

Non-Marriage Doctrine or “Bu Hun Zhu Yi” in China: “Unmarried Aunt” as a New Portrayal of Women on Wechat Subscription Accounts

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Abstract: In recent years, the phenomenon of not getting married or late marriage among young Chinese people has become increasingly serious, while unmarried women are more subject to traditional gender norms from families and society. Against this background, a short video titled “Unmarried aunt hands out red packets” quickly became popular on Chinese media platforms during the 2023 Spring Festival. To explore the new media portrayal of the “unmarried aunt,” this qualitative study selected 17 articles on the WeChat Subscription Accounts (WSAs) as the unit of analysis. Referring to feminist communication theory, this paper reveals two interconnected dimensions of representation: external and inner traits. Externally, the figure is portrayed through markers of sophistication, constructing an image of affluent independence. Internally, narratives transcend superficial depictions to position the “unmarried aunt” as a multifaceted agent of social change: an enlightener, a rebel, a trailblazer, and an emotional anchor offering alternatives to motherhood. Central to these portrayals is the theme of economic independence, framed as both a material and symbolic tool for resisting societal pressures tied to marriage and motherhood. Financial autonomy is depicted as enabling spiritual empowerment (self-worth, confidence, freedom) while aligning with feminist discourses increasingly visible in Chinese media. Findings underscore the “unmarried aunt” as a contested cultural symbol, embodying the possibilities and limitations of female agency in a rapidly evolving sociopolitical landscape.

Keywords: Non-marriage Doctrine, Chinese Unmarried Women, Media Portrayal

1. Introduction

During the Chinese Lunar New Year in 2023, TikTok video blogger @cc Yuhan produced a video titled “My youngest aunt, who believes in non-marriage doctrine, is now back home to hand out red packets” [1]. A young woman with full makeup is handing out lucky money to each of the younger generations. Dressed in a long, red overcoat, she looks elegant and confident in that video. Without dialogue and special visual effects, the 13-second clip received more than 10 million likes in two days, and an astonishing 400 million individuals viewed and discussed relevant issues on Weibo [1-2]. The video quickly went viral, and “unmarried aunt” suddenly became a hot topic on Chinese social media.

The portrayal of women is a significant topic in media studies, reflecting evolving societal norms and values. This research examines how unmarried women in China are represented by WeChat

Subscription Accounts (WSAs), which is a prominent feature of WeChat, China's largest social media application launched by Tencent in 2011 [3]. WSAs function as a form of We Media, enabling users to publish long-form textual content with fewer restrictions compared to traditional media [4-5]. This relative freedom facilitates discussions on sensitive and controversial topics, as evidenced by the extensive coverage generated on WSAs following the viral "unmarried aunt" video.

Unlike platforms such as Weibo, WSAs primarily feature in-depth articles, allowing for systematic and nuanced narratives. As a user-generated content platform, WSAs provide a space for diverse ideologies and perspectives [6-7], enhancing the diversity and representativeness of sources. This makes WSAs a valuable channel for analyzing media portrayals of unmarried women.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social background

The "unmarried aunt" phenomenon, which gained prominence during the Chinese New Year, reflects the societal pressures faced by young Chinese women today [2]. As a time for family reunions, the Chinese New Year often intensifies discussions about marriage, with single women facing significant coercion from parents and relatives to marry and have children. The growing online searches for "marriage pressure" on social media directly reflect this family pressure [2].

As a country of universal marriage, China has experienced a notable delay and decline in marriage rates in recent decades [8]. Unlike previous generations, young people increasingly view singleness as a valid life choice, while perceiving successful marriage as increasingly difficult to achieve [9]. Scholars have defined this phenomenon as "delayed marriage", including late marriage, fear of marriage, and temporary celibacy as "non-marriage" [10-11]. This concept has gained traction on Chinese social media, reflecting shifting attitudes toward marriage.

Several factors contribute to the trend of delayed marriage among modern women. Socioeconomic changes have gradually reshaped attitudes toward marriage. Legal and institutional developments challenged traditional gender roles and encouraged women's economic independence [12], while educational expansion and globalization have further influenced these shifts. Besides, career commitment is the most prevalent causes since it takes up most of their free time and keeps them from seeking romantic relationships [13]. Simultaneously, exposure to Western media and values through globalization and urbanization has fostered a consensus on women's independence and reshaped attitudes toward marriage and sexuality [14-15].

Despite these advancements, the tension between traditional norms and modern values persists. The rise of phenomena such as "leftover women" and "marriage-free" lifestyles has sparked anxiety among older generations, highlighting the generational divide in attitudes toward marriage [16]. While young people aspire to marriage, they recognize its challenges, prioritizing personal autonomy and self-expression over traditional expectations [13]. This pragmatic approach underscores the evolving dynamics of marriage and singlehood in contemporary China.

2.2. Feminist communication theory

Feminist communication theory, rooted in interdisciplinary feminist studies of the 1970s, addresses the marginalization of women and gender relations in political and scholarly contexts [17]. Rakow and Wackwitz have further developed the feminist communication theory by providing the key themes in this area: difference, voice, and representation [18]. These elements explore how women's communication—both interpersonal and mediated—can challenge societal norms and reconstruct gender dynamics [19].

A focal point of feminist communication theory is "voice", defined as a form of public expression that conveys perspectives on self and social life [20]. Harp et al. [19] emphasize that voice

encompasses not only the ability to speak but also the power to be heard and recognized. This aligns with Lipton and Mackinlay's [20] assertion that voice represents privilege and resistance, serving as a methodology to reclaim women's experiences and challenge subordinate positions [18]. In mass media, women's voices are seen as tools for empowerment, enabling them to participate in public discourse and defend their perspectives.

3. Research design

Thematic analysis is a qualitative method which is widely used within psychology [21]. According to Braun and Clarke, thematic analysis is to identify, analyze and report patterns or themes from data collected [22]. Although it is poorly demarcated, they argued that thematic analysis should be regarded as a foundational one in qualitative research.

3.1. Coding process

Braun and Clarke offered an accessible and practical guideline for applying thematic analysis and the six-step process that they proposed in 2006 was applied to this study [22]. Thus, codes and themes were identified and refined iteratively to enrich the depth and rigour of the research. This study will adhere strictly to this process to ensure a systematic and rigorous integration of data.

3.2. Sampling procedure

Sample data were collected using the built-in search tool of WeChat Subscription Accounts (WSAs), which tracks articles based on keywords. The search terms, "non-marriage doctrine" and "aunt," were selected to align with the research objectives. Articles were included only if both keywords appeared explicitly; those lacking either term were excluded. To ensure originality, only articles labeled as "original" below the title were selected, while reprinted articles (identified by declarations or notes) were omitted. Additionally, low-quality articles, overly short texts, and promotional content were excluded. The data collection period spanned from 25 January 2023, when the viral video was released, to 25 July 2023, when sampling commenced. After applying these selection criteria, 17 articles were retained for analysis.

4. Discussion

4.1. External traits: from viral video to media icon

The "unmarried aunt" figure is consistently portrayed through observable external traits rooted in the viral video. Her appearance—marked by delicate makeup and a burgundy coat—symbolizes sophistication, while her graceful demeanor (e.g., distributing red envelopes) reinforces an image of elegance.

Critically, these depictions emphasize her economic power. Articles frequently highlight her financial independence through visuals of cash or generous monetary gestures, framing material success as integral to her identity. Collectively, the external traits—stylish attire, refined aesthetics, and financial strength—construct a media icon of affluent independence, transcending traditional expectations of unmarried women.

4.2. Inner traits: resistance, mentorship, and emotional liberation

The "unmarried aunt" transcends her viral image through narratives that redefine her societal role. As a mentor, she guides younger generations in self-acceptance and financial independence—one niece attributes her career confidence to an aunt's advice on "prioritizing self-investment over marriage".

Simultaneously, she embodies resistance to patriarchal norms: articles cite aunts who reject arranged marriages or pursue non-traditional careers (e.g., a writer defying familial pressure), framing these choices as acts of defiance.

Her role as an emotional anchor further challenges traditional motherhood. Unlike critical mothers, aunts offer unconditional support—one niece credits her aunt's praise for healing self-doubt fueled by parental expectations. Through these dual identities, the aunt navigates tensions between tradition and modernity, symbolizing both rebellion against constraints and the possibility of alternative familial bonds.

4.3. Economic independence and media empowerment

Media representations in China increasingly frame economic independence as both a tool of resistance and a symbol of empowerment for unmarried women. In contemporary China, the portrayal of women in media reveals a dynamic interplay of complexity and contradiction, as they navigate and challenge traditional gender stereotypes [23]. These evolving representations are not only a testament to the changing status of women in Chinese society but also highlight the growing tension between tradition and modernity [24].

This shifting landscape sets the stage for exploring how economic independence and media empowerment further redefine women's roles and identities in contemporary society. Economic independence has long been a central theme in media representations of women, frequently highlighted in magazines, newspapers, and journals [25]. This focus aligns with the findings of Mou et al., who identified a recurring emphasis on independence-related virtues in media posts, such as hard work, free-spiritedness, open-mindedness, and ambition [7]. In this study, “economic independence” is framed as a mechanism enabling women to resist traditional social expectations, particularly the familial pressures surrounding marriage and motherhood. Financial stability is perceived as a protective factor, shielding single women from coercion. Beyond its material implications, economic independence is also imbued with spiritual significance, fostering a sense of self-worth, security, freedom, and confidence among women.

Moreover, financial independence is increasingly portrayed in media as a tool for women's empowerment, enabling them to make autonomous life choices. This shift may be attributed to the rising prominence of feminist discourse in Chinese media, which has heightened awareness of gender issues. Consequently, “economic independence” has become a compelling narrative device, frequently employed in media portrayals of unmarried aunts to attract audience engagement.

According to Nadjah et al., fostering awareness is central to women's empowerment, enhancing their independence and participation, particularly in economic domains. Prior research also highlights the role of digital media in amplifying women's concerns, supporting their economic, political, and social empowerment, and advancing gender equality across diverse contexts [26-27]. While the tangible impact of women's economic empowerment remains limited, it has undeniably contributed to raising awareness and shifting perceptions.

5. Conclusion

From an academic perspective, this study addresses a significant gap in the literature by exploring the under-researched portrayal of the “unmarried aunt” in Chinese media. Unlike existing studies that often rely on English-language sources, this research delves into the unique social and media contexts of China, capturing nuanced cultural dynamics that are frequently overlooked. By analyzing WSAs, the study reveals how these articles provide a closer and more nuanced narrative perspective, moving beyond the superficial viral image of the “aunt” to incorporate reader submissions that reflect intersectionality and amplify the voices of marginalized groups, particularly unmarried women.

The findings underscore the transformative potential of media in shaping public understanding of gender roles and challenging stereotypical representations. Central to this transformation is the narrative of economic independence, which WSAs frame not merely as a material safeguard against marital coercion but also as a symbolic foundation for spiritual empowerment—enabling unmarried women to reclaim agency in both private and public spheres. By breaking through these limitations, WSAs contribute to a more comprehensive and empathetic understanding of unmarried women's lives, offering insights that are both socially relevant and academically significant. This study not only highlights the evolving portrayal of women in media but also emphasizes the importance of inclusive storytelling in fostering awareness, empowerment, and social change. As such, it opens new avenues for further research on culturally specific media representations and their broader societal implications.

This study has notable constraints: (1) The thematic analysis's subjective nature and purposive sampling risk overlooking data nuances and reducing representativeness; (2) Focusing solely on WeChat Subscription Accounts (WSAs) limits generalizability to mainstream media, while the six-month data scope may miss longitudinal shifts; (3) Cross-language translation risks eroding cultural subtleties, despite efforts to preserve contextual accuracy. These limitations highlight the need for mixed-method approaches, broader platform inclusion, and bilingual validation in future research.

Future studies should adopt mixed-method designs and expand to platforms like Weibo and Douban to improve generalizability, while longitudinal tracking of the “unmarried aunt” image could reveal its evolving societal impact.

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