

2023

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Recommended Citation

Zexi, Li and Jin, Huang (2023) "A Literature Review on “Non-Marriage”: A Global Comparative Perspective," *Contemporary Social Sciences*: No. 5, Article 5.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.19873/j.cnki.2096-0212.2023.05.005>

Available at: <https://css.researchcommons.org/journal/vol2023/iss5/5>

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A Literature Review on “Non-Marriage”: A Global Comparative Perspective

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Abstract: This paper presents a comprehensive analysis and comparison of the existing literature on the phenomenon of non-marriage or staying unmarried in Asian countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore, as well as European and American countries such as Spain and the US, and explores the trends, characteristics as well as reasons behind such a phenomenon. Through analysis, the present study found that there is a growing trend of postponed marriage and parenthood as well as an increasing proportion of individuals who exhibit no enthusiasm towards matrimony or parenthood in the aforementioned countries. To some extent, non-marriage or postponed marriage has become a prevalent trend in developed countries and even some developing countries. Japan, South Korea, and several developed countries in Europe and America have exhibited this phenomenon since the middle to late 20th century, with a relatively long history. The emergence of this phenomenon in China, Malaysia, the Philippines, and other developing countries in Asia, however, was relatively late, exhibiting a gradual development process. The current marriage landscape in China is characterized by a growing number of non-marriage individuals and a significant level of marital stability. In terms of reasons for staying unmarried, the marriage rates in the aforementioned countries can be attributed to various factors at macro, meso, and micro levels. In China, the phenomenon of non-marriage is closely associated with a range of factors, including diverse values and attitudes towards romance and marriage, marriage squeeze, education expansion, and the rise in females' economic and social status. The emphasis in future research should be placed on predicting the phenomenon of non-marriage, with a specific focus on exploring the reasons for advocating non-marriage, examining the internal mechanisms underlying this phenomenon, analyzing the consequences of non-marriage, and proposing corresponding countermeasures while establishing the public identity towards marriage.

Keywords: marriage, staying unmarried, the phenomenon of non-marriage, global perspective, literature review

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.19873/j.cnki.2096-0212.2023.05.005>

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Research Background and Research Questions

In the past, love, marriage, and childbearing were intricately intertwined. In China, the previous advocating for late marriage and childbearing, as well as having fewer but healthier babies, has been replaced by a social trend marked by a decreasing inclination towards both marriage and childbearing. This reflects the gradual separation of love, marriage, and childbearing that were once intertwined. Young people now enjoy more choices in these three aspects due to rapid social development. Specifically, in contemporary society, the phenomenon of late marriage and childbearing, and declining inclination toward marriage and childbearing, is being embraced and adopted by a segment of young people. According to the latest quarterly statistics released by the Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China, a total of 7.636 million marriage registrations were recorded in China in 2021. The number of marriage registrations in 2021 dropped below eight million, compared to 9.273 million in 2019 and 8.143 million in 2020 (Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022). In fact, over the course of nearly three decades, from 1985 to 2013, China's marriage registration data exhibited a consistent upward trend and culminated in a peak of 13,469,300 pairs in 2013. However, by 2021, there was a significant decline in the number of marriage registrations, with a decrease of approximately 5.83 million pairs compared to the figures recorded in 2013 (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2022). The institution of marriage plays a crucial role in determining China's fertility rate. Despite some policies aimed at promoting fertility, an increasing number of young people, who are the main drivers of fertility, are opting for late marriage and childbearing or even choosing to stay unmarried and have no babies.

The decline in the marriage rate is not a unique occurrence exclusive to China. Since the late 20th century, the phenomenon of non-marriage has emerged as a prevalent trend in several countries across Asia, Europe, and America, and this trend is becoming more and more obvious, thereby transforming into an international phenomenon. The existing literature is generally deficient in terms of research on the phenomenon of non-marriage from a global comparative perspective. Given the limitations inherent in the existing literature, this study aims to enrich the research on the phenomenon by conducting an international comparative analysis in this regard, with a focus on identifying some consensus and differences.

The CNKI and Google Scholar databases, as well as the official website of the Cabinet Office and authoritative announcement websites, were utilized in this study for literature research. In light of the diverse range of platforms utilized for searching foreign literature, the official website of the Cabinet Office, and other authoritative announcement websites, we will refrain from providing a detailed introduction in this paper. Therefore, the second section, "Key Features and Trends in the Study of Non-Marriage in China," will not include an analysis of foreign literature, while a comprehensive examination of foreign literature will be conducted in the third, fourth, and fifth sections. To enhance the research's credibility, this paper limits the data scope of Chinese literature to "A Guide to the Core

Journal of China” and the “Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI) journals (including its extended edition)” on CNKI. A comprehensive literature search was conducted using the advanced search function on CNKI, focusing on the subjects of “staying unmarried” or “non-marriage.” The search was not limited to any particular time frame, and as of April 11, 2023, when the search was performed, a total of 126 relevant articles were retrieved. After manually excluding non-academic studies and articles with weak relevance to the present study, a total of 97 Chinese literature sources were ultimately obtained as the research data for this paper, as indicated in the second section.

To conduct an international comparative analysis of research on non-marriage, it is imperative to clearly define this term. The determination towards the phenomenon of non-marriage and the non-marriage advocates in various countries primarily depends on two factors: the marriageable age and reproductive age. The age range of 20 to 30 is commonly observed as the period when most individuals enter their first marriage, thus leading some researchers to establish 35 as the threshold for assessing individuals who choose to stay unmarried (Ye & Lin, 1998). However, in demography, an older age range, such as 40 to 50 or 50 and above, is often chosen to delineate individuals who have surpassed the age for marriage and childbearing but remain unmarried (Wang & Chen, 2021). The ratio of the unmarried population aged 50 and above to the total population aged 50 and above is regarded as the lifelong unmarried rate by Chinese demographers, given that completing a first marriage at the age of 50 is extremely rare (Yu & Xie, 2019). This standard is also commonly used in studies conducted in Japan, South Korea, and the US. In addition, the definition of non-marriage groups as “people who do not marry” remains consistent across all countries. The non-marriage group can be categorized into the general non-marriage population and the specific non-marriage population. The general non-marriage population refers to individuals who currently have no intention of getting married, either due to subjective or objective reasons. They tend to actively or passively choose not to marry while advocating for the same. The specific non-marriage population, in the demographic sense, consists of individuals who are 45 or even 50 years old after surpassing the marriageable and childbearing age but remain unmarried. In comparison to those in the marriageable stage aged between 25 and 35 years old, their likelihood of future matrimony is extremely low. The present study focuses on the research on the general non-marriage population and places a particular emphasis on the literature regarding individuals who consciously choose not to marry when reaching the marriageable age.

Key Features and Trends in the Study of “Non-marriage” in China

Literature Quantity

According to the search results of relevant Chinese literature, the first article related to the phenomenon of staying unmarried published in a core journal appeared in 1992. The title of this article is “Analysis of First Marriage Age Among Females in Liaoning, Shandong, Guangdong, Guizhou and

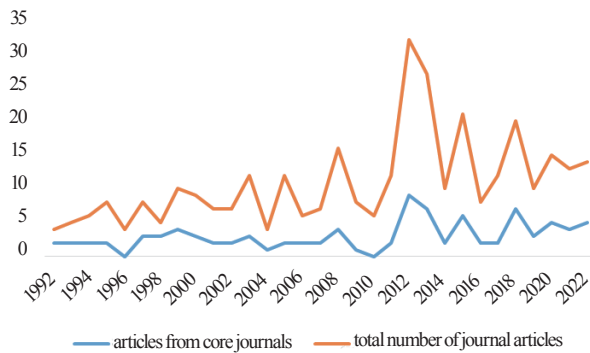


Figure 1 Quantity of previous Chinese literature pertaining to the research on non-marriage.

unmarried. Subsequently, there has been a gradual and modest upward trend in academic research on non-marriage, with a relatively limited number of publications overall. The year 2012 serves as the pivotal point. The introduction of pronatalist policies stimulated an upsurge in marriage registrations. Numerous studies have explored the implications for contemporary marriage from the perspectives of the “forbidding marriage between people bearing the same surname,” “prohibiting marriage between close relatives,” and other situations related to marital prohibitions in folk customs. Meanwhile, the number of marriage registrations in China has been decreasing year after year since reaching its peak in 2013. Influenced by the aforementioned two factors, there has been a surge in discussions pertaining to singlehood, romantic relationships, and marriage. The publication trend of articles in the field of non-marriage exhibited fluctuations, with an overall increase observed after 2012. The rise of China’s single economy, coupled with the phenomenon of late marriage and the growing trend of research on non-marriage in recent years, undoubtedly positions the research on non-marriage as a crucial component in exploring marriage and intimate relationships in the new era.

Highly Cited Articles

To investigate the subject of significant academic interest in research on non-marriage, this paper has compiled a list of the top ten highly cited articles as of April 11, 2023 (as presented in Table 1). Among them, the article by Guo Zhigang and Deng Guosheng entitled “Research on Marriage Squeeze in China” in 2000 has garnered the highest number of citations. They emphasized in their paper that if China’s population continues to age and the historical impacts of the marriage squeeze persist, it is likely to lead to a progressively increasing lifelong unmarried rate in China from the perspective of the marriage squeeze phenomenon. Guo and Deng’s paper, based on highly reliable data sources, including the authoritative data of the national demographic census, introduced new concepts and analytical models regarding the marriage squeeze phenomenon in China and offered multi-dimensional perspectives for predicting its consequences. As a result, it has become a seminal reference for scholars when starting studies related to non-marriage. Notably, the argument concerning

Gansu Provinces and Beijing Municipality.” It was authored by Zha Ruichuan, an expert with the Population Research Institute (now known as the Population Development Studies Center) of Renmin University of China. Based on an analysis of females’ age at first marriage in the five provinces and one municipality, the article highlighted the trend of late marriage and late childbearing and reduced fertility rates among females across regions. However, there is an extremely low rate for females who choose to stay

the measurement of the marriage squeeze in China and its consequences has garnered significant citations. The remaining nine articles mainly center around the view of marriage, late marriage, the manifestation and reasons for staying unmarried, as well as the problems and consequences of being unmarried.

Table 1 Top 10 Highly Cited Papers on “Staying Unmarried” or “Non-marriage” in Chinese Literature

Ranking	Citations	Author(s)	Title	Journal	Publication time
1	162	Guo Zhigang, Deng Guosheng	Research on Marriage Squeeze in China	<i>Market and Demographic Analysis</i>	May 2000
2	125	Lu Shuhua	Research on Statistical Analysis and Evolving Perspectives on Marriage	<i>Sociological Studies</i>	March 1997
3	103	Wu Yaowu, Liu Qian	The Impact of Higher Education Expansion on Marriage Market: Female or Male Marriage Squeeze?	<i>China Economic Quarterly</i>	October 2014
4	72	Ye Wenzhen, Lin Qingguo	Analysis of the Causes and Countermeasures for the Phenomenon of China's Older Unmarried Population	<i>Chinese Journal of Population Science</i>	August 1998
5	59	Editors of Population Research: Yu Hongwen, Deng Guosheng, Wang Zongping, Liu Shuang	Perspective on the Phenomenon of High Sex Ratio at Birth	<i>Population Research</i>	October 2003
6	58	Liu Liqun, Zhang Jingjie	“Leftover Women” and Grand Banquet: Study of the Media Portrait of “Leftover Women” and Strategies Behind Media Coverage from a Gender Perspective	<i>Collection of Women's Studies</i>	September 2013
7	56	Wang Yuesheng	A Study on the Late Marriage and Non-marriage Groups of Chinese Males in the Late 18th Century	<i>Journal of Chinese Social and Economic History</i>	June 2001
8	42	Shi Jinqun	Current Dilemma and Way Out for Family Support of the Aged People in China	<i>Journal of Minzu University of China (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)</i>	July 2013
9	40	Liu Shuang, Guo Zhigang	A Study on Issues Concerning Mid-aged Unmarried Population in Beijing	<i>Population & Economics</i>	July 1999
10	37	Zhai Zhenwu, Liu Wenli	Are Chinese People Not Willing to Get Married—Study of Chinese Marriage from the Perspective of Cohort	<i>Exploration and Free View</i>	March 2020

Topics of Literature Research

The analysis of the topic “staying unmarried” or “non-marriage” in Chinese literature primarily focuses on the aspect of non-marriage, while extensively examining the structure and manifestation of marital relationships. The topics encompass various dimensions, including contemporary and historical marriage structures and practices at both national and regional levels, as well as cultural

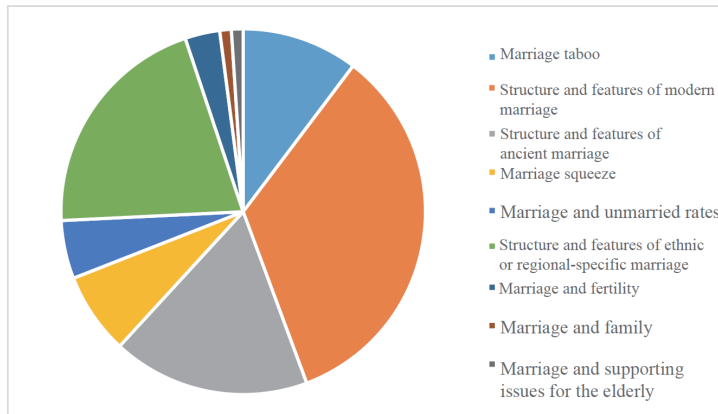


Figure 2 Distribution of research topics regarding “staying unmarried” or “non-marriage” in Chinese literature

customary laws and cultural practices about marriage. Marriage taboos encompass the “prohibition of marriage between close relatives” and “prohibition of marriage between people bearing the same surname,” among others. As shown in Figure 2, these four topics account for about 80 percent of the total topic ratio. In addition, there are other research topics, such as the examination of marriage and unmarried rates across various age cohorts, the investigation into the phenomenon of marriage squeeze, the exploration of the interplay between marriage and elderly care, and an analysis of the intricate relationship between marriage and family dynamics, alongside its correlation with fertility patterns. It can be seen that limited research has been conducted on the phenomenon and underlying causes of non-marriage from a sociological perspective.

Distinguished from non-marriage instances such as “prohibition of marriage between people bearing the same surname or coming from the same clan” inherent in folk and ethnic customs, as well as legal regulations such as “prohibition of marriage between close relatives,” the research on staying unmarried from a sociological perspective places greater emphasis on the phenomenon of voluntary or involuntary social celibacy, wherein individuals actively or passively choose not to get married for various reasons, leading to a range of consequences.

Analysis of Trends in Non-marriage from a Global Comparative Perspective

The phenomenon of delayed marriage and non-marriage can be attributed to the same underlying changes (Watkins, 1984), and there is often a sequential relationship between the postponement of the first marriage age and the rise in the unmarried rate. The rising trend of the average age at first marriage, as observed in Japan and South Korea, is likely to result in an increase in the lifelong unmarried rate (Chen & Li, 2020). However, it is important to note that late marriage does not necessarily equate to non-marriage. Compared with instances in Japan and South Korea, China now only shows a significant postponement of marriage, with a gradual and minimal increase in the

taboos surrounding marriage. Among them, the structure and manifestation of modern marriage encompass various aspects, including but not limited to the postponement of first marriages, evolving marital practices among young adults, intimate relationships within marriages, emerging trends in matrimony, as well as love and marriage dilemmas. The marriage structure and manifestation in ethnic minority areas primarily revolve around

percentage of individuals who remain unmarried, particularly among females (Zhai & Liu, 2020). However, females are more inclined to embrace the unmarried status after a prolonged postponement in marriage age (Li & Shen, 2019). For cohorts born after 1970, older unmarried females who surpass the marriageable age tend to exhibit an escalating resistance toward first marriage and a rapid decline in the likelihood of getting married, resulting in an increase in the number of unmarried individuals (Feng, 2019).

According to the data from China's seventh national population census in 2020, the age of first marriage of the young population is getting later and later, and the higher the education attainment level of the young population, the larger the age of first marriage and the larger the proportion of the non-marriage population, which has evolved into a social trend (Zhang, 2022). The unmarried rate of both males and females in China has experienced fluctuations and witnessed an overall increase since the implementation of reform and opening-up policies (Wang & Chen, 2021). As of 2020, the lifelong unmarried rate of Chinese males and females stood at 3.11 percent and 0.44 percent, respectively, indicating that China remains in a model characterized by the universality of marriage as a whole (Chen & Zhang, 2022). Although the unmarried rate in China is relatively low compared to countries like Japan and the US, which have a long history of non-marriage, there has been an increasing trend in the number of unmarried individuals in China, given its large population of 1.4 billion. Overall, China's marriage patterns have shifted from early to late marriage, with non-marriage still in its nascent stage and the fundamental nature of universal marriage remaining unchanged.

The international concept of marriage and marital behavior have both undergone significant changes since the 20th century, leading to a substantial increase in the number of unmarried individuals (Brown & Manning, 2022). Japan and South Korea have the highest rates of unmarried individuals among East and Southeast Asian countries. The lifelong unmarried rate in Japan started to experience a significant upward trend in 1970 and has since maintained this trajectory. The lifelong unmarried rate for individuals aged 50 in Japan has significantly increased, going from 1.7 percent and 3.3 percent in 1980 to 28.3 percent and 17.8 percent in 2020 for males and females, respectively (Cabinet Office, 2022b). Additionally, the lifelong unmarried rate among males is about 1.5 times higher than that among females. According to the 2019 marriage statistics report of South Korea, the average age at first marriage for males and females was recorded as 33.4 and 30.6 respectively, while the number of registered marriages exhibited a consistent downward trend (So & Kang, 2021). Other Asian countries, such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore, have also witnessed a fast-growing unmarried rate, especially in large cities and among the Chinese community in Southeast Asian countries (Jones, 2005). In the past, the phenomenon of staying unmarried was considered abnormal in the family-centric countries of East and Southeast Asia. Currently, it is becoming increasingly prevalent for females to choose not to get married, and this trend is even more pronounced in major cities across East and Southeast Asia compared to Western countries. Some scholars have previously referred to East Asia as the "flight from marriage," and this description also applies to certain Southeast Asian countries, such as Thailand, Myanmar, Brunei, Singapore, and Malaysia (Jones, 2005).

The study conducted by Gubernskaya examined the evolving local perspectives on marriage and child-rearing in Western countries, including Germany, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Austria, the Netherlands, and the US between 1988 and 2002. The findings revealed a shift in public opinion away from traditional norms of universal marriage and childbearing (Gubernskaya, 2010). The marriage pattern in Western Europe has also experienced significant changes (Billar & Wilson, 2001). Taking Spain as an example, the country is showcasing a consistent declining trend in marriage rates, accompanied by a postponement in both the average age at which individuals get married and the age at which they enter their first marriage. In addition, there emerges a growing prevalence of unmarried cohabitation. The average age for females to enter their first marriage in Spain was 29.4 years old in 2005, whereas males typically married at the age of 31.5 years old (Castro-Martín, Domínguez-Folgueras, & Martín-García, 2008). In some Western European countries, marriage has gradually been replaced by cohabitation to some extent, with unmarried cohabitation now serving as the initial stage of family formation. Meanwhile, the occurrence of marriage without prior cohabitation has become less common among young individuals (Kiernan, 2002). Marriage is still considered an ideal in the US, but some Americans tend to deviate from it in practice. The marriage rate in the US has been on a decline since the mid to late 20th century, and more and more individuals opt for staying single or cohabitation without getting married (Waite, 1995). Non-marital families make up a large proportion of the US population, and the proportion is steadily increasing. The number of non-marital cohabiting couples in the US was less than 50,000 in 1960, but it had increased to over nine million by 2017 (Joslin, 2022). The trend towards marriage in American society is highly stratified, with the most significant decline observed among the middle class. This demographic increasingly embraces premarital sex behavior and out-of-wedlock birth. Moreover, less educated Americans are also becoming less inclined toward marriage (Wilcox et al., 2010). Other studies have shown that highly educated individuals in the US have been embracing an enhanced concept of marriage since the 21st century. It has been observed that college-educated females exhibit a higher likelihood of entering matrimony and possess the capacity to mitigate certain risks associated with marital dissolution (Isen & Stevenson, 2010).

In general, there is a growing trend in some countries where individuals are opting to postpone or forgo marriage. Studies have shown that since the 1970s, the trend of late marriage and late childbearing has been more pronounced in East Asia than in the West (Raymo et al., 2015). According to the 2017 survey data from Statistics Korea, the marriage rate in South Korea witnessed a significant decline of approximately 50 percent between 1980 and 2016, plummeting from 10.6 to 5.5 per 1,000 people. Additionally, there was an evident rise in the average age at first marriage for both males and females, reaching 32.8 years for males and 30.1 years for females (Statistics Korea, 2017). The Social Indicators 2022 of South Korea reveals that half of the population aged 13 and above perceive marriage as unnecessary (Government statistics of South Korea: Half of South Koreans think it's okay not to get married during their lifetime, 2023, March 23). Under the influence of late marriage and non-marriage, some scholars predict that South Korea's population will decline by 15 percent between 2010 and 2040, and the proportion of people aged 65 and above will reach 36

percent by 2050 (Choe & Retherford, 2009). In Japan, the average age of first marriage for males and females was 31.0 and 29.4, respectively, in 2020 (Cabinet Office, 2022b). Japan's National Institute of Population and Social Security Research predicts that the population aged 65 and above in Japan will reach 33.7 percent in 2035 and 40.5 percent in 2055 (Kaneko, 2008). It seems that the consequences of non-marriage are more serious in Japan than in South Korea. However, marriage has not been "deinstitutionalized" in Japan. Cohabitation and out-of-wedlock births remain relatively uncommon, while the legal system and social norms still maintain a conservative stance towards these aspects (Sørensen, 2016). Some studies have pointed out that the decline in the Japanese fertility rate can be primarily attributed to changes in marital behavior, such as an increase in the number of unmarried individuals and changes in couples' reproductive behavior (a decrease in birth rates). Furthermore, since the incidence of out-of-wedlock children remains relatively low, the impact of the rising number of unmarried individuals on Japan's declining fertility rate outweighs any changes in fertility behavior among married couples (Wasawa, 2015; Sato & Kaneko, 2015). Marriage in the US has undergone a process of "deinstitutionalization," as evidenced by the increasing number and complexity of cohabiting unions and the emergence of same-sex marriage, indicating a gradual transition from institutional marriage to companionate marriage and then to individualized, personalized marriage (Cherlin, 2004). The concept of cohabitation has undergone a transformation since the onset of the 21st century. For some Americans, cohabitation serves as a trial marriage or a viable and long-term alternative to marriage (Cherlin, 2005). The acceptance of cohabitation in European and American countries follows a gradual process, with varying attitudes among different countries. However, it can generally be observed that these countries go through four stages: "Cohabitation as a marginal or avant-garde phenomenon," "cohabitation as a testing ground for marriage," "cohabitation as an alternative for marriage," and "cohabitation being indistinguishable from marriage" (Kiernan, 2002). The US transitioned from the second stage to the third stage as early as the beginning of the 21st century (Booth et al., 2002). Cohabitation is increasingly becoming institutionalized and legalized in European and American countries. Developed countries such as the US and Canada have enacted laws and regulations to protect the rights and define responsibilities of cohabiting couples. Unlike in Western countries, the phenomena of premarital cohabitation and out-of-wedlock births are less common in Asian countries. The patterns of marriage and childbearing in Japan and South Korea are influenced by economic factors as well as strong social norms (Matsuda & Sasaki, 2020; Park & Raymo, 2013). Currently, unmarried cohabitation and out-of-wedlock births are still not considered viable alternatives to marriage in Japan (Raymo et al., 2015).

Analysis of Features of Non-marriage from a Global Comparative Perspective

The distribution of unmarried individuals varies across different dimensions and countries, exhibiting both similarities and differences. In China, the demographic of females who tend to opt for late marriage or non-marriage generally comprises those aged over 27, possessing a high level

of education, and exhibiting financial independence (Xu & Zeng, 2018). Conversely, unmarried males are more likely to reside in remote and economically distressed regions characterized by low educational attainment. Among those who opt not to enter matrimony, there undoubtedly exist individuals who actively or passively refrain from marriage due to reasons other than those aforementioned. The recognition of the importance of marriage remains consistent across genders and age groups, and marriage remains a universal choice among young individuals (Peng et al., 2022). However, there exist significant disparities within the unmarried demographic in terms of gender, household registration, and educational attainment. Specifically, the proportion of unmarried males exceeds that of females; agricultural households exhibit a higher prevalence of singlehood compared to non-agricultural households; and rural areas witness the highest risk for non-marriage among males, especially those with lower education attainment (Peng et al., 2022). In both urban and rural areas, the proportion of unmarried females is significantly low, while males face varying degrees of marriage squeeze regardless of their locations. It is worth noting that the proportion of unmarried males in rural areas exceeds that of their urban counterparts by a considerable margin (Peng, 2011). Additionally, it is generally believed that individuals with higher education attainment are more inclined to opt for non-marriage. However, studies have proved that individuals with higher education attainment, particularly females, do not exhibit a greater inclination towards non-marriage (Yu, 2022). The existence of male marriage squeeze is undeniable, resulting in a significantly higher proportion of unmarried males compared to females (Guo, 2021). Empirical analysis has revealed that the lifelong unmarried rate of elderly males is significantly higher than that of females (Zhou, 2015).

Marriage, as a social institution, has historically been characterized by the marginalization of males in lower social strata across numerous countries. Highly educated males in Japan and South Korea tend to postpone marriage, yet they exhibit a higher likelihood of entering into matrimony compared to their less educated counterparts (Piotrowski et al., 2015; Park & Lee, 2017). In Japan, the prevalence of late marriage or non-marriage is particularly pronounced among females of high social status and males of low social status, thereby giving rise to the phenomenon known as the mismatch in the marriage market (Raymo & Iwasawa, 2005). Japan's National Institute of Population and Social Security Research projected in 2017 that by 2035, approximately one out of every four Japanese males will remain unmarried throughout their lifetime, while the corresponding figure for females is estimated to be around one out of every seven (The National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2017). Japanese females are more attached to marriage. In Japan, it is difficult for females to give birth outside of wedlock, and the concept of "marriage as a prerequisite for establishing a family and having children" is deeply ingrained in Japanese females (Ueno, 2018). Meanwhile, different from the perspective that highly educated females in the US are more inclined towards marriage, highly educated females in Japan exhibit a lower likelihood of choosing marriage and being chosen as partners compared to their non-highly educated counterparts. This can be attributed to traditional gender norms prevailing in Japanese society, where educated females have more opportunities in the labor market but relatively fewer possibilities to participate in household

chores and childcare. As a result, they may be perceived as less desirable as potential partners (Ayako, 2023). To boost both marriage and fertility rates, the Japanese government has implemented various measures, such as providing financial support for childcare, improving the quality of childcare services, and promoting the adoption of a parental leave system (Date & Shimizutani). Since 1992, the Japanese government has consistently implemented various child-rearing policies, such as the Angel Plan, the New Strategy to Deal with Decreased Birth Rates, and the Child and Child Care Support Act, in an effort to alleviate fertility pressure and stimulate the declining marriage rate (Kirihara, 2021). The Japanese government's response to the rising unmarried rate, however, primarily focuses on family-related measures, thereby reinforcing traditional Japanese notions and practices surrounding gender and marriage.

In 2010, the cohabitation rate of individuals aged between 20 and 40 in the US exceeded 10 percent, while France and Sweden witnessed rates exceeding 20 percent. These figures exhibit a positive correlation with the proportion of out-of-wedlock births within each respective country (Cabinet Office, 2010). The phenomenon of unmarried cohabitation is progressively supplanting the institution of marriage in these European and American countries, while the recognition and protection of children born out of wedlock are gradually increasing. Contrary to China, the marriage rate in the US has experienced a greater decline among females compared to males, but both genders are facing challenges brought about by the marriage squeeze (Goldscheider & Waite, 1986). American marriage, which was once "rigid, work-centered, custom regulated, with well-defined roles for husband, wife, and children," has now shifted to being "flexible, pleasure-centered, co-operatively regulated, with loosely defined roles for husband, wife, and children" (DiFonzo & Stern, 2008).

The traditional norms of gender continue to exert a dominant influence on the sexual roles within marriages in Asian countries; however, it is undeniable that there is an ongoing restructuring of marital roles for both males and females, leading to a departure from traditional norms. Compared to the unmarried rate and characteristics observed in other countries across East Asia, Southeast Asia, as well as Europe and America, China's marriage exhibits a notable level of stability.

Analysis of Reasons for Non-Marriage from a Global Comparative Perspective

The decision to stay unmarried represents one's personal response to the perspective on life, cultural attitudes towards marriage, and societal norms. The reasons for non-marriage among individuals may vary in their emphasis points due to variations in systems across different countries. In general, the understanding of the reasons for non-marriage in different countries can generally be categorized into three perspectives: macro level, meso level, and micro level.

The Macro Perspective

From a macro perspective, the underlying factors contributing to non-marriage in various countries exhibit remarkable similarities, while the nuanced distinctions are often manifested at

the meso level and micro level. The trend towards late marriage or non-marriage is associated with economic, social, and demographic transformations. Engels believed that marriage is essentially an economic relationship (Engels, 2018). The economic function of marriage used to be highly valued in the past. The economic function of marriage has been partially supplanted by the social security system and welfare programs in the process of modernization, leading to a gradual reduction in the auxiliary roles associated with marriage and prompting a reevaluation of its status within the traditional family system. Furthermore, the diversification of values on marriage and love, along with the rise of individualism, the imbalance in gender ratio (Wang, 2022), the growing acceptance of non-marriage in society, as well as advancements in females' economic and social status, has empowered individuals to prioritize their autonomous consciousness, which has ultimately eroded their overall inclination towards marriage.

The Meso Perspective

From a meso perspective, unmarried groups are products of the transitional process from traditional society to modern society, which is influenced by both conventional and contemporary factors. The formation of unmarried groups in China is influenced by the changes in traditional marriage culture and education expansion. In terms of traditional marriage culture, the marriage gradient selection tendency is widely acknowledged among the public (Hu & Li, 2019). The sanctity of marriage and family, which primarily serves the purpose of ancestor worship and lineage continuation, has been compromised, leading to a prevalent trend of late marriage or even non-marriage. Consequently, China witnessed the emergence of a distinctive phenomenon known as "leftover singles" (Deng, 2015). In terms of education expansion, the expansion of university enrollment has led to an increase in the average years of schooling among individuals and a delay in the age of first marriage (Song & Fan, 2017). This, in turn, has contributed to significant changes in the economic foundation of marriage, promoted gender equality, and transformed traditional gender norms (Yu et al., 2020). Moreover, it has also exerted an influence on females' attitudes towards marriage. The expansion of university enrollment has resulted in a postponement of the age at which both males and females enter their first marriage, thereby enhancing the overall level of human capital within society and improving the matching efficiency in the marriage market. This phenomenon has also contributed to an increase in the marriage rate in China, with a more pronounced impact on females than males (Liu & Liu, 2018). In summary, education does not necessarily have a negative impact on marriage. Education has the potential to postpone first marriages, but it may also counteract or reverse the delayed effect of education on marriage (Yu & Xie, 2013).

The high cost of education, challenges faced by females in balancing work and family responsibilities, gender inequality, and an uncoordinated division of labor based on gender are the primary factors contributing to the prevalence of non-marriage in Japan and South Korea, two East Asian countries with a long history of non-marriage (Raymo et al., 2015). Japanese society is characterized by traditional norms that females should assume the role of housewives upon marriage

and relinquish their surnames. As a result, an increasing number of Japanese females no longer regard marriage and childbirth as a necessary course of their lives (Wang et al., 2022). Most single females in Japan perceive marriage and subsequent family life as a burden and are prioritizing their career choices over marital commitments (Raymo, 1998). The gender inequality prevalent in Japan significantly impacts the decision-making process of highly educated females when it comes to marriage, often leading to the postponement or rejection of marriage (Nemoto, 2008). As for Japanese females, the declining appeal of marriage among them can be attributed to the diminished significance of traditional marital institutions in contemporary society. The increase in the number of unmarried individuals in East and Southeast Asian countries over the past few decades can be partially attributed to the combined impact of a growing proportion of urban dwellers and individuals with higher education attainment. Overall, the surge in the number of non-marriage individuals in Asian countries can be attributed to rapid regional economic development, mismatches in the marriage market, gender inequality, and evolving marital expectations.

The Micro Perspective

From a micro perspective, some Chinese scholars considered financial stability and individual characteristics the primary determinants for non-marriage (Zhang, 2015). Studies found that factors contributing to non-marriage vary between genders. For females, the main factors influencing their decision to remain unmarried include their enhanced economic and social status, reduced gender income disparity, and decreased inclination towards childbearing. Additionally, another significant factor is the comparatively lower involvement of husbands in childcare responsibilities compared to their wives, which has undermined females' positive perception of marriage (Jones, 2019). Unmarried females who break free from the constraints of traditional institutions often establish a "self-centered" approach to emotional interactions in their personal lives and opt for alternative means to find emotional fulfillment (Gao, 2019). For males, a survey conducted in Ankang city, Shaanxi province, China, revealed that the marriage squeeze exerts a more pronounced impact on middle-aged males of lower economic and social strata, with limited educational attainment, and residing in economically distressed areas (Zhang & Atani, 2019).

In Japan, research on non-marriage places particular emphasis on examining the reasons why females choose not to get married. On the one hand, with the increasing economic independence experienced by many females and a relaxation of social expectations regarding marriage, females aspire for a reevaluation of their familial status to promote enhanced gender equality within marital relationships (Retherford et al., 2001). This may also result in heightened expectations for potential marriage partners, and if a suitable partner cannot be found, the option of postponing or abstaining from marriage altogether may become increasingly viable (Oppenheimer, 1988). The difference in roles of Japanese females before and after getting married, on the other hand, significantly reduces their desire for matrimony. Prior to marriage, females have the opportunity to enjoy a stable income, attain higher professional status, and experience greater personal freedom. However, after getting

married, they often assume the role of homemakers, who are primarily responsible for serving their families and caring for their spouses and children (Zhang, 2015). In Japan, highly educated females often opt out of marriage due to increased income, as societal expectations continue to place the majority of family care responsibilities on females (Ono, 2003). From the perspective of Japanese females' own development, the enhancement of educational attainment and employment opportunities has significantly elevated their social status, prompting a continuous pursuit of gender equality among Japanese females, and fostering the gradual formation of a marriage concept centered on personal happiness (Liu, 2019). Studies have also concluded that the primary factors contributing to Japanese females' inclination towards late marriage or non-marriage include a growing sense of financial autonomy, a lack of suitable marital prospects, and challenges in attaining work-life balance (Li, 2012). The research conducted on the situations in Singapore revealed that unmarried individuals in Singapore tend to perceive marriage as a personal matter rather than a societal and familial obligation. The singles prioritize personal freedom and choice when it comes to deciding if and when to enter into matrimony (Jones, 2012). A substantial body of evidence also indicated that the significant increase in divorce rates, rising housing costs, and the shortages of housing in Singapore have significantly eroded individuals' desire for marriage. Additionally, the shortages in housing and high living costs impose constraints on family size, contributing to increased uncertainty about marriage (Ronald & Druta, 2016). In Malaysia, factors such as uncertainty in the labor market, fluctuations in male income, and instability in employment contribute to a decreased willingness or suitability for males to enter marriage. Additionally, as more and more highly educated females enter the workforce, their economic independence grows, leading to a declined inclination towards marriage among them.

In 2010, the average age of first marriage in European and American countries represented by the US was 25.8 years for females and 28.3 years for males. The phenomenon of premarital cohabitation contributes to the postponement of the first marriage and even non-marriage (Copen et al., 2012). According to a survey conducted among heterosexual Chinese-American and Japanese-American females, researchers identified several factors contributing to the choices of remaining unmarried among these young individuals. These factors include the identification of drawbacks inherent in their parents' traditional marriage, filial pressure imposed on eldest or only daughters, parents' high expectations regarding education, and limited availability of suitable partners (Ferguson, 2000). In addition, unmarried individuals in the US enjoy a decisive social well-being advantage. They can still attain substantial levels of social well-being even if they choose not to enter marriage (Shapiro & Keyes, 2008).

To conclude, there exist significant disparities between Asian countries and European and American countries regarding the factors contributing to non-marriage. In many Asian countries, late marriage and non-marriage are primarily attributed to socioeconomic changes, including the popularization and expansion of regular education, rise in females' employment rates, gradual elimination of arranged marriages, and macro-structural transformations in urbanization and industrialization. The key factors contributing to the phenomenon of late marriage and non-marriage

in East and Southeast Asian countries are primarily attributed to the diminishing prevalence of arranged marriages and the persistent presence of gender inequalities. With the rise of individualism, the institution of arranged marriage has undergone significant erosion. However, the emergence of marriage freedom associations and other social organizations has not yet fully compensated for this deficiency (Retherford et al., 2001). Additionally, the presence of gender inequality further accentuates the inverse relationship between females' education and marriage transition (Kim & Kamo, 2018). The experience of South Korea revealed that there is a strong correlation between the prevailing gender inequality and the mismatch in the marriage market in the country (Raymo & Park, 2020). The experience of Japan suggested that as females' economic and social status improves, an increasing number of females are choosing to postpone marriage or even decide not to get married at all due to the asymmetry in gender roles regarding both work and family (Raymo, 2003). Moreover, the prevailing culture of overwork in Singaporean workplaces deprives young singles of the time and space necessary for courtship, making it the primary reason why they struggle to find long-term partners and choose not to get married (Straughan, 2015). In certain European and American countries, represented by the US, there has been, on the one hand, a decline in the influence of both religious and secular factors on marriage. On the other hand, the escalating cost associated with marriage has transformed it into a "privilege" exclusively accessible to successful individuals (Wilcox et al., 2015). The culture of open marriages, the embrace of free love, and the emphasis on individuality over traditional family structures form the realistic foundation for the phenomenon of non-marriage in European and American countries. Meanwhile, the implementation of relevant laws and regulations regarding unmarried cohabitation safeguards the rights and interests of both parties involved in unmarried cohabitation and out-of-wedlock childbirths, leading to an increasing prevalence of unmarried cohabitation in European and American countries.

Literature Review and Research Prospects

Literature Review

This paper provides a comprehensive review of the domestic and international research literature on non-marriage, focusing primarily on the trends, characteristics, and underlying factors contributing to non-marriage in Asian countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore, as well as European and American countries including Spain and the US. In terms of trends of non-marriage and late marriage, the present study found that there is a growing trend of postponed marriage and parenthood, as well as an increasing proportion of individuals who exhibit no enthusiasm towards matrimony or parenthood in the aforementioned countries. In terms of the characteristics of non-marriage, Japan, South Korea, and several developed countries in Europe and America have exhibited the phenomenon since the middle to late 20th century, with a relatively long history of non-marriage. The emergence of this phenomenon in China, Malaysia, the Philippines, and other developing

countries in Asia, however, was relatively late, exhibiting a gradual development process. Currently, the marriage landscape in China is characterized by a growing number of non-marriage individuals, a significant level of stability, and notable instances of male marriage squeeze. In terms of reasons for staying unmarried, the phenomenon of staying unmarried in each country is affected by macro, meso, and micro factors. In China, the phenomenon of staying unmarried is closely associated with a range of factors, including diverse values and attitudes towards romance and marriage, the marriage squeeze, the education expansion, and the rise in females' economic and social status. In response to the issue of non-marriage, Japan has implemented structural reforms in five key areas: promoting gender equality, facilitating work-life balance, improving childbearing and education, addressing aging population challenges, and fostering a positive lifestyle (Cabinet Office, 2022a; Hiroko, 2008). The US government aims to mitigate family disintegration and foster healthy families by focusing on marriage education, long-term family development plans, and strategies for addressing domestic violence in order to address the deficiencies in marital relationships (Haskins et al., 2005).

The phenomenon of non-marriage has been extensively explored in the existing literature, both domestically and internationally, encompassing various levels and perspectives. In terms of research content, the existing research primarily focuses on the trends, characteristics, and underlying reasons for non-marriage. However, there is a lack of discussion regarding the social impact of non-marriage and the corresponding measures to address it. In terms of research methods, most studies primarily employ the quantitative analysis method based on various databases to establish models to predict and discuss the demographic attributes, marriage concepts, and characteristics of unmarried groups. However, there is a scarcity of qualitative research and literature that offer profound explanations regarding the formation mechanism of non-marriage. In terms of research objects, the existing research encompasses both general and specific non-marriage populations, spanning a wide range of ages.

Research Prospects

This study aims to enrich the research on non-marriage from a global comparative perspective by conducting a comprehensive literature review of both domestic and foreign articles, with the intention of providing valuable references for future studies. Meanwhile, the unique perspective of this present study will offer some insights for Chinese scholars to conduct further research on marriage within the context of China's increasingly prevalent trends of late marriage and non-marriage.

In terms of research types, despite the abundance of explanatory studies that provide a theoretical foundation for governments to develop relevant policies in response to the increasing unmarried rate, policy development often fails to keep up with this prevailing trend. The delayed response has resulted in the emergence of non-marriage as an unmanageable risk factor that significantly impacts social development. The utilization of advanced monitoring methods is therefore imperative in order to collect and analyze real-time data, thereby enhancing the existing research on predicting non-marriage.

In terms of research content, based on the identity of the current institution of marriage, the surveys and experiences of many countries demonstrate that marriage remains the preferred choice for the majority of individuals when it comes to establishing intimate relationships. The desire for marriage remains prevalent among individuals, even in European and American countries where more liberal attitudes towards marriage are observed. However, the traditional marriage paradigm, expectations regarding family and marriage, marriage norms supported by mainstream culture, and gender role assignments are facing significant challenges. It is suggested future research should focus on comprehending the lifestyles, attitudes towards marriage and relationships, perceptions of sexual behavior, and life experiences of those who choose not to get married, which holds great significance for alleviating non-marriage and tackling related issues. In terms of the reasons for choosing to stay unmarried, some may argue that this choice is a behavioral response by certain groups to evade or reject marriage. However, the factors contributing to their choice vary across individuals, and such a choice holds different significance among individuals of different age cohorts and social strata. Therefore, it is recommended that future research on non-marriage should focus on exploring the reasons behind the surge in the number of unmarried individuals from the perspective of social and economic changes as well as personal life courses, considering the vast and diverse cultural framework within Chinese society. To be specific, the individual's code of conduct and mode of action are influenced by various social and cultural systems. Therefore, how does the individual respond to these systems during this process? What social and cultural changes are contributing to the increasing number of unmarried individuals in China? Which type of choice, active or passive, is more prevalent among non-marriage individuals? What policies are available for the government to reference or adopt if it wants to encourage earlier marriages and address the trend of non-marriage? In summary, the phenomenon of non-marriage is a product generated under the combined influence of contemporary social and economic structures, the emerging marriage and love culture, national policies regarding marriage and childbearing, as well as personal choices in relationships. Therefore, it is crucial to examine both the macro-level background and micro-level realities to understand the reasons behind individuals' choice of non-marriage, thereby developing a rational and harmonious marriage and love culture along with appropriate policies for marriage and childbearing in China.

It is also important to further investigate the internal mechanisms and consequences of non-marriage, as there exists a paucity of research on these facets. The above information is crucial for countries to assess the situation of non-marriage and develop effective policies regarding marriage and childbearing in response to this growing trend of non-marriage. In terms of the consequences of non-marriage, it is evident that the existence of non-marriage and its worldwide prevalence will inevitably exert negative impacts on social development. For individuals, the phenomenon of non-marriage will inevitably influence their marriage strategies. For society, the widespread prevalence of late marriage and non-marriage will directly influence the demographic structure, leading to the crisis of population aging (Jiang, 2010). Moreover, it will also bring about changes in family structure and fertility, potentially leading to a range of supporting issues for the elderly. The upward trend in

the proportion of females who choose to remain unmarried throughout their lives in China in 2020 indicates that the number of females who choose to postpone their marriage or even decide not to get married is increasing. Based on such a situation, the supporting issues for single females will transform from a personal issue to a social problem (Li & Shen, 2019). The growing population of individuals who decided not to get married is likely to further aggravate the low fertility rate (Wang et al., 2018). As one of the most economically developed countries in Asia, Japan has a long history characterized by low fertility rates and a decline in marriage rates. As of 2020, the total fertility rate in Japan stands at 1.33, while the average proportion of unmarried individuals in their 50s is recorded at 23.05 percent (Cabinet Office, 2022). The impact of declining fertility and marriage rates has led to the emergence of a trend in Japan characterized by weakened familial ties, diminished geographical consciousness, and a reduction in the social significance of interpersonal relationships. Consequently, Japan has been referred to as a “non-relationship society.” The academic circle and international community have not yet established a consensus on the threshold for defining the lifelong unmarried rate. Currently, there is a global trend where the marriage rate in several major countries is declining year by year and the number of people choosing not to get married is increasing. The phenomenon of non-marriage has become widespread across different countries, albeit to varying degrees. However, it is important to note that while similarities exist among these countries experiencing non-marriage, there are also differences. Therefore, in confronting this shared challenge, it is feasible to leverage the experiences of countries grappling with the phenomenon of non-marriage and formulate localized strategies to address it. In short, the phenomenon of non-marriage is garnering increasing attention from both scholars and the public, and the pattern of non-marriage will emerge as a prominent topic within the academic discourse on marriage in the future.

Based on global comparative research on non-marriage in this paper, it is recommended that more emphasis should be placed on predicting the phenomenon of non-marriage in future research, with a specific focus on exploring the reasons for advocating non-marriage, examining the internal mechanisms underlying this phenomenon, analyzing the consequences of non-marriage, and proposing corresponding countermeasures while establishing the public identity towards marriage. In particular, it is necessary to understand the development trend of non-marriage and the internal formation mechanism underlying this phenomenon by comprehensively considering factors such as gender, social class, country, marriage culture, and economic and social changes to provide effective decision-making reference for the government and society to deal with the problems caused by this phenomenon.

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(Editor: Xiong Xianwei)