhen.

Given the disconnections between the idea of "local villagers" and their wealthy living conditions in Shenzhen, I believe that the imaginative dichotomy between rural and urban can be blurred. We should not view Shenzhen, which has undergone rapid and compressed urbanisation relying on migration in the past two decades, as being like Beijing or Shanghai, which have gone through almost a century of urbanisation. It thus, proves the worth of exploring this particular young migrant society, understanding the heterogeneous groups of people here, and gaining valuable insights into how rapid social transformations influence individuals' identity formation and their life course decision-making.

4.3.2 Second-Generation Shenzhen Migrants

Compared to Shenzhener, it seems easier to identify oneself as a Second-Generation Shenzhen Migrant (SGSM, 深二代), as Long did. This is a typical identity emerging in Shenzhen from its particular migration history including many young individuals who dependently moved to Shenzhen with their families. Unlike locals defined by dividends, the identity of SGSM seems to be more concerned with the migration history of the members of their family tree. This group of people usually have other family members who have been in Shenzhen for a long time. The length of migration is believed to be meaningful in seizing the best timing for development and wealth accumulation in this city. Thus, this identity is not just about migrant history but also entails financial conditions.

Long's family has run a large chain of bakeries for over 20 years in Shenzhen. Their business grew alongside the city's rapid transformation, likely benefitting from the policy incentives of Shenzhen's "golden age" of development (Campbell, 2021). I have come across their bakeries in different regions of Shenzhen several times during my fieldwork. With the support of family capital, Long is also incubating various startup brands across the country,

including bakeries, café shops, and some trending entertainment industries. Coincidentally, one of the script-murder stores I visited in Shenzhen turned out to be one he had invested in.

The impression of the good financial status of SGSM was intensified in Mak's narrative when she instinctively used these indigenous identities to explain her family's good financial conditions:

> So, actually, for me, both my husband and I don't have any financial pressures, because we both are... he's a SGSM, and I'm a local. So, our families actually provide us with a lot of (economic) support. We don't have pressures regarding housing or cars; it's more like we spend what we earn from our own incomes, and then there might be additional rental income as well.

The financial reference in these identities was further in evidence when Hore, a female born in Anhui in 1996, clearly felt uncomfortable in introducing herself as a SGSM:

> I'm the so-called, with quote marks, a SGSM. My parents migrated to Shenzhen, and I stayed here with them as they settled down. Then I went through elementary school, high school here, and didn't leave Shenzhen until university.

I asked, what do you mean by "Second-Generation Shenzhen Migrant" with quote marks? She answered:

> At university, there was a very diverse group of people from different provinces and even different countries. When people hear I am from Shenzhen, everyone would think, 'Huh? You're from Shenzhen', as they had not much knowledge of Shenzhen people, and they would think, 'Does that mean you are like some powerful figure like a second-generation Shanghai or Beijing resident?' Do you own a house (that's worth millions in such a metropolis)? … It was only then that I truly began to realise what others refer to as a SGSM.

Hore is not confident referring to herself as SGSM even though she is literally what the term refers to, with parents who migrated to Shenzhen decades ago. She is aware that the imaginations attached to this identity are normally of individuals who are financially well-off, but her family is not prosperous. Hore has reflected that Shenzhen is different from other cities in the speed of its transformation, and not every migrant who has settled down in the city for more than a generation is "successful" and rich as local residents or the second-generation migrants in other megacities. She is unsure whether she can match the developing speed of the city. She is also doubtful whether she really belongs here and can represent this city with the identity of SGSM. She understands that this title only belongs to those who are living a decent life in the city, but she is more associated with the fishing village.

Engaging all these narratives together, similar as the definition of "local villagers", even Second-Generation Shenzhen Migrant is not to an identity to be claimed merely according to the literal or conventional meanings of family migration history. Instead, it is also intertwined with strong economic connotations. The logic underlying the identification system in the city is financial success. Only those who have achieved wealth through migration can comfortably take the identity of SGSM. For instance, Donny, a male born in Wuhan in 1987 admits without hesitation that he is both a "Second-Generation Rich" (富二代) as well as "Second-Generation Shenzhen Migrant" (深二代), revealing the strong correlation between the two terms in the indigenous identification system. This complexity of identity in Shenzhen further underscores the need for a sophisticated understanding of place identity, one that moves beyond institutional definitions to consider personal experiences and social interactions embedded in the social fabrics.

Although analyses of Second-Generation Shenzhen Migrants' life pursuits and fertility planning have not been revealed at this stage, these subjective identifications provide valuable insights not only into the city and its inhabitants, but also into how individuals

perceive both the city and their own place within it. The exploration of identity in Shenzhen reveals a complex and multifaceted understanding of what it means to be a "Shenzhener," reflecting the city's unique policies and social dynamics. The concept and self-identification of being a "Shenzhener" or Second-Generation Shenzhen Migrant is not merely tied to official documentation or simply family migration background, but appears to be closely associated with financial status and wealth. Highlighting the interplay between place and people, it can be speculated that the emphasis on finance in individual perceptions is deeply rooted in and shaped by the city's rapid urbanisation and large-scale migration. This, in turn, underscores the centrality of economic rationale to the overall social fabric of Shenzhen – commonly described by participants as a "city of money," where wealth accumulation dominates both social identity and everyday life.

4.4 Why Did You Migrate to Shenzhen?

Among the 60 participants in my research, 13 identify themselves as Second-Generation Shenzhen Migrants (SGSM) and 1 as the "local villager". The remaining majority are migrants who do not identify themselves as Shenzheners, despite the city's tempting slogan. While they come with diverse social backgrounds and life experiences, their life planning trajectories converge – they all chose to migrate to Shenzhen. Why did they independently or actively decide to move to this city? What specific facets of the city consistently attracted them? These questions offer insight into their ideologies, as reflected in their actions – what these individuals are pursuing, not merely within the city but in their broader lives. Among their responses, three primary motivations for moving to Shenzhen emerged, among these young educated adults.

4.4.1 Development and Advancement: Pursuing a Better Self

As one of the first-tier cities in China, Shenzhen is perceived by participants as attractive with more and better job opportunities, representing development and advancement

compared to smaller cities in China. Most educated young adults begin their exploration of migration when choosing university locations. Rain, a female born in 1992 comes from a well-off family in Anhui in central China; her father holds a senior position in a bank. Despite her father's arrangement of a job for her at the local bank, she resisted and followed the pathway of upward intracity migration in her degree pursuits. She explains the importance of living in a large city by comparing the small city in Anhui where she completed her undergraduate studies with Shanghai, where she pursued her graduate degree:

> I feel that being in a better city, you might encounter more opportunities. After starting my graduate studies, I noticed a clear difference. When I was in my undergraduate studies, if you wanted to find an internship, it was impossible. In that kind of city, you could only maybe find a part-time job like working as a waiter, and what do you think you could gain from that? Although I'm not sure what I really learned during my internship while in graduate school (in Shanghai), it was different because you could interact with others in various ways. A supervisor I met during the internship later gave me advice when I was hunting for a job. It was very different, and I value the place a lot.

Rather than accepting the secure job her father arranged in her hometown, Rain values the challenges of living in a metropolis, perceiving that a life pathway in a larger city is better, developed, and advanced. These have all strengthened her idea of living in a large city and motivated her later decision to move to Shenzhen for her first job. On the other hand, she criticised her ex-boyfriend's decision of not migrating and believed that there is a dramatic "gap" between their thinking patterns:

> Just like my ex-boyfriend when we were together at university, he felt that he was the type who pursued a comfortable life. He just wanted to go home (settle down in his home city) after graduation. Then, at home (city), he didn't feel it necessary to find a job with a very

> high salary; he would be quite happy just living contentedly. In my view, this might be a bit unambitious, haha, I totally couldn't accept that.

In her description on intracity migration, returning to the home city after receiving education in a bigger city is an "unambitious" decision, whilst migrating to a bigger city indicates pursuing upward social mobility and personal development. She uses "home" to represent the "home city" in her discourse, also indicating the comfortable and easy life in the small home city as being at home. The differences in migration decisions and life values between Rain and her ex-boyfriend are illustrated in Du (2018)'s research as two different types of personal identities with associated mobility patterns: moving up and moving down. For most interviewees, the decision to migrate upward expressed their identity as ambitious and forward-looking. This aspirational spirit resonates with Shenzhen's own ethos of striving and rapid development – a city narrative cultivated since the reform era, when Shenzhen emerged as a symbol of opportunity, mobility, and relentless progress.

Unlike Rain, who had already envisioned a future in top-tier cities during her student years, Vel only began to navigate her mobility aspirations and identity after entering the workforce. Born in Sichuan in 1993, she initially imagined a comfortable life in Chengdu, the provincial capital and a second-tier city in southeastern China. During her undergraduate studies, she aspired to "a relaxing life close to home," and after graduation, she worked in Chengdu for a year, but soon found the reality disillusioning:

> Super boring, the job there was so boring. ... I was at a retail company in Chengdu, and that year I did data analysis every day. I found it extremely boring because it was just a lot of spreadsheets, which seemed quite *low*-level to me. Then my colleagues, they would do a fixed format thing the whole day. The tasks given to me were similar, but I found this stuff very simple, I could finish the whole day's work within the morning, and I had the afternoon completely free, the kind of free that drove you crazy. (I can't imagine) My

> colleagues had been doing this for 5, 6, 7, 8 years! I realised that the comfortable life wasn't as nice as I thought; you start to feel yourself worthless (laughs), it's just too boring.

This period in Chengdu marked a turning point. The "relaxing" life she once aspired to revealed itself as monotonous and stifling, prompting her to rethink both her career orientation and her personal identity. Vel came to see herself not as someone who valued ease and predictability, but as a person excited by challenges, professional breakthroughs, and the sense of advancement she later sought in Shenzhen:

> And finally, I got a job at a company (in Shenzhen) that does large-scale e-commerce, working with Amazon, a foreign trade company as a data analyst. Why did I decide to go there? It was because of that company; I felt that this group of people were all very upward-moving, very youthful. The way they spoke and the words they used, I felt, were different from the people I met in Chengdu who, I think, were very easy people with quite simple minds. And I thought, oh, these people (in Shenzhen) look very professional. They were very career-oriented.

As Vel, educated migrants in Shenzhen are not primarily motivated by financial betterment. Some deliberately gave up parental support in their home cities – such as houses or cars often considered "necessary equipment" for an independent life – and instead accepted the compromises of commuting by metro and renting small flats in the crowded metropolis. For them, upward migration and establishing a life in a larger city symbolise personal advancement. This pursuit of mobility outweighs the desire for property ownership or immediate financial gains. What they seek is not a stable and comfortable life already prepared by others, but the opportunity to become a "better self" through meaningful work that aligns with their self-identity and affirms the kind of life value they aspire to. Such aspirations can only be pursued in rapidly developing metropolises like Shenzhen, which

provide the professional opportunities and dynamic environments they find essential for personal development.

4.4.2 Inclusiveness in Values: Exploring Non-normative Possibilities

The pursuit of such self-defined value cannot be separated from the wider social environment in which it is embedded. Many young migrants choose Shenzhen to start their independent lives, seeing it as a large and new city that offers an open atmosphere and fewer traditional constraints (Gong et al., 2023). There is a clear implication in people's ideologies on the city hierarchy, drawing linear and straightforward connections between city development status and liberal value systems that bigger and more developed cities are also more advanced in social values, with residents perceived as holding more liberal ideologies towards personal life events.

For example, when talking about age anxiety, a widespread concern among women in their late twenties, Jennie, a female, born in Hunan in 1996 shared her comments:

> I really... I can understand why my sister has that severe age anxiety. She's in Changsha (provincial city of Jennie's hometown), and over there, age anxiety is really prevalent, especially among many outstanding women. […] This is actually one of the reasons why I really want to escape (hometown)... really want to leave this place. It's like, if you're in an environment where everyone has this kind of mindset, it's actually very hard to accommodate your own thoughts.

She emphasised the importance of the wider society in impacting individual mindsets on gender and age. The structural traditional value system in her "ancestral home" (老家), a second-tier provincial capital city in China, motivated her to migrate out. She further pointed out that Shenzhen, as a big city, progresses faster in liberalising social values, not only such as in releasing age anxiety but also in fostering more open attitudes towards divorce:

> Shenzhen is much better; Hunan is really severe. Because my friend is currently single, and when he/she talks to their hometown friend, the hometown friend says that they think people who are still single at the age of 27 or 28 must have some problems. I think it's actually quite normal (people in less developed cities think in this way) because in that environment, everyone has the same kind of thinking, constantly instilling this idea into you. It's actually very hard for them to realise that saying such things is problematic, or that it could be hurtful to you. But I think that, actually, there is still progress… At least in Shenzhen, in big cities, that's the case (progressing), right?

Jennie's narrative is particularly revealing about how she divides herself from the "others" who stay in their hometowns. She believes that non-migrants are naturally influenced by the local and traditional value system in the small-city society. The identity that she has grouped herself in is attached to Shenzhen, perceived as a liberal and open society, with advanced and developing ideologies in life events. In Shenzhen, they can escape the "backward" ideas and gain "progress" together with the city's development.

Second, some interviewees illustrate Shenzhen's inclusiveness, considering the loose social connections among people and the reduced social monitoring and judgment in everyday interactions. Rain stated this vividly:

> I think that big cities might be better with a higher level of inclusivity overall, and well... Perhaps it's because everyone in big cities, especially first-tier cities, might be busy with work, and the ties between people aren't as strong, so nobody cares too much about what you must or must not do. I feel that I can live more comfortably in this kind of environment, not liking others to meddle in my life.

In smaller towns, people are perceived to be less able to accept "unusual" things, as Vel reasoned:

> When choosing between Shenzhen and Chengdu, I prefer Shenzhen because it's more inclusive. I can do whatever I want and nobody comments on it. Even if I wear something outrageous, like just a sports bra out, nobody really bothers you. But in my hometown, I once wore leggings and so many people stared at me, hahaha. Then I told my mom, I said, 'Mom, are these people living in feudal times? Why do they keep staring at me?' [...] Then I felt that I couldn't dress like that anymore; I had to change right away, quickly change. I wasn't dressed revealingly, just in yoga pants and a very long top, yet so many people stared at me. [...] So, my thought is that in smaller places, they find it hard to accept anything new; they think you're an oddity. But Shenzhen, being a larger city, tends to accept these things, the usually outrageous stuff.

Unlike the first point revealing migrants' aspirations for a developed and advanced society, the second illustration of Shenzhen's inclusiveness emphasises that people who choose to live in Shenzhen may wish to live with fewer constraints and more freedom and autonomy in their lives. This orientation toward looser social ties and reduced interpersonal surveillance reflects not only a general preference for personal freedom but also deeper value orientations that resist tightly prescribed social expectations. What matters analytically is not whether Shenzhen is in fact inclusive, but that participants perceive and pursue it as such. Their narratives of migration reveal underlying aspirations for autonomy and alternative ways of imagining adulthood, which in turn illuminate the values and orientations that shape their later approaches to marriage and childbearing.

Third, language is perceived as a key indicator of Shenzhen's particular inclusiveness and motivates those who have already decided to migrate to choose here. Among nearby popular migration destinations such as Shanghai and Guangzhou, Shenzhen, being a young city mostly populated by migrants, uses Mandarin as the "official" language for the convenience of people from everywhere to communicate without barriers. The nearby

migrant hub, Guangzhou, with its thousand-year history and well-developed local communities, predominantly uses Cantonese among residents, presuming mutual understanding. Also, Shanghai is a society that particularly values and prides itself on its local language, as shared by Rain:

> Just like I was telling you about where I was planning to work (in Shanghai), the colleagues there clearly knew I was non-local, but they insisted on speaking in Shanghainese with me until I said I didn't understand, and only then would they switch to Mandarin. […] Actually, it was somewhat uncomfortable.

Rain's discomfort highlights how language functions as more than a medium of communication – it also signals social boundaries and local privilege. For many young adults, Shenzhen's prevalent use of Mandarin makes it feel more open and accessible than neighbouring cities, reinforcing its attraction as a place where outsiders can more easily build lives. Together with the perception of progressive values and looser social ties, this linguistic inclusiveness contributes to a broader sense that Shenzhen enables alternative ways of living and imagining the future.

4.4.3 Proper Distance: Earning Independence from Families

The third main reason driving people to migrate is the urge to create a proper distance from parents or to escape the guidance, support or even control by senior family members over their life course. The migrants with good educational backgrounds in the research sample are usually from middle-class families with "powerful" parents – parents who have social resources that contribute to their power in family relationships, resonating the descending familism as reviewed in previous chapters (Yan, 2016). Young adults' decision to migrate away from their home city indicates a symbol of, or at least the determination for, earning independence from parents.

Wendy's (female, born in 1992 in Guangdong) husband, originally from Inner Mongolia, was strongly determined to settle in Shenzhen due to his intolerance of his "oppressive" mother. As illustrated by Wendy:

> My husband couldn't stand the oppression from his mother. His mother is a bit domineering, a bit stubborn, and he didn't want to be with her every day. He said if we stayed in Hohhot, she would come and bother us every few days, come and annoy him every so often (repeats and laughs).

David, a male born in Jiangxi in 1995, shared similar reasons. He moved to Shenzhen after his parents forcefully broke up his previous relationship.

However, the "proper" distance is sometimes hard to evaluate and does not simply mean moving further away and escaping. When I met Rain, she was considering moving from Shenzhen to Shanghai or Nanjing, which are cities closer to her home city in Anhui. She explained:

> Although I don't want to live too close to my parents, I also don't want to be too far from them. As the only child, I must consider taking care and looking after them. Right now, I live too far away, and they are also getting older, or if there's any issue at home, it's such a hassle to go back each time, so I really need to think about this.

For the one-child generation migrants, accommodating the caring needs of their parents while pursuing self-development and life autonomy requires a proper balance. In negotiating between the two, the one-hour train distance between Nanjing and Shanghai becomes crucial when making decisions. Although her husband has already moved to Nanjing for a new job, she still hesitates to give up seeking a job in Shanghai, believing Nanjing is too close to home, compared to Shanghai. She described it as "terrifying" when she learned that her parents had asked her husband to come home from Nanjing to Anhui for

dinner “every two weeks”. Frequent meetings associated with a shorter geographic distance with parents made her hesitant to move closer.

Neither too far nor too close becomes the ideal. The negotiation of geographic distance thus extends beyond practical migration decisions; it reflects how young adults of the one-child generation pursue a delicate balance between filial responsibility and personal autonomy. Proper distance operates as both a spatial and moral strategy, allowing them to maintain ties of care while also safeguarding independence in their own life course. In this sense, migration is not simply about where to live or work, but about shaping the terms of their relationship with parents and family – sustaining connection without losing the autonomy they seek. These negotiations of distance also provide crucial contextual insight into how young adults later interact with their families around reproductive timing.

4.5 Where Is It and Who Are They?

Through analysing the identity system and the motivations for migrating to Shenzhen, a clearer picture emerges of how Shenzhen is perceived, contextualising the personal narratives and the research. First, Shenzhen is highlighted as appealing to migrants and perceived as a hub of transformative opportunities – turning individual lives for the better, just as the city itself evolved from a fishing village into a first-tier metropolis. The city is described as offering abundant career prospects, professional networks, and an advanced working atmosphere that pushes individuals to improve themselves and achieve personal growth.

Second, Shenzhen is often characterised as a young city. This perception arises not only from its predominantly young migrant population, with 79.53% of the population aged between 15 to 59 (Statistics Bureau of Shenzhen, 2021), and its relatively short history of development within the last two decades but also from its liberal and inclusive vibe. This openness to new ideas and values mirrors the qualities of young people, who are drawn to

novel inventions and ideologies. With this liberal atmosphere, people in Shenzhen are afforded a degree of freedom in their thoughts and behaviours, even when these deviate from normative expectations around key life event such as childbearing.

Third, the examinations of "local villagers" and "Second-Generation Shenzhen Migrants" together reveal a defining feature of Shenzhen: the dominance of economic logic. Frequently described as a "city of working" ("打工之城"), Shenzhen embodies an ethos in which success is defined by economic achievement and constant striving for upward mobility. This ethos is reinforced by the city's material realities, most notably its notoriously high housing costs – averaging over 100,000 RMB (around £11,000) per square meter in central areas, comparable to London (Sina Finance, 2021) – which make financial capacity an indispensable condition for long-term settlement. In this context, identity and belonging are measured less by cultural roots than by economic resources, a pattern consistent with Du's (2025) finding that belonging in Shenzhen is associated with financial capacity.

Nonetheless, for many of the middle-class and educated participants in my research, personal growth transcends financial wealth and property ownership and extends to the pursuit of spiritual fulfilment. These individuals aspire to personal growth, independence, and a subjective sense of satisfaction, defining success on their own terms. These collective motivations and aspirations reveal a shared identity among the migrants. Although they come from diverse regions across mainland China, with varied family conditions and distinct life trajectories, their paths converge in Shenzhen, forming a collective image of this group. They share a strong desire for personal growth, openness to liberal values, and a determination to define their own lives independently. The indication of strong autonomy in living their life, through the process of emplacement, foregrounds the representation of their various responses to normative expectations on childbearing and resisting prescribed life courses in

the following chapters. For local residents and SGSM, these same logic and values are embedded in the city's social fabric, shaping their experiences and ideologies.

4.6 Conclusion

In exploring the diverse identities within Shenzhen – whether they are locals, second-generation Shenzhen migrants, or those who have actively chosen to start their independent lives here – what emerges is a city perceived with freedom, spirit of perseverance, and relentless pursuit of development and progress. Compared with these inner values, the "superficial" place identity becomes secondary or even irrelevant here. To be a "Shenzhener" in this newly formed migrant society is not about where you are from or who you are, but about embodying these shared values. Shenzhen's identity transcends mere place identity, evolving into a social identity. Here, dialects disappear, no one cares about your origin, and there exists a tacit agreement to progress together and chase desired personal identities. Settling in Shenzhen becomes a part of each individual's social identity, connecting the city and the self with attributes of advancement, development, liberalism, openness, and freedom. Thus, the slogan "*Come and You Become a Shenzhener*" holds true.

Through the personal narratives in the context of a migrant society, we gain a vivid and comprehensive understanding of the sample group in this research, laying the groundwork for better comprehending their life course transition decision-making in subsequent chapters. This sample is characterised by selection bias; participants who are willing to voluntarily engage in these life story interviews are often reflective about their lives, and the intracity migration to Shenzhen itself is selective as illustrated in this chapter. The sample in this study is not only reflexive but also pursues progress and development, demonstrating strong agency in their lives. Agency is deeply intertwined with their decision to migrate; they are not merely choosing a city to live and work in, but more importantly, they are choosing a life and lifestyle they aspire to. It is precisely because I am in dialogue

with this group that the following chapters foreground their reflexive critiques of social norms (Chapter 5) and their strategic negotiations around reproductive expectations (Chapter 6).

The significance of this chapter also lies in speaking to sociological research of migration and challenging the paradigms and stereotypes in current research. First, most existing migration studies are based on a rural-urban binary dichotomy. However, in the rapidly urbanised society of Shenzhen, local residents cannot be easily categorised within this binary framework. Second, the focus on *hukou* as an institutionalised place identity in Chinese migration research is also inadequate. As revealed in Shenzhen, having or not having a *hukou* does not indicate the relationship or connection between the self and the society, nor does it define how an individual perceives themselves or their place identity. Third, past research has often focussed on rural-to-urban migrants, neglecting the growing scale of intracity migrants. These migrants differ in family and educational backgrounds, resulting in varied migration motivations that require separate discussion. Migrants should be considered with an understanding of their heterogeneity. Moreover, awareness of this heterogeneity among migrants is important when studying their fertility behaviours, which will be further illustrated in the following chapters with more details to reveal.

In conclusion, this chapter has illuminated the multifaceted and dynamic nature of identity in Shenzhen. By focusing on migration, identity, and agency, it has shown that being a Shenzhener is more about adopting the city's values of progress, openness, and ambition than about one's place of origin. This understanding disrupts traditional migration narratives and regards migration as an active and agentic aspect of life course decision-making. The discussion of migration also highlights the unique social fabric of Shenzhen, where identity is continually reshaped by personal aspirations and collective development. The findings underscore the need to reconsider how migration studies are conducted, advocating for a

more nuanced approach that recognises the diversity and agency of migrants. These insights are crucial for understanding how migration, identity formation, and agency are interwoven in rapidly urbanising societies like Shenzhen, paving the way for a deeper exploration of its inhabitants' childbearing practices in the subsequent chapters.

CHAPTER 5

Navigating the Norm: The Temporality of Childbearing in Contemporary China

Having gained insights into the research site and participants in Chapter 4, this chapter turns to the central focus of delaying childbearing. It addresses the first two research questions of this thesis by theorising the normative temporal framework that prescribes the timing of childbearing as experienced and articulated by participants within the empirical context of contemporary China and by examining the challenges that arise when individuals fall outside of it. The novel temporal framework advanced in this chapter systematically articulates and theorises what is often taken for granted as a form of normative "common-sense" temporal order – expectations that are deeply embedded in everyday reasoning and rarely made explicit, yet profoundly shape individual life course planning. To those outside this context, however, these temporal norms may appear familiar, strikingly rigid, or even difficult to conceive. By rendering these implicit timelines explicit, systematised, and theorised, the chapter provides a framework that not only clarifies local experiences but also enables international comparison and deepens understanding of life course transitions.

Existing scholarship on social normative timelines has largely focused on age norms – the socially expected ages or age ranges at which major life transitions should occur (Liefbroer & Billari, 2010; Settersten, 2003; Settersten & Hagestad, 1996). Building on this conceptual foundation, this research extends the analysis to include sequence (the socially expected order of transitions) and duration (the socially expected time frame within which transitions should occur) into the temporal structures restricting life course transitions (Elder, 1994). Started with the aim of examining childbearing norms, this temporal framework progresses to a comprehensive discussion of life course transition norms. It captures how participants in China experience childbearing as embedded in a wider set of tightly prescribed life course transitions, including a productive line (mainly including education, career,

housing) and a reproductive line culminating in childbearing as a universal destiny of adulthood. The interaction of age, sequence, and duration norms across these two lines creates an unusually rigid system in the context of China. Theoretically, this framework advances life course research by moving beyond fragmented discussions of single norms to reveal how multiple dimensions of temporality combine to regulate life planning.

This chapter seeks to explore the fundamental question at the core of this research: what are the social benchmarks against which they are delaying? These benchmarks emerged inductively from the fieldwork. In some interviews, participants described them as taken-for-granted assumptions about how life should progress, while in others, participants critically reflected on and debated them, thereby making the underlying expectations explicit. Both types of accounts were essential in constructing the temporal framework through grounded theory analysis. Clarifying these benchmarks is vital. Without first identifying what constitutes the "proper" timing of childbearing, it is impossible to meaningfully define what "delaying" means in this context. This mapping also provides crucial groundwork for Chapter 6, where the focus then shifts to individual responses to these norms within the ongoing process of delaying.

The chapter proceeds in four steps. It begins by situating the study within existing scholarship on the normative timing of childbearing. It then develops the original temporal framework, emphasising how childbearing is constructed as a "universal destiny" within the normative life course framework described by the participants, and revealing the denial and pathologisation of childlessness. The framework is elaborated through a detailed discussion of how productive and reproductive stages interact to form a stringent normative system, before concluding with the argument that delaying childbearing becomes one of the few viable ways of asserting autonomy in fertility decisions – albeit as a carefully managed and processual form of delay. Finally, the framework is applied in a case study of workplace

discrimination against childless married women, illustrating its broader analytical power and exposing the entrenchment of temporal expectations within gendered structures of inequality.

5.1 Theorising the Temporality and Temporal Structures of Childbearing

5.1.1 The Dominance of Age Norms in Life Course Research

As introduced in Chapter 2, the social normative timeline framework demonstrates how temporal expectations operate as sites of social regulation, revealing fertility timing as an ongoing negotiation with culturally sanctioned life course sequences rather than simply biological feasibility or resource accumulation. This research adopting a normative approach shifts analytical attention from treating delay as deviation from optimal conditions to understanding it as a process through which individuals navigate competing temporal logics embedded within cultural expectations.

Empirical research within this normative framework has predominantly focused on age norms as the primary mechanism of temporal regulation. Building on foundational work that established age as the structural axis for understanding social expectations around timing (Byrd & Breuss, 1992; Hagestad & Neugarten, 1985; Neugarten, 1976; Settersten, 2003), existing studies examine how chronological markers create "prods and brakes upon behaviour" that hasten some events while delaying others (Settersten & Hägestad, 1996; Settersten & Mayer, 1997).

This age-centric approach has been particularly prominent in research on reproductive timing. Studies examining childbearing norms consistently identify perceived age-based "deadlines" for motherhood, often concentrated in the late twenties or early thirties, with deviations prompting social disapproval or reduced familial support (Liefbroer & Billari, 2010). Research in collectivist societies demonstrates that these age-based reproductive expectations can be especially rigid, as fertility timing becomes linked to family reputation and intergenerational obligations (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005; Zang, 2024). The focus on age

markers in reproductive timing research has revealed how chronological thresholds operate as powerful regulatory mechanisms. For instance, Xie's (2021) documentation of Chinese women's intensified pressure around specific age milestones – such as 30 as the "ideal" time for pregnancy and 35 as an "alarming" deadline for risky pregnancy – demonstrates how age-based categories generate systematic temporal anxiety in reproductive decision-making.

However, the predominant focus on age has created analytical limitations that constrain understanding of how temporal regulation actually operates in structuring reproductive decisions. Age represents only one dimension of temporal experience (Elder, 1994), and exclusive attention to age-based chronological markers may obscure other crucial temporal mechanisms that shape fertility timing and family formation processes.

5.1.2 Expanding Temporal Analysis: Sequence and Duration Dimensions

Life course theory provides a theoretical foundation for more comprehensive temporal analysis through Elder's (1994) conceptualisation of social dimensions of time in terms of incidence, duration, and sequence of social roles. This framework identifies three essential temporal indicators of life course transitions: timing (the age at which transitions occur), sequence (the order in which transitions are experienced), and duration (the length of time spent in particular life stages) (Hagestad & Neugarten, 1985; Settersten & Mayer, 1997). Building on this theoretical foundation, Liefbroer and Billari (2010) developed an empirically-oriented framework that expands beyond age to include sequence and quantum norms in understanding life course transitions. Sequence norms emphasise the expected order of events, while quantum norms refer to the number of times events should or should not occur. These norms are particularly powerful in regulating family formation processes, where deviations from expected ordering often provoke strong social sanctions and moral disapproval.

The operation of sequence norms is especially pronounced in reproductive timing, where the conventional progression from relationship formation through marriage to childbearing remains deeply institutionalised across many cultural contexts (Liefbroer & Billari, 2010; Yu & Xie, 2022). Research consistently demonstrates that non-marital childbearing faces significant normative regulation, with mothers who bear children outside marriage experiencing social stigma, reduced family support, and institutional discrimination (Hall et al., 2018; Maldonado, 2011; Yates & Gatsou, 2021).

In collectivist societies like China, violations of this sequence carry particularly severe consequences. Reproduction outside marriage not only challenges prevailing norms of family formation but also remains strongly constrained by cultural and institutional forces in China (Yu & Xie, 2022). Empirical research on unwed single mothers shows how such deviations are heavily stigmatised, resulting in reduced family support, community-level disapproval, and even institutional discrimination in access to welfare and healthcare (Kuang et al., 2022; Q. Li & Zhong, 2025; Q. Liu, 2018; X. Zhao & Basnyat, 2018, 2021a, 2021b). At the same time, recent research shows that individuals may strategically disrupt or reorder this sequence norm. Importantly, it is precisely the strength of these sequence norms that shapes the form of deviation that is possible. Rather than rejecting normative expectations outright, individuals who deviate from the sequence norm often do so through constrained and strategic reordering. For example, Lai and Choi's (2021) analysis shows how women may disrupt conventional sequencing not to oppose family formation norms per se, but to prioritise partner-matching norms, illustrating how negotiation and contestation occur *within* an otherwise strongly institutionalised sequence structure.

Taken together, these findings underscore the continued salience of sequence norms. It is because sequence norms remain widely recognised and difficult to exit that individuals develop strategies to negotiate, delay, or partially reorder them. Consistent with this

interpretation, the data collected in this study show that participants largely acknowledged and oriented themselves toward prevailing sequence expectations, even as they adopted various strategies to manage or defer their reproductive implications. Given the extensive empirical documentation of sequence norms in reproductive timing, this research does not establish a separate analysis of sequence expectations but integrates them within the comprehensive temporal framework alongside age and duration dimensions.

On the other hand, this study directs analytical attention to duration norms, the socially expected length of transitional periods, which remain significantly undertheorised despite their importance in structuring life course transitions. Flaherty's (1987) phenomenological analyses provide a theoretical foundation for understanding duration as a socially constructed temporal dimension emerging from interactions between individual consciousness and social structure. Research on *waithood* (Inhorn & Smith-Hefner, 2021; Singerman, 2007; Yopo Díaz & Cabib, 2025) offers valuable insights into the temporal dynamics of prolonged transitions, but primarily from the perspective of structural constraints rather than normative regulation. What this literature makes clear is that the significance of waithood lies precisely in the mismatch between expected and actual durations: when transitional stages extend beyond socially sanctioned timeframes, they acquire heightened social meaning and consequence (Inhorn & Smith-Hefner, 2021). In this way, waithood underscores the analytical value of focusing on duration norms themselves, not only the barriers that prolong them.

However, systematic examination of how duration functions as a normative framework remains largely absent from empirical literature. The limited studies that touch on duration norms nevertheless reveal their implicit but consequential role in family formation processes. Surra and Hughes (1997) distinguish between "relationship-driven" and "event-driven" pathways of relationship development, showing how culturally expected durations

shape evaluations of whether a relationship is progressing "appropriately". Similarly, Sassler and Miller (2011) document how partners navigate implicit expectations regarding the "right" pace between milestones such as moving in together, engagement, and marriage. They highlight how deviations from the "right" pace often attract scrutiny from family, peers, or even the couples themselves. Although these studies focus primarily on documenting timing practices rather than theorising the normative power of duration itself, they suggest that duration norms operate as powerful yet understudied mechanisms of temporal regulation, particularly in intimate relationships where "too fast" or "too slow" progressions can prompt social concern or intervention.

5.1.3 Toward Integrated Temporal Analysis

These existing insights – ranging from Elder's (1994) foundational theorisation of temporal dimensions to prevalent empirical documentation of rigid temporal sequences in Chinese contexts (Yu & Xie, 2022) – converge to suggest that temporal regulation operates through integrated frameworks rather than isolated normative mechanisms. The evidence indicates that age, sequence, and duration norms function as interconnected components within broader temporal structures that simultaneously constrain multiple aspects of life course planning. This integrated understanding of temporal regulation provides the theoretical foundation for this chapter's central empirical analysis.

In this research, I conceptualise the temporality of childbearing norms through Elchardus's (1988: 45) definition of temporality as "the property that is necessary and sufficient in order to meaningfully relate a system to the concept of time." According to this definition, I argue, that in the context of childbearing norms, temporality refers to specific ways of unpacking and interpreting systemic norms on fertility through the lens of time, with particular attention to the three temporal aspects outlined above. By using the term

"temporality", I also emphasise how these norms are understood as a lived, socially constructed, and dynamic experience of time (Hoy, 2009; B. Wang, 2020).

The empirical analysis that follows therefore, seeks to map how participants experience and navigate these integrated temporal frameworks in their daily lives. This chapter develops a comprehensive framework that reveals how age, sequence, and duration expectations intersect to structure childbearing decisions within broader life course planning. This approach enables examination of temporal regulation as participants actually encounter it – not as abstract normative categories but as practical constraints requiring strategic navigation during ongoing life transitions. The framework emerging from this analysis demonstrates how temporal norms function as systematic structures rather than flexible guidelines in the Chinese context, providing a crucial empirical foundation for understanding delaying childbearing as a strategic engagement with comprehensive temporal constraints in the next chapter.

5.2 The Temporality of Childbearing Norms in Contemporary China

From this section, I turn to the empirical findings on how childbearing norms are temporally structured in contemporary China. Consistent with the life course approach, childbearing is not a stand-alone event, but is deeply and firmly positioned in a seamlessly interlinked and coherent life course spectrum. The spectrum centres on childbearing while widely covering individual life courses from the education stage since childhood, receiving higher education, being employed, dating, ideally buying a housing property, getting married and lastly, to childbearing. In the normative system examined in this study, childbearing is positioned as a key life-course milestone, and preceding stages are valued according to their perceived contribution to achieving this reproductive endpoint.

It is much more than that a woman needs to bear a child before 35 or another age-based deadline, it is *how* you can reach the deadline. The process to the point of childbearing

is all respectively expected regarding stringent and comprehensive temporal norms. Nonetheless, even if the steps before childbearing are not satisfactory on some occasions, such as a late entry into marriage, as long as you can achieve the deadline and complete childbearing, it is still acceptable despite not being desirable. I hereby refer to and extend the temporal norms about childbearing as those prescribing life course transition until the achievement of childbearing. To introduce the norms of life course transitions, I start by illustrating the core status of childbearing with reference to the unacceptability of childlessness in this society.

5.2.1 Denial and Pathologisation of Childlessness

The core status of reproduction within the life course lies in its normative construction as an expected and taken-for-granted life outcome. In the normative contexts documented in existing research on China, reproduction is deeply embedded in societal expectations, and childlessness is frequently framed not as a purely personal choice but as a deviation from normative life trajectories (H. Evans, 2002; McMillan, 2014; K. Xie, 2021). This normative framing is reflected in participants' accounts. Amongst my participants, David, a 28-year-old male, was childless and expressed a strong intention to remain so at the time of interview. His perspective on being life-time childfree was initially met with disbelief by his wife, when they first talked about it:

> When we were just friends, I already knew... He mentioned many times that he doesn't like children and wanted to be childfree. But back then, from a friend's perspective, I thought this guy was so immature. Because I thought it was impossible, as traditional Chinese men are always obsessed with becoming a father, or with passing on his lineage. They are normally particularly stubborn about it. When he was saying these things (be childfree), I just thought, well, because you're too young, you haven't experienced certain things, which has led to you having these kinds of thoughts.

The denial of the possibility that anyone might choose to be childless is firstly reflected in the perception that such a choice is unbelievable or even impossible. The insistence on remaining childless is interpreted by others as a sign of immaturity, indicative of being too young and childlike. These descriptions suggest that choosing to be childless is seen as lacking rational consideration or the proper ability to make such "key" life course decisions.

Similarly, Black, a 31-year-old male, interpreted his wife's initial refusal to have children as the result of social media influence, particularly content emphasising the fear of childbirth. He suggested that her susceptibility to such messages reflected a lack of "rational thinking" and an "emotional" disposition. Black later recounted how his wife changed her mind and "agreed" to have children, summarising this shift by saying, "She eventually figured it out (她后来想明白了)." At the time of the interview, Black's wife had not yet given birth, and the analysis here focuses on how this shift was narrated and interpreted by Black, rather than on subsequent reproductive outcomes. The translation from Chinese to English, "figuring out," fails to fully convey the implicit bias in Black's perception of his wife's fertility intentions. In its original Chinese context, this expression implies realising the correct way and decision. Thus, Black implicitly positioned his wife's earlier reluctance to have children as a mistake to be corrected, rather than as a legitimate standpoint.

From the perspective of Black's wife, did she genuinely "realise" that having children was the right way to go, or did she merely acknowledge the impossibility of remaining childfree amidst unyielding fertility norms? The act of "figuring out" can be interpreted as an inevitable compromise to conform to these norms, reflecting the pervasive fertility norms that invariably guide such decisions. Childlessness, whether by choice or circumstance, challenges the normative expectation of having children and is frequently subjected to scrutiny and stigma. During the fieldwork, childlessness was frequently described by

participants as difficult to sustain or to be recognised as legitimate, while delaying childbearing was often framed as a more socially tolerable way of managing normative expectations, which will be recalled when wrapping up the temporal norms of childbearing at the end of this section.

5.2.2 Interconnected Productive and Reproductive Lines

Childbearing is the central milestone of individual life course in China, but the processes leading up to it require closer examination. To capture these processes, I draw inspiration from Marxist thought (Marx & Engels, 1889), which distinguishes between production, the creation of goods and services for economic development, and reproduction – the biological and social processes that sustain society (Brewer & Marx, 1984; Engels, 2001). Adopting this conceptual distinction, I frame individual life course planning in terms of productive and reproductive lines, positioning childbearing at their intersection.

This temporal division finds support in existing research, as we reviewed earlier, demonstrating reproductive timing is rarely considered in isolation but instead coordinated with achievements in other life domains. Research reveals that individuals conceptualise motherhood timing through comprehensive temporal scripts that integrate productive achievements, or say, life biography, including education completion, career establishment, housing acquisition, with reproductive readiness (Shelton & Johnson, 2006; Datta et al., 2023). This interconnection between productive and reproductive trajectories also resonates with Wang and Hu's (2025) concept of a normative biography in the context of China, which captures how young adults and their parents imagine early adulthood as a sequence of interlinked milestones – including education, career establishment, urban mobility, and eventual family formation. While their analysis centres on international higher education, it underscores how family formation is anticipated and evaluated in relation to prior productive

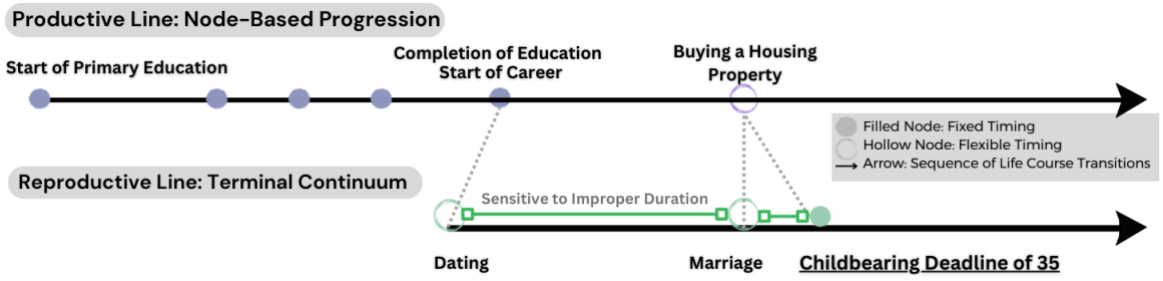
achievements, reinforcing the analytical distinction and coordination of productive and reproductive lines developed here.

Building on this insight, this study establishes a more explicit temporal framework in the context of China that distinguishes, yet interconnects, productive and reproductive lines, demonstrating how they function as a coordinated system. The productive line refers to the process of producing and collecting resources for personal development in the economic sense, i.e. preparing and working in the labour market. In this chapter, production mainly represents individual education and career development as a general idea. In Marxism, the reproductive line emphasises the biological reproduction, procreation of children and is composed of cumulative stages for childbearing during life trajectories (Engels, 2001).

With the research focus on childbearing, the productive line will merely be briefly analysed regarding its role in situating the life stage of childbearing across the broad life course and serving the progression and achievement of reproduction. The process of receiving education and gaining income from the labour market can be viewed as preparing and accumulating resources for supporting family formation and reproduction, apart from personal development. The reproductive line starts at the mid-part of the productive line, as shown in the Figure 1., connecting the transition from education to the labour market, and thereafter, the two lines progress in parallel, engaging in a dynamic relationship – at times harmonious and mutually supportive, but at other times, in tension or conflict.

Figure 1.

Framework of the Temporality of Childbearing Norms in Contemporary China



Note. The fixed nodes between the start of primary education and the completion of education represent stages in the standard educational pathway, such as transitions to junior high, senior high, and undergraduate or postgraduate education. The framework reflects a typical progression culminating in the completion of undergraduate education but can be adapted for individual cases. The dashed line between "completion of education/start of career" and "dating" illustrates the traditional norm discouraging students from dating to prioritise education when they have not finished it. Although the norm has evolved to accept dating during higher education, dating at earlier stages remains socially frowned upon. The dashed line linking "buying a housing property," "marriage," and "childbearing deadline" reflects the expectation that homeownership is ideally associated with marriage and childbearing but not obligatory.

Notably in Figure 1., both the productive and reproductive lines in the framework are single-directional spectrums. The unidirectional nature of these lines underscores the importance of sequence in life course transitions, as we reviewed above. Progressing in the right direction signifies forward movement, marked by achievements and the completion of milestones. Each successful completion of a preceding stage lays the foundation for advancing to the next.

The life stages in the framework are intentionally represented as nodes rather than fixed age markers to highlight their multidimensional temporal character and preserve analytical flexibility. Each node integrates expectations of age, sequence, and duration. Filled nodes denote stages tied to strictly defined "proper" ages, reflecting rigid norms with minimal room for negotiation. Hollow nodes indicate stages where age functions more loosely as a reference point, but where progression remains tightly governed by duration norms that regulate pacing and coordination across the life course. This visual distinction demonstrates how temporal regulation operates through different mechanisms: some life stages demand

strict chronological compliance, while others impose control through duration-based constraints.

Hereby, sequence, age and duration compose the temporal framework of childbearing norms in the context of China. Within this originally proposed framework, age plays a powerful and central role, not merely as a reference point but as a significant factor that motivates and often determines individuals' life course decision-making. Sequence establishes the order and direction of life transitions. Duration reinforces the structure, regulating how long particular stages should last, particularly in contexts where no explicit age limit is prescribed. How the temporal norms work in individual life course transitioning will be illustrated in the following analyses with specific cases and qualitative evidence.

5.2.3 Productive Line with Node-Based Progression

5.2.3.1 Education and Career as Temporal Foundations

In the productive line, the early stages of life are devoted to preparing for entry into the labour market, primarily through the accumulation of human capital via education. Once education is completed, the focus shifts to generating income in productive industries. Education and occupation provide essential resources for family formation and reproduction; however, within the scope of this thesis, attention is directed to their temporal characteristics rather than their material functions. Conceptualised as a node-based progression, the productive line unfolds through distinct, punctuated milestones. In education, these milestones create clearly segmented stages, with each node marking the completion of a step and signalling the sequential pattern that structures advancement.

Moreover, the dots and gaps are strictly defined in the education period with reference to age, almost not allowing for any delays. Some participants in the research mentioned their temporal considerations about whether to take another year of study after an unsatisfactory result of the College Entrance Examination, a key transitional node between high school and

university education in the productive line. Rain, for instance, explained, “Actually, if there is a significant age gap between you and your classmates after you start school, it would feel quite strange.” Every “normal” child is expected to follow the temporal norm and finish their education with exactly the same tempo so as not to be “left behind”. As the age norms work, “discrepancy” always needs an explanation for being “off time” (Laz, 1998). Retaking a year or being held back for a year at school – a non-normative duration of a particular education stage can be stigmatised and requires special scrutiny.

Most importantly, any delay in the education period is believed to be problematic because it delays the start of the reproductive life course regarding the strict sequential ideology that family formation should be arranged after the completion of education. Thus, the completion of education marks a sharp divide between production and reproduction lines. Many people I met during the fieldwork joked about the “sharpness” of the node, such that parents do not allow their children to date before graduation but expect them to get married and bear children right away after graduation. Although education and reproduction seem incompatible in the temporal sense, it is not necessarily the same for occupation and career development. A good career and promising prospects in the job market are believed to be the foundation for family formation, particularly in the sense of offering a housing property.

5.2.3.2 Compromise and Negotiation over the Norm of Housing Ownership

Buying a housing property is considered a desirable milestone in one’s productive trajectory, signifying career advancement and prospects. It also connects the productive and reproductive lines – where resources accumulated through productive life stages are utilised to support reproductive life stages. This normative positioning of housing as a prerequisite for family formation is also documented in recent empirical research. For example, Yip and Choi (2025) show how homeownership is widely framed as a precondition for marriage in contemporary China, and how young people engage in negotiations and compromises to

achieve the dual goals of housing acquisition and marital formation. Their findings further highlight the substantial housing burden faced by young adults and the pressure exerted by social reproductive norms, underscoring how housing operates not merely as an economic achievement but as a morally and socially loaded requirement within the reproductive norm system.

During the interviews, housing is a recurring topic spontaneously and specifically emerging in discussions about marriage and childbearing, indicated in the dashed lines of Figure 1., as a normative consideration in life planning. Its close connection with the reproductive line signifies a need for more elaboration as a key stage on the productive line in the proposed framework, and particularly about its indication as a hollow node – its temporal flexibility as part of the norm.

Housing, often linked to the concept of "home" (Fravega & Boccagni, 2024), is deeply embedded in Chinese culture and norms. If we view marriage as the emotional and legitimate foundation of a new nuclear family, housing forms the physical basis of the imagination of a "home". Consequently, in Chinese society, buying a property is almost always associated with marriage, as illustrated by Long (male, 27 years old):

> Speaking of houses, we've actually been talking about it recently. After getting married, my wife and I are currently renting a place. The issue of housing is something we discussed early on, and my wife did feel a bit upset about it at one point. She would naturally feel that owning a house is something we should aim for.

This quote illustrates how the norm linking housing to marriage is naturalised in everyday discourse. Long deliberately emphasises their current "renting" status, framing it as a problem that requires negotiation and eventual resolution. Such emphasis reveals the underlying normative assumption that property ownership, rather than renting, constitutes the legitimate foundation of married life. At the same time, his wife's statement that she

"naturally" felt they should aim for home ownership underscores that this expectation is normalised and internalised. Together, these details show that housing ownership is not merely a financial aspiration but a temporal norm – couples are expected to progress from renting to owning as part of the proper sequencing of family formation.

Through the example of Flora (female, 30 years old), the symbolic significance of housing ownership in family formation becomes evident. Flora and her partner live and work in Shenzhen, yet her parents explicitly required the couple to purchase a house in her hometown as a prerequisite for her marriage – despite the fact that they would never reside in this property. This requirement demonstrates how property ownership operates as a normative marker for family formation legitimacy rather than practical housing provision. The symbolic meaning of housing within marriage is so pronounced that even when couples have no intention of living in the purchased property, ownership itself remains a normative requirement for marriage approval.

Understanding the role of housing within marriage norms highlights its cultural value and symbolic significance, which stands in contrast to the more practical and tangible considerations when it is associated with childbearing. Ethan (32 years old), for instance, described how he "jumped onto the housing bandwagon under pressure" ("强行上车买房了") after having been married for several years and with a five-year-old son approaching the age to start primary school. Ethan honestly mentioned that he was not financially prepared to buy a property when he married. He postponed purchasing a property until his child approached school age, explaining that his main motivation at that point was to secure his child's admission to a good school. The decision was mostly facilitated by local policies in Shenzhen that children's school admissions are based on proximity to family property ownership (Dong & Li, 2019). Moreover, owning a property is widely perceived as providing a stable and comfortable environment for raising children, making it highly desirable for

couples starting to plan childbearing. If housing is seen as fulfilling a symbolic role in marriage, it is more of a concrete and practical expectation when it comes to childbearing.

In the grounded temporal framework presented in this chapter, "buying a housing property" is represented by a hollow node, indicating its flexible timing. This flexibility stems not only from the absence of a specific age or stage at which it must occur but also from its negotiable nature in realisation. While buying a house is normatively expected, it is not obligatory and must be reconciled with the financial realities individuals face. The compromised negotiation on this matter does not mean it is not normative but right on the other hand. The financial pressures of purchasing a property in a metropolitan area like Shenzhen make this normative expectation even more visible in two ways.

First, for most of my interviewees, as long as they could manage the financial burden of buying a property, they simply proceeded with the purchase as a default step in their life trajectory. Participants often treated this decision as self-evident, presenting it during interviews without feeling the need to provide justification or explanation. However, for those unable to financially meet this expectation, some of them tend to rethink and challenge the norm to justify their incapability, questioning whether buying a house is "truly" necessary as a means of reconciliation. Flyer, aged 32 and "flew" to Shenzhen from a small town in Jiangsu province at a young age, expressed this sentiment:

> So, regarding the issue of working in a first-tier city (like Shenzhen), many people say, 'Work here for a lifetime to buy a house'. Well, I might never buy one in my entire life because I have no desire for it at all. For me, the concept of 'home' is not tied to owning a house.

On the other hand, for others who are unwilling or unable to shoulder the significant financial burden but still try to conform to the norm, they would buy a housing property in their hometown or a nearby city with much lower housing prices. Similar to the case of

Flora's family negotiation, Vel has vividly described her partner's "keen" attitude towards fulfilling the norm of buying a marriage house. She said:

> Right after we got our marriage certificate, he kept saying, 'We need to buy a house, buy a house, buy a house!' Even before we married, he was always talking about buying a house. […] At that time, his idea was to buy a house in Shenzhen. Buying a house in Shenzhen was possible, I told him, 'If I have to pay the mortgage together with you, I'll feel too stressed. My life won't be happy. I don't want to buy a house in Shenzhen.' Later, we compromised and bought a house in Chengdu (the capital of their home province). He was really fixated on the idea of buying a house, you know? After we married, he kept pushing for it, and eventually, we bought the house.

From this quote, we can understand how people reconcile the financial burdens of buying a housing property in Shenzhen while conforming to the norm as part of life course planning. Through fulfilling the symbolic requirement of housing in the context of marriage and "home" – buying a house they will not live in at all within their marriage life, Vel's husband managed to conform to the norm with the compromised realisation. Here, it is migration that enables the compromised realisation of the norm. In other words, it is this particular research context of a migrant society that makes the normative nature of buying a housing property for marriage most evident.

In summary, buying a property is deeply embedded in the norms surrounding one's life trajectory, connecting productive and reproductive life stages. However, individuals must reconcile the norm with financial realities in the context of Shenzhen with overpriced housing. In practice, both the timing and location of purchasing a housing property are negotiable – whether to buy at the time of marriage or childbearing, and whether to buy in Shenzhen or in other areas with more affordable housing prices. This is why "buying a housing property" is depicted in Figure 1 as a hollow node and connected to marriage and

childbearing with dashed lines, reflecting its normative yet flexible nature. Based on the findings above, I believe future research exploring housing as a potential factor influencing the decision to enter parenthood should delve deeper into its contextual nuances. Housing ownership should not be treated as a simple dichotomy (i.e., "yes" or "no") but rather examined within the broader living context. This includes considerations distinguishing the location of residence with information about the price level of local housing, from the location of housing purchases, particularly in societies with populations of migrants.

5.2.4 Reproductive Line as a Terminal Continuum

Then, we turn to the main focus of this research on the norm of people's reproductive life stages revolving around childbearing. The reproductive line comprises sequential stages predominantly involving dating, referred to here as relationships, marriage, and childbearing. In contrast to the productive line, which is delineated by distinct milestones, the reproductive line is described as a terminal continuum. As such, it is characterised by a directed progression with childbearing as the ultimate destination, constrained by an age limit. Each stage in this continuum is normatively internalised as "naturally" transitioning to the next, assuming the absence of any impediments. These transitions not only mark one's advancement through life trajectories but are also a continuation of preceding stages. Unlike the productive line, where most phases of education and professional achievement are clearly defined with temporal standards, the stages of dating and marriage within this continuum provide some "flexibility" in age-based timing. Provided the sequence is preserved and ultimately leads to childbearing, dating and marriage function as relatively unbound variables within this continuum. I will unpack the description of a terminal continuum through the following aspects.

5.2.4.1 Integral Milestones: Converging Towards Childbearing

Firstly, I posit that within the terminal continuum, where childbearing is paramount, neither dating nor marriage can be considered an "achievement" in the same way as, for instance, completing a university degree in the productive line might be. Both dating and marriage are foundational stages and prerequisites for reaching the ultimate goal of childbearing – the final destination and the sole measurement of "success" in one's reproductive life course. Described as a continuum, the reproductive line delineates norms about reproductive life course transitions as a consistent and unbroken process from dating to fertility. A satisfactory relationship signals a suitable partner for entering into marriage, which is then seen as the legitimate institution for childbearing in China (Yu & Xie, 2021). The seamless transitions between reproductive life stages are often evidenced by the societal pressures exerted during individual critical transition points.

Joyce, a 28-year-old woman from Shan'xi, western China, who had recently married at the time of the interview, recounted how her transition from a seven-year relationship to marriage vividly illustrated this dynamic. After relocating to Shenzhen and cohabitating for two years, her partner's parents deemed it appropriate for them to marry. Her partner's mother travelled two-thirds of the way across China from their hometown to Shenzhen to "interrogate" her, as described by Joyce:

> We were having a nice meal, and she (Joyce's partner's mother) just suddenly said, 'Well, how do you two feel about each other? Is it (the relationship) all good?' Then I said it's pretty good, and she replied, 'If it's good, why don't you get married?' I said there's really no need, what's the difference between being married and now? No difference. Then his mother said, 'Well, if there's no difference, then you should get married, right?'

From this conversation, a stable relationship devoid of "problems" is anticipated to naturally progress into marriage within normative expectations. Marriage is envisioned as the culmination of a successful relationship, symbolising advancement, even when it is

acknowledged that marriage may not change their cohabitation lifestyle significantly. The intricate connections between relationship, marriage, and childbearing become more pronounced in the following strategy employed by her partner's mother to persuade them to marry. As described by Joyce:

> When they were urging us to get married, they said, 'You can get married first, there's no rush for children.' But my expectation at the time was that the so-called 'no rush' would only last about six months to a year, and then it would quickly start (to push us).

Although Joyce's partner's mother initially appears to decouple childbearing from marriage, the narrative ultimately reinforces the normative belief that marriage both conditions and soon leads to childbearing. Joyce's own interpretation of this strategy reveals that her hesitation toward marriage was closely tied to ambivalence about having children. Taken together, it becomes clear that marriage serves as a crucial bridge between a relationship and childbearing within an integral continuum. A relationship free from "problems" is expected to culminate in marriage, leading inevitably to childbearing. The progressive notion posited here is that marriage is a step closer to childbearing compared to a relationship. Thus, the "concession" made by Joyce's partner's mother is understandable, in that while it does not immediately result in childbearing, marriage notably narrows the gap towards this ultimate goal and assures the transition to childbearing in the near future.

5.2.4.2 Prescribed Reproductive Endpoint with Strict Age Deadline

Age works as the paramount factor defining the endpoint of childbearing within the reproductive continuum. The age of 35 was recurrently cited during interviews as the critical deadline for childbearing. While both females and males are subject to societal expectations to achieve parenthood within specific age ranges, participants of both genders frequently invoked age 35 as a salient biological threshold for women's fertility, drawing on widely circulating biomedical and popular discourses about reproductive risk. Analytically, the

significance of age in this framework lies in its function as an alarming temporal marker that delineates the endpoint of acceptable delay and intensifies normative pressure, rather than in the specific numerical value of 35 itself, which may vary across contexts.

Wendy, a 31-year-old woman who has been married for over two years and childless, was hesitant about the best time to enter parenthood. When queried about whether she perceived a final deadline for making this decision without further delay, she responded, "Well... I haven't fully decided on the timing yet. I'm considering that it might be better to have a child before turning 35, right?"

I then asked, "If that deadline isn't met, would it not matter?" After thinking for a while, she answered:

> Well... it seems to be the case for now, but I'm still worried about regrets, like in the future, really wanting but not being able to (conceive a child). Or you could, but it might not be good for the child. It's a common issue with older mothers, I don't know if you've heard, but children born to them might either be very smart, or there could be a chance of intellectual developmental delay, having problems, etc. I always hear people say this, and it worries me.

Wendy's narrative suggests her understanding that childbearing after the age of 35 can potentially increase the risk of infertility or developmental problems in children born to mothers of advanced maternal age – over the age of 35. The notion that the biological limit for childbearing is set at the age of 35 is also commonly accepted by males for their partners. However, a critical clarification needs addressing regarding this deadline: should the endpoint of childbearing in the reproductive continuum, as defined by reaching the age of 35, refer to the timing of the first childbearing event or the completion of all planned childbearing?

Andy, a 31-year-old male who has been childfree and married for two years, provided insightful perspectives when questioned about their timing considerations for having children:

> Well, it's like this: if we just have one child, even if it's a couple of years later, it's fine. But if you want two children, you definitely need to start having the first one around the age of 30. Otherwise, it becomes riskier for the woman, and as a woman gets older, her physical condition may not be especially strong. It's better for her to start a little earlier, which is generally healthier for her.

This response was almost uniformly echoed by male participants in the study concerning their views on childbearing timing – highlighting their partners' or wives' ages as the pivotal factor. While age expectations for entering into relationships and starting a family may vary across individual trajectories, participants consistently articulated a strong belief in age 35 as a critical childbearing deadline. This belief was grounded in concerns about the perceived biological limits of women's reproductive health, accompanied by an expectation that women should complete all intended childbearing before reaching this age.

5.2.4.3 The Significance of Duration Amidst the Seemingly Flexibility

Childbearing is the only stage indicated by a fixed deadline based on age along the proposed reproductive life spectrum, but it does not mean that the other two life stage transitions are allowed more freedom for personal choices on the timing. Although there are no explicit age constraints during the earlier stages of the reproductive line up to the ultimate deadline, the intervals between dating, marriage, and childbearing are also structured and normatively defined with more nuances. Primarily, as individuals commence their journey on the reproductive path with dating, the factor of duration often takes precedence over chronological age in decision-making, although age remains a critical indicator of the starting point of the reproductive spectrum.

When Kevin, a 33-year-old male who has been married for two years and remains childless, was queried about his previous life experiences with familial pressure to secure a partner, his initial response was to reflect on his age at the time – 26. Similarly mentioned in other interviews, age-related concerns are a recurrent theme in discussions concerning the search for an appropriate partner – the starting point of the reproductive line. Intriguingly, when I inquired why Kevin chose to marry at that specific time, he explained, "Definitely, it was because of time. It's been about three years since we've been together in 2017, so chronologically, it's about the time we should reach this step (marriage)."

Taking the two statements together, we see a clear indication that age serves as a critical starting point on the reproductive line. Initiating the process earlier allows individuals to navigate through subsequent stages more smoothly and reach the end goal of childbearing with relative "ease" and "no rush". Once in a relationship, it is the appropriate or expected duration of the relationship – not necessarily the age – that propels individuals to move to the next stage.

This perspective was also supported by Joyce's parents. Inquiring whether her parents ever worried about her age and marriage planning, her response sharply delineated duration from age as the primary influencer when considering the transition from a relationship to marriage:

> My parents didn't really talk about (me) being too old because I actually started dating my partner quite early. So for many years, they've known I have a stable relationship, which probably keeps them from feeling anxious about me not having a partner or urging me to find one. But they might say, 'Oh, you two have been together for quite a while now.' They might suggest that it's good and you can consider getting married or something (urging) like that.

From Joyce's narrative, it is evident that she perceives age primarily as linked to the initiation of dating, which marks the commencement of the reproductive line. Having entered this continuum and established a "stable" relationship, signified by a sufficient duration, her parents do not view her age as problematic for her life course transitions. Once the reproductive line is initiated with dating, duration supersedes age as the primary driver for expected life course transitions.

The concept of duration is characterised by its relative optimality. It is intuitive that if the duration before a transition is too short, it may be perceived as unstable, uncertain, and risky for progressing into subsequent life stages. Conversely, if the duration is deemed appropriate – often gauged by a longer span with contextual variations – it connotes stability and security. Specifically, in the transition from dating to marriage, an adequate duration not only ensures the consistency of the relationship but also reinforces the reliability of progressing to marriage. Additionally, the appropriateness of duration often remains arbitrary; exceeding what is considered a suitable duration can turn the promising relationship into a problematic one all at once. A "proper" life course shall only be indicated by a timely progression into the next life course transition, and the normality of life course transition lies in that transitions are restrictively expected to happen with proper durations.

We will continue to see how the seemingly flexible temporal norms without fixed nodes at the transitioning points of marriage and childbearing turn out to, instead, offer inflexibility and normalise individual life course transitions. Age, together with duration and sequence, thus, formulates an overwhelming temporal structure disciplining and restricting the timings of individual reproductive trajectories.

5.2.4.4 Unacceptance of Improper Duration of Relationship with Gender Distinctions

Aligned with the central role of childbearing in one's life trajectory, the rejection of an excessively long duration for a relationship underscores the view of relationships as a

temporary stage in preparation for marriage and childbearing along the terminal continuum. Concerning this temporariness, relationships invariably require a "conclusion", typically transitioning smoothly into marriage. Flyer, a 32-year-old woman who had recently registered her marriage at the time of the interview, offered a "fresh" view highlighting the "meaninglessness" of an overly extended relationship duration in her life story narrative:

> After dating for over two or three years, the relationship was very stable, and it seemed meaningless to just maintain the status quo. That's because you can't date for seven, eight, or ninety years, right? There must be an outcome (of relationships), because humans, well, follow this outcome. The dating process is fine, very stable, and there are no major conflicts, so the next step is to make a decision. You have to decide whether you want to continue being together or prefer to separate. If you choose to stay together, it is to get married.

This seems to be the consensus reached by Flyer and her husband, who said:

> Actually, when two people are together, marriage seems like a natural course of action. It involves having to be responsible to each other's parents, be responsible to your partner. if two people are together and don't get married, there's a problem. Neither the man nor the woman can find a complete, logically consistent reason for not wanting to marry, right? If the man doesn't want to get married, what is he waiting for, huh? If the woman doesn't want to get married, what are her reasons? No matter how you turn these reasons upside down, they can't be logically consistent; you can't prove that these two people are really great together. So, we think, on the contrary, without considering these issues too much, we just feel that such a thing is about to happen in the relationship.

From both narratives of the couple, marriage is perceived as the "natural" culmination of a "good" relationship, marked by an appropriate duration. An improper duration is seen as not only meaningless but potentially indicative of underlying "problems", like cheating or

infidelity in the relationship. The use of “natural” particularly underscores their internalisation of these norms. However, an examination of the couple’s narratives highlights a critical gender-based divergence in perceiving marriage as the “natural” outcome of a relationship, a theme that also emerged in Kevin’s account.

When queried about his rationale for believing that over three years of dating was the right time to transition to marriage, Kevin’s response notably highlighted gender differences:

> To be honest, when two people have been together for more than three years, if you don’t get married, it’s not really fair to the woman... it’s like saying you lack the responsibility for her, right? Think about it, a girl has been with you for over three years, anyway, you owe her an outcome (交代). If you’re not going to marry her, then you say goodbye to her; otherwise, the best choice is to get married.

According to Kevin’s perspective, the negative consequences of a long-duration relationship specifically burden women. Why is a failed transition after a two-to-three-year duration deemed particularly unfair to women? How does the transition from a relationship to marriage signify a fulfilment of responsibility to his partner? From the perspective of this study’s temporal framework, Kevin’s view can be understood as resting on the assumption that one’s reproductive life course is a terminal continuum. With childbearing as the definitive marker of completion of one’s reproductive norm, failures in relationships or childless marriages are seen as a waste of time. Given the critical importance of the age limit in fertility, time becomes the most precious resource along this continuum for women who bear stricter biological age limits. Entrenched within gender structures, women face heightened vulnerability about the implications of relationships that do not lead to marriage and childrearing. This is because the period of their life course to have children is believed to be shorter than that of men, intensifying the idea that females’ time being wasted – not having children at the proper time is more problematic.

Vel, aged 30, only recently married after a relationship that had lasted over seven years. She did not perceive the duration of her relationship as "improper" until a colleague remarked, "Having been together for so long without getting married, is there a problem between you two?" Vel's mother, acutely aware of the gender-specific implications of "improper" durations, urged her to marry as soon as possible, as Vel described:

> She told me to get married earlier, when I was maybe 28 or 29. She said, 'Look, you've spent so many years dating, your best years are being spent here (with this partner)'. She said if you don't get married soon... it's different for men compared with women, the traditional way of thinking, you know. She said 'Men... even if you two don't end up together, it's easy for a man to find someone else. But it's not the same for girls.' She said, 'Before long, you'll be 30 years old, and then your youth will be gone!'

From this, it is evident that progressing from the temporary life course of dating to marriage is perceived as particularly critical for women. Understood from the perspective of this study's temporal framework, when a relationship does not culminate in marriage, the extended duration is deemed "wasteful". This is because a woman's youth – considered her most valuable period, defined by the age window for conception – is seen as being irreplaceably "consumed" in a relationship that fails to progress into marriage. This "failure" renders it challenging for women to complete childbearing within the prescribed deadline. Thus, although both genders may invest comparable time in an unsuccessful relationship, the repercussions are disproportionately severe for women due to the gendered structures of reproductive temporality. This interpretive lens also clarifies why both Flyer's husband and Kevin believe that transitioning from a long-term relationship to marriage represents taking responsibility for their female counterparts. It is understood as safeguarding the value of women's "prime" years and preventing them from being disadvantaged when re-entering relationships at an older age under stricter reproductive expectations.

5.2.4.5 Normative Durations for Relationship and Marriage with Informative Difference

Having sorted out the importance of duration as part of a normative structure within the temporal framework, we now delve deeper into the nuanced expectations of the appropriate durations along the reproductive spectrum. The anticipated durations for transitioning from dating to marriage, and from marriage to childbearing, differ significantly. The expected proper duration for the latter is notably shorter than the former. This distinction underscores the sequential, progressive nature of the reproductive line, where both dating and marriage are viewed as temporary stages leading to the "success" of childbearing. Dating involves seeking a suitable partner to potentially become the mother or father of one's child, whilst marriage functions as the confirmation that the search and evaluation stage is complete, and that the partner is considered appropriate and ready for childbearing. During the dating phase, it is considered reasonable to invest more time and meet various potential partners to ensure the right match. Conversely, marriage serves as a guarantee, a prerequisite for, and a condition of childbearing. Entering into marriage signifies readiness for immediate childbearing with a rapid transition expected.

To exemplify what is considered a "proper" duration of marriage before childbearing, consider the case of Long, who identified himself as a second-generation Shenzhen migrant in the previous chapter. When we met in Shenzhen, he was 27 years old and had been married and childless for three years. He vividly shared his experience of exceeding the normative gap between marriage and childbearing:

> I've heard quite a bit, you know, people saying (gossip about us), 'Wow, they've been married for two years, how come they haven't had kids yet?' The most outrageous thing, the most outrageous thing, was hearing that employees in the company [Long works at his father's company] were discussing this. It's quite funny. A friend of mine told me, 'I heard your company's employees gossiping about you in the cafeteria.' I asked, 'what about?' It

> was really exaggerated, like, at that time, because my wife was a bit heavier and liked wearing dresses, there were rumours she was pregnant. Then, naturally, she wasn't, and then the rumours escalated, suggesting she had been pregnant but then, for some unknown reason, had a miscarriage or something, and then it (the fetus) was gone.

Long's recount highlighted the normative expectations from his colleagues for a swift transition from marriage to childbearing. A two-year gap has been regarded as peculiar, thus sparking rumours as people attempt to make sense of the unexpected duration. This "abnormal" gap has heightened the alertness of the couple's families, concerned about the state of their marriage – a seamless progression to childbearing typically signifies a successful marriage, as discussed around the logic of a terminal continuum earlier in this chapter. An excessively prolonged gap may signal an unsatisfactory marriage, according to societal norms. Moreover, the unexpected duration has even raised suspicions about their fertility capabilities:

> I've even been contemplating one issue: maybe my parents, or even her parents, have ever suspected that one of us might be infertile! I've subtly felt this concern through our conversations and chats, such as when they suggest, 'Shouldn't you go for a medical check-up? How's your health now?' There were such remarks, and you can discern the underlying meanings. Could it be that they think one of us might have a fertility issue? I have considered this possibility.

Long's recount makes clear that duration norms are not neutral expectations but powerful interpretive frameworks. A two-year gap between marriage and childbearing, though relatively short in absolute terms, was already perceived by colleagues, friends, and families as "abnormal." What might appear as a simple personal choice was instead collectively read as a sign of something gone wrong. Colleagues transformed the unexpected duration into rumours about pregnancy and miscarriage, while family members interpreted it

as a possible indicator of infertility, urging medical checks. These interpretations illustrate how duration norms operate: they convert the passage of time into moral and social judgments about the couple's health, relationship, and legitimacy of their marriage. All these rumours and families' concerns embodying the norm pressured Long and his partner to plan childbearing earlier than they themselves would aspire.

On the other hand, when the expected gap between marriage and childbearing is exceeded, the delay is often problematised as "wasted time" within marriage. This concern is perceived as especially acute for women, given the gendered constraints of reproductive timelines. Karl, a 32-year-old male, has been married for over six years without children. The couple are neither intentionally postponing childbearing nor actively trying to conceive. Yet Karl believes that this unintentional delay could be wasteful for his wife:

> But now I'm also facing this issue, which is the existence of women's best childbearing age, and I worry about... whether it might *delay* my partner (耽误另一半, literally means stopping his partner from childbearing given the narrow age window for women's fertility). Exactly, if (she) wants to have children (in future), her risk of reproductive issues could increase (as she ages), and that's a consideration. […] I am concerned about her reproductive risks, since she and I are the same age, right, 32 years old, yes. So, I do have these worries, and I wonder if it might *delay* (耽误) her in some way.

As they enter the final stage before childbearing – marriage, individuals approach the deadline with a clearer awareness of the age limit that unfairly restricts women's reproductive capabilities and health management. Karl was primarily concerned that the prolonged gap before childbearing had particularly wasted his wife's time and prevented her from completing childbearing before the perceived reproductive deadline. Overall, we can discern the normative expectation of a short or even non-existent gap between marriage and childbearing through these cases. An excessively long gap, whether 3 years or 6 years,

indicates perceived problems in marital conditions and fertility capabilities, and is believed to be particularly a waste of women's time in completing childbearing within the restrictive age limit.

5.2.5 Delaying Childbearing as a Processual Delay along the Reproductive Line

With all these stringent temporal norms surrounding reproductive life stages in the context of China in mind, we can now conceptualise the delaying of childbearing as a "processual delay" – any delays along the terminal continuum of the reproductive line can contribute to the delay in reaching the ultimate point of childbearing. It becomes important to treat the delaying of childbearing not as a single decision but as an extended process. Delaying childbearing is an ongoing, temporally extended process characterised by repeated negotiation, strategic adjustment, and sustained engagement with normative pressures – rather than as a discrete moment of postponement or a final reproductive outcome.

Flora, aged 31who has recently entered marriage, shared her reflections on considering marriage:

> When it comes to marriage, I've just always been delaying. Because we've been together for about seven or eight years, just cohabiting. Sometimes I've been away for a long time (for education), when I come back, we're still living together. I feel it doesn't make much of a difference; we've always lived together, so why get married if we don't want children? […] I can feel that he is the right person, and I definitely wouldn't go looking for someone else, but I think whether we get married or not doesn't really change anything, so why do it? I think there might be a deeper reason too, what if after getting married, I'm pressured to have children? […] I'm afraid that if I do, I'll be pressured to have children, because I hear everyone say that the next step after marriage is to have kids.

In this narrative, Flora affirmed that her partner could be her lifetime companion – passing the evaluative stage and valid for transitioning to marriage. From her perspective on

the norm of marriage, the expected smooth transition from marriage to childbearing, or rather, the status of marriage as a prerequisite for childbearing, is pronounced: “We’ve always lived together, so why get married if we don’t want children?” In essence, the differences between dating and marriage have been blurred by cohabitation while differentiated through childbearing. For those who cohabit before marriage, the decision to enter parenthood or not becomes the pivotal factor for getting married as they perceive reproductive life stages as a terminal continuum. This is also seen in global contexts. Evidence from Europe, North America, and Latin America also shows that marriage increasingly functions as an institution closely tied to childbearing rather than to couplehood per se (Manning, 2004; T. C. Martin, 2002; Perelli-Harris, 2014).

Aware of the expected close link and short interval between marriage and childbearing, individuals may strategically delay earlier transitions in order to postpone reproductive expectations. This does not only occur at the point of entering marriage; even during the dating stage, some participants resisted “authenticating” their partners to family – a step that signifies readiness for marriage – precisely to defer childbearing pressures. Among female participants in this research, Rain, aged 31 and having been married and childless for over two years at the time of the interview, exhibited the strongest resistance to having children, which shaped her reluctance to introduce her partner to her family while dating. When asked, “Did you ever mention your ex-boyfriend to your family?” she answered:

> No! My family is like this; once I mention my dating experience, they will insistently question me (about the dating partner), and then ask me to bring the person home to see (if he is alright for marriage), and then a bunch of following issues will arise. It’s not okay... They think very long-term. Actually, when I talked about my boyfriend (with them) during my undergraduate years, I had never thought about marriage, but they thought about it a lot.

Rain's account demonstrates that delaying childbearing can begin well before marriage, taking shape through everyday negotiations already embedded in dating. Within the framework of this thesis, her case illustrates the processual nature of delay: rather than a discrete decision made at the point of marriage, postponement unfolds through successive acts of deferral across life course transitions. This perspective also highlights the limits of demographic approaches that reduce postponement to an age-based indicator. Delay is not merely a number; it is a process, a mindset, and a lived experience.

Through these analyses and detailed personal narratives, it is thus an appropriate point to wrap up the discussion of childbearing temporality and extend it into the broader framework of life course transition norms. The temporality of life course norms examined in the context of China has been illustrated through the overwhelming framework covering age, sequence and duration. From the moment people begin their education, they are expected to complete educational milestones stage by stage, with caution not to be left behind. Once they reach the critical point of finishing education and entering the labour market, expectations suddenly shift from productive achievements to reproductive obligations. Their personal life courses are never merely personal but are closely defined by temporal norms. Without standard expectations in timing and age as in the stage of education, everyone must be careful about making life course transitions with "proper" durations in their reproductive life stages. The seemingly flexible timings are as strict as the defined age timing, and even put every minute, more or less, at risk of being problematised.

Although the productive and reproductive lines operate as distinct temporal frameworks, they intersect at critical stages such as housing acquisition, creating an integrated system that prescribes virtually all aspects of individual life course progression. This comprehensive temporal regulation reveals a crucial paradox: within such a rigid normative system where childbearing operates as the central organising principle, delaying

reproduction emerges as one of the few socially tolerable forms of deviation from prescribed life course patterns, resonating with other research on childbearing norms in China (K. Xie, 2021; X. Xie, 2023).

However, even this limited deviation requires extensive negotiation with the overwhelming normative structure. The temporal framework's rigidity means that delaying childbearing cannot be accomplished through simple postponement but must be managed as what can be termed "processual delay" – ongoing temporal navigation of reproductive expectations over extended periods. This process requires individuals to maintain awareness of normative timelines while carefully coordinating their movements through both productive and reproductive stages, recognising that the reproductive line operates as a "terminal continuum" where delay strategies must eventually reconcile with biological constraints and intensifying social pressure. The concept of processual delay therefore captures how individuals exercise limited agency within comprehensive temporal constraints, revealing the nature of delaying childbearing as a strategic engagement with their temporal dimensions.

More importantly, these life course transition norms do not operate uniformly across all individuals but are entrenched in gender structures. Among the key reproductive life stages, women are particularly vulnerable to judgements arising from going against proper age prescriptions of life stages and having "improper" gaps in transition to the next stage. To illustrate the interactions between productive and reproductive lines, and how these intersect with the gendered nature of life course transition temporalities, the next section will present a case study of discrimination towards married yet childless women in the labour market. The case study serves to further manifest the overall temporal framework in a coherent image.

5.3 "Stuck in Between": Discrimination towards Childless Married Women in Labour Market

The emphasis on the temporal norm of "proper" durations and smooth transitions between life stages in the reproductive line proposed in this chapter brings about one of the most prominent cases in the thesis, discrimination against women "stuck" in the stages between marriage and childbearing in the workplace and job market. This case illustrates how the reproductive and productive stages of life, which can at times be mutually supportive, here come into sharp conflict. Employers often perceive married but childless women as carrying imminent childbearing risk, which casts doubt on their long-term work commitment. In this way, women's reproductive timelines directly intrude into their productive careers, producing a form of penalty even before motherhood occurs.

This dynamic resonates with the framework of women's future childbearing risk recently proposed by Hutt Cabello (2023) as a particular dimension of the motherhood penalty. Before that, motherhood penalty has been researched widely in sociology with scholars arguing that by virtue of their mother status, women incur penalties in labour market outcomes, such as lower wages and lower status positions. The penalty is pronounced when female workers who are mothers are compared with childless women and male counterparts. This is because employers view motherhood as incompatible with devotion to work (e.g. Correll et al., 2007; Crittenden, 2010).

With the consistent core emphasis on the incompatibility between motherhood and work, Hutt Cabello (2023) expands the research about the penalty from current mothers to the penalty incurred by potential mothers. This perspective points out that women who are "at risk" of having children can be regarded as uncertain and risky for employers. The risks derive from stereotypes about mothers' work performance and long-term commitment and also the possible costs associated with maternity leave including the benefit costs and hiring and training replacements during the leave (Appelbaum & Milkman, 2011). Although this is not the main focus of the research, life stories collected during the interviews show that

female employees in China are aware of the costs of maternity leave for their employers, which leads to discrimination towards women with future childbearing possibilities.

What is different in China is that Hutt Cabello (2023) spends meaningful efforts in her dissertation to define and evaluate women's future childbearing risks by considering age, marital status, race/ethnicity and social class in the U.S context. However, following the analysis above, marital status is the only risk factor for motherhood in the society of contemporary China. The life course transition norm in China displays a consistent pattern as described by the reproductive line as a terminal continuum – childbearing happens to every woman after marriage as an expected "outcome". Even broadly, at the point of entering the reproductive line, starting from dating, every woman is viewed equivalently at a certain "risk" of becoming a mother in the workplace until they reach the final point of childrearing. Four female participants provided particularly detailed accounts of experiencing workplace discrimination as childless women, with their cases selected for in-depth analysis to illustrate how such unequal treatment manifests across different career stages including first-job seeking, job changing, and promotion.

5.3.1 When Applying for the First Job

When she was 23, Jennie was asked about her dating and marital status during interviews for her first job after graduation: "Do you have a boyfriend? Do you have any plans for marriage and childbearing?" These direct questions unveiled the employers' worry about Jennie's reproductive life course plans at the point of entering the labour market as a productive life stage. This is indicated in the proposed framework above, which shows that the reproductive line normally starts and merges with the productive line at the point of finishing education and entering the job market for the first time.

Aware of the norms, Jennie recognised the worry immediately and hid her dating status from the recruiters at that time, "because they think if you have a boyfriend, you may

immediately get married and bear children." She thought being single was a safer answer than dating someone, because "You know, it will take quite a long time from being single to bearing children". Her answer is also understandable according to the terminal continuum framework; being single indicates not even entering the reproductive line and thus would not smoothly lead to childbearing. Having a partner or not becomes a critical threshold; having indicates a shot and expected continuum proceeding smoothly towards childbearing while not having is believed to "take a quite a long time" until entering motherhood. Jennie further added her understanding about the normative expectations of life course transitions in relation to age: "As you get closer to 30 years old, they will be more concerned about you being married yet childless."

5.3.2 When Changing Jobs

Jennie's perception has been confirmed by three other married and childless female participants around the age of 30 in the research. Coincidentally, they started discussions on the topic themselves rather than being questioned, which indicated the prevalent awareness and concerns of this discrimination. For example, when I asked Mak, "Why did you decide to get married right after graduation?", she answered: "Because at that time, I wasn't aware of how significant the discrimination in the job market was against married women who hadn't had children yet." In retrospect, this suggests that had she been aware of such discrimination, she might have reconsidered marrying so early. In fact, she only became aware of it later when she planned to change jobs after marriage:

> During interviews, recruiters asked me, 'When do you plan to have children?' and 'How many years have you been married?' Then they directly… no… subtly indicated that if you have children right after joining the new company... they implied that the workplace might not be very welcoming. I can understand it, but I also feel that it's very unfriendly towards women.

Recruiters' questions about the years after marriage unveiled that once they believe childbearing will normally or definitely happen after marriage, the key and only uncertain point is about when to have children. It is like a ticking time bomb; they want to know when it will explode. Mak's account of recruiters shifting from asking "directly" to "subtly" about childbearing demonstrates that, however nuanced the questioning, the underlying warning not to have children was still plainly conveyed through their expressions, revealing the strength of the norm. In the job-seeking market, married women have been regarded as subjects who should be cautiously interrogated during interviews because of their possibilities for childbearing. Mak said that it was "understandable" that a woman would sense discrimination when being interrogated at a job interview. Nonetheless, I believe regarding the discrimination as "understandable" shall be carefully understood as Mak's agentic reaction to the unchangeable and irresistible social norms as facts – justifying its reasonability to allow for reluctant "acceptance".

Gendered discrimination in the labour market surrounding childbearing status was also pronounced when Rain and her husband both planned to move to another city and change jobs. When I interviewed Rain who had remained childless for two years after marriage in Shenzhen, her husband had already moved to Nanjing after changing his job smoothly. She said:

> I was actually ahead of him to start job searching, and at that time, I found a job opportunity at a company in Shanghai that was quite suitable. But you know [sigh], this brings us to the current, more realistic issue of being married without children. They assumed I might want to have kids soon, which led to a lot of (negative) considerations (of employing me). I've realised that I'm facing many such issues now while job hunting. [...] This kind of discrimination in the workplace [sigh], it's really incomprehensible.

Although Rain started job searching well ahead of her husband and luckily found a promising opportunity, she was left behind by her husband because of the gender differences in the future parenthood penalty. I asked about her reaction towards the discriminatory treatment, “Did you promise to them that you intended to not have kids at all?” She responded with tones of helplessness, frustration and anger:

> *Nobody* would believe it! Sometimes I tell them, but actually when I was telling them, I wondered why I should even have to say these things. Is this really my issue? We should be judged based on our work capabilities... In fact, during my last interview, my (potential) supervisor was really satisfied with me, but in the end, because their hiring team was quite large, they decided by voting during the final interview. They thought maybe I would have children, given my married but childless status. I truly find it absurd, you know? I feel that having to explain myself is in itself a very unfair situation for me.

Contrary to Mak’s framing that recruiters’ concerns are “understandable,” Rain’s account highlights the deeper consequences of gender-based discrimination. Her refusal to justify her personal life choices in job interviews underscores her resistance to such unfair treatment. In these hiring contexts, Rain could sense that her professional competence was recognised, even appreciated by her potential supervisor. Yet this recognition ultimately became meaningless, as assumptions about her likelihood of soon having children, derived from her married but childless status, overshadowed her qualifications at the decisive moment. The determining and overriding effects of her private life status in the professional workplace made her feel unacceptable. However, the same personal status of being married yet childless has not placed her husband in a similar dilemma in his job-seeking. The differences evidenced in the gender-based discrimination towards women who are married and childless in the labour market provoked her overwhelming anger.

5.3.3 When Seeking Job Promotion

Rabb, aged 31 and married for one year when interviewed, was rejected by her supervisor when she requested a promotion on the grounds that she was married and childless. She described:

> Last week, a colleague who held a position one level higher than mine was promoted, and I went to our manager to ask if I could take her place, as I have also been in my current position for many years, about four or five years. I asked if I could be promoted, feeling that it was about time. However, he refused me on the grounds that I am too *old*, had just gotten married and might soon have children.

After knowing that the colleague Rabb mentioned who recently got promoted, was also female, I asked, "Then how could she have got promotion?" Rabb's answer brought another nuanced layer to the future motherhood penalty. She answered, "She has already finished her maternity leave. She's done!" By this, Rabb meant that her colleague had already gone through the expected interruption of childbearing and returned to work, so from the employer's perspective she no longer posed a risk of further disruption. We understand from the quote that for the employer, the "bomb" of married women taking maternity leave has already exploded, so recruiting a candidate who has completed childbearing can be a safe choice.

Nevertheless, regarding the completion of childbearing as the end of discrimination, here comes another question in Rain's narrative:

> Some of my colleagues in HR departments have talked to me, saying, 'What if you have a child here and then switch jobs?' I said, after having one child, won't they think I won't have a second? From my understanding, people who have had one child are more likely to have a second. It's scary, how many children do you have to have before it's considered 'done'?

Rain felt frustrated at the suggestion from her HR friends and articulated that women can never be regarded as having completed childbearing – which resembles Hutt Cabello (2023)'s point that current mothers can possess stronger future childbearing "risks". However, we can also see from the HR's suggestion that, in the current labour market in China, first childbearing is mostly seen as an indication that a woman is "done" with childbearing. Thus, discrimination particularly targets married women without children. Hereby, we understand bearing one child as the terminal of the proposed reproductive line in the research. Bearing more than one child can be a possible outcome due to personal choices but not as strict as a social norm (Y. Cai & Feng, 2021; Fong, 2002; Yu & Xie, 2021).

To summarise, in the labour market of China, employers are cautious about hiring or promoting childless women as these women are expected to bear at least one child, and they are even more cautious about hiring or promoting married childless women as they are expected to bear children sooner. Hence, when clarifying whether the first or all planned childbearing shall be regarded as the completion of childbearing in the norms, the answer is the first childbearing because of the prevailing one-child norm as the legacy of one-child policy in China (Y. Cai & Feng, 2021; Fong, 2002; Shen & Jiang, 2021). Together with the unacceptance of childlessness in the societal norms, the first childbearing of female employees is an event that is foreseeable and certain to happen. In other words, only the completion of the childbearing norm – having at least a child – can end the labour market discrimination, instead of never having children or the completion of childbearing itself.

The temporal framework proposed in this chapter encompassing age, duration, and sequence effectively captures and contextualises the challenges faced by childless women around the age of 30, as highlighted in the focused case studies. If we understand the "discrimination" according to the normative framework identified in this chapter, we recall the initial expression, "stuck", at the beginning of this section. On the one hand, the word

"stuck" implies the incompatibility between women's productive and reproductive life courses, captured in research on future motherhood penalty. On the other hand, the unequal treatment received by married yet childless women is an obvious manifestation of what would happen to individuals caught between life stages of marriage and childbearing. Not until completing first childbearing, it is always interpreted as incomplete, unfinished and unresolved reproductive life status. The inevitability of childbearing is seen as the ultimate destiny of every woman. Even though Rain had settled her mind on remaining childless, and she might be able to escape from childbearing *itself*, she could never escape from the norm and from people's expectation and assumption that she would eventually become a mother, as she shouted: "*Nobody* would believe it!"

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter commenced with the objective of interrogating the temporal norms, the social benchmarks, embedded in the discussion of delaying childbearing in the context of contemporary China. However, it concludes by presenting a comprehensive framework that reveals how life course transitions operate as integrated temporal systems. The framework's core theoretical contribution lies in demonstrating that childbearing functions not as an isolated life event but as the central organising principle around which all other life course transitions derive their temporal significance and regulatory force. Anchoring on the core importance of childbearing within the proposed temporal framework, we can expand the current demographic conceptualisation of delaying childbearing from being understood as a singular, unified action or phenomenon to a processual delay and an ongoing process as the socially more acceptable form of resistance to the fertility norms than outright rejection.

Moreover, the overall framework is deeply entrenched with unequal gender structures. Women are the primary bearers of this reproductive responsibility, facing overwhelming temporal limitations in their life planning. Spending time on pursuits unrelated to

childbearing for women of presumed childbearing age is often regarded as a wasteful use of time, limiting personal experiences of dating and relationships to the sole purpose of finding suitable partners for marriage and childbearing. Fulfilling reproductive duties is considered a more critical life task than career development. It is based on such normative beliefs that childless women experience significant workplace discrimination, as demonstrated in the final case study of this thesis. However, not everyone subscribes to this fertility-centric life planning, as evidenced by individuals like Rain, who questions why pursuits in productive life must be sacrificed for reproductive duties.

Shenzhen's distinctive character as a migrant society proved analytically crucial for revealing these temporal dynamics. The convergence of individuals from diverse regional backgrounds created conditions where temporal norm variations became visible while simultaneously exposing their underlying commonalities across Chinese cultural contexts. As noted in the previous chapter, Shenzhen is often described as a "city of working (打工之城)" – a place where people migrate to pursue social upward mobility and explore new life possibilities. Within this migration context, the tension between the productive line – representing new life possibilities, and the reproductive line – embodying traditional fertility norms, can be significantly magnified. The decision to move to Shenzhen also indicates a degree of reflective thinking among migrants concerning their life trajectories and social norms as illustrated in Chapter 4. Given these stringent and pervasive norms, the awareness, reflections, and reactions of my research subjects – young educated migrant adults born around the 1990s – show considerable variations and valuable insights.

The analysis in this chapter establishes delaying childbearing as "processual delay" – an ongoing strategic engagement with temporal norms rather than simple postponement decisions. The comprehensive nature of temporal regulation means that delaying childbearing requires sustained coordination across multiple life domains over extended periods, revealing

individual agency as operating within rather than against normative structures. This processual understanding provides foundation for examining how individuals develop and maintain strategic approaches to temporal norm negotiation, the analytical focus of Chapter 6, where attention shifts to the specific practices through which individuals exercise temporal agency within the constraining, yet navigable temporal frameworks established in this chapter.

CHAPTER 6

Negotiating Temporal Norms: Migration, Agency, and Strategic Responses when Delaying Childbearing

Building on the contextual analysis of Shenzhen's migrant society (Chapter 4) and the conceptual discussion of temporal frameworks regulating life course transitions in China (Chapter 5), this chapter addresses the central research question: how do individuals navigate normative childbearing timelines during the extended process of delay? The convergence of strong temporal norms and spatial mobility creates distinctive conditions for examining spatio-temporal agency in the context of childbearing. The empirical analysis in this chapter zooms into their everyday interactions with norm enforcers, who monitor compliance with the norms and administer potential sanctions (Bicchieri, 2005; Opp & Hechter, 2001). As reviewed in Chapter 2, family members often serve as the practical sites where normative fertility planning is monitored and scrutinised in the context of China.

By foregrounding agentic negotiations with temporal norms, and showing how migration intersects with these processes, this chapter makes two key theoretical contributions. First, it demonstrates that agency is inherently spatial as well as temporal; migration generates distinctive resources – distance, economic opportunities, and identity – that enable individuals to contest temporal norms. Second, it develops the concept of *temporal structuration* to capture how individuals actively engage with social structures through temporal practices, thereby incrementally shifting the very frameworks that constrain them.

The chapter consists of three sections. The first and most extensive section provides a comprehensive analysis of how participants actually delay childbearing in practice. Through four distinct approaches – Accommodation Strategies, Transformation Strategies, Strategic Redirection, and Identity-Based Strategies – this section highlights that delaying childbearing

is not a single act but an ongoing process, enacted through diverse strategies that migration and spatial positioning strengthen. The second section engages with theoretical discussions of temporality and extends both Flaherty's (2003, 2011) concept of "time work" and Giddens' (1984) structuration theory by theorising *temporal structuration*, highlighting the recursive interplay between agency and constraint in the context of delaying childbearing.

The final section concludes by positioning delaying childbearing as a critical lens for engaging with theoretical discussions of agency. It concretises how time and place intersect in the everyday exercise of agency, illuminating the micro-level practices through which individuals negotiate childbearing expectations. In doing so, the analysis demonstrates that agency must be understood as a response that both reveals and arises from their pressing and determining force. This perspective situates delaying not simply as resistance or compliance but as a practice that crystallises how agency and constraint are mutually constituted in the lived negotiation of reproductive timelines.

6.1 Revealing: Strategic Approaches to Navigating Temporal Norms of Childbearing

The following analysis examines how individuals strategically navigate the temporal constraints established in Chapter 5. Regarding the pressures, participants I met in Shenzhen show a diverse range of strategies that go beyond simple compliance or resistance, instead navigating creatively within and around normative expectations. As we reviewed in Chapter 2, agency, understood as the capacity to act within rather than against structural constraints (Giddens, 1984; Sewell, 1992), can operate through sophisticated micro-level interactions (Goffman, 1959; Scott, 1985). These everyday negotiations reveal agentic interactions with temporal norms, which particularly intersect with migration and spatial mobility. Through moving across places, participants can draw on physical distance, alternative social contexts, and new identity resources to coordinate reproductive timing decisions.

These approaches can be understood through four main categories: *Accommodation Strategies*, where individuals manage normative pressure without directly challenging it; *Transformation Strategies*, through which migrants actively attempt to shift others' normative expectations; *Strategic Redirection*, where they cleverly shift the dynamics to neutralise normative pressure; and *Identity-Based Strategies*, which leverage new social positions to justify different reproductive timelines. In the following subsections, I will examine each of these strategic approaches in detail, illustrating how they intersect with migration experiences and the unique context of Shenzhen. The section will conclude with a synthesis illuminating the spatial dimension that has been underexplored in previous research on temporal agency.

6.1.1 Accommodation Strategies: Managing Normative Pressure Without Confrontation

Accommodation strategies refer to approaches for managing normative pressures without directly challenging either the norms themselves or the norm enforcers. These strategies enable individuals to navigate within normative systems whilst maintaining a degree of personal autonomy, yet without explicitly contesting the legitimacy of childbearing expectations. This framework draws inspiration from Goffman's (1959) "front stage/backstage" theory, wherein individuals strategically manage the impressions they present to others whilst concealing their genuine intentions or perspectives.

I have identified three primary accommodation strategies employed by participants: information control, performative compliance, and strategic avoidance. Each of these concepts has roots in previous literature but has been adapted to the specific context of childbearing norms in contemporary China. These strategies emerged as the most commonly employed approaches for managing childbearing pressure amongst my participants, and they demonstrate a particularly pronounced interrelationship with spatial mobility. Rather than representing simple evasion or capitulation, these accommodation strategies reveal sophisticated forms of agency that operate within rather than against normative constraints.

6.1.1.1 Information Control

Information control is the classic measure proposed in the front stage/backstage theory, originally referring to selectively revealing or concealing information (Goffman, 1959). In the context of childbearing norms, it means strategically disclosing life plans and fertility intentions that might violate temporal norms. This strategy is particularly compatible with the terminal continuum framework of reproductive life transitions proposed in the previous chapter. By controlling information about different stages in this continuum, individuals can manage normative pressure without directly challenging its validity.

Andrew's case demonstrates how information control creates space for reproductive autonomy. At 32 years old and married for three years when we met, Andrew displayed a notably reserved attitude when discussing reproductive life stages, despite having discussed openly about his overseas education and migration experiences. His reticence required numerous follow-up questions to understand his reproductive trajectory. When I learned his relationship had lasted seven to eight years before marriage, I asked about his family's opinion during this period. He responded:

> No, we were always planning to get married, but only told our parents (about the relationship) in 2020 [the year when they got married]. Before that, they didn't know – neither of our families knew we were dating.

When asked why he hadn't told their families, he replied tersely: "To avoid trouble, there's already so much going on (in life), talking about this (reproductive life plans) every day isn't meaningful." After a moment of silence, I pressed further: "What is the trouble you were trying to avoid?" He finally elaborated:

> (If they had known) They'd ask about it (the relationship) every day, call you... It's fine to just chat casually (without mentioning the relationship) with your family, why discuss this every day? After they know, it's all about asking when we're getting married, how this and

> that will work, how the relationship is going recently... It's unnecessary. Relationships are personal matters. When it's time to get married and you feel (the relationship is) mature enough (for the transition), just then let them know.

When explicitly asked if his parents would pressure him after learning about the relationship, he quickly answered, "Of course!" before returning to his reserved demeanour and adding: "Not exactly, I just think... I consider this (reproductive trajectory) rather personal." This revealing exchange demonstrates how information control operates as an accommodation strategy. Andrew clearly understands the normative expectation that parents would monitor relationship progress and push for marriage once dating is disclosed, consistent with the terminal continuum framework described in the previous chapter. His strategic non-disclosure about the relationship for over seven years represents a deliberate attempt to carve out autonomous space without directly challenging its validity. Importantly, this strategy was enabled and reinforced by Andrew's migration status, which created physical distance that made such extended non-disclosure possible.

While concealing relationship status might be relatively manageable, hiding decisions on major life transitions like marriage and childbearing from parents is challenging in Chinese culture, where these events are considered significant family matters (Lee & Feng, 1999). Rain's case illustrates how information control extends to fertility intentions. Among all participants, Rain expressed one of the strongest desires to remain childless since her early twenties, while recognising it as "abnormal". Despite being married for several years, she continues to hide her intention to remain childless from her parents, while actively navigating normative pressures through other strategies described in the following sections.

This strategic concealment of genuine fertility intentions creates space for negotiation while avoiding direct confrontation with family norms. By withholding an explicit declaration of the wish to remain childless, individuals like Rain can employ delaying tactics

and gradually explore the possibility of negotiating childlessness over time. Information control thus becomes the foundation for other strategies: it provides a temporal buffer that allows resistance to unfold incrementally, testing and potentially expanding the boundaries of acceptable reproductive choices while minimising conflict.

6.1.1.2 Performative Compliance

Apart from Goffman's theory (1959), the second accommodation strategy, performative compliance, is also inspired by the concept of false compliance, originating from Scott's (1985) framework of everyday resistance, wherein individuals appear to adhere while privately maintaining alternative plans. This understanding of performative compliance also resonates with Choi and Luo's (2016) concept of "performative family," developed in the context of gay and lesbian individuals navigating strong normative pressure to conform to heterosexual marriage and family formation expectations.

In the context of childbearing norms, performative compliance manifests as strategically appearing to accept normative expectations without actual intention to fulfil them. Participants often described this approach as letting comments urging childbearing go "in one ear and out the other" ("左耳进、右耳出"). This expression vividly illustrates how normative pressure is acknowledged superficially while being internally dismissed. This represents an accommodation strategy where individuals appear receptive to normative expectations but neither internalise them nor directly challenge them.

Rabb's experience exemplifies this approach. As a third-generation Shenzhen migrant who lives with her parents throughout her life, she has been facing continuous pressure regarding family formation. When single, her parents pushed her to date; now married, they urge her to have a baby, arguing that they are young enough to help with childcare. When asked how she responds to this pressure, Rabb explained:

> I just placate them with a few words – on the surface I agree, saying 'Yes, yes, I'll try hard, I'll make an effort, I'll go dating,' and so on. But in reality, whatever happens, just happens [laughs]. They can pressure all they want. […] But when they pressure me, I actually feel quite anxious. At the beginning, I was quite anxious, but later I became more relaxed – many things aren't guaranteed just because you want them.

While performative compliance involves surface-level acquiescence without actual compliance, this strategy does not mean individuals remain emotionally unaffected by normative pressure. As Rabb indicates, despite her outward dismissal of parental pressure, she internally processes these comments and experiences anxiety about non-conformity, particularly given the continuous pressure from living with her parents. The interpretation of not conforming to normative expectations as "many things aren't guaranteed just because you want them" represents an internal compromise, a way of managing her own disappointment and anxiety so that parental pressure feels less overwhelming. In this sense, emotion work – the management of one's feelings in private life to align with social expectations (Hochschild, 1983) – is not only directed outward to maintain harmony with her parents but also inward, as Rabb works to protect her sense of autonomy and emotional stability. The case demonstrates that even strategies of accommodation can be deeply taxing because they rely on sustained emotional work to make normative pressure bearable.

Flyer, who moved to Shenzhen early in her life, has always faced harsh comments about her childless status from family members in her hometown. What is different from Rabb's case is that she is able to mobilise agency against the harsh comments enabled through migration. She recounted a particularly painful incident in her twenties:

> My grandmother, on a Chinese New Year's Eve, discussed my... uterus not being able to produce children at the (family reunion) dinner table. I got so angry. Although I was originally planning to leave on the seventh day of the New Year, I changed my flight to

> leave on the second day. Their kind of... persuasion, while seemingly well-intentioned, sometimes feels like verbal abuse – they can say extremely hurtful things.

The Spring Festival in Chinese societies holds immense cultural significance as a time for family reunion, especially for migrants returning to their hometowns. Yet Flyer experienced such distressing comments about her reproductive capacity from her grandmother in front of other family members during what should have been a joyous occasion. Her response – rescheduling her return to Shenzhen to escape the pressure – demonstrates how much mental discomfort she was bearing at that moment, and migration enables agency by providing a physical escape route from normative pressure.

Flyer highlighted the persistent nature of the pressure regarding reproductive life transitions:

> It started in my twenties, and they've said many hurtful things. And also... every phone call (during days away from home), before hanging up, it's always this issue. I've ranted about this countless times on social media [laughs], but I just think, whatever, let it be, let them pressure me – anyway, I'm in Shenzhen, and they can't come with knives to chop me [laughs].

This narrative reveals several important dimensions of performative compliance and its relationship to migration. Because migration meant that most of her interactions with family occurred through phone calls, reproductive pressure became a recurring theme in these distant conversations. Each call risked turning into a reminder of her "failure" to conform to the temporal norms, and she often ended the conversation once the topic arose. Her social media complaints indicate she does process these comments emotionally, despite her outward dismissal. Most significantly, her concluding remark – "anyway, I'm in Shenzhen, and they can't come with knives to chop me" – directly connects migration with her capacity to maintain performative compliance. The spatial distance created by migration enables her to

maintain the appearance of listening while effectively ignoring the pressure without serious consequences. The agency embedded in performative compliance is subtle yet significant. These seemingly passive responses actually represent active strategies through which individuals try to protect themselves emotionally from normative pressure, although they unavoidably process and internalise the pressure. By outwardly acknowledging but inwardly dismissing normative expectations, they avoid direct confrontation that might damage family bonds while urging individual autonomy.

Interestingly, Mak revealed another dimension of performative compliance during her childless marriage for years:

> Actually, we've always told others that we will have children […]. But when we discuss it between ourselves, I feel that we don't actually want children that quickly. So when others ask, 'Huh? You've been married for two or three years and still don't have children?' Then we say, 'We're trying hard, we're working on it.' But actually... we haven't taken any action. Because we're thinking, maybe it's a bit like deceiving ourselves – deceiving others and incidentally deceiving ourselves too. Because by heart, we don't want children that quickly.

This narrative reveals how performative compliance can operate as a dual deception, directed both outward toward norm enforcers and inward toward oneself. By maintaining the appearance of trying to conform while taking no concrete action, Mak and her husband create a middle ground that partially satisfies social expectations while preserving their autonomous decision-making in childbearing. This highlights how agency manifests not only in conscious resistance to norms but also in navigating the complex psychological terrain between conformity and non-conformity and even in conforming to the norm. These various manifestations of performative compliance demonstrate how individuals create space for autonomy in the timing of childbearing without directly challenging normative expectations.

6.1.1.3 Strategic Avoidance

As norm enforcers are typically close family members, being far away in Shenzhen helps migrants to engage in performative compliance to keep pressure at bay. However, certain periods like Spring Festival, when families reunite and migrants return home, can become particularly challenging for those facing stringent normative pressures as illustrated in Flyer's case. In response, some participants develop strategies of strategic avoidance, deliberately minimising contact with family members, especially extended family members, to reduce exposure to pressuring comments about childbearing.

I borrow the term "strategic avoidance" directly from Riessman's (2000) analysis to capture how individuals actively manage normative demands through distancing and non-engagement. This usage of "strategic avoidance" resonates with Choi and Peng's (2016) analysis illustrating how migrant men resist normative pressure to perform domestic labour. In addition, it parallels Choi and Luo's (2016) discussion of minimising network participation as a strategy for reducing exposure to intergenerational and community-based pressure. While these studies focus on domestic labour and marriage respectively, the present study extends such avoidance-based strategies to the domain of reproductive timing. Taken together, these studies foreground the coexistence of persistent normative pressure in family domain and individual agency in the context of China, demonstrating how avoidance operates not as withdrawal from norms, but as an active, situated strategy for managing and negotiating normative demands – an analytical perspective that underpins the analysis developed in this chapter.

Uma, my 30-year-old yoga coach in Shenzhen who has been married for three years, exemplifies this approach. I was persuaded by the apparent peacefulness in her thoughts, mind, and emotions to have her as my yoga teacher. But I later discovered from listening to her life story that the peaceful demeanour was hard-won and had been attained by

maintaining independence and navigating difficult interactions with her parents. She explicitly described how she had been pushed to marry by her parents' insistence during a Spring Festival visit back to her hometown. However, as the terminal continuum framework proposed in Chapter 5 suggests, marriage merely transitions pressure to childbearing rather than ending it. After marriage, Uma continued to receive persistent comments from her mother encouraging her to have children, with other family members becoming intermediaries for her mother's pressure.

During subsequent Spring Festivals after her marriage, Uma faced increasing pressure about having children from both her mother and extended family members who would visit their home during what should have been a joyous celebration. She explained her strategic response:

> Because I... I was thinking that every time I went back for the New Year, it was very unpleasant. So I'm thinking that this year I might not go back for the New Year – I might go back the weekend before the New Year, and I don't want to stay at home for so long. Because I'd have to face many relatives, and everyone I meet might ask about it (childbearing plans). Although everyone might think, 'Hey, just asking casually is no big deal,' when I hear it, I feel like this is my personal issue (and not feeling comfortable being asked).

By strategically returning to her hometown earlier than the typical festival period, Uma attempts to minimise the encounters with potential norm enforcers – a constrained yet meaningful expression of agency over her fertility planning. Uma recognises that extended family members might view their inquiries about fertility plans as casual greetings after long separation, but she must actively protect what she considers private. Significantly, this strategic avoidance is directly enabled by migration and the spatial mobility it entails.

Remaining in one's hometown and living among norm enforcers would severely limit the effectiveness of avoidance strategies compared to what migration allows.

Rain explicitly identified avoiding living at home and the constant pressure from family members as one of her primary motivations for migration, rather than returning to her hometown after university. When discussing her decision, she stated:

> If you asked me to go back home [move to the home city], I definitely wouldn't want to... You don't even need to think about it – right now I barely manage to go home twice a year, and my family is already pressuring me [about having children] harshly like this. What kind of state would I be in if I were at home? It feels like I would be lectured to death by others every day...

The spatial separation created through migration proves crucial in avoiding norm enforcers and managing childbearing pressure. This separation creates a space of freedom – freedom from constant pressuring comments from close family members and from potential encounters with extended networks "greeting" you by asking about your life and fertility plans. The compromise of enduring intense pressure during brief annual visits home becomes acceptable when balanced against the autonomy gained during the rest of the year in Shenzhen.

Strategic avoidance reveals how migration enables a particular form of agency through physical distance. By controlling when and how they encounter norm enforcers, migrants create temporal and spatial buffers around their reproductive autonomy. This strategy demonstrates that agency does not only operate through direct confrontation but also emerges through the intertwined dimensions of temporality and spatiality. The opportunity to "opt out" of continuous normative pressure represents a significant form of agency that would be unavailable without the spatial mobility afforded by migration.

Nonetheless, despite Uma's efforts to strategically avoid pressure by timing her visits back to the home city to minimise encounters with extended family, she cannot avoid her mother. Festival reunions remain culturally obligatory, ensuring that maternal pressure is both unavoidable and persistent. While she can avoid many norm enforcers, she must still confront her mother – the closest family member and most persistent norm enforcer. This limitation of strategic avoidance necessitates additional strategies, which will be explored in the following sections.

6.1.2 Transformative Strategies: Actively Shifting Normative Expectations

While Accommodation Strategies allow individuals to manage normative pressure without directly challenging its validity, Transformation Strategies represent more direct attempts to change how parents and other norm enforcers understand and apply childbearing norms. These approaches align with what Riessman (2000) identifies as "speaking out and acting up" – directly challenging stigmatising expectations of childlessness rather than avoiding or internalising them. The literal description of "transform" ("改造") is grounded in the empirical narrative from the participants, as will be illustrated below. Through these transformative strategies, individuals in the research actively engage with norm enforcers and attempt to shift their perspectives, challenge their assumptions, and recalibrate their expectations regarding appropriate childbearing timing.

In this section, I examine the approaches individuals employ to actively transform normative expectations, ranging from confrontational communication to more educational approaches. I demonstrate that while confrontational strategies are common, educational approaches require specific relational conditions to be viable. Crucially, I argue that as transformative strategies often involve emotionally taxing interactions with disappointing results, individuals frequently resort to accommodation strategies, revealing the dynamic

interplay between different forms of agency and the limitations of transformation within deeply entrenched normative systems.

6.1.2.1 Confrontational Communication

We continue with Uma's story to explore how she negotiates childbearing norms with her mother despite her strategic avoidance of other norm enforcers. When asked how she responded when her mother pushed her to conform to norms, Uma described their interaction as "our way of interaction, which can't really be called arguing" – indicating a special way of communication between them while downplaying its confrontational nature. When I probed further about her approach, she acknowledged that her communication strategies were "sometimes a bit provocative". When her mother pushes her to have children by presenting various justifications, Uma challenges the validity of each reason by "giving some extreme examples". For instance, when her parents argue that having children ensures care in old age (Chinese saying "养儿防老," similar in other contexts with limited state elderly care), Uma counters with "some families raise children to adulthood but end up losing them". Their discussions also encompass the economic burden of raising children in Shenzhen and health concerns related to childbearing during the pandemic era.

Although these conversations are neither pleasant nor peaceful, Uma recognises their efficacy in gradually transforming her mother's perspective. She believes that through these repeated confrontational interactions, she has been expressing her position with increasing strength, and her mother's expectations might have shifted. At minimum, Uma feels that the pressure has eased, evident in fewer phone calls from her mother explicitly urging her to have a child, and also in conversations that feel less confrontational than before.

6.1.2.2 Educational and Peaceful Discussion

While confrontational communication represents a common transformative strategy, some participants employ more educational approaches that require specific relational

foundations. These less adversarial strategies involve reasoned argumentation, sharing evidence, and appealing to parents' intellectual understanding, rather than engaging in confrontational or openly oppositional exchanges. This approach depends on a relationship foundation between the young adults and their parents that allows for mutual respect and genuine dialogue.

Joyce, who has obtained a master's degree from the University of Edinburgh in linguistics, adopts this approach. Describing her relationship with her parents as unusually close, compared with peers, they are able to have conversations at "spiritual levels beyond basic living concerns". This exceptional relational quality creates space for what she frames as an educational project: "I think my parents were still quite traditional in that stage, so I've been trying to transform their thinking". The term "transform" ("改造") has special significance, indicating a deliberate attempt to reshape normative perspectives rather than simply managing or navigating around them.

This educational approach manifests in Joyce's sustained attempt to present logical arguments against conventional life course expectations:

> I also struggled a lot, talked (with them) a lot before. Whether it's about my career choices, city selection, life planning, I've always been explaining logically to them, and they can understand to some extent, including discussing practical matters. I said, 'Look, what benefits does marriage bring me?'... When I explain it this way, they can understand.

The repeated emphasis on "explaining logically" ("讲道理") highlights the distinctive character of this approach – it operates through rational persuasion rather than emotional resistance. Unlike confrontational strategies that often escalate tensions, this educational approach attempts to transform normative expectations by appealing to parents' capacity for reasoned reflection. Joyce's description of presenting practical considerations about marriage

benefits represents a cost-benefit analysis intended to shift her parents from normative to practical reasoning.

This educational strategy extends to deeper philosophical discussions about childbearing itself:

> Sometimes I debate with my parents about whether people should have children [laughs], how much impact does having or not having children actually have on a person? These kinds of discussions.

These discussions move beyond practical concerns to engage fundamental questions about the purpose and value of reproduction – a significant elevation from typical pressuring conversations about life timing. Such philosophical engagement represents a sophisticated attempt to reshape the normative framework itself rather than simply negotiating within it.

The relative success of this approach appears contingent on parental receptiveness, which varies significantly even within the same family. Joyce's mother demonstrates some openness to questioning conventional life patterns, acknowledging her own conventional life course choices as "following the crowd" ("随大流"). This creates space for intergenerational dialogue reflecting on reproductive choices, but her father's more traditional perspective does not permit this. Such differential receptiveness highlights how educational approaches depend not only on the individual's communicative skills but also on the norm enforcer's willingness to engage in reflective examination of taken-for-granted assumptions.

Despite its sophistication and hard work, Joyce's educational approach has not achieved the expected results in transforming her parents' normative beliefs. Her insightful conclusion reveals the persistent gap between intellectual understanding and normative conviction:

> My attitude is also quite gentle, just normal communication about this issue. They're the type who say, 'I think what you're saying makes a lot of sense, I can't refute these things you've said, but I just feel that people should have children [laughs].'

This statement accurately captures the limitations of educational strategies when confronting deeply internalised norms. Her parents intellectually acknowledge the validity of her arguments while emotionally maintaining their normative position. This disconnection between rational acceptance and normative conviction demonstrates how childbearing expectations can be so deeply internalised and often operate at a pre-reflective level resistant to logical argumentation.

Nevertheless, Joyce identifies an important partial success of her educational approach:

> Because I've been explaining logically, they won't use extreme methods to force me. At most, they just can't help occasionally mentioning it.

While not transforming the fundamental normative expectation, her reasoned approach modifies its expression and enforcement, creating greater space for, although limited, autonomy. This represents a significant achievement in the context of strong normative pressures – shifting from potential coercion to occasional verbal reminders.

Joyce characterises her educational approach as "maintaining a state that's a bit offensive but not too offensive" – a delicate balance between challenging normative expectations while preserving relational harmony. This strategic calibration of challenge and respect distinguishes the educational approach from both accommodation (which minimises challenge) and confrontation (which risks relational damage). The educational approach thus occupies an intermediate position in the spectrum, offering partial successes without the relational costs of more confrontational methods.

6.1.2.3 Transformation Resorting to Accommodation

Despite Joyce's thoughtful approach to communicating with her parents, her efforts to transform their ideologies yield disappointing results. Parents' internalised normative beliefs prove remarkably resistant to change. This pattern, where transformative strategies produce limited results despite significant emotional investment, leads many participants to eventually resort to accommodation strategies as a more sustainable approach for both themselves and the relationships with norm enforcers. The shifting trajectory represents a crucial pattern that illuminates the dynamic exertion of agency within normative systems, which also shows the resilience of reproductive norms in the society.

Rain's narrative crystallises this pattern, explicitly articulating her transition from transformative attempts to accommodation strategies:

> Sometimes they're not exactly pressuring me, it's just discussion about ideologies... I actually tried to tell them I don't really want to get married, and they asked, 'why don't you want to get married?' You must have a very sufficient reason, but actually after you give this reason, they still won't understand, haha. Later I just thought, ah, I can't be bothered to explain to you. Then I just placate them, 'Yes, yes, yes, we'll see, we'll see,' like that.

This narrative reveals several critical insights. First, Rain's initial transformative attempts involved the provision of "sufficient reasons" – suggesting a reasoned approach similar to Joyce's educational strategy. Second, the transition to accommodation ("can't be bothered to explain") follows directly from the experienced futility of transformation ("they still won't understand"). This shift is not a surrender of agency but rather a strategic reorientation into more effective forms of negotiation. By choosing accommodation over futile confrontation, Rain demonstrates reflexive awareness of the limits of persuasion and exercises agency through pragmatism – preserving autonomy while minimising conflict.

Rain's subsequent explanation clarifies the rational decision-making behind this transition:

> Now when they pressure me to have children, I just say, 'Mm-hmm, let nature take its course [顺其自然]' haha, using these phrases [话术, literally means the art and standardised pattern of language] to make their words have no target... like 'making their fists hit cotton'. Because I also don't want to have any direct confrontation with them. Direct confrontation doesn't work anyway, I've tried it. Both direct confrontation and those (communication) don't work at all, so now it's just about who can better fool the other, haha.

Rain's metaphor of making parental pressure like "a fist hit cotton" ("拳头打在棉花上") brilliantly captures the essence of her strategic shift. Rather than meeting normative pressure with the hard resistance of transformation which proves ineffective, she creates a soft, absorptive surface that diffuses pressure without direct opposition. This is not passive submission but a sophisticated form of agency that recognises the constraints of the normative system and navigates within them more effectively.

The emotional calculus behind this strategic shift emerges clearly in Rain's account of the cumulative toll of failed transformative attempts:

> It's better if this issue isn't brought up (in the conversation with parents), after bringing it up it always gets a bit off track. I find it annoying, very annoying, every time they talk to me about it (urging me to have babies) I find it annoying, because I don't want to repeat what I've already told him ten thousand times. But I also don't want to listen to him going on and on, sometimes when my father talks to me, I just go 'yes, yes,' but actually I'm not listening at all. Afterward I actually don't know what he said, but he thinks I've taken it in and seriously, hahaha.

This narrative conveys the repetitive futility of transformation attempts, a pattern that creates significant emotional burdens without positive results. The shift to accommodation strategies of performative compliance appears to be more effective for emotional self-

protection and for preserving both personal well-being and familial relationships, particularly when autonomy is maintained, given that the norm enforcers' assertions can hardly be transformed.

This pattern of shifting from transformation to accommodation reveals three significant theoretical insights about agency within normative constraints. First, it demonstrates that agency operates not as a fixed approach but as a dynamic process of strategic adaptation based on experienced efficacy. Individuals learn through interaction which strategies create the most space for autonomy with the least emotional and relational cost. Second, it reveals the limitations of direct transformative approaches when confronting deeply internalised norms. Parents can intellectually engage with arguments while emotionally maintaining normative expectations, creating a persistent barrier to fundamental transformation. Finally, it strengthens how accommodation strategies represent not the absence of agency but its sophisticated recalibration – a recognition that within certain normative constraints, indirect navigation creates more space for autonomy than direct confrontation.

Having experienced both the inefficacy of direct transformation and the emotional costs of accommodation, individuals increasingly seek alternative ways of navigating normative pressure that do not rely on either approach alone. Strategic redirection thus emerges not as a compromise, but as an adaptive response grounded in the practical realities of negotiating entrenched norms.

6.1.3 Strategic Redirection: Creating Alternative Pathways Around Normative Pressure

Strategic redirection represents a distinct mode of engagement with the temporal norms of childbearing. Rather than confronting norms directly or managing them through passive accommodation, these strategies operate by reconfiguring the terrain on which normative power operates – redirecting, repurposing, or forcefully interrupting expectations

in ways that expand their capacity for autonomy. In doing so, they create pathways that avoid compliance without openly challenging the legitimacy of dominant norms. This category, which emerged inductively from the empirical material, highlights a nuanced form of agency that expands existing dichotomies of acceptance and resistance in the literature.

In the following sections, I examine four distinct redirection strategies that emerged consistently across participants' narratives, presented in order of increasing assertiveness: strategic partial compliance, which subtly creates space for autonomy while partially meeting expectations; "magic against magic," which cleverly deploys traditional beliefs against traditional pressures; economic leverage, which establishes clearer boundaries through financial independence or constraints; and defensive escalation, which employs extreme counterthreats to definitively shut down normative pressure.

6.1.3.1 Strategic Partial Compliance

The temporal norms of childbearing, as established in the previous chapter, function as a systemic framework characterised by a continuum of interconnected life stages – dating, marriage, and culminating in childbearing. This interconnectedness creates an opportunity for strategic negotiation through partial compliance: by selectively adhering to certain elements of the normative framework (marriage) while creating space to avoid others (childbearing). This approach represents a subtle form of redirection that neither fully conforms to nor directly challenges the normative system. Instead, individuals navigate within the system's structure, exploiting its sequential nature to create room for reproductive autonomy. By meeting parents halfway through marriage, individuals can redirect normative pressure away from immediate childbearing while appearing to remain within the broader normative framework.

This form of partial compliance parallels Choi and Luo's (2016) analysis of "performative family" and practices of "partially meeting parental expectations" among gay

and lesbian individuals negotiating intense pressure to conform to heterosexual marriage and family formation norms. Building on these insights, the present study demonstrates how similar strategies are mobilised not only to manage marriage expectations, but also to negotiate the timing of childbearing within a temporally structured normative system. Taken together, this comparison highlights the exceptional strength of family formation norms in the Chinese context, thereby making partial compliance a recurring and structurally intelligible strategy.

In this study, the strategy of partially conforming to marriage norms while carving out space to avoid childbearing is illustrated in Rain's account:

> I've been married for two years now. [...] Actually, getting married wasn't really according to my own wishes. It was because my family thought I was getting older, so they pushed me to let them meet (my partner). […] After meeting, everything 'progressed' beyond my control [laughs]. They kept pushing me forward (to get married). I actually knew that marriage was something I probably couldn't avoid, because between my parents and me, regarding marriage and having children, there had to be a compromise. My compromise was to get married but not have children.

Rain's narrative explicitly frames her decision as a strategic redirection rather than simple compliance. She recognises reproductive norms as stringent constraints that cannot be entirely rejected but can be strategically navigated. By identifying marriage and childbearing as separate components within the normative framework, she creates a space for negotiation. Her approach is a compromise – a calculated concession on marriage that generates leverage to maintain autonomy regarding childbearing. This represents a sophisticated understanding of how normative systems operate and how they can be tactically engaged without direct confrontation.

Rain further elaborates on this strategic calculation later in the conversation:

> I did fight against it (refusing to marry according to temporal norms) for a while. But because I knew that marriage is... probably an inevitable thing. I felt that with my parents, not getting married and not having children is (impossible) […] Actually, as I mentioned earlier, it's probably a compromise between myself and my parents. I figured I would probably get married, so when they pushed me on this, I didn't find it too difficult to move forward with it. But I have decided not to have children, so when they push me on that, I won't budge.

This strategic partial compliance operates through two complementary mechanisms. First, marriage functions as a demonstration of partial adherence to the normative framework, reassuring parents that their daughter has not completely rejected the normative life pathways. By positioning herself on the normative spectrum through marriage, Rain creates a perception of potential progression toward childbearing without actually committing to it, thereby securing time to delay childbearing without provoking immediate conflict. Second, beyond its symbolic function, marriage also operates as a form of normative currency that can be exchanged for autonomy in childbearing decisions. By having already fulfilled one major expectation, Rain gains a form of moral credit or bargaining power that legitimises her resistance to the subsequent stage. This transactional logic distinguishes marriage not only as a sign of compliance but also as a resource strategically deployed to negotiate reproductive autonomy.

6.1.3.2 "Deploying Magic Against Magic"

Another form of Strategic Redirection emerges when individuals cleverly deploy elements of traditional belief systems to counter traditional pressures – essentially deploying "magic against magic (魔法打败魔法)." This expression originated from a line in the 2021 China Central Television (CCTV) Spring Festival Gala and has since become a popular internet phrase through China's online culture. The expression encapsulates a "fight fire with

fire" approach – that is, countering one discourse by turning its own logic or language back against it – delivered with humorous undertones that defuse serious confrontation. It reflects young people's creative resistance against rigid discourse systems by appropriating and repurposing established language forms.

The temporal norms of childbearing are deeply embedded in traditional Chinese culture (Yu & Xie, 2022), with expectations about proper timing, sequence, and necessity of reproduction rooted in centuries of cultural practice. Norm enforcers, particularly parents and older relatives, typically hold strong attachments to these traditional beliefs and use them as the basis for norm enforcement. This creates a unique opportunity for strategic navigation: rather than directly opposing traditional values, individuals identify and mobilise alternative aspects of the same traditional culture that happen to support their reproductive preferences.

This strategy is apparent in Flyer's narrative. Recall that when she was single and in her twenties, at a New Year's Eve family dinner, Flyer's grandmother had attacked her for having a "uterus not able to produce children". Now, after she had recently married, and facing pressure to have a baby, Flyer employed a more strategic and indirect response:

> Well... I use magic to defeat magic. When they push me to prepare for pregnancy, I say, 'I'm a Sheep (in the Chinese zodiac), and Bing [her husband] is a Horse. Oh no, Grandmother, Snake and Dragon [referring to recent potential birth years of child] – that won't work, that won't work, they're incompatible [considered an inauspicious match in the zodiac system]. It's better to have a Horse or a Sheep baby, they're in harmony (with our zodiac) and don't clash.' Both Horse and Sheep [zodiac years] – that's three years later [laughs]. That's roughly within our (fertility) plan. […] So actually, there are some excuses that neither worry the family nor create conflict.

By invoking Chinese zodiac compatibility that her grandmother respects – a traditional belief system in which each birth year corresponds to an animal sign, and certain

signs are believed to harmonise while others clash – Flyer strategically redirects pressure away from immediate childbearing without directly rejecting the temporal norm of having children soon after marriage. Her phrase “deploying magic against magic” perfectly captures the essence of this strategy: fighting cultural pressure with culturally recognised counter arguments. This approach is particularly effective because it works entirely within the traditional value system of childbearing norms rather than challenging it. Flyer doesn’t question the validity of traditional beliefs or the importance of childbearing in Chinese culture – she simply identifies alternative traditional considerations that happen to align with her preferred childbearing timeline. By suggesting zodiac compatibility as a legitimate concern, she redirects what could be a direct confrontation into a shared cultural conversation where her delay in childbearing appears responsible rather than rebellious.

This “magic against magic” strategy reveals how individuals can exercise agency through creative navigation of normative systems, using the internal logic and contradictions of traditional belief systems to create alternative pathways for personal choice. Unlike Accommodation Strategies that passively manage pressure, Flyer actively reshapes the terms of the conversation. Yet unlike Transformation Strategies that directly challenge normative expectations, she doesn’t attempt to change her grandmother’s fundamental beliefs about proper life course timing. This strategic positioning in the middle ground is what makes “magic against magic” such an effective form of redirection. By speaking the normative language of tradition rather than challenging it, Flyer achieves a form of agency that appears as normative compliance rather than resistance, yet serves her own reproductive timeline.

6.1.3.3 Economic Leverage

Moving beyond symbolic redirections through partial compliance or cultural beliefs, economic leverage represents a more tangible form of Strategic Redirection that alters the power dynamics between the young adults and norm enforcers. This approach utilises

financial resources – either independence or dependence – as a means to create alternative pathways around childbearing norms. As temporal norms of childbearing operate within broader social and economic contexts, individuals leverage these economic dimensions to create legitimate grounds for reproductive autonomy. This can manifest in two distinct but related forms: assertions of economic independence that establish clear boundaries against parental authority, or arguments about economic interdependence that highlight financial constraints as legitimate reasons for delaying childbearing.

Andrew's case demonstrates how economic power can directly translate into authority over reproductive timing decisions. Andrew, whom I introduced earlier, withholds information about his relationship status from his parents, insisting that "this is a private issue." He similarly refrains from sharing his fertility plans with them. He works in the finance sector, and his office is located near Shenzhen's largest luxury mall. We met in the Starbucks of the mall where the only Starbucks café is Starbuck Reserve, which sells the most expensive Starbucks coffee luxury lines. His financial achievements, attained in part through his successful migration, have reconfigured family power dynamics.

When asked about his parents' suggestions about their fertility planning, Andrew replied with remarkable confidence:

> It's not important. For me... they don't have... they only have discussion rights, not decision-making rights. I'm 'mountains high and emperor far away' [山高皇帝远 in Chinese, idiom meaning far from authority's reach], they've long given up (power) on this matter. [...] Actually, both my wife and I are quite strong-willed in our families. [...] The family's economic control... has long... long been, right, in my own hands [...] Yes, so of course they have no way to influence my decisions.

Andrew's strategic redirection operates through a complete inversion of traditional generational authority. By establishing himself as the family's economic centre, he

reconfigures what would typically be a hierarchical parent-child relationship into one where he grants his parents “discussion rights” while retaining “decision-making rights” for himself. His emphasis on economic control explicitly links financial power to reproductive autonomy. In Andrew’s case, migration and financial success reshape the intergenerational contract (Ikels, 2004): rather than depending on parental resources before reciprocating support in later life, he is financially independent and no longer bound by such expectations. This independence enhances his decisional authority over fertility, showing how upward mobility and resource accumulation can weaken traditional parental leverage in reproductive matters.

Deere, a 33-year-old woman from Wuhan who had been married and childless for approximately five years at the time of the interview, similarly articulated an even more direct connection between economic independence and relative immunity from normative pressure surrounding childbearing:

> I feel their urging has absolutely no effect on me. Because, how should I put it, I’m very clear that now, they have nothing to hold over me. It’s not like they can withhold my cost-of-living, or pocket money, or property to threaten me. That might... I mean, essentially, I don’t rely on my parents, so they have no way to pressure me. Many people take things from their parents, so they must submit to others, right? I don’t take anything from you, so you can’t control me, haha.

Deere’s response addresses what Liefbroer & Billari (2010) identified as a key enforcement mechanism: parents reducing financial or instrumental support as a sanction for not conforming to fertility norms. By establishing financial independence, Deere neutralises this potential sanction, creating space for autonomous life course planning. Unlike previous redirection strategies that work primarily within cultural and symbolic domains, this approach shifts the conversation from purely normative expectations to concrete financial realities,

creating space for reproductive autonomy through economic reasoning that even traditional norm enforcers find difficult to contest.

Significantly, this is the only strategy of Strategic Redirection that directly engages with migration. This strategy is uniquely enabled by individuals' migration to Shenzhen, which facilitates both their physical distance from family and their economic advancement. Deere connects her independence in life planning to her migration experience as follows:

> After I independently studied and lived away from home, especially after meeting more and more people during my studies abroad and working in Shenzhen, I discovered that those opinions from the older generations in my family – you can actually completely ignore them, as long as you take responsibility for yourself.

This account reveals more than a shift in intergenerational power associated with economic relations; it also signals a shift in the sources of guidance she draws upon. Through study abroad and work in Shenzhen, Deere gained broader experiences and perspectives, which she came to view as more relevant and useful than her elders' advice in navigating her life. The phrasing – "as long as you take responsibility for yourself" – reframes accountability from filial approval to self-responsibility, providing a moral warrant for discounting parental guidance. In this sense, migration furnishes three enabling resources at once: spatial distance, economic independence, and a new repertoire of perspectives that she considers more credible. Together, these resources underpin her capacity to set and defend her own reproductive timeline within a highly normative environment, allowing her to redefine the boundaries of parental authority in reproductive decision-making.

Meanwhile, the high living costs of Shenzhen also enable agency in fertility planning for Wan, but in a different direction. Rather than asserting economic independence, he shares the financial burden of having babies with his parents. Given that this burden would be unbearable for his parents back in their hometown with much lower income, they effectively

lose their "power" to pressure Wan. When asked about how he would respond to his parents' expectations about having babies, Wan described:

> It's very simple. [Asking back to his parents] 'Do you have 1 million ready (for bearing and rearing children)?' Yes, I've calculated it for you, haha. Are you prepared? In other families, parents provide the money, haha.' But actually, we haven't planned to have parents pay this money. For our wedding, we basically paid for ourselves. Yes, this is a very practical reason.

As Wan confesses, he doesn't genuinely intend to have his parents financially support their fertility plans. Rather, by directly calculating and presenting the substantial financial cost of having children in Shenzhen, and rhetorically transferring this burden to his parents, he redirects the pressure to have babies. This approach cleverly turns Shenzhen's high cost of living – typically regarded as a constraint on childbearing – into a resource for negotiation. It works on the legitimate foundation, as reviewed earlier, that childbearing is a collectivist decision and the patriarchal family constitutes the unit of reproductive decision-making (Lee & Feng, 1999; Yu & Xie, 2022). Within this framework, parental involvement in shouldering the economic costs of childbearing and childrearing is seen as legitimate precisely because parents are understood as authoritative participants in the decision. By reframing reproduction as a joint financial project – one his parents cannot realistically afford – Wan redirects the pressure of having children from parents.

Wan's strategy represents an interesting variation of economic leverage. Instead of using economic independence to establish autonomy, he underscores economic interdependence to create mutual constraints, resonating with Yan's (2016) notion of descending familism. By framing childbearing as a shared financial responsibility rather than merely a normative expectation, he transforms what would otherwise be one-sided pressure into a negotiation where both parties must confront practical realities. In doing so, he

effectively neutralises parental pressure without direct confrontation, positioning delaying childbearing as a matter of shared obligation rather than outright rejection of the norm.

Together, these accounts of economic leverage demonstrate how material considerations can be strategically deployed to create space for delaying childbearing. Whether through asserting financial independence like Andrew and Deere, or highlighting financial constraints like Wan, participants redirect normative pressure without challenging the legitimacy of the temporal norms of childbearing themselves. This strategic redirection is particularly enabled by migration to Shenzhen, which creates both physical distance from parental surveillance and economic circumstances that can be leveraged in negotiations about childbearing timing. The spatial mobility that brings participants to Shenzhen reconfigures the economic context in which reproductive decisions are made, creating new possibilities for exercising agency within normative constraints.

6.1.3.4 Defensive Escalation

I will end this section on Strategic Redirection with the most dramatic and assertive form of redirection I encountered during the interviews. This approach involves deploying extreme counterthreats to definitively shut down normative pressure through what I term "defensive escalation." Unlike other redirection strategies that work within or around normative expectations, defensive escalation deliberately introduces a more "shocking" proposition that effectively terminates the conversation altogether.

For instance, Vel's account vividly illustrates how defensive escalation works in practice. She described the persistent pressure from her husband's aunt urging them to have babies after marriage, which made them increasingly uncomfortable:

> She would hint at it indirectly to make me feel that now I should have children. Like saying, you're in a (patriarchal) family, being the eldest grandson [laughs] or the eldest grandson's wife, you should have children. Then she would say how much she wants to

> hold a baby, really wants to hold... His aunt kept saying that she doesn't have grandchildren, so she's constantly annoying us about it, and I just don't want to deal with her.

After enduring this ongoing pressure, Vel and her husband finally figured out the most effective way to end this annoying interference, through her husband's strategic but fierce reaction:

> When his aunt pressured him again to have children, he said, 'I won't have any! I don't want to have any!' He said, '(If you push me more) I'm going to get sterilised,' just to scare his aunt, and then his aunt was like, 'Oh, sorry (and shut up),' haha [laughs]. I thought it was too funny.

This interaction reveals a crucial dynamic in defensive escalation. The aunt was merely pressuring them to have children sooner rather than later – the enforcement of temporal norms, but Vel's husband escalated the confrontation by threatening not just a delay but a complete refusal of childbearing altogether, reinforced by the extreme threat of sterilisation. This counterthreat fundamentally transforms the stakes of the conversation: what began as pressure about timing suddenly transforms into the prospect of no children ever. This escalation effectively silences the aunt by making her realise that her continued pressure might push him toward a much more severe rejection of childbearing norms than mere delay. The immediate retreat of the aunt demonstrates the effectiveness of this strategy.

This represents a sophisticated understanding of norm dynamics. Unlike other strategies that maintain some degree of cultural connection or apparent compliance, defensive escalation pushes the discussion beyond normative boundaries to create shock and discomfort. Yet importantly, it still functions as redirection rather than transformation because it doesn't attempt to change the aunt's beliefs about childbearing norms. Instead, it creates a conversational dead-end that makes continuing the normative pressure socially impossible.

This most assertive form of strategic redirection demonstrates how individuals can establish definitive boundaries against normative pressure when more subtle approaches prove insufficient.

6.1.4 Identity-Based Strategies: Mobilising Self-Identity to Justify Alternative Timelines

The final strategic approach is that participants leverage identities as resources for negotiating childbearing norms. Identity formation fundamentally involves how individuals position themselves within available social categories and organise approaches to major life decisions, including reproductive timing (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). Identity categories, such as motherhood, carry embedded expectations about appropriate life course patterns, with women drawing on these normative assumptions to explain and justify their reproductive decisions (Miller, 2005). More broadly, social identities are intertwined with lifestyle expectations and temporal logics of family formation, where individuals' tastes, practices, and timing preferences are shaped by classed and cultural distinctions (Bourdieu, 1984). The relationship between identity and life planning operates through what Giddens (1991) conceptualises as reflexive identity construction: individuals actively select and sustain identity positions that align with their aspirations while negotiating the social expectations attached to them. This reflexive process is particularly pronounced during emerging adulthood, a stage characterised by identity exploration and experimentation, when decisions about reproductive timing intersect directly with broader identity projects (Arnett, 2000).

This conceptual foundation leads to Hitlin and Elder's (2007) notion of "identity agency," which recognises how individuals mobilise different aspects of their self-definition to guide action across contexts. While their work primarily highlights how identity agency facilitates the fulfilment of role expectations, my research extends this framework by demonstrating how participants strategically employ identity also to legitimate selective non-

compliance with reproductive temporal norms. In this sense, identity becomes a resource for negotiating social expectations, enabling individuals to maintain legitimacy even while deviating from prescriptive family formation pathways. This represents a novel application of identity agency concepts to reproductive decision-making, advancing theoretical understanding of how identity functions as both a mechanism of conformity and a tool of strategic resistance.

Unlike other strategies working on or around the norms, identity-based strategies operate through a different mechanism: they reframe reproductive decisions as legitimate choices by anchoring them in alternative social identities organised around distinct temporal logics. This mode of navigating norms does not simply involve saying "no" or reshaping expectations; instead, it legitimises deviation by situating reproductive timing within identity projects that carry their own validity and authority. Such strategies are analytically more complex because participants rarely articulate them in straightforward terms. Rather, they emerge through subtle cues, rationalisations, and identity work embedded in their narratives, requiring careful interpretation to uncover the ways identity is mobilised as a resource for negotiating normative timelines. To illustrate this dynamic, I draw on two representative cases, Flyer and Mak, to elaborate how they leverage different identities to justify their interactions with the normative timelines of childbearing.

6.1.4.1 Flyer: "Come on! I am a cosmopolitan girl!"

Flyer's strategic deployment of metropolitan identity reveals how spatial mobility enables not just physical relocation but identity transformation that can be leveraged for negotiating with the norm enforcement. Flyer, who I introduced in the beginning of the research, "flew" to Shenzhen from her hometown at a young age to pursue her dream and a better life. Having migrated to Shenzhen for over a decade, she is now doing clerical work. She has incorporated the living status in Shenzhen into her self-definition, creating a

distinctive social position that carries different normative expectations. When introducing her relationship with her husband, Flyer immediately establishes this metropolitan identity as a central aspect of how she navigates intimate relationships:

> At first, I wasn't attracted to him at all, because, come on, I'm a cosmopolitan girl! I'm living in a first-tier city – what kind of men, what kind of smooth-talkers haven't I seen? You're ordinary-looking, from an ordinary family background; it's impossible for me to be interested in you.

Here, her claim is more than a simple self-description. By positioning herself as a "cosmopolitan girl" living in a first-tier city, Flyer elevates her standards of partner selection and implicitly contrasts them with what she perceives as more limited expectations in less urbanised contexts. This illustrates how place, identity, and partner choice operate as interconnected elements in her narrative, revealing how spatial positioning informs both self-identification and decisions in intimate relationships.

Flyer later makes this link explicit by contrasting her own outlook with that of her family's domestic worker:

> Actually, you need to consider another factor, which is that women from first-tier cities, or economically independent women, have completely different views on marriage and relationships compared to women from basic levels of society. [...] She is a grassroots worker (基层劳动者), hum, without many… educational opportunities. She can only come to the first-tier city for basic jobs. […] She has immeasurably different values in intimate lives from mine.

Through this comparative framing, Flyer demonstrates that distinct social identities are seen as legitimately operating under different normative expectations in family formation. By situating herself within the category of "women from first-tier cities" and "economically independent women," she aligns with a normative framework in which delaying marriage or

childbearing is regarded as appropriate rather than deviant. In her narrative, "cosmopolitan women" are expected to prioritise career development, self-fulfilment, and financial independence before family formation, a pattern she contrasts with normative timelines where women typically marry and have children at younger ages.

This positioning does not directly repudiate traditional values; instead, it shifts her life choices onto a different normative track, one that carries its own legitimacy. In doing so, Flyer exemplifies a sophisticated form of identity agency that extends Hitlin and Elder's (2007) original conceptualisation: rather than deploying identity primarily to fulfil role expectations, she strategically mobilises it to carve out legitimate space for deviation from certain temporal norms. Importantly, this manoeuvre also illustrates how normative timelines are classed and spatialised – different identities associated with place and space not only entail different resources but also grant access to alternative temporal schedules.

Flyer described how she employs the identity to negotiate with the potential norm enforcers from her partner's family regarding childbearing plans during their wedding:

> I managed it. […] (Compared with) the girls at similar ages from his hometown, there really is a big difference in how we speak, including some girls who might not even be able to say complete sentences in public settings. And I wasn't like, um, doing the conventional type of reciting vows and then crying and sniffling. I was gracious and confident throughout, and the way I spoke was reassuring to the elders, so they could tell the difference... […] And when they saw me, they thought, 'Hey, she's different, she's a cosmopolitan girl, there's something special about her.' So they wouldn't constantly nag like they do to others in their hometown every day, 'Oh, go have a child'.

This passage reveals Flyer's perception of how her identity performance affects the application of childbearing norms in her interactions with others. In her understanding, by embodying the "cosmopolitan girl" identity through her speech, confidence, and demeanour,

she creates a situation where norm enforcers apply different expectations to her. She perceives that her metropolitan distinction exempts her from the immediate pressure to have children, precisely because women in "first-tier city" can be associated with alternative normative scripts that prioritise independence and career. Whether or not her in-laws actually perceive her exactly as she describes, her belief in the protective power of this metropolitan identity shapes how she herself navigates these interactions. She interprets the reduced pressure about childbearing as a response to her distinctive identity. The case of Flyer illustrates how individuals actively employ identity-based strategies in negotiating with normative timelines of childbearing.

What makes Flyer's case particularly revealing is that she does not fundamentally reject traditional gender roles or norms – during our conversation, she explicitly embraced becoming a "virtuous wife and good mother" ("贤妻良母"). This indicates that her deployment of the identity of a "cosmopolitan girl" contrasted with a traditional gender role is strategic rather than representing a complete rejection of normative values. She selectively mobilises aspects of her cosmopolitan identity to navigate temporal norms while possibly accepting other aspects of traditional gender roles. This selective identity deployment demonstrates how individuals can navigate multiple, sometimes contradictory identity frameworks to create space for autonomy in childbearing decision-making without complete rejection of traditional values.

This identity deployment is directly enabled by migration. The physical movement to Shenzhen creates not just spatial distance from norm enforcers but access to the cosmopolitan identity category with its associated alternative life course expectations. Without this migration experience, Flyer would lack access to this identity resource for negotiating reproductive norms. Her emphatic declaration "Come on! I am a cosmopolitan girl!" thus

represents not merely self-description but a migration-enabled assertion of identity that creates space for reproductive autonomy within otherwise constraining normative contexts.

6.1.4.2 Mak: "They can't see I am a lawyer."

While Flyer's case demonstrates how migrants leverage cosmopolitan identities, Mak reveals how identity-based strategies can also function for locals through strategic differentiation from "typical" local patterns. Mak's case shows how she actively mobilises her professional and educational identity specifically to justify deviating from the normative reproductive timelines and differentiating herself from the local others. As the only native Shenzhen resident among my participants, Mak's case provides crucial insights into how identity-based strategies operate within the migration context of Shenzhen.

In Chapter 4, Mak described how "locals" are perceived as marrying and having children early, often relying on land-based dividends rather than pursuing higher education or professional careers. Revisiting her account here, what becomes clear is how she actively distances herself from this "typical" local identity by contrasting her own reproductive orientation with theirs. Through her reflections, she articulated the intersections of migration, identity, and fertility behaviours in ways that illuminate how identity categories are negotiated in Shenzhen's unique social landscape, as evident in the following quote:

> In Shenzhen, most people's impression of locals is that they marry very early and have children very early. Most of the locals around me who didn't study... that is, didn't go to university or graduate school, or my former high school classmates who just attended vocational college or stopped studying after high school, I found they tend to marry earlier and have children earlier.

Through this comparison, Mak does more than simply describe social differences: she mobilises her professional status as a lawyer and postgraduate education as resources to reclassify herself into a different normative track. By attaching early marriage and

childbearing to "less educated locals," she claims an alternative identity position – educated professional woman – which carries different, and more permissive, reproductive timelines. This strategy highlights two important dynamics. First, it shows how identity categories are not fixed but can be subdivided and redefined in ways that create legitimate space for deviation from normative expectations. Second, it underscores how classed markers such as education and profession intersect with local identity to produce multiple, competing temporal frameworks. For Mak, delaying childbearing is not presented as a refusal of local norms per se, but as alignment with a different, equally legitimate identity category.

Mak explicitly reinforces this differentiation by connecting her professional identity as a lawyer to alternative reproductive timelines through workplace observations:

> The people in my team are basically all in relationships, and they only consider marriage and childbearing around age 30. […] Considering childbearing and marriage around age 30, after you've worked in the same place for seven or eight years, is actually a very good thing, because I've seen many benefits in these women. First, their emotions are very stable. Second, their thinking is mature. Third, they already have a certain... position in the workplace, yes, they have people working under them, so they don't need to work so hard themselves. Fourth, their income is very stable, so childbearing won't affect their position or income.

This detailed articulation of the benefits of later childbearing for professional women reveals how Mak actively constructs an alternative normative framework through her professional identity. Rather than simply describing professional women's patterns, she frames postponing childbearing as superior ("a very good thing") with specific advantages. This framing transforms what might otherwise be seen as norm deviation into a superior approach for her social category.

The identity-based nature of her strategy becomes even more explicit when she contrasts her situation with relatives from her husband's rural hometown:

> When I went back to my husband's hometown in Zhanjiang, their traditional concepts are very strong. […] Their brothers' wives and sisters basically never work, and they're all at home bearing children and raising children. Then I told my husband, I think people there don't respect women at all. […] I told him, in their minds, they only see your role as a mother and wife, but they don't see your role as someone's daughter, or that my profession is a lawyer.

The assertion that "my profession is a lawyer" is a strategic claim to an identity that she believes should carry different reproductive expectations. By contrasting her professional status with the traditional gender role she observed among her husband's relatives in rural Zhanjiang, she challenges the legitimacy of applying such reproductive timelines to her own situation. Despite Shenzhen locals often being associated with patterns closer to rural fertility norms, as noted earlier, Mak constructs an alternative identity positioning. This demonstrates how identity agency in China's restrictive reproductive context operates not simply through fulfilling established role expectations, but through strategically aligning with identity categories that legitimise alternative timelines.

While not directly connected to personal migration experience like Flyer, Mak's identity strategy is nevertheless also enabled by Shenzhen's migration context. The city's status as a migrant destination creates a comparative framework of rural-urban dichotomy that she deploys in her identity positioning. The cases of both Flyer and Mak reveal how they leverage different identity resources from their respective positions. Despite their different social locations – Flyer as a migrant emphasising her cosmopolitan status, Mak as a local emphasising her educational and professional distinction – both strategically mobilise identity to access alternative reproductive timelines. This further demonstrates how identity-based

strategies can function across different social positions, with individuals deploying whatever identity resources are available to them to navigate reproductive norms. This reveals an important dimension of how migration enables reproductive agency – not just through physical distance from norm enforcers, but also through access to identity resources associated with place and mobility that create culturally legitimate space for autonomous fertility timelines.

To summarise, the strategic deployment of identity revealed in these cases extends our understanding of agency within normative constraints. Building on Hitlin and Elder's (2007) conception of identity agency, which emphasises how identities guide action toward fulfilling role expectations, my research highlights how individuals mobilise specific identities to create legitimate space for deviating from reproductive norms. Applying identity agency to the negotiation of childbearing timelines represents a novel contribution, showing that individuals strategically claim membership in categories with recognised alternative temporal expectations. This demonstrates how agency within constraints operates not just by working within or against normative systems, but by mobilising the complex, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory identity frameworks that exist within these systems.

6.1.5 Summarising: Contextualising Agency as Spatial and Interactional

The four strategic approaches examined above collectively offer important theoretical insights that extend our understanding of agency within normative constraints. There are several key theoretical contributions of the framework presented above. First, while previous research has mostly theorised the temporal dimensions of agency, my findings reveal how agency is simultaneously spatial in nature. Migration plays a crucial role across the strategies in navigating temporal constraints, though in different ways. For accommodation strategies, spatial distance creates the conditions for strategic avoidance and information control. For transformation and redirection strategies, migration often provides the comparative

perspectives and economic independence that enable more equal communicative exchanges with parents. Finally, identity-based strategies depend directly on the alternative identity resources made available through migration or the urban context it creates.

Crucially, migration emerges not merely as the background context, as Giddens (1984) initially conceptualised, but as a constitutive element of agency in life course planning. First, Shenzhen as a migrant metropolis provides both the material conditions and the cultural atmosphere in which such agency can be exercised. As discussed in Chapter 4, for participants, the choice to migrate to Shenzhen – rather than returning to their hometowns after graduation – embodies personal self-identification and their life planning. This divergence highlights the inherent connection between migration and delaying childbearing: those who relocate often prioritise career development, experiment with non-normative lifestyles, and seek independence from family influence, thereby accumulating resources and capacities for negotiating reproductive norms. The spatial dimension is particularly significant, as the physical distance, economic opportunities, cultural repertoires, and identity transformations enabled by Shenzhen's migrant context furnish specific tactical advantages in navigating temporal expectations. Migration thus represents both an initial act of agency and an enabling environment, shaping how individuals strategically negotiate the timing of childbearing.

Second, this represents an important extension of Giddens' (1984) theoretical work on time and place in structuration theory, providing empirical evidence of how these dimensions interact in concrete practices of agency. By examining how individuals negotiate the childbearing norms within the migration context, this research demonstrates that agency operates in intersecting ways between time and place. The specific mechanisms that I have identified through interactive nuances show how spatial positioning – particularly through

migration – creates distinctive possibilities for negotiating temporal norms that would be unavailable in other contexts.

Building upon this spatial conceptualisation of agency, I will next engage with Flaherty' (2003) concept of "time work" to examine the temporal dimensions of agency to consolidate the spatio-temporal nature of agency. The strategies discussed thus far demonstrate how spatial positioning creates particular possibilities for negotiating normative pressures, but they also represent ways of engaging with temporal structures through concrete interactions with norm enforcers. It is this active engagement with normative structures that constitutes a form of temporal practice, a concept I will explore further in the next section.

6.2 Re-engaging: Delaying Childbearing as *Temporal Structuration*

The preceding analysis has established how individuals employ various strategic approaches to navigate childbearing norms. While the temporal dimension of delaying childbearing in its relation to time and the agentic nature of these strategies may seem straightforward, their intersection requires more sophisticated theoretical engagement. This section develops a framework for understanding delaying childbearing not merely as passive waiting or simple resistance, but as what I term *temporal structuration* – an active engagement with social structures that reflects the duality between individual agency and temporal norms, grounded in the empirical context of contemporary urban China.

6.2.1 Theoretical Engagement: Time Work & Temporal Agency

Flaherty's (2003) concept of "time work" provides a useful starting point for this analysis. Time work is defined as "individual or interpersonal efforts to create or suppress particular kinds of temporal experience" (Flaherty, 2003: 17). This concept emphasises individual agency in shaping subjective temporal experiences, suggesting that people actively work to make time feel to pass quickly or slowly, to create particular qualities of temporal experience. Flaherty (2011) has further developed it into the concept of "temporal agency,"

which refers to individuals' capacity to actively construct and manage their temporal experiences rather than passively experiencing time as externally determined. This understanding of temporal agency differs from other temporal approaches to agency in sociological literature as I reviewed earlier. While Emirbayer & Mische's (1998) "chordal triad" framework examines how agency operates through temporal orientations (past, present, future), and Hitlin and Elder (2007) identify different forms of agency based on temporal horizons, Flaherty's approach focuses specifically on agency over temporal experience itself. Evans' (2007) bounded agency concept, while acknowledging temporal constraints, does not directly address how individuals actively shape their experience of time within these boundaries.

Although Flaherty integrates temporality and agency more explicitly than many other theorists, he also acknowledges key limitations in his conceptualisation of time work. Flaherty (2003) situates temporal agency firmly within existing social structures, emphasising individuals' capacity to shape their subjective experience of time across dimensions such as duration, sequence, frequency, timing, and allocation, without directly challenging structural arrangements. While this framework offers valuable insight into how agency is exercised at the level of temporal experience, it leaves under-theorised how temporal practices interact with, respond to, or potentially reshape social structures through ongoing social processes. As a result, Flaherty's approach foregrounds subjective temporal agency but offers a relatively constrained account of its structural implications – an analytical gap that becomes particularly salient in contexts such as childbearing negotiations, where temporal practices are inseparable from normative and institutional pressures.

6.2.2 Theoretical Establishment: Proposing "*Temporal Structuration*"

Grounded in the empirical context of delaying childbearing, my research advances beyond Flaherty's (2013) framework by demonstrating that temporal agency unfolds not only

within social structures but also through active engagement with the temporal norms of childbearing. Drawing on Giddens' (1984) concept of structuration, which emphasises the duality of structure and agency, I propose *temporal structuration* as a framework for understanding how individuals both draw upon and engage with temporal structures through their reproductive timing practices. The strategic negotiations examined in previous sections reveal delaying childbearing not as passive waiting, nor merely "time work" shaping their own subjective temporal experience, but exists in a dynamic and strong relationship with the structure and constraints in childbearing timing.

I establish the framework of *temporal structuration* through the following three dimensions of analysis. First, delaying childbearing is a temporal practice constituting active temporal agency rather than passive submission to circumstances. As demonstrated through the diverse strategies employed by participants, delay represents not the absence of action but sophisticated tactical engagement with normative pressures. When Flyer strategically deploys her cosmopolitan identity, when Rain carefully manages information disclosure, or when Uma strategically times her hometown visits, they are constructing their temporal experience through engagement with normative expectations. This active dimension reflects, confirms and maintains Flaherty's (2013) arguments about temporal agency that individuals actively shape their temporal experience.

Second, beyond the shaping of subjective experience, all four strategic approaches presented above illustrate intensive forms of interaction with norms and structures, rather than remaining confined within them. Even accommodation – often perceived as passive – entails active engagement. Individuals selectively disclose information, deflect conversations, or enact performative compliance to manage normative pressures. These tactics do not dismantle the norm but reconfigure how it operates in practice, carving out space for autonomy without direct confrontation. Each strategy thus represents a distinctive way of

negotiating the tension between temporal experience and normative expectations, showing how agency manifests through ongoing interaction with structure, even as it remains constrained by it. This insight resonates with Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, particularly its emphasis on the duality of structure and agency, and extends it into the temporality perspective developed by Flaherty's (2013) notion of temporal agency.

Third, regarding the outcome of the agency exertion and its influence on the structure inherent in Giddens' structuration theory, these strategic negotiations presented in the research have two important and interrelated manifestations. Firstly, through the agentic negotiations, individuals create present temporal autonomy while simultaneously acknowledging and engaging with structural constraints, manifesting the idea of agency within structural constraints. By successfully negotiating space for non-reproduction in the present, participants achieve their desired temporal experience – not having children yet – while still operating within social relationships where normative expectations exist.

More importantly, these strategic negotiations potentially contribute to broader transformations in temporal norms through their cumulative and collective practice. While individual acts of delaying may not immediately change normative expectations, their collective enactment represents a form of "practice-based resistance". Through the achieved present results of non-reproduction in individual cases, the group practices may gradually shift what is considered a normal or acceptable timeline of childbearing. This potential for structural transformation through practice further fulfils the duality component of structuration theory and extends beyond Flaherty's (2003) acknowledged limitations of time work, suggesting that temporal agency may indeed challenge the status quo over active engagement through time and with time.

The transformative potential of delaying is particularly evident in how participants' strategies interact with norm enforcers. When Joyce engages her parents in philosophical

discussions about the purpose of having children, when Mak challenges the economic logic of early childbearing, or when Flyer successfully establishes different expectations based on her cosmopolitan identity, they are not simply creating personal autonomy but potentially shifting the normative frameworks themselves. Even accommodative strategies can indirectly challenge the norms; in using these strategies, individuals are practising alternate timelines by delaying childbearing. Cumulatively, these strategies may also see normative timelines gradually replaced by alternative reproductive timelines.

Through this analysis, I propose *temporal structuration* as a theoretical framework that engages Giddens' (1984) structuration theory and Flaherty's (2002, 2003, 2013) concept of time work but extends beyond either of them. With nuanced analysis and vivid cases of delaying childbearing, I capture how individuals not only shape their subjective temporal experiences but also engage with normative structures through their temporal practices. This framework recognises agency not as freedom from constraint but as situated engagement with constraints that creates space for autonomy within relational contexts. Delaying childbearing thus emerges not as passive waiting or simple resistance, but as a sophisticated form of temporal practice that exemplifies the duality between individual agency and normative structure in the context of reproductive timing.

6.3 Conclusion

This chapter has examined how individuals navigate temporal norms of childbearing through various strategic approaches in the context of migration in urban China. Through detailed analysis of participants' narratives, I have identified four distinct strategies through which they negotiate normative pressures: Accommodation Strategies, Transformation Strategies, Strategic Redirection, and Identity-Based Strategies. These strategies reveal sophisticated forms of agency that operate not through simple resistance or compliance, but through nuanced engagement with normative structures. Drawing on these findings, I propose

two key theoretical contributions that extend our understanding of agency in life course decisions.

The first significant contribution of this research is the exemplification and contextualisation of the spatio-temporal agency as theoretically argued by Giddens (1984). Through detailed case studies, I demonstrate that migration to Shenzhen creates a distinctive socio-spatial context that enables particular forms of agency to negotiate normative pressure around childbearing timing. Rather than viewing spatial and temporal dimensions of agency as parallel but separate phenomena, I argue that they are fundamentally intertwined – migration becomes not merely a background context, but an active resource strategically deployed in temporal negotiations around childbearing. By examining these intersecting dimensions, this research contributes to theoretical understandings of agency as simultaneously spatial and temporal, revealing how individuals strategically mobilise geographic distance to reconfigure their temporal possibilities in life course planning.

The second theoretical contribution lies in deepening our understanding of agency across multiple dimensions. Firstly, this research extends temporal conceptions of agency through the framework of *temporal structuration*, moving beyond Flaherty's (2002, 2003, 2013) focus on subjective temporal experiences to examine how individuals actively engage with social structures through temporal practices. The diverse strategies identified in this research demonstrate how individuals not only shape their experience of time but also negotiate the relationship between their temporal practices and normative expectations. Secondly, this research contributes to understanding the micro-level mechanisms through which individuals interact with norms in everyday life. While much previous research has focused on either structural constraints or broad patterns of agency, this analysis reveals the specific tactical engagements through which individuals navigate normative pressures in concrete interactions with norm enforcers in the context of childbearing decision-making.

This granular understanding helps bridge the gap between abstract theoretical principles and lived experiences of agency.

Third, this research demonstrates how agency operates within the highly constrained context of childbearing norms in China. Despite the stringent normative expectations around reproductive timing, participants find creative ways to negotiate space for individual autonomy without directly challenging these norms. While this chapter has emphasised the various agentic strategies individuals employ, it is crucial to recognise that these all represent forms of agency within constraints rather than freedom from them. This fundamental reality was vividly captured in my conversation with Deere, who, despite her confident and rebellious spirit in resisting childbearing temporal norms, still married at the socially expected age. When I questioned this apparent contradiction, she explained it using a Chinese idiom that translates roughly as "an arm cannot beat a thigh" ("胳膊拧不过大腿") – acknowledging that one can hardly completely contradict or transform social rules.

What makes this insight particularly revealing is that Deere did not frame this compliance as a limitation but as "shrewdness" – an agentic optimisation of her position within unchangeable social rules. This reframing illustrates a nuanced level of agency within constraints – strategically interpreting social constraints to negotiate the helplessness in contradicting the constraint. Each participant in this research, operating within their individual social position and with their specific resources, pursued their desired life timeline through flexible adaptation to their particular circumstances, but always within the broader structural constraints that shape reproductive possibilities in contemporary China.

Despite the sophisticated strategies individuals employ to negotiate with norm enforcers, it is important to recognise that these enforcers – primarily parents and family members – are not truly adversaries. In this "war without gunpowder," there are endless emotional wounds: the young adults' hurt, suppression, and frustration; parents'

disappointment, anxiety, and resignation. In this struggle unfolding in the most intimate relationships, regardless of the outcome, there are no winners – all are victims of normative systems that constrain individual autonomy regarding childbearing and broader life trajectory. The strategic negotiations documented in this chapter reveal not just individual agency but the social and emotional costs of normative pressures around childbearing timing. When Rain pretends to listen to her father while internally disengaging, when Uma strategically avoids extended family during holidays, when Joyce engages in exhausting philosophical debates with her parents about the purpose of childbearing – these strategies create space for temporary relief but often at significant relational and emotional cost.

This recognition of costs reminds us that agency within constraints is never free from consequence. The very strategies that create space for individual autonomy may simultaneously create distance, misunderstanding, or tension in family relationships. Yet participants persist in these negotiations precisely because reproductive timing represents such a fundamental aspect of life course planning – too important to simply surrender to external expectations, yet too embedded in intimate relationships to address through simple opposition. Through the framework of *temporal structuration*, this chapter has demonstrated how individuals actively engage with temporal norms through strategic negotiations that create space for autonomous life timelines while acknowledging structural constraints. This understanding reveals delaying childbearing not as passive waiting or simple resistance, but as sophisticated temporal practice that exemplifies the duality between individual agency and social structure in reproductive timing – a duality simultaneously enabled and complicated by the spatial dynamics of migration.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION: The Gendered Architecture and Hidden Burden of Delaying Childbearing

7.1 The Unequal Weight of Delay

This research journey began with the recognition that delaying childbearing needed to be analysed as more than a demographic trend. Shifting the previous focus on the "what" and "why" questions of delayed childbearing to "how" people delay childbearing in practice constitutes a window into broader social transformations around temporality, agency, and structural constraint. The analysis unfolded across three interconnected steps. Chapter 4 situated the study in Shenzhen, a distinctive migrant city, and demonstrated how migration intersects with personal identity and life planning. Chapter 5 advanced a novel temporal framework mapping age, sequence, and duration norms, revealing the highly prescriptive temporal expectations that structure the timing of family formation. Chapter 6 analysed the sophisticated strategic practices through which individuals navigate these constraints, identifying four main approaches working within and around prescriptive expectations.

Taken together, these chapters show that delaying childbearing is not a simple act of postponement, but a socially situated practice that requires continuous negotiation with powerful normative timelines. The very sophistication of the strategies observed underscores not the freedom of individual choice, but the weight of constraint. To delay childbearing even temporarily demands sustained effort, emotional work, and strategic positioning, revealing how deeply temporal expectations continue to structure young adults' lives despite broader social changes.

Significantly, the participants in this research possess relatively ample social resources to mobilise in response to these pressures: 95% hold undergraduate or graduate degrees, many originate from urban backgrounds and well-off families, and most have

professional careers that provide them with economic independence. Yet even these highly educated, economically privileged individuals find the process of delaying childbearing systematically challenging and emotionally taxing. This raises profound concerns about the experiences of those lacking such resources – individuals without higher education, stable employment, family financial support, or professional mobility options. For those unable to gain access to the strategic resources documented in this research, the structural pressures around reproductive timing likely create even more severe constraints on life course flexibility and personal autonomy.

Furthermore, many of the strategic practices analysed in this research depend on migration – the ability to create spatial distance from family monitoring and social pressure. Migration emerged in this thesis not simply as a background condition but as a constitutive dimension of agency. Spatial mobility provides individuals with opportunities to reconfigure how and where normative pressures are encountered, thereby reshaping the possibilities for delaying childbearing. As one participant aptly remarked, “As migrants, at least we have a fallback.” This reflection captures a broader truth: migration creates not only practical buffers against normative enforcement but also an alternative horizon of possibility, a sense that life trajectories can be renegotiated beyond the confines of a single place. In this sense, mobility exemplifies how agency is exercised through the intersection of time and space – how individuals expand their temporal room for manoeuvre precisely by shifting their spatial position.

However, migration itself represents a form of resource and capability that remains inaccessible to many individuals. Not everyone possesses the economic means, educational credentials, professional opportunities, or personal and family circumstances that enable geographic mobility. When Spring Festival gatherings become sites of reproductive pressure, not everyone can return to distant work locations to escape family scrutiny. In social

environments where migration options are unavailable, individuals may face more sustained and irreconcilable pressure and contradiction around reproductive timing expectations. Nonetheless, as discussed in Chapter 4, individuals who choose migration often possess existing preferences for non-normative life planning, while those who do not (choose to) migrate may feel more comfortable with or be more willing to accommodate normative life course timelines. Thus, the question of whether migration is best understood as an option, a resource, or an embodied capacity remains open, and while beyond the scope of this thesis, it represents an important direction for further research and debate.

7.2 The Gendered Architecture of Delay

Beyond differences in resources and social positions, the analysis needs to address a more fundamental axis of inequality – gender. While gender was less foregrounded in the preceding chapters, it has remained an implicit thread woven throughout this research. To fully understand delaying childbearing in contemporary China, it ought to be made explicit: every negotiation, every strategy, every anxiety is saturated with gendered meanings. The trajectory of migration, the pressures of normative time, the hidden reproductive labour, and the vulnerabilities within relationships during the process of delaying are not neutral struggles; they are profoundly structured by gender. Women disproportionately carry compressed timelines, hidden labour, and relational precarity, while men are socially positioned with extended fertility and greater structural flexibility.

7.2.1 Migration and the Gendered Division of Spatial Mobility

The analysis of migration in the research reveals distinctly a gendered pattern in family responses to spatial mobility decisions. Multiple female participants reported that their families explicitly opposed their migration plans with reference to their gender, arguing that it is better for women to pursue stable lives and employment rather than the perceived instability associated with geographic mobility.

Vel's migration narrative exemplifies this gendered opposition. Despite her family's claims of gender equality – her grandparents "were not the kind of people who favour boys over girls" and instilled beliefs that "you're amazing, you're strong" – her decision to move from Chengdu to Shenzhen met with overt resistance: "They said 'you're sick! There's no one who makes decisions like this... Why are you going there?'" Her family's alternative vision involved staying locally: "You stay here, when your boyfriend graduates, you two get married, buy a house in Chengdu, the family will support you... How happy this would be." The opposition framed stability and proximity as a happy scenario, while her pursuit of personal development through migration appeared as a dangerous deviation.

Similarly, Deere described systematic family intervention in her educational and migration decisions. When she wanted to leave her home province, Hubei, for university, her "grandparents, uncle, and mother all didn't want me to go so far... They think (that because) I'm a girl." The family justified this through protective discourse – "They don't want a girl to run that far away". Kevin's narrative further reveals the gender contrast. His wife's family initially opposed their relationship precisely because "Guangdong people don't let their daughters marry outside the region." His partner's family required him to provide guarantees about remaining in Guangdong province given he is from Northeastern China and requested that he purchase property near Shenzhen to secure their approval. The geographic constraint applied specifically to preventing female migration, while his mobility remained unquestioned. This dynamic operates along the lines of Kandiyoti's (1988) patriarchal bargains, and is akin to what other scholarship refers to as "patriarchal protection" (such as Newman, 1999) – where family opposition is framed as concern for women's wellbeing but in practice constrains women's autonomy and opportunities.

7.2.2 Temporal Pressure as Gendered Burden

The temporal expectations of age and duration discussed in Chapter 5 place uneven burdens on women, particularly through the age-based pressures of childbearing linked to biological limits. In conversations with male participants, fertility planning was often framed with reference to their partners' decisions. Statements such as Andy's remark that "The decision definitely lies with her" outwardly signal respect for women's autonomy, yet they also reveal how the weight of temporal responsibility is disproportionately shifted onto women. Men may position themselves as supportive, but this support frequently entails remaining relatively insulated from the consequences of timing, while women must confront the compressed fertility window and navigate its difficult trade-offs.

Andy simultaneously emphasised age constraints applying primarily to women: "If we want two children, we definitely need to start around age 30, otherwise it's quite dangerous for women." While expressing concern for women's bodies, men maintain temporal flexibility and advantage, with reproductive risks and timing pressure falling on their female partners.

The gendered pressure also manifests through the ways women's bodies are narrated and evaluated in terms of their reproductive capacity. When Long elaborated on their plan to have children at around age 28, his account centred almost entirely on the conditions of his wife's body. He explained:

> My wife doesn't really like exercising, and her health has never been very strong. She often feels weak, has cold hands and feet in winter, and catches colds easily. […] Her frame is also quite small – she's only about 153 cm, compared to my 180 cm – so I've been worried about whether there might be risks in childbearing.

Long also described how he tried to "supplement" her body with food or traditional medicine to improve her *qi* (literally means breath) and blood circulation, explicitly linking

these efforts to preparing her for future childbearing. His concern, while genuine, frames his wife's everyday health not as an independent matter of wellbeing but as a problem to be solved in relation to pregnancy. This narrative demonstrates what can be termed "reproductive embodiment" – women's bodies are envisioned and assessed primarily through anticipated reproductive outcomes. In Long's perspective, his wife's physical attributes are evaluated in terms of potential fertility risks, with her health articulated through a reproductive lens. Rather than separating health and autonomy from reproduction, this framing absorbs them into reproductive functionality, reinforcing how gendered pressure operates through the embodiment of women's bodies.

Duration expectations within relationships add another layer of gendered burden, as the same length of time is judged differently for men and women. As shown in Chapter 5, a prolonged relationship without childbearing is often interpreted as "wasting women's time," given the biological limits of female fertility. Male participants frequently framed this as a matter of responsibility toward their partners, describing themselves as considerate for recognising women's temporal constraints. Yet this framing simultaneously shifts the pressure of coordination onto women, highlighting how apparent sensitivity can coexist with – and even reproduce – underlying gendered temporal inequalities.

Taken together, these narratives reveal that the temporal pressure of childbearing is socially gendered. Women live under accelerated timelines, their bodies read as countdown clocks, their years weighed more heavily, and their delays regarded as riskier. Men, by contrast, remain temporally and morally buffered – able to claim sensitivity without sharing vulnerability, able to delay reproduction for a longer period with much less existential cost.

7.2.3 Risk, Responsibility, and the Reproductive Second Shift

During the period of delaying childbearing, people often describe reproductive planning as a joint endeavour between couples, yet the consequences of unintended

pregnancy fall almost exclusively on women. This unequal distribution of reproductive risk constitutes a systematic asymmetry, though often represented as shared decision-making.

The gendered responsibility for reproductive risk became particularly clear in the account of one participant, who requested anonymity. She explained that for women, the consequences of an unintended pregnancy extend far beyond the private sphere, carrying severe professional and economic implications:

> I very much dislike having changes… if something suddenly happens that makes me feel out of control, that's actually very scary. Particularly having children, pregnancy is too risky for me. It's not just a child, it's not just as simple as having a child.

Her concern was about the vulnerability that an unplanned childbirth would create in the workplace and at home. Married but childless women in this study consistently reported systematic discrimination in hiring, promotion, and career transitions (see Chapter 5). In this context, an unplanned pregnancy could derail her employment and undermine the financial independence on which her reproductive autonomy depends. As she put it, her husband's current income alone "cannot support our whole family," making her earnings essential for sustaining the possibility of delay.

Acknowledging that she "cannot afford this risk," she adopted dual contraceptive measures: secretly using an intrauterine device (IUD) without her husband's knowledge, while also deploying barrier methods he endorsed. This hidden, invasive, and psychologically taxing labour highlights how the responsibility for managing reproductive risk falls disproportionately on women. They are compelled to prevent unintended pregnancies to buffer themselves against structural discrimination in the labour market beyond family negotiations.

The participant's narrative also reveals the extent of hidden reproductive labour required to sustain delaying. At age 32, she described undergoing "very detailed

examinations of pelvic cavity, fallopian tubes, follicles every year to ensure when I want children, I can immediately remove the IUD and get pregnant." She orchestrated annual fertility testing not only for herself but also for her husband: "I also require my husband to do a male fertility check during his annual physical examination, and he is very cooperative." The contrast is telling. While her husband receives praise for being "cooperative" with testing she requests and coordinates, she bears the invisible burden of researching, scheduling, monitoring, and managing both their reproductive health.

This invisible, ongoing labour illustrates what can be conceptualised as "reproductive second shift": during the process of delaying childbearing, women perform relentless temporal and bodily work – consulting doctors, undergoing medical procedures, recording health data, managing contraception, monitoring fertility – while simultaneously devising continuous strategies to negotiate with prescriptive reproductive timelines. Crucially, much of this labour remained invisible even to their partners, who experienced the process merely as "mutual planning" while receiving credit for cooperation with strategies they neither initiated nor managed. The husband's "cooperation" becomes a form of praised participation, while the woman's orchestration of the entire reproductive risk management system remains unrecognised labour. These dynamics overall demonstrate how reproductive agency is a gendered negotiation that demands invisible, unremunerated, and unshared effort.

7.2.4 Gendered Burdens of Delay in Intimate Relationships

The deepest gendered burden of delaying childbearing lies in women's acute awareness that, within intimate relationships, their biological timeline is shorter than their male partners'. This asymmetry places women in a more vulnerable position, requiring them to shoulder much of the emotional work associated with anticipating and managing potential regret of remaining childless. Many female participants delaying childbearing expressed anxiety that they might desire children only at a stage when their reproductive capacity had

declined, while still feeling unprepared for immediate parenthood. The possibility of future regret thus weighs unequally on women and men. For women, the scope for changing their mind is more strictly constrained: once fertility declines, options narrow sharply. By contrast, men's longer reproductive window gives them comparatively greater flexibility – if they later regret delaying or remaining childfree, the possibility of pursuing parenthood remains more open to them, including through partnering with younger women.

This asymmetry produces a distinctive relationship vulnerability for women. The cost of future regret is not simply the loss of potential parenthood but the potential rupture of intimate relationships. Both Joyce and Rain acknowledged the possibility that if their partners later desired children, divorce would be the likely outcome. Joyce's matter-of-fact response exemplifies this awareness, noting pragmatically that "Many people get married, have children, and still divorce." Rain, who made it clear before marriage that remaining childfree was her bottom line, noted that if her husband later changed his mind about wanting children, she would not compromise: "If we really reach this irreconcilable step, I can't make compromises... Divorce."

While these responses demonstrate courage and resilience, they reveal the systematic gendered nature of temporal vulnerability and relationship risk. Men's extended fertility affords them the possibility of exiting one relationship and re-entering parenthood elsewhere. However, women face temporal compression without comparable alternatives. They need to simultaneously manage present delay strategies while calculating future fertility possibilities, knowing that temporal miscalculation could result not only in reproductive regret but also in relationship loss. Such emotional work is highly gendered, as male partners experience less intensely due to their temporal advantages.

To summarise, across mobility, timing, reproductive risk, and intimate relationships, the architecture of delaying childbearing reveals itself as fundamentally gendered. The

strategies participants employed – creative, resourceful, persistent – are evidence less of unfettered freedom than of the structural inequalities that necessitate such ingenuity. At the same time, it is important to emphasise that revealing these gendered imbalances is not intended to frame couples as adversaries. On the contrary, many male partners in this study demonstrated care and consideration by refraining from exerting reproductive pressure and by respecting their partners' preferences. Such gestures are meaningful, especially given the disproportionate physical, psychological, and professional burdens women bear in reproductive decision-making. The purpose of highlighting these asymmetries is therefore not to reinforce division, but to make visible the additional labour women carry so that it may be better recognised, understood, and shared. Only through such recognition can couples form stronger alliances to face together the risks of time, the weight of external pressures, and the challenges of both childbearing and remaining childfree.

7.3 The Temporal Experience of Delaying Childbearing

Beyond the gendered dimensions analysed above, summarising delaying childbearing through a temporal lens reveals how time itself becomes a mechanism of constraint that transforms the lived experience of reproductive decision-making. Time operates simultaneously as life's most precious resource and as a structural force that shapes daily experience through chronic anxiety, strategic burden, and fundamental reordering of life course development.

7.3.1 Temporal Dread and Life Stage Transformation

Participants' narratives reveal an early recognition that, despite efforts to delay, reproductive expectations would ultimately prove unavoidable. This created a condition of "temporal dread": living with the anticipation of unwelcome obligations that could not be permanently avoided, yet whose timing and intensity remained uncertain. Such awareness permeated everyday life, transforming family gatherings, holiday celebrations, and even

casual conversations into occasions requiring vigilance and strategic impression management. Reproductive pressure was frequently described as “the most discordant note” in otherwise joyful occasions, illustrating how temporal anxiety infiltrates daily social experience.

As participants entered their late twenties and early thirties, this temporal dread evolved into a reconfiguration of the life stage itself. What might conventionally be understood as a decade of personal growth and exploration became overshadowed by reproductive timelines. The years between 25 and 35 were experienced less as opportunities for organic development than as periods of strategic management, where career ambitions, romantic relationships, and family negotiations had to be coordinated under the shadow of temporal norms of life transitions. Even intimate relationships were redefined through duration expectations, turning love into a measured progression toward reproduction. Marriage, similarly, was often described not as a milestone of celebration but as “locking on reproductive shackles” that accelerated normative pressure.

This continuum – from early anticipatory anxiety to full-scale temporal reordering of adult life – demonstrates how temporal norms compress and constrain the experience of delaying childbearing. While these pressures fall unevenly along gendered lines, with women bearing intensified risks and shortened biological windows, the overarching burden of time as both resource and structural force profoundly shaped the lived experience of most participants.

7.3.2 Time as Accumulating Constraint

The temporal experience involves complex internal negotiations with future uncertainty and potential regret, negotiations shaped by time’s passage and accumulating weight. When asked to estimate their probability of ultimately remaining childless, no participant provided a figure exceeding 50%. This acknowledgement reflects not only awareness of intensifying external pressure but also understanding that time carries the

possibility of internal transformation – their own reproductive desires might shift as they age, making current resistance feel increasingly futile.

Each passing year brings intensified family questioning, heightened biological anxiety, and mounting social isolation from peers following normative timelines. Time does not remain neutral but becomes progressively burdensome, carrying the weight of accumulated family disappointment and increasing biological risk. This temporal accumulation can create a distinctive form of constraint wherein delay becomes self-defeating. The longer participants resist reproductive expectations, the more painful each family gathering becomes, the more complex strategic management grows, and the more uncertain future fertility becomes. Time transforms from a resource enabling strategic flexibility into a source of mounting pressure that makes "getting it over with" seem preferable to continued resistance. The chronic experience of temporal pressure might make reproduction appear as eventual relief from ongoing negotiation.

7.3.3 The Paradox of *Temporal Structuration*

Drawing on the concept of *temporal structuration* developed in this thesis, these temporal experiences reveal a fundamental paradox in how individual agency interacts with structural constraint. While participants' sophisticated temporal practices – their strategic negotiations with timing expectations, creative engagement with normative frameworks, and active construction of alternative timelines – demonstrate remarkable agency and potentially contribute to broader social change through collective practice, this theoretical possibility comes at enormous individual cost in time. The temporal structuration that enables both present autonomy and potential structural change requires each individual to absorb years of chronic anxiety, strategic burden, and painful temporal experience illustrated above.

The potential transformation occurs through the accumulated emotional labour and temporal suffering of countless individuals who must navigate the gap between existing

norms and emerging possibilities. Each participant's successful delay represents both an act of temporal agency and a form of temporal sacrifice – generating possibilities for reimagining reproductive norms while personally bearing the burden of living through a period of normative transition. This temporal experience thus extends beyond reproductive decision-making to encompass a fundamental reordering of how individuals experience time, development, and life course progression during crucial adult years, revealing the individual costs carried in the hope for social change.

7.4 Limitation and Future Research

This investigation represents foundational research into previously underexplored theoretical territory, with limitations reflecting its pioneering orientation toward establishing comprehensive analytical frameworks rather than providing exhaustive analysis of all relevant dimensions. As an innovative study examining delaying childbearing through sociological, temporal and process-oriented lenses in the particular context of China, the research prioritised developing malleable theoretical frameworks – particularly the comprehensive temporal framework encompassing age, sequence, and duration dimensions, and the concept of *temporal structuration* – that could capture commonalities across diverse social contexts and participant backgrounds.

The framework-building approach necessarily limited detailed analysis of variations based on specific demographic categories. The research did not differentiate explicitly between urban-to-urban versus rural-to-urban migration patterns, nor provide systematic examinations of how educational levels, occupational categories, or family economic backgrounds might create differential access to strategic resources. These analytical choices reflected the study's primary goal of identifying shared patterns and developing theoretical frameworks that capture common dynamics within the Chinese context, rather than providing

a comprehensive mapping of individual-level variations in the delaying childbearing phenomenon.

In addition, the recruitment strategy itself constitutes an important limitation. The study explicitly targeted individuals who experienced social pressure surrounding childbearing, which was consistent with the research aim of examining how norms generate pressure and how individuals respond to it. As a result, individuals who do not experience or no longer perceive such pressures may be underrepresented in the sample. This focus may therefore understate the extent to which childbearing norms have weakened or lost salience for certain groups in contemporary urban China, while offering a detailed account of how normative pressure continues to operate where it is felt most acutely.

Because of the necessary constraints of conducting the interviews over the course of a year, the research with the participants was itself constrained by time. The interviews could only capture the research participants' reproductive intentions and strategic practices as they existed during specific interview moments. Nevertheless, by eliciting accounts of natal family influences, relationship histories, and past decision-making processes, as well as inviting participants to speculate about their futures, the research incorporated a longitudinal perspective into the analysis. Of course, these retrospective and prospective narratives were mediated by participants' present vantage points. On the other hand, reproductive decision-making is inherently dynamic, involving ongoing negotiations with changing circumstances, evolving relationships, and shifting personal priorities. Indeed, during the process of thesis writing, several participants updated their childbirth on WeChat with the timing differed from what they had anticipated during interviews. These developments highlight both the fluidity of reproductive decision-making and the methodological challenge of studying temporal processes within the limited frame of a doctoral project.

Future research might therefore pursue longitudinal designs tracking participants across multiple waves of data collection to capture how reproductive intentions, strategic practices, and negotiations with normative timelines evolve over time. Such studies could test whether the *temporal structuration* framework's prediction of gradual normative transformation occurs in practice, examine how individuals adapt their strategies to shifting life circumstances, and explore whether the painful temporal experiences documented here diminish as expectations change. Additionally, comparative work across different demographic groups, regional contexts, and policy environments would illuminate how structural resources shape differential access to temporal agency and strategic possibilities.

7.5 Final Remarks

This thesis has argued that delaying childbearing is not simply a demographic outcome but a deeply social practice. In examining how young adults in China manoeuvre within and against the temporal expectations of childbearing and other life course transitions, the study sheds light on broader questions of how micro-level agency is enacted under constraint, and how modern lives are organised around the discipline of time. To delay is to negotiate with time itself – time as culturally prescribed, as biologically embodied, and as socially enforced. The interdisciplinary nature of delaying childbearing – encompassing demographic, sociological, gender, and temporal dimensions – requires collaborative research approaches capable of capturing the full complexity of it. While this thesis focuses on contemporary China as an empirical case, the analytical frameworks developed here offer broader theoretical insights for understanding delaying childbearing as a global phenomenon affecting diverse social contexts. Its contributions can be understood along two dimensions.

7.5.1 Empirical contributions

This research does not claim to uncover previously unknown phenomena but rather systematically reveals and analyses experiences that resonate deeply with some individuals

living within Chinese society. The study serves as a sociological window into the underlying fabrics of contemporary China – characterised by strong fertility expectations, intensive temporal awareness, and rigorous normative regulation implemented through both formal institutions and informal social interactions. Through detailed documentation of how young people navigate the tensions between normative expectations and contemporary possibilities, the research illuminates the struggles that individuals experience during periods of social change.

By documenting the sophisticated strategies participants employ – Accommodation, Transformation, Redirection, and Identity-based tactics – this study shows that agency in reproductive timing is never straightforward resistance. Instead, it represents a form of hidden labour requiring constant impression management, medical vigilance, relational negotiation, and spatial manoeuvring. The very complexity of these strategies highlights the systematic difficulty of delaying childbearing in China: a process that drains emotional energy, consumes time, and exposes individuals to persistent family and workplace pressure. These findings provide a rare empirical account of how alternative life trajectories are sustained within highly normative reproductive regimes.

While the analysis foregrounds the enduring strength of normative expectations surrounding childbearing, the findings also point to subtle forms of social change in how these norms are understood and engaged with. Rather than being treated as unquestioned life principles, childbearing norms increasingly appear in participants' narratives as explicit social expectations that can be recognised, reflected upon, and strategically negotiated. Many participants demonstrated heightened awareness of normative pressure and articulated their responses in deliberate and self-conscious ways, indicating a shift from taken-for-granted compliance toward more reflexive engagement. In this sense, social change is observed less in the weakening or disappearance of norms themselves than in individuals' growing capacity

to identify norms as such and to exercise agency by working around them. These changes are incremental and uneven, yet they suggest that normative force and individualisation coexist, producing new modes of negotiation rather than wholesale normative transformation.

This research contributes to China studies by illuminating key features of contemporary Chinese society, while simultaneously framing the Chinese experience as a paradigmatic case that enriches global debates. The Chinese context provides analytical insights that extend beyond national boundaries, contributing to international discussions about fertility postponement, temporal agency, and normative negotiation in rapidly changing social contexts.

7.5.2 Theoretical contributions

The research makes three interconnected theoretical advances. First, through the detailed analysis of Shenzhen as a migrant society, the study reveals the distinctive and indigenous identity systems rooted in migration as a structural and socio-historical condition, complicating the traditional rural-urban dichotomy that dominates Chinese migration studies while demonstrating the diminishing effects of *hukou* registration on social positioning and belonging. Second, the research establishes a comprehensive and malleable temporal framework prescribing normative individual life course transitions through age, sequence, and duration dimensions embedded in China, yet offering an analytic lens that may inform studies in other contexts. This framework provides a systematic analysis of how temporal expectations operate as structural constraints while opening pathways for comparative and cross-cultural inquiry.

Third, the study develops the novel theoretical framework of *temporal structuration*, integrating Giddens' (1984) structuration theory with Flaherty's (2003) notion of time work while extending both through empirical analysis of delaying childbearing from a sociological perspective. By conceptualising agency as simultaneously temporal and spatial, this thesis

demonstrates how migration creates new possibilities for negotiating reproductive timelines while revealing the limits of such strategies under persistent normative constraints.

More importantly, this thesis emphasises time as a constitutive dimension of social organisation. Temporal structures do not merely measure life; they actively shape what life courses are possible, desirable, or sanctioned. At the collective level, time functions as an institutional force, synchronising individual trajectories. At the personal level, time is experienced as a scarce resource, compressing life choices. Yet time is not only constraining; it can also be mobilised as a resource and a form of power. Individuals strategically deploy temporal narratives, postponements, and deferrals to create space for autonomy, negotiate with authority, and subtly shift normative expectations. In this sense, the study highlights that time is simultaneously structural and experiential: it regulates, disciplines, and synchronises, but individuals can also mobilise it as a resource – deploying, stretching, or reinterpreting it.

Across all three theoretical contributions, the research reveals how these frameworks are shaped by systematically gendered mechanisms. This analysis shows that delaying childbearing is also a gendered phenomenon that makes visible the broader structural inequalities embedded within temporal expectations and reproductive responsibilities. It points to the need for further research to extend this line of inquiry by examining how gendered temporal norms and reproductive negotiations may evolve across different cohorts, social locations, and institutional contexts, and how such dynamics intersect with ongoing social change.

Ultimately, delaying childbearing in China is not a private deferral but a social diagnosis: it reveals how time disciplines, how gender stratifies, and how agency survives under constraint.

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APPENDIX A

Recruitment Poster

[Original Poster in Chinese]



[English Translation]

Recruitment Poster (English Translation)

PhD Research Interview Recruitment
University of Oxford, Department of Sociology
Ethics approval number: SOC_R2_001_C1A_22_36

Eligibility:

- Married for more than 2 years, without children;
- In a stable relationship of more than 3 years, unmarried and childless;
- In any marital or relationship status, experiencing social pressure regarding reproduction;
- Have children, but have experienced reproductive pressure before and after childbirth.

If you are at least 27 years old, currently living in Shenzhen, and your situation matches one of the above, and you are willing to share your experiences and feelings, please contact me via WeChat/phone: **17610770529**.

I look forward to spending a warm afternoon tea time with you!

APPENDIX B

Information Sheet for Participants

[In Chinese]

性别与生命历程：

中国城市居民关于伴侣关系、婚姻和生育的决策

参与访谈信息说明

牛津大学研究伦理委员会批准参考：[SOC_R2_001_C1A_22_36]

介绍语

您被邀请参加牛津大学社会学系的一项博士研究项目。在您做出决定之前，了解为什么要进行研究以及研究将涉及什么对您来说很重要。请花时间仔细阅读以下信息，如果您愿意，可以与他人讨论是否参与本项目。如果有任何不清楚的地方，或者您是否需要更多信息，请询问我。您可以花点时间决定是否要参加。

为什么开展这个研究？

本研究旨在调查中国城市居民在生命历程中的各个阶段（包括伴侣关系、婚姻和生育）之间转换时的经历和感受。尽管近年来，无论性别如何，人们似乎都通过教育和职业获得了更多权力，并且在个人问题上获得了更多的独立性，但生命历程之间的关键转变，包括步入婚姻和为人父母，仍在日常生活中令人担忧和不知所措。因此，本研究将深入研究个体间的微观互动，以调查他们如何制定、协商和实践关于在交友、婚姻和生育之间进行过渡的决策。

为什么我被邀请参加？

我们邀请您参加这项研究，是因为您可能正在进行但尚未完成生命历程转变，包括步入婚姻和为人父母。该研究特别关注目前居住在深圳、年龄超过 27 岁且没有孩子的城市居民。目标参与者可能已经与伴侣同居超过 3 年或已婚 2 年。该研究计划招募约 80 名男性和女性。

我一定要参加吗？

不，是否参加由您决定。您可以在研究期间随时将此决定告知我，从而退出研究而无需给出理由，也不会产生负面后果。截止 2024 年初左右，您可以撤回您为研究提供的任何信息。您停止参与或拒绝回答特定问题的决定不会影响与研究人员及其他相关团体的关系。如果退出研究，有关您的所有相关数据将立即销毁，匿名性和机密性不会受到损害。

如果我参加这个研究会发生什么？

我期待与您在事先约定的时间和地点进行一次或多次一对一访谈，了解您对伴侣关系、婚姻和生育的个人经历和看法。在您同意的情况下，我想对采访进行录音。根据牛津大学指导的口头信息提供和同意寻求流程，在面谈之前，将获得知情同意并口头记录。每次访谈最长可达两个小时，最理想的情况是在一次两小时的会议中收集研究所需的所有信息。同时，根据信息收集情况，后续可能会向您约见更多其他时间进行访谈。

在面试过程中，您可以自由提及任何（您或您认识的人的）经历或对异性伴侣关系、婚姻和生育的看法。分享您的个人经历时，最好按时间顺序排列，并注明关键时间点。在某些时候，我可能会提出问题来明确理解你的叙述或推动对话，但大部分采访都是针对完全以您为主导的。这也意味着当您对继续访谈感到不自在时，您可以随时要求暂停或停止访谈。在这种情况下，您的决定将得到最大程度的尊重，有关您的所有相关数据将立即被销毁。每次访谈后，录音将被安全存储并随时谨慎匿名。

在参加过程中会有什么潜在的不利和风险吗？

参与这项研究几乎没有可预见的不利或风险，除了在分享您对私密话题的个人经历和看法时可能会因担心信息泄露感到不适之外。但是，我们不会以任何形式收集或记录您参与的任何可识别信息，以将任何风险降至最低。

参与这项研究会有任何好处吗？

虽然参与该项目没有直接的好处，但希望这项研究能为我们创造一个更公平、更自由的环境，让我们在伴侣关系、婚姻和生育问题上做出更独立、自由的决定。非常感谢您通过参与这项研究做出的贡献。访谈期间的餐饮、场地费用将由我承担。

有哪些关于我的信息会被收集？为什么这些信息和你的研究目的相关？

我的研究将收集五种类型的数据，包括研究参与同意书、研究参与者的联系方式、田野笔记、录音和完整的访谈记录。我们将收集口头同意的纸质记录，以验证本研究的伦理公平性。收集联系方式主要是为了在需要后续采访时与您取得联系。田野笔记、录音和笔录是主要的研究资源，将参考叙述分析和扎根理论进行分析，并得出研究结果。它们都不会包含可识别信息，并且会被谨慎和安全地管理。

由于研究数据可能会在博士学习结束后继续用于我对相关主题的进一步研究，所有研究数据，包括同意书、联系方式、实地笔记、录音和访谈记录将被保留，直到该主题的相关研究完成，并在出版或公开发行后至少三年。在研究人员离开牛津大学之前，研究数据将存储在 Nexus365 OneDrive for Business 上，该驱动器已获得牛津大学信息安全团队的批准，可用于存储研究数据并提供自动备份。当研究人员不再与大学有关联时，数据将通过加密的 U 盘安全地传输到加密的笔记本电脑，并受到研究人员的

安全保护。无法识别信息的原始研究数据可通过投稿学术刊物存档，以供日后发表。研究人员、主管和潜在合作者将可以访问研究数据，同时保持所有数据的机密性。

这个研究会被公开发表吗？我的信息会从任何发表物或研究产出中被辨认出吗？

研究结果将写在我的博士论文中，并可能出现在会议报告和学术出版物中。从最终产出中将无法识别您的身份，我希望您允许我在论文中使用直接引语。我会保证在任何研究产出中都将无法识别您的身份。我的论文的副本将以印刷版和在线版的形式保存在牛津大学研究档案馆，在那里它将向公众开放，以促进其在未来研究和社会影响中的使用。

数据保护

牛津大学是您个人数据的管理者，将决定您的个人数据在研究中的使用方式。大学将出于上述研究目的处理您的个人数据。学术研究是一项为了公共利益而进行的任务。有关您对个人数据的权利的更多信息，请访问 https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights。

谁会审核这个研究？

本研究已获得牛津大学中央大学研究伦理委员会下属小组委员会的伦理批准。（伦理参考号：SOC_R2_001_C1A_22_36）。

如果我对这个研究有担忧或不满，我可以联系谁？

如果您对本研究的任何方面有任何疑问，请联系我本人（游希佳，xijia.you@sociology.ox.ac.uk）或我的导师 Man-Yee Kan（man-yee.kan@sociology.ox.ac.uk）和 Rachel Murphy（rachel.murphy@area.ox.ac.uk）。我们将尽力回答您的询问。我们将在 10 个工作日内确认您的疑虑，并告知您将如何处理。如果您仍然不满意或希望提出正式投诉，请联系牛津大学研究伦理委员会主席，他将尽快寻求解决问题：

主席，Agnieszka Swiejkowska；
电子邮件：research@sociology.ox.ac.uk
社会科学与人文学科间研究伦理委员会主席；
电子邮件：ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk；
地址：牛津大学研究服务部，Boundary Brook House，Churchill Drive，Headington，Oxford OX3 7GB

其他信息与联系方式 Further Information and Contact Details

如果您想事先与某人讨论该研究（或者如果您事后有疑问），请联系：

游希佳
英国牛津大学社会学系
42-43 Park End Street, Oxford OX1 1JD, England
学校邮箱：xijia.you@sociology.ox.ac.uk

[In English]

Gender & Life Course: Urban Chinese Decisions on Partnership, Marriage and Childbearing

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference:

[SOC_R2_001_C1A_22_36]

Introductory paragraph

You are being invited to take part in a DPhil research project at the Department of Sociology, University of Oxford. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part.

Why is this research being conducted?

This research aims to investigate the experiences and ideologies of urban Chinese when they transit between life course stages, including partnership, marriage and childbearing. Even though it claims that recent Chinese generations regardless of gender, have been empowered through education and career, and gained more independence on personal issues, critical transitions between life courses, including entering marriage and parenthood, seem to concern and overwhelm individuals in their daily life. Hence, this research will delve into the micro-level interactions among individuals to investigate how they formulate, negotiate and practice ideologies on making transitions among partnership, marriage and childbearing.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You are invited to take part in this research as you might be on the way to but yet, make life course transitions including entering marriage and parenthood. The research particularly looks at urban heterosexual Chinese residents in Guangdong Province, aged over 27 and remain childless. This group of target participants may have been cohabiting with a partner for over 3 years, or married for 2 years. This research plans to recruit around 80 individuals including both males and females.

Do I have to take part?

No. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. You can withdraw yourself from the study without giving a reason, and without negative consequences, by advising me of this decision anytime during the research. The deadline by which you can withdraw any

information you have contributed to the research is around early 2024, before the writing-up of my DPhil thesis. Your decision to stop participating or refusing to answer particular questions will not affect the relationship with the researcher, University of Oxford, or any other group associated with this project. In the event of a withdrawal from the study, all associated data about you will be immediately destroyed and the anonymity and confidentiality will not be jeopardized.

What will happen to me if I take part in the research?

It is expected that you would kindly take one or more one-to-one interviews about your personal experiences and perceptions on partnership, marriage and childbearing, at before-hand appointed time and location. With your consent, I would like to audio record the interview. Before interviews, informed consent will be obtained and recorded orally, according to the Oral Information Giving and Consent Seeking Process guided by the University of Oxford. Each interview will be taken as longest as two hours and be recorded audibly. It is most ideally that all information needed for research will be collected during one two-hour session. Otherwise, follow-up interviews may be foreseeable and conducted at the convenience of you before the submission deadline of my DPhil thesis, which is expected to be late 2025.

During the interview, you are free to mention any experiences (of you or someone you know) or perceptions on heterosexual partnership, marriage and childbearing. When sharing your personal experiences, a chronological order is preferable and key timing points are worth indicating. I may, at some point, ask questions to clarify your narrative or push forward the conversation, but most of the interview will be for your agency. It also means you could ask to pause or stop the interview at any time when you feel uncomfortable to continue. Your decision will be utmostly respected if in this case, and all associated data about you will be immediately destroyed. After each interview, the recordings will be safely stored and carefully anonymised at any time.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks in taking part?

There is almost no foreseeable disadvantages or risks of taking part in this research, apart from the possible discomforts when sharing your personal experiences and perceptions on intimate topics. However, any identifiable information of your participation will neither be collected nor recorded in any format, to keep any risks to the lowest possibility.

Are there any benefits in taking part?

While there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this research will lead to a more equitable and freer environment for both Chinese individuals to make independent decisions on partnership, marriage and childbearing issues. Your contribution through participating in this research will be

gratefully appreciated. The food, drink and venue costs during the interviews will be taken by the research project.

What information will be collected and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research objectives?

Five types of data will be collected in my research, including consent forms, contact details of research participants, fieldnotes, audio recordings and transcripts. Paper records of oral consent will be collected to validate the ethical fairness of this research. Contact details are mainly for contacting you when a follow-up interview is needed. Fieldnotes, audio recordings and transcripts are the main research resources that will be analysed with reference to narrative analysis and grounded theory, and to reach research findings. None of them will contain identifiable information and each of them is expected to be managed carefully and securely.

Since the research data may be used for my further research in relevant topic after the end of DPhil study, all research data, including consent forms, contact details, fieldnotes, and audio recording and transcripts will be retained until relevant research in the topic has been finished, for a minimum of three years after publication or public release. Before the researcher leaves the University of Oxford, research data will be stored on Nexus365 OneDrive for Business, which has been approved by the University's Information Security team for the storage of research data and offer automatic backup. The data will be securely transferred via an encrypted USB sticks to encrypted laptops when the researcher is no longer associated with the University, and will be safely protected by the researcher. The primary research data with unidentifiable information may be archived by submitting to academic journals supporting publications in future. The researcher, supervisors, and potential collaborators will have access to the research data while keeping the confidentiality of all the data.

Will the research be published? Could I be identified from any publications or other research outputs?

The findings from the research will be written up in my DPhil thesis, and may be in conference presentations and academic publications. You will not be identifiable from the outputs, and I would like your permission to use direct quotations *but without identifying you* in any research outputs. A copy of my dissertation will be deposited both in print and online in the Oxford University Research Archive where it will be publicly available to facilitate its use in future research and social implications.

Data Protection

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the study. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a

task that is performed in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available at https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights.

Who has reviewed this study?

This study has received ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. (Ethics reference: Insert).

Who do I contact if I have a concern about the research or I wish to complain?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please contact Xijia You (xijia.you@sociology.ox.ac.uk) or the project supervisors Man-Yee Kan (man-yee.kan@sociology.ox.ac.uk) & Rachel Murphy (rachel.murphy@area.ox.ac.uk). We will do our best to answer your query. *We* will acknowledge your concern within 10 working days and give you an indication of how it will be dealt with. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford who will seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible:

The Chair, Agnieszka Swiejkowska;
Email: research@sociology.ox.ac.uk

The Chair, Social Sciences & Humanities Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee;
Email: ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk; Address: Research Services, University of Oxford, Boundary Brook House, Churchill Drive, Headington, Oxford OX3 7GB

Further Information and Contact Details

If you would like to discuss the research with someone beforehand (or if you have questions afterwards), please contact:

Xijia You
Department of Sociology, University of Oxford
42-43 Park End Street, Oxford OX1 1JD, England
University email: xijia.you@sociology.ox.ac.uk

APPENDIX C

Ethics Approval Letter

Department of Sociology
42-43 Park End Street · Oxford · OX1 1JD
Telephone: 01865 281740
Fax: 01865 286171
Email: drec@sociology.ox.ac.uk
Website: www.sociology.ox.ac.uk

To: Xijia You
CC: Prof Man Yee Kan (Supervisor); Graduate Studies Office

3rd May 2024

RE: **Ethics Decision for the amendment request to the research project:**
'Delaying Childbearing: A Temporal Strategy of Mobilising Reproductive Agency for Chinese Women'
Ref. SOC_R2_001_C1A_22_36

Amendment of research ethics application

Number of Amendment:	**1**
Month notification received:	**March 2024**
Subject of Amendment:	**(i) Addition of remote round of interviews with participants.** **(ii) Addition of use of encrypted and password-protected hard drive as temporary, short term data storage.**
Documents reviewed:	*Revised/Updated*: **CUREC1A checklist**

Dear Xijia,

I am pleased to inform you that, on the basis of the information provided to the DREC, this amendment request to your research project has been judged as meeting appropriate ethical and safety standards. I herewith confirm this has been approved.

Sincerely,

Agnieszka Swiejkowska
DREC Secretary, Department of Sociology
University of Oxford

APPENDIX D

Participants' Profile

Order of Interview	Pseudonym	Gender	Year of Birth	Age	Education level	Reproductive Status	Migration Status
1	Stella	Female	1996	27	Master's Degree	In relationship	Migrant
2	Ethan	Male	1991	32	Master's Degree	Married and have children	Migrant
3	Shine	Female	1996	27	Master's Degree	In relationship	Migrant
4	Long	Male	1996	27	Bachelor's Degree	Married without children	SGSM
5	Zine	Female	1994	29	Bachelor's Degree	In relationship	Migrant
6	Dana	Female	1993	30	Master's Degree	Married without children	SGSM
7	David	Male	1995	28	Master's Degree	Married without children	Migrant
8	Deere	Female	1990	33	Master's Degree	Married without children	Migrant
9	Yara	Female	1990	33	Master's Degree	Married and have children	Migrant
10	Meow	Female	1996	27	Master's Degree	Married without children	Migrant
11	Jennie	Female	1996	27	Bachelor's Degree	In relationship	Migrant
12	Uma	Female	1994	29	Bachelor's Degree	Married without children	Migrant
13	Yenny	Female	1995	28	Bachelor's Degree	Single	Migrant
14	Qira	Female	1996	27	Master's Degree	In relationship	Migrant
15	Kevin	Male	1991	32	Bachelor's Degree	Married without children	Migrant
16	Shein	Female	1989	34	Bachelor's Degree	Single	SGSM
17	Rabb	Female	1992	31	Bachelor's Degree	Married without children	SGSM
18	Bella	Female	1992	31	Bachelor's Degree	Married and have children	Migrant
19	Lee	Male	1995	28	Bachelor's Degree	In relationship	SGSM
20	Jane	Female	1986	37	Bachelor's Degree	Single	Migrant
21	Gina	Female	1996	27	Master's Degree	In relationship	Migrant
22	Yozy	Female	1993	30	Bachelor's Degree	Married without children	Migrant
23	Flyer	Female	1991	32	Vocational School	Married without children	Migrant
24	Jenna	Female	1993	30	Master's Degree	In relationship	Migrant
25	Andrew	Male	1992	31	Master's Degree	Married without children	Migrant
26	Donny	Male	1987	36	Master's Degree	Married and have children	SGSM
27	Hore	Female	1996	27	Bachelor's Degree	In relationship	SGSM
28	Orin	Female	1991	32	Bachelor's Degree	Married and have children	SGSM
29	Apple	Female	1995	28	Master's Degree	Single	Migrant
30	Rain	Female	1992	31	Master's Degree	Married without children	Migrant

Order of Interview	Pseudonym	Gender	Year of Birth	Age	Education level	Reproductive Status	Migration Status
31	Kira	Female	1996	27	Master's Degree	In relationship	SGSM
32	Joyce	Female	1995	28	Master's Degree	Married without children	Migrant
33	Howard	Male	1987	36	Master's Degree	Married and have children	Migrant
34	Chin	Female	1996	27	Master's Degree	In relationship	Migrant
35	Serene	Male	1995	28	Bachelor's Degree	In relationship	Migrant
36	Black	Male	1992	31	Bachelor's Degree	Married without children	Migrant
37	Aqua	Male	1993	30	Master's Degree	In relationship	Migrant
38	May	Female	1995	28	Master's Degree	In relationship	Migrant
39	Charlie	Female	1991	32	Master's Degree	In relationship	SGSM
40	Dump	Male	1986	37	Bachelor's Degree	Married and have children	Migrant
41	Sirius	Female	1985	38	Bachelor's Degree	Married and have children	Migrant
42	Snowy	Female	1995	28	Bachelor's Degree	In relationship	SGSM
43	Storm	Male	1990	33	Master's Degree	Married without children	Migrant
44	Mak	Female	1995	28	Master's Degree	Married without children	Local
45	Karl	Male	1991	32	Bachelor's Degree	Married without children	Migrant
46	Flora	Female	1993	30	Bachelor's Degree	Married without children	Migrant
47	Ryann	Female	1993	30	Bachelor's Degree	In relationship	SGSM
48	Marry	Female	1987	36	Bachelor's Degree	Single	Migrant
49	Vel	Female	1993	30	Bachelor's Degree	Married without children	Migrant
50	Larry	Male	1994	29	Master's Degree	In relationship	Migrant
51	Port	Male	1996	27	Bachelor's Degree	In relationship	Migrant
52	Wan	Male	1990	33	Vocational School	Married without children	Migrant
53	Max	Female	1993	30	Bachelor's Degree	In relationship	Migrant
54	Wendy	Female	1992	31	Vocational School	Married without children	Migrant
55	Zena	Female	1988	35	Bachelor's Degree	In relationship	Migrant
56	Cozy	Male	1996	27	Master's Degree	In relationship	SGSM
57	Rocky	Male	1994	29	Bachelor's Degree	Married without children	Migrant
58	Taro	Female	1996	27	Bachelor's Degree	Married without children	Migrant
59	Garrett	Male	1996	27	Master's Degree	In relationship	Migrant
60	Shawn	Female	1996	27	Bachelor's Degree	Married without children	Migrant

Note. Participants shaded in yellow are those cited in the thesis.