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The Role of Tourism in Chinese Women's Self-Perception and Identity Reconstruction

A thesis

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Abstract

Within post-socialist Chinese society, women's lives are profoundly shaped by multiple structural forces, including state-family themes, Confucian gender ethics, marital and reproductive discipline, and marketed femininity. Against this complex gendered institutional backdrop, tourism has progressively emerged as a vital social practice through which contemporary Chinese women achieve self-awareness, emotional restoration, and subjectivity. While existing research has explored the relationship between tourism and identity reconstruction, much of this scholarship remains grounded in Western individualistic frameworks that emphasise autonomy, self-expression, and personal transformation (Bruner, 1991; Wang, 1999). Research on women's travel has predominantly been influenced by Western viewpoints, frequently emphasising empowerment and agency within relatively liberal socio-cultural frameworks (Frohlick, 2005; Jordan & Aitchison, 2008). Consequently, there remains a limited understanding of how women in non-Western societies negotiate self-reconstruction through travel (Caton, 2012) in societies where gender norms, familial expectations, and social structures are traditionally less equitable than those in contemporary Western societies. This study aims to bridge this theoretical gap by analysing how tourism provides Chinese women with spaces of structural release and explaining how women generate non-confrontational, relational, and culturally embedded subjectivity through travel.

Grounded in a constructivist paradigm and feminist epistemology, this qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews with 72 Chinese women from diverse urban contexts, age groups, educational backgrounds, and marital/parental statuses. Thematic induction and coding analysis were conducted using NVivo. While focusing on women's narrative experiences, the study also examines the mechanisms of self-transformation triggered by travel at institutional, cultural, and affective structural levels. The methodological framework particularly emphasises researcher positionality and reflexivity, ensuring the research process faithfully represents women's own meaning-making.

Findings reveal that travel functions not merely as a leisure activity but as an institutional interstice within women's lives. In this context, the intensity of familial obligations, emotional labour responsibilities, societal evaluation systems, and gender norms temporarily diminishes, enabling women to experience emotional awakening, boundary awareness, and value reconstruction. This study additionally proposes a model of negotiated subjectivity to elucidate how women attain subjectivity formation through travel within non-Western gender systems. Unlike the oppositional subjectivity found in Western contexts, negotiated subjectivity is a form of agency rooted in relational theory, cultural context, and emotional intelligence. It manifests as women achieving identity reconstruction and self-positioning by adjusting boundaries, rewriting self-narratives, and reordering values without disrupting social and familial structures.

The study concludes that tourism holds profound social significance in the lives of contemporary Chinese women, influencing not only emotional states but also reshaping individual understandings of family, intimate relationships, and social roles. Theoretically, this research advances cross-cultural dialogue between tourism mobility theory, identity reconstruction theory, and feminist subjectivity theory. Practically, it offers actionable

recommendations for destination governance, tourism product design, gender-friendly policy formulation, and mental health services. Furthermore, the study reveals that tourism serves as a vital social resource for Chinese women, transcending leisure to profoundly shape their self-understanding, relational positioning, and life choices.

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Background

1.1.1The Status of Women in Ancient China

A persistent debate concerns the status of women in ancient China. On one hand, archaic matriarchal legends, yin-yang cosmology, and historical records collectively attest to women's significant role in Chinese religious imaginaries and familial structures. Early mythological narratives, including those surrounding female creator deities, highlight women's centrality in cosmological origins (Birrell, 1993; Allan, 1991). In addition, the yin-yang framework conceptualizes gender not as a rigid hierarchy but as a complementary and interdependent relation, in which the feminine principle (yin) performs essential generative and sustaining functions (R. Wang, 2012; Kohn, 2001). Furthermore, historical studies of family life in imperial China show that, despite institutional constraints, women played indispensable roles in maintaining kinship systems and domestic authority (Ebrey, 1993; Ko, 2005). On the other hand, following the institutionalization of Confucian ethical systems, as reflected in classical texts such as the Zhou Li, women were increasingly placed in subordinate positions within a hierarchical social order. Confucian doctrines formalized gender hierarchy through kinship structures and moral codes that emphasized female obedience and domesticity (Ebrey, 1993; Rosenlee, 2012). As a result, women's bodies, marriages, and everyday conduct became subject to extensive social regulation and moral discipline, particularly within the patriarchal family system (Mann, 1997; Ko, 2005; Hinsch, 2002). These regulatory mechanisms were embedded in ritual practices and social institutions, reinforcing a gendered social order that linked moral virtue to female compliance.

The historical trajectory of women's status in ancient China was not a linear progression from high to low; rather, it resulted from the prolonged interaction among diverse intellectual traditions, political institutions, and social structures. The yin-yang concept in early cosmology did confer upon women a symbolically significant position. Ancient Chinese society, in fact, accorded women considerable importance, as reflected in the religious beliefs prevalent at the time. Ancient Chinese people believed that the cosmos was governed by two opposing forces. The renowned classic, the I Ching, designated these opposing forces as yin and yang, respectively. In the I Ching, yin and yang are conceptualized as complementary forces that structure the cosmos, with yin often associated with the feminine and yang with the masculine. However, rather than representing a fixed hierarchy, this relationship emphasizes interdependence and dynamic balance (Jung et al., 2011; Needham, 1956; R. Wang, 2012). This indicates that, within ancient religious beliefs, women occupied a position of considerable significance. It also suggests that, in early belief systems, women could occupy positions of symbolic importance. In Chinese mythology, the figure of Nüwa is often portrayed as the creator of humanity, while Fuxi is associated with the development of social order. Early depictions frequently present them as complementary and equal figures, indicating a worldview that emphasizes balance rather than rigid hierarchy.

This cosmological perspective presents yin and yang as two interdependent and dynamically balanced forces that generate and sustain all phenomena. Rather than fixed opposites, yin and yang are understood as relational and continually transforming, thereby emphasizing mutual dependence and equilibrium (Needham, 1956; R. Wang, 2012). Yin is often associated with

gentleness, receptivity, and nurturance, whereas yang corresponds to strength, initiative, and outward expansion. In later periods, this cosmology underwent successive processes of moralization and gendering, gradually developing into a gender order in which yang was privileged, men dominated the external sphere, and women governed the domestic sphere. However, returning to the pre-Qin period of the Hundred Schools of Thought reveals diverse and not entirely consistent conceptions of gender. For example, in contrast to later Confucian social ethics, Daoist philosophy valorises qualities such as softness, flexibility, and receptivity, often associated with the feminine principle. Classical Daoist texts, particularly the Dao De Jing, praise the "mysterious female" (xuan pin) as the generative source of all existence, positioning the feminine as fundamental to the Dao itself (Kohn, 2001; R. Wang, 2012). This philosophical orientation situates women, at least symbolically, as closer to nature and the Dao. However, this stands in sharp contrast to the Confucian system, which institutionalized gender hierarchy and prescribed women's roles within rigid familial and moral structures (Ebrey, 1993; Rosenlee, 2006). Yet the factor that most profoundly shaped women's status in ancient China was the patriarchal ritual system, which became institutionalized from the Western Zhou and Spring and Autumn periods onward. Classical ritual texts, including the Zhou Li and the Book of Rites (Liji), delineated distinct gendered spheres, assigning men to the outer, public sphere and women to the inner, domestic domain. This spatial and social division was central to the Confucian ritual order, reinforcing hierarchical distinctions and moral classifications such as honour and status (Ebrey, 1993; Lewis, 2012; Rosenlee, 2012). These distinctions were embedded within broader Confucian principles that sought to regulate social relations through clearly defined hierarchies of status, propriety, and moral conduct. This system closely intertwined gender difference with hierarchical order through ritual and musical institutions. Women were explicitly confined to the inner sphere and bound to domestic labour, childbearing, and emotional care. By contrast, politics, military affairs, and public decision-making belonged to the male-dominated external world. This hierarchical gender structure was further consolidated during the Han dynasty through the institutionalization of Confucian ideology, particularly after Dong Zhongshu's advocacy of "rejecting other schools and exclusively venerating Confucianism" (ba chu bai jia, du zun ru shu). This ideological shift laid the foundation for the development of normative frameworks, such as the Three Bonds and Five Constants (san gang wu chang), which formalized hierarchical social and gender relations and placed women in subordinate positions within the family and moral order (Queen, 1996; Lewis, 2009; Rosenlee, 2012; Ebrey, 1993).

This framework integrated the principle of '"the husband as the bond of the wife' wi" into the patriarchal order, transforming women from household members into legal dependants. The relatively low status of women in traditional Chinese society was rooted not only in its deeply entrenched patriarchal kinship system, but also in institutionalised marital practices such as polygamy and concubinage. These practices reinforced hierarchical distinctions among women and consolidated male authority within the family, thereby limiting women's autonomy and social mobility (Ebrey, 1993; Mann, 1997; Hinsch, 2002; Ko, 2005).

During the Eastern Zhou period, a significant major intellectual transformation occurred, commonly referred to as the "Hundred Schools of Thought," in which diverse philosophical traditions emerged in response to social and political upheaval. Among these, Confucianism and Daoism gradually developed into two of the most enduring and influential intellectual

traditions in Chinese history, shaping ethical systems, cosmological understandings, and cultural practices across subsequent dynasties (Feng, 1948; Schwartz, 1985; Lewis, 1999; de Bary, 2007).

Daoism advocated "the unity of heaven and humanity" and the superiority of non-action over action. Under the influence of Daoist thought, some individuals renounced worldly life and sought communion with nature through meditation. This group held women in high esteem, believing them to be closer to nature's primal forces because the female womb could nurture new life. Others who revered Daoist philosophy pursued a different path, seeking immortality through spiritual cultivation. This group also venerated women, but primarily because they believed the female body contained essential elements indispensable for refining the elixir of immortality. Although Daoism and Confucianism arise from distinct philosophical foundations, both engage the concept of the feminine, albeit in markedly different ways. Daoist thought elevates the feminine principle as a fundamental generative force within the cosmos, often associated with the Dao itself (Kohn, 2001; R. Wang, 2012). In contrast, Confucianism incorporates women into a hierarchical moral and social order in which their roles are defined in relation to male authority and familial obligations (Ebrey, 1993; Rosenlee, 2012).

Despite Daoism's popularity at the time, many heads of state and their advisers found its doctrines impractical for statecraft. Rulers sought a doctrine that could assist them in consolidating power, governing the populace, and expanding territory. Thus, they regarded Confucianism as the more suitable choice. Daoist philosophy carried strong matriarchal overtones, whereas Confucianism represented the opposite. Confucius's teachings constituted a pragmatic philosophy within a patriarchal society. As stated in the Analects (17:25), "women and petty men are difficult to manage," a phrase often cited to illustrate the relatively low status accorded to women in Confucian thought (Confucius, 1998). Men were the heads of households, while women's primary duties were to serve their husbands, manage domestic affairs, bear healthy sons, and continue the lineage. Women's social value was largely defined by their fulfillment of prescribed domestic and moral responsibilities, while their individual desires, emotional experiences, and personal aspirations were often subordinated to these roles (Ebrey, 1993; Rosenlee, 2006; Mann, 1997; Ko, 2005). Women endured immense hardship during the historical periods when Confucianism served as the governing ideology. Confucianism placed particular emphasis on gender segregation, requiring women to adhere strictly to prescribed roles. During its early promotion, these segregationist principles were less rigid. In the Western Zhou period, married women still enjoyed considerable freedom. As segregationist demands intensified, it was decreed that husbands could regard their wives as human beings worthy of attention only within the confines of the bedchamber; at other times, women were forbidden from even seeing their own husbands. Women were denied access to education, and their sole duty was the management of the household. By the Ming Dynasty, society had become subject to pervasive ideological control. During this period, women's circumstances became even more restrictive; apart from courtesans, respectable women were rarely permitted to appear in public. In certain historical contexts, particularly among lower social strata, women could be treated as transferable assets within marital and familial arrangements, including the purchase of concubines or arranged transactions involving wives. Although such practices were not uniform across all periods or regions, they nevertheless reflect the deeply embedded

patriarchal structure of traditional Chinese society, in which women's status was often subordinated within both legal and social frameworks (Ebrey, 1993; Mann, 1997; Sommer, 2000; Ko, 2005; Rosenlee, 2012).

During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, the Zhou royal court established the Zhou Rites as the dominant ideology, which defined social hierarchy by delineating ranks and clarifying the order of respect and subordination. Women were categorized as belonging to an inferior class. The Zhou Rites also prescribed strict gender segregation, and concepts such as separate spheres for men and women, male superiority over women, men belonging to the outer sphere and women to the inner, and male dominance over female submission became widely prevalent. Although women occupied a subordinate position within the social hierarchy of early Chinese society, their status was not entirely marginal. As Ebrey (1993) suggested, women were in many respects "lowly but not despised," retaining a degree of social presence and functional importance within family and community life. In certain historical contexts, particularly in earlier periods, women also enjoyed greater flexibility in areas such as marriage arrangements and participation in economic activities (Hinsch, 2002; Ko, 2005). First, women could remarry without social stigma. Following the death of King Huiwen of Qin, his favoured consort Mi Yue remarried the King of Yiqu and bore him two sons. Secondly, women participated in socioeconomic activities, primarily in tertiary sectors such as commerce, industry, and textiles. Historical records, particularly the Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji), document the case of Qing, the wealthy merchant widow from the Ba-Shu region, who was recognized and honoured by Emperor Qin Shi Huang for her economic achievements. According to these accounts, she was granted exceptional status, including the construction of a commemorative terrace in her honour. This case indicates that, despite the broader patriarchal constraints of the period, women could, in exceptional circumstances, attain substantial economic influence and social recognition (Sima Qian, Shiji; Hinsch, 2002; Ebrey, 1993). Classical ritual texts such as the Zhou Li (Rites of Zhou), particularly the section on "Matchmakers" (Meishi), record that in the second month of spring, men and women were permitted, and at times encouraged, to meet and form unions, and that restrictions on such interactions were temporarily relaxed. Those who failed to participate without valid reason could even face penalties. This suggests that early institutional frameworks did not uniformly restrict women's marital choices but instead incorporated regulated forms of social and marital interaction (Zhou Li; Hinsch, 2002; Lewis, 2006). This implies that the government permitted unmarried men and women to meet and pursue romantic relationships openly. During this period, couples could even privately pledge themselves to one another without prohibition. Failure to attend this gathering festival without a valid reason would incur penalties.

In 124 BCE, Dong Zhongshu proposed the Confucian principal doctrines of "abolishing all schools of thought except Confucianism" and "the Three Bonds and Five Constants." Emperor Wu of Han greatly admirably endorsed these ideas and implemented them as state policy. Women's personal freedoms and property rights were severely suppressed, reducing them to dependants of men. Subsequently, the Book of Exemplary Women was compiled. While such texts ostensibly praising the virtues of chaste and exemplary women, such texts also served as normative frameworks that regulated female behaviour, reinforcing expectations of compliance and moral discipline (Mann, 1997; Ebrey, 1993). The Confucian ritual and moral system were adopted by ruling elites as a normative framework to regulate

and evaluate women's conduct. Through institutionalised codes of propriety and virtue, women's behaviour was subjected to continuous moral scrutiny and social control, particularly within the family and kinship structure (Lewis, 2006; Rosenlee, 2012; Ebrey, 1993). Yet, as evidenced by the renowned Han-era dynasty poem The Peacock Flies Southeast, the moral codes enforced by the government failed to fundamentally alter popular beliefs. This well-known Yuefu poem, The Peacock Flies Southeast, recounts the tragic story of Jiao Zhongqing and Liu Lanzhi, whose self-chosen love ultimately led to their joint death. Notably, the narrative does not frame their actions as a violation of filial piety; rather, it reflects a degree of social sympathy towards their predicament. In some interpretations, social and familial pressures appear to have shifted towards facilitating their joint burial, suggesting that communal values could, under certain circumstances, accommodate emotional bonds alongside ritual expectations (Idema, 2010). This demonstrates that contemporary social attitudes did not endorse the notion of "marriage by parental decree and matchmaker's word."

The Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties constituted an era of extraordinary intellectual freedom and openness in Chinese history. Women during this period boldly actively challenged feudal ethical norms. While Confucian norms imposed significant substantial constraints on women during the Qin–Han period, certain women—particularly in exceptional or elite contexts—were able to transcend these limitations and participate in political and military spheres traditionally dominated by men. Such cases, though not representative of the broader female population, demonstrably indicate that gender boundaries were not entirely fixed and could be negotiated under specific historical conditions (Hinsch, 2002; Ebrey, 1993). These women either presided over court affairs or assisted in governing the state, offering counsel, accepting appointments, commanding troops, and appearing frequently on the political stage and battlefield in political and military arenas. In the economic sphere, they wove cloth and tilled the fields, shouldering crucial essential responsibilities for livelihood and sustenance. Within marriage and family life, many women actively pursued love, asserted control over their own destinies, and enjoyed considerable freedom in social interactions and marriage. Within the traditional domestic roles of family life, women played a central role in managing household affairs and were often responsible for the organization and daily functioning of the family. Consequently, they exercised considerable practical authority, particularly in resource management and family coordination, although they remained situated within a broader patriarchal structure (Ebrey, 1993; Mann, 1997; Ko, 2005). This gave rise to the saying, "A capable woman upholding the household is better than a great man." Even during periods often described as a "golden age" of Chinese scholarship and culture, women made significant contributions to literary and cultural production, leaving an enduring legacy for later generations (Ko, 1994; Mann, 1997). During this period, women's humanity and individuality developed considerably, marking a high point in ancient Chinese feminism. In China's historical continuum, the later Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD) is widely recognized as a period of economic prosperity and cultural openness. Scholars have noted that the relatively cosmopolitan and flexible social environment of the Tang era created conditions in which women could enjoy a comparatively higher degree of autonomy and social visibility, particularly in marriage, mobility, and cultural participation (Yao, 2013; Twitchett & Fairbank, 1978; Schafer, 1963; Bossler, 2020). Although society remained fundamentally patriarchal, women's status during this period was, in several respects, higher than in many other dynasties.

While marriages were still arranged by parents, social norms were comparatively liberal, with fewer constraints imposed by ritual and law. Women in the Tang period were relatively active in public life, participating in leisure activities and social interactions, and appearing in public spaces with fewer restrictions than in later periods (Ebrey, 2003).

During the late Sui and early Tang periods, numerous women were forcibly brought into the imperial court. Combined with the prolonged warfare that often accompanied dynastic transitions, these conditions frequently caused substantial demographic disruption, including an increase in widows and widowers and the fragmentation of family structures. Such circumstances posed major challenges to population recovery and, consequently, to the restoration of the agrarian economy, which depended heavily on stable household organization and labour availability (Lewis, 2009; Elvin, 1973; Lee & Feng, 2001). Consequently, Emperor Taizong of Tang issued an edict encouraging widowers and widows to remarry. Empress Wu Zetian's accession to the throne further stimulated the ambitions of court women to participate in governance and even contest supreme power, ushering in a brief "era of red attire" in which Chinese women attained unprecedented status. During the Tang dynasty, women had the right to inherit property. Tang legal codes stipulated that, in the absence of male heirs, unmarried daughters could inherit family property, reflecting a relatively flexible approach to women's property rights in certain contexts (Johnson,2019; Faibank & Twitchett, 1979).

With the rise of Neo-Confucianism during the Song and Ming periods, a more restrictive moral framework governing women became increasingly institutionalized. Neo-Confucian thinkers sought to reassert social order through stricter interpretations of ritual propriety and gender hierarchy, often presenting the relative openness of the Tang period as evidence of moral decline. In this discourse, the perceived laxity of earlier social practices was retrospectively linked to a "collapse of ritual order" (li huai yue beng), reflecting an effort to legitimize more rigid gender norms in later periods (Bol, 2020; Furth, 1999). With the consolidation of Cheng–Zhu Neo-Confucianism as an orthodox ideological framework, gender hierarchy was further institutionalized, emphasizing male authority and female chastity. This is reflected in moral maxims such as "starvation is a minor matter, whereas loss of virtue is a grave one," which underscored the prioritization of female chastity over individual well-being. During this period, practices such as foot-binding also became increasingly widespread, functioning as a powerful cultural mechanism that regulated women's bodies and reinforced gender norms (Furth, 1999; Ko, 2005).

Earlier, during the Song dynasty (960-1279), women faced comparatively fewer social constraints. By contrast, in the later Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) periods, restrictions on women became more pronounced. For example, in the surviving masterpiece Along the River During Qingming Festival by the Northern Song painter Zhang Zeduan, the depiction of sedan chairs and diverse urban figures provides visual evidence of everyday mobility and social interaction in public space (Zhang, 2018; Ebrey, 2010). In addition to managing household and estate affairs, some women participated in legal disputes, governmental administration, and even military affairs under the guidance of their husbands or sons. In certain contexts, particularly within elite or long-established households, women could help manage family affairs and, at times, engage indirectly in administrative or military matters under the authority of male relatives. While they were expected to act "within their proper sphere," such contributions could be socially recognized rather than explicitly

condemned (Bossler, 2013; Ebrey, 1991). Legal provisions also indicate some flexibility in marital practices. For instance, historical legal codes suggest that women could, under specific circumstances, remarry if they lacked adequate support within marriage. Furthermore, during the Northern Song period, legal sources recognized forms of consensual marital dissolution, often referred to as he li (amicable separation), in which both parties could agree to terminate the marriage. Although constrained by broader patriarchal norms, these practices show that marital relations were not entirely rigid and could accommodate negotiated outcomes (Sommer, 2002; Hinsch, 2002).

The Song dynasty further specified women's inheritance rights, categorizing them as unmarried daughters, married daughters, and daughters who had returned to their natal families, among other cases. The Yuan dynasty, established by the Mongols, exerted certain influences on Chinese society, but it did not produce significant changes in women's social status; traditional feudal family structures and Confucian ethical principles remained dominant. Confucian thought continued to shape perceptions of women's roles, portraying them as subordinate to men, with primary responsibilities centred on household management and childbearing. Although orthodox Confucian ideology largely emphasized women's domestic roles, some voices within the tradition recognized the value of women's education and cultural participation. Figures such as Ban Zhao (c. 45–116 CE), who composed Lessons for Women (Nü Jie) in the Eastern Han period (c. 100 CE), advocated female education within a moral framework. Subsequent historical developments also created increasing opportunities for women's literary expression and participation in cultural life (Ebrey, 2003). However, these perspectives remained constrained within the broader patriarchal structure and did not fundamentally challenge dominant gender norms (Ko, 2005; Mann, 2007; Furth, 1999). The proliferation of arches erected during this period to honour female chastity reinforced heightened moral expectations and social pressure on women, thereby further burdening them with male-defined standards. Unmarried women were bound to their fathers, while married women were bound to their husbands, and they possessed no autonomy in choice; remarriage for women constituted a grave offense under Ming and Qing statutes. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, regulation of women's behaviour became increasingly stringent, reflecting the consolidation of patriarchal norms and moral expectations. Scholars have noted that this period witnessed a heightened emphasis on female chastity and social discipline, which significantly constrained women's autonomy (Mann, 1997; Ko, 2005; Bossler, 2013; Furth, 1999). Some late imperial discourses further aestheticized and eroticized the practice of foot-binding, reflecting the extent to which women's bodies were shaped by cultural ideals and the male gaze (Ko, 2005). This indicates that Chinese women were increasingly objectified within patriarchal social relations. Son preference during the Ming and Qing dynasties was pronounced, and the practice of drowning female infants appears to have been widespread. Local gazetteers from the late Qing period, such as the Nanchang Prefecture Annals (Tongzhi era), include accounts indicating that female infanticide was a serious concern in certain regions, with reports suggesting that a substantial proportion of female infants were not reared. Although such descriptions may reflect localized conditions and rhetorical exaggeration, they nonetheless indicate the gendered valuation of children in traditional society (Lee & Wang, 2001). However, such accounts should be treated with caution because they are often difficult to verify and may reflect moral narrative rather than consistent historical practice.

At the institutional level, legal and didactic texts from the Han dynasty onward, such as the Biographies of Exemplary Women and Ban Zhao's Admonitions for Women, played a central role in codifying female virtue through ideals of obedience, chastity, and self-sacrifice. These texts aligned women's moral worth with filial and marital submission, embedding gender norms within both ethical discourse and everyday practice (Rosenlee, 2012; Furth, 1999). Normative frameworks such as the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" and the "Seven Grounds for Repudiation" further integrated moral prescriptions into legal structures, constraining women's marital autonomy and bodily agency within patriarchal family systems (Sommer, 2002). During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the widespread establishment of chastity memorials intensified this process by transforming female virtue into a form of symbolic capital associated with both state authority and lineage honour. In this context, practices such as "death for chastity" were increasingly valorised and ritualized, becoming a significant, though not uncontested, measure of female moral worth (Ko, 2005; Bossler, 2020; Theiss, 2005).

Of course, the status of women in ancient China did not decline uniformly. During the Wei (220-266), Jin (266-420), and Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-589), as well as the Tang dynasty (618-907), particularly among elite groups and in certain regions, women occupied relatively more flexible positions in marriage, property management, and social participation. Scholars have noted that the fluid social conditions of these periods, together with less rigidly enforced gender norms, created limited but significant spaces in which women could exercise agency within family and social structures (Dien, 2007; Yao, 2011; Schafer, 1963). The Tang Code granted unmarried women certain inheritance rights, while historical records and literary works depict women traveling freely, engaging in social activities, and participating in family affairs. Yet these localized relaxations did not alter the broader patriarchal structure. With the rise of Neo-Confucianism during the Song and Ming dynasties, moral constraints on gender intensified. The ethical dictum that "starving to death is a minor matter, but losing one's virtue is a grave one" subordinated women's lives to the imperative of chastity. The widespread practice of foot-binding institutionalized the physical subjugation of women and became an integral mechanism of gender domination.

Following the Xinhai Revolution, the Republican government introduced a series of reforms intended to transform social customs, including official efforts to abolish practices such as foot-binding. At the same time, everyday life, encompassing dress, diet, marriage practices, and leisure activities, underwent gradual and uneven change, reflecting broader currents of Westernization and modernization. These developments indicated not only institutional reform but also a reconfiguration of social norms and gender relations in the early twentieth century (Glosser, 2003; Hershatter, 2007; Ko, 2005; Goodman, 1995).

Women's consciousness of their rights awakened, leading them to adopt short haircuts, pursue education, engage in free love, participate in social and political life, and seek happiness and personal liberty. In 1915, the Legal Compilation Committee under the Ministry of Justice of the early Republic began drafting a modern civil code as part of broader legal reforms. Although these efforts were not fully realized until the formal promulgation of the Civil Code in 1929 to 1930, they marked an important shift toward the modernization of family law. The emerging legal framework sought to reform traditional practices such as child marriage, polygamy, and restrictive divorce arrangements, reflecting changing attitudes toward marriage and gender relations in Republican China (Meijer, 1967; Huang, 2001;

Glosser, 2003). The provisions stipulated that “a man under sixteen years of age and a woman under fifteen years of age shall not be permitted to marry”; “a person who is already married shall not be permitted to marry another”; and “where a husband and wife are not harmonious and both consent to divorce, they may be permitted to divorce.” Moreover, this period saw the emergence of a substantial number of female intellectuals who actively participated in China’s cultural and literary transformation. Prominent figures included Lin Huiyin, a pioneering architect and writer often associated with the poetic image of “April in the human world,” and Bing Xin (Xie Wanying), whose works articulated new forms of female subjectivity. Other influential women writers, such as Lü Bicheng, Xiao Hong, Shi Pingmei, and Eileen Chang (Zhang Ailing), are often grouped in later cultural discourse as representative figures in modern Chinese women’s literary expression. Collectively, their contributions reflect the expanding intellectual and cultural space available to women in the Republican era (Hershatter, 2007; Barlow, 2004; Wang, 2016).

From a historical sociological perspective, the evolution of women’s status in ancient China reveals a complex trajectory from symbolic esteem to institutionalised subordination. Women held profoundly significant symbolic significance within cosmology, maternal imagery, and certain spiritual traditions, yet they were continually diminished as they were progressively marginalised within patriarchal and state power structures to become domestic resources and ethical tools. It is reduced to domestic labourers and instruments of moral discipline. Against this long-term structural backdrop, modern Chinese discourses on women’s liberation, gender equality, and subjectivity both represent a break from tradition and mark a departure from it, while engaging in and sustaining an ongoing dialogue with it.

1.1.2 The Shackles of Women in Chinese History

Within the patriarchal and ritual structures described above, the constraints imposed on Chinese women were not merely abstract ideological norms. Through a range of institutional practices, these constraints penetrated the minutiae of the body, marriage, and daily life, producing a pervasive and habitual structure of oppression. Institutionalized practices such as foot-binding, chest-binding, arranged marriages, child marriages, the division between inner and outer spheres, and sacrificial burial gave tangible form to this oppression.

Constraint 1: Foot-binding

Foot binding represented one of the most emblematic forms of bodily constraint. It involved tightly wrapping a woman’s feet in a long cloth bandage, sometimes reinforced with splints, thereby causing the muscles and bones to deform and bend in accordance with contemporary aesthetic ideals. Foot binding has been widely interpreted as a practice that regulated female sexuality and behaviour, as reduced mobility could limit opportunities for unsupervised contact, elopement, or departure from marital households (Ko, 2005; Levy, 1966; Furth, 1999). Foot binding was explicitly documented as early as the Northern Song Dynasty and became widespread during the Ming and Qing dynasties. It declined only gradually in the late Qing and early Republican eras under multiple reformist pressures. The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom also opposed foot binding, although its influence remained limited in the broader

social context. By the late Qing period, reform-minded intellectuals increasingly criticized foot binding, arguing that it contributed to perceptions of female physical weakness and impeded broader social and economic development. Such critiques were closely tied to emerging discourses that linked women's bodies to national strength and modernization (Ko, 2005; Hershatter, 2007; Barlow, 2004). Consequently, several Natural Foot Societies were established. Reformist leader Kang Youwei authored the "Proclamation Against Foot-Binding Societies." Following the Xinhai Revolution and the overthrow of the Qing dynasty, the Republic of China issued a nationwide decree abolishing foot-binding in 1912. Foot-binding not only perpetuated specific aesthetic ideals but, more importantly, confined women to domestic spaces by severely restricting their mobility. This physical constraint made it difficult for women to escape paternal authority and prevented their participation in productive labour and public life. A substantial body of scholarship has shown that foot-binding functioned not only as a gendered aesthetic practice but also as a marker of social status and class distinction. It embodied culturally constructed ideals of feminine beauty while simultaneously signalling a family's ability to exempt women from physical labour, thereby reinforcing hierarchical social differentiation (Gates, 1996). Although romanticized in moralizing discourse, it profoundly diminished women's bodily autonomy and freedom of movement in practice.

Shackle 2: Prohibition on Short Hair

During the 1920s in the Republic of China, women were prohibited from cutting their hair, and female revolutionaries who did so often endured severe torture. In the early Republican period, new cultural symbols, including short hair, reformist dress, and the figure of the "New Woman," emerged prominently in urban settings. These developments reflected broader processes of cultural transformation, through which changing representations of female appearance and behaviour signified challenges to traditional gender norms and the redefinition of women's social roles within modernity (Barlow, 2004; Goodman, 1995). However, repeated crackdowns by local authorities and public censure of women's short haircuts and revealing attire showed that women's bodies were still treated as vessels of family honour and social order, rather than as sites of personal autonomy. This tension was especially pronounced during the transitional period between the late Qing dynasty and the early Republic. Although reforms aimed at abolishing foot-binding, promoting women's education, and modernizing civil law marked significant progress, they coexisted with persistent moral regulation and, in some cases, severe social sanctions against women who violated established gender norms. This paradox reflects the complex interaction between reformist ideals and enduring patriarchal structures in the process of China's modernization (Barlow, 2004; Hershatter, 2007; Huang, 2001).

Shackle 3: Chest Binding

Women's bodies were increasingly subjected to strict regulation, as reflected in practices such as foot-binding and the use of restrictive clothing, which constrained physical movement and limited bodily autonomy. To preserve their virtue, they women endured breast sores without medical treatment, considering even death as an honour. In 1920, the Shanghai government issued a proclamation banning all short, sleeveless, and leg-baring clothing, as well as imitating on of foreign styles deemed indecent, with offenders facing imprisonment. In 1924, Zhang Jingsheng''s The Beautiful Outlook on Life champion promoted the "“Natural Breast

Movement."" On 8 March 1927, the renowned courtesan Jin Yayu and others staged a nude protest march. Reformist discourse in the early Republican period, reformist discourse increasingly linked women's bodily liberation to broader projects of social and national renewal. Campaigns against practices such as foot-binding and breast binding emphasised the need to free women's bodies from physical constraints, framing bodily reform as essential to both individual emancipation and collective modernisation (Barlow, 2004; Ko, 2005).

Shackle 4: Arranged Marriages

Marital constraints—such as, including arranged marriages, child brides, the '"Seven Grounds for Divorce',"' and sacrificial burials—tightly bound a woman's life trajectory/course to familial interests. Before the Republic, the typical age for at first marriage was sixteen to eighteen for men and fourteen to sixteen for women. Marriage negotiations commenced even earlier, often one to two years beforehand. The principle of an advance. Arranged marriages was predicated on matching social standing, with fathers overseeing the union. In traditional Chinese marriage arrangements, factors such as family background, social reputation, economic status, moral character, and physical appearance were carefully evaluated, reflecting the fundamentally familial and strategic nature of marriage. Emotional attachment between the individuals involved parties was typically secondary, as marriage functioned primarily to consolidate family alliances and maintain social order (Ebrey, 1993; Wolf, 1972).

From an economic perspective, marriages in upper-class society were viewed as reciprocal exchanges, in which the bride price and dowry were of equal value, or in which the dowry exceeded the bride price. These unions served not only as mechanisms of labour transfer but also as instruments for achieving political, economic, and emotional objectives. Among lower social strata, marriage often functioned as an economic and familial arrangement rather than as an individual choice. A woman's marriage typically involved her relocation to her husband's household, where she was incorporated into his family lineage, thereby significantly redirecting her social ties away from her natal family (Wolf, 1972; Ebrey, 1993).

Shackle 5: Child Brides

As a distinct form of early marriage, the practice of adopting young girls as future daughters-in-law, often referred to as "child brides" or "little brides," was documented in regions such as Huizhou. Local records describe how these girls were incorporated into their future husbands' households at an early age and raised as prospective wives. Such arrangements were closely tied to economic considerations, as they enabled families to reduce the financial burden of marriage. Although these practices varied across regions, they were primarily characteristic of late imperial society rather than of recent developments (A. Wolf, 1966; M. Wolf, 1972; Ebrey, 1991). Folk songs and local cultural expressions also provide insight into the lived experiences and social perceptions associated with the practice of child brides in certain regions of China. For example, ballads from Jiangxi province depict the unequal and often distressing dynamics of such arrangements, highlighting the economic motivations behind adopting young girls as future daughters-in-law. Although these sources are not strictly documentary evidence, they nonetheless reveal popular attitudes toward gender, marriage, and familial obligations in everyday life (Ko, 2005; Hershatter, 2007). In traditional ballads such as The Peacock Flies Southeast, female protagonists are often depicted within restrictive marital structures, revealing emotional distress and limited agency. Such representations provide insight into the emotional dimensions of women's lived experiences

within unequal marital arrangements (Hershatter, 2007; Ko, 2005). By the time the child matures, the mother's youth has long since passed.

Shackle 6: Distinction Between Inner and Outer

The distinction between the inner and outer spheres constituted the most fundamental gender norm in traditional society and originated in the Rites of Zhou. The household gate marked the boundary of "men outside, women inside": men engaged in governance, warfare, military service, farming, hunting, and commerce beyond the home, whereas women managed domestic affairs, "overseeing the kitchen and wine," cultivated silkworms, wove cloth, bore children, and honoured their in-laws. In elite discourse, it was considered improper for women to exercise authority over men, as reflected in idioms such as "the hen crowing before the rooster," which symbolized a reversal of the normative gender hierarchy. At the same time, everyday gender roles were organized through a clear division of labour, commonly expressed in the ideal of "men ploughing and women weaving," which reinforced the separation of male and female responsibilities within both the household and society (Rosenlee, 2012; Bray, 2023; Ebrey, 1991). This structure produced inequality in access to social resources and space.

Normative ideals such as the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" became influential in shaping expectations for women's behaviour in traditional Chinese society. The "Three Obediences" prescribed that a woman should obey her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and her son in widowhood, thereby reinforcing a hierarchical gender order throughout the life course. The "Four Virtues," often associated with elite moral instruction, encompassed propriety, speech, appearance, and domestic skills, further defining standards of feminine conduct (Rosenlee, 2012; Ebrey, 1991).

Furthermore, if a woman committed any of the "Seven Causes for Divorce," she was to be unconditionally repudiated. The Seven Causes for Divorce are listed as follows: disobedience to parents, infertility, adultery, jealousy, contagious disease, excessive talkativeness, and theft. During the Han Dynasty, although the concept of the "Seven Causes for Expulsion" (七去) emerged within ritual codes, it became a principal criterion for divorce among commoners. Historical records predominantly cite these seven causes as grounds for repudiation. In the Tang Code (Tanglü), the "Seven Grounds for Repudiation" were codified within the legal framework governing marriage and family relations, thereby formalizing existing moral norms in state law (Johnson, 2019; Sommer, 2002).

The moral injunctions of the Three Obediences, the cultivation of the Four Virtues, and the deterrent penalties of the Seven Grounds for Divorce interacted in a mutually reinforcing manner.

Shackle 7: Human Sacrifice in Burial

Practices of burial sacrifice in early China can be traced to the Shang and Zhou periods, when forms of human sacrifice were associated with elite ritual systems. In later periods, particularly from the late imperial era onward, these practices developed into moralized forms of female self-sacrifice, such as widow chastity and "death for virtue," which were increasingly valorised within Confucian discourse. Although official prohibitions were issued at various points, such practices re-emerged in different forms, reflecting the persistent

intersection of ritual practice, morality, and gender norms (Lewis, 2006; Theiss, 2004; Ko, 2005).

Arranged marriages transformed matrimony from individual affection into a form of familial resource allocation, while child brides, in extreme cases, saw young girls' lives wholly subsumed within their husband's family plans. The convergence of the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" and the "Seven Grounds for Divorce" rendered women's marital status profoundly precarious. Women were expected to submit unconditionally while perpetually facing dismissal on grounds such as barrenness, jealousy, illness, promiscuity, or theft. Sacrificial burial can be understood as a mechanism through which women's lives were incorporated into the symbolic capital of male lineage and clan authority. In this sense, female virtue and self-sacrifice were transformed into forms of moral value that enhanced family honoured, reinforcing an ethical logic in which a woman's worth was defined relationally, in terms of her contributions to others rather than her individual autonomy (Bourdieu, 2011; Theiss, 2004; Ko, 2005; Mann, 1997). These seemingly disparate constraints collectively formed a highly integrated gender system. Physically, practices such as foot-binding and chest-binding shaped female bodies to be submissive, weakened, and introverted. Spatially, the division between men outside and women inside, with distinct inner and outer spheres, defined the boundaries between family and society, excluding women from the public sphere. At the level of marriage and everyday life, institutions such as arranged marriage, the practice of child brides, and forms of female self-sacrifice structured and constrained women's lives within patriarchal family systems. These practices collectively subordinated women's roles and identities to the interests of lineage continuity and familial authority (A. Wolf, 1972; Theiss, 2004; Ko, 2005). Examining contemporary Chinese women's circumstances through this lens clarifies that, even with legally established equality, many deeply embedded cultural scripts persist and transform within emotional structures, exerting enduring influence on women's self-perception, agency development, and scope for action.

1.1.3 The Status of Modern Chinese Women

Following the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Party and government successively promulgated the Common Programme of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, the Marriage Law, the Election Law, and the Constitution. These laws and regulations explicitly defined women's rights, obligations, and interests, thereby enshrining gender equality within the national legal framework. With the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the 1950 Marriage Law introduced major reforms to family and gender relations. It abolished practices such as arranged and transactional marriage and institutionalized monogamy, while granting women legal equality within marriage. At the same time, state policies encouraged women's participation in social production and political life, recasting them as active citizens in the socialist project (Diamant, 2000; Wang, 2016; Davin, 1979). Women thus acquired equal social rights with men and gained the right to participate in state governance. In the mid-1950s, the Chinese state actively promoted gender equality in labour and production, including policies advocating equal pay for men and women within rural collectives. These efforts were reinforced by political discourse, most

notably Mao Zedong's widely circulated slogan that "women hold up half the sky," which signalled the incorporation of women into socialist nation-building and productive labour (Wang, 2016; Hershatter, 2007; Davin, 1979). The socialist state also promoted women's participation in political life by encouraging their involvement in governance and representative institutions. Although women's representation remained limited in the early years of the People's Republic, official discourse emphasized the need to expand women's participation and achieve greater gender balance in political structures. These efforts reflected broader ideological commitments to gender equality within the framework of socialist nation-building (Wang, 2016; Hershatter, 2007; Davin, 1979).

The government has mandated that all levels of government appoint a specified proportion of female cadres. China's millennia-old tradition of "officialdom-centred thinking" prioritising official positions and respecting officials meant that allowing women to hold office represented a subversive shift in the system. This reform granted Chinese women the right to employment. Furthermore, following the founding of the People's Republic of China, the 1950 Marriage Law abolished polygamy and institutionalized monogamy (Feng, 2001). Notably, women's organisations, particularly the All-China Women's Federation, played an important role in advocating for and shaping the Marriage Law, although the process remained state-led (Wang, 2016). Concurrently, the establishment of the All-China Women's Federation provided an institutional platform for promoting women's rights and mobilising their participation in socialist reconstruction (Hershatter, 2007; Davin, 1979). Although its influence has since diminished, during the decades immediately following the nation's founding, the Federation made substantial contributions to securing comprehensive rights for Chinese women. Concurrently, the Chinese government enacted labour legislation, such as the Labour Law of the People's Republic of China, to promote equal treatment for women in employment (Law, 1994; Cooke, 2004). Vocational training and career guidance programmes further enhance women's employability and competitiveness. According to the World Bank, China's female labour force participation rate reached approximately 61% in 2019, exceeding the global average (Pimkina, 2020).

Women play an increasingly important role across all sectors, particularly in education, healthcare, and culture. In recent years, the state has strongly supported female entrepreneurship. The Opinions on Promoting High-Quality Development of Innovation and Entrepreneurship and Creating an Upgraded Version of the "Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation" Initiative, jointly issued by the National Development and Reform Commission and other departments, explicitly calls for support for women entrepreneurs. Financial support, entrepreneurial training, and policy incentives have been introduced to encourage women's participation in entrepreneurship in China (UN Women, 2020). Following the reform and opening up, the state implemented a series of measures in the education sector to ensure women's equal access to education. The nine-year compulsory education policy guarantees schooling for all children of compulsory school age. Government initiatives such as the "Spring Bud Programme" assist girls in impoverished regions in completing their education. In addition, legislation such as the Maternal and Child Health Care Law has been enacted to improve women's health and protect their rights during pregnancy and childbirth (Guo et al., 2015). The government also provides maternal healthcare services through the National Basic Public Health Service Programme (Health China Initiative, 2022).

This series of institutional reforms has facilitated significant progress for Chinese women in education, labour-force participation, and political representation. The slogan "women hold up half the sky" was not merely political rhetoric; it substantially shaped women's sense of agency and social participation (Wang, 2016; Hershatter, 2007). Women were encouraged to move beyond the domestic sphere and participate in factories, agricultural production, and state institutions, thereby becoming both labourers and citizens within the socialist project (Hershatter, 2007; Davin, 1979).

Since the reform and opening up, and alongside social development and progress, gender consciousness has gradually awakened in China. Women have begun paying greater attention to their rights and social status, articulating their needs, and pursuing rights through various means. The slogan "women hold up half the sky" was not merely political rhetoric; it played a significant role in shaping women's sense of agency and social participation (Wang, 2016; Hershatter, 2007). Women were encouraged to move beyond the domestic sphere and participate in factories, agricultural production, and state institutions, thereby becoming both labourers and citizens in the socialist project (Hershatter, 2007; Davin, 1979). However, research also indicates that this state-led, top-down emancipation, while creating structural opportunities, also entails complex paradoxes. On the one hand, women's participation in labour and education has increased significantly. Numerous data indicate that China's female labour participation rate ranks among the highest globally, and educational attainment has risen markedly. On the other hand, gender equality in practice has often been defined by women's ability to meet standards historically associated with men, requiring them to participate in labour and national development without a corresponding transformation of domestic gender divisions or care responsibilities (Wang, 2016; Honig & Hershatter, 1988). In practice, gender equality has often been defined by women's ability to meet standards historically associated with men, requiring them to participate in labour and national development without a corresponding transformation of domestic gender divisions or care responsibilities (Wang, 2017; Honig & Hershatter, 1988). As a result, women frequently occupy dual roles across both the public and private spheres, shouldering a disproportionate burden of productive and reproductive labour (Hershatter, 2007; Davin, 1979).

Amid China's rapid societal development, contemporary Chinese women appear to have achieved notable gains in economic, educational, and social status. However, despite this apparent progress, women continue to experience substantial explicit and implicit pressure in workplaces, families, and society at large. In reality, the status of Chinese women is elevated in appearance but constrained in practice, as superficial progress obscures persistent inequalities and structural challenges. Although the proportion of women pursuing higher education has increased significantly in recent years, gender imbalances persist in certain fields and disciplines. For example, female representation in STEM fields, such as engineering and computer science, remains significantly lower than that of men, reflecting persistent gender disparities in education and employment (UNESCO, 2017; World Bank, 2020). Persistent stereotypes, such as the notion that "girls are not as clever as boys at mathematics," demonstrate the continuing influence of deeply rooted traditional attitudes.

Although modern women enjoy greater autonomy in marriage and family life, societal expectations and pressures have not diminished. Many women struggle to balance work and family responsibilities, bearing the burden of competing demands. Women shoulder greater responsibilities in childbirth and child-rearing, and career women are often forced to choose

between professional advancement and family commitments. Furthermore, national reform policies indicate that the status of modern Chinese women remains constrained. On 28 May 2020, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress enacted the Civil Code of the People's Republic of China, which introduced a divorce cooling-off period. Couples seeking divorce must undergo a 30-day reflection period, during which either party may withdraw the application if they change their mind. While the introduction of the divorce "cooling-off period" in China's Civil Code aims to reduce impulsive divorces and maintain family stability, scholars have noted that it may impose additional constraints on women, particularly in situations involving domestic conflict or inequality (Meining, 2021; Zhang, 2026). For women enduring domestic violence or severe marital discord, the cooling-off period undeniably prolongs their exposure to such conditions. During these 30 days, victims may face heightened safety risks, which intensify their psychological and physical burdens. The cooling-off period complicates the divorce process, constituting a constraint on spouses' freedom to dissolve a marriage. One practical consequence is that women may be left in legal limbo because, if the husband withdraws the application, the marriage may still be regarded as valid even when cohabitation has ended. Furthermore, in many companies, women face fertility-based discrimination during job applications and promotions. Surveys and reports indicate that women in China are frequently asked about their marital status and childbearing intentions during recruitment, which can adversely affect their employment prospects and career advancement (Human Rights Watch, 2021; UN Women, 2020).

Some enterprises favour hiring men or women who have already completed childbearing to avoid potential future costs associated with maternity and childcare leave. Following China's introduction of the "three-child policy," women's position in the workplace has become even more precarious. In 2021, an Alibaba employee publicly shared her experiences of sexual harassment and unfair treatment within the company on social media, sparking widespread public concern. This incident highlighted the persistent gender discrimination and sexual harassment faced by female employees in the workplace (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Seth, 2025). Despite corporate statements that emphasize gender equality, the absence of effective mechanisms and protective measures often results in the infringement of female employees' rights in practice. Since reform and opening up, and alongside marketization, urbanization, and the rise of consumer culture, Chinese society has experienced new shifts in gender relations.

Yan's (2010) research on individualization indicates that, amid the restructuring of relations among the state, market, and family, individuals are increasingly expected to assume responsibility for their own lives. Although women's educational and career opportunities have expanded, they also face a wider range of conflicting norms, as they are expected to succeed professionally while simultaneously fulfilling the roles of wives and mothers. Leta Hong Fincher's (2023) research further shows that, within the interconnected domains of property ownership, the marriage market, and fertility policy, women remain structurally excluded from household asset accumulation despite nominal equality. The "leftover women" label and its associated public discourse effectively bind marriage anxiety to population governance, regulating women's bodies and reproductive choices through gendered mechanisms (Evans, 2024). This also suggests that the elevation of women's status in post-New China is not a linear or unconditional emancipation, but rather a complex formation shaped by the interaction of state feminism, market-based inequality, and traditional gender

culture. On one hand, women gained legal equality and partial structural opportunities; on the other, gender inequality reemerged in more covert and sophisticated forms through the marriage market, workplace advancement, bodily aesthetics, and fertility policy. This places contemporary Chinese women in a contradictory position: seemingly liberated, yet still subject to divine discipline.

Many young women in China today were born during a period of rapid economic expansion and steadily improving infrastructure. This generation, regardless of gender, is marked by fragmentation. On the one hand, China's ancient traditions conflict with Western media influences. Chinese women face traditional expectations to marry and bear children by a certain age, to support their husbands, and to raise their children. Yet these longstanding views continue to severely constrain women's career advancement and personal aspirations. At the same time, as Western values of equality, freedom, and independence permeate Chinese society, they provide modern women with new perspectives and possibilities, prompting them to question and challenge cultural constraints. Simultaneously, rapid social change and accelerated rhythms of life leave women with little time to reflect on their life paths before they are swept along by the momentum of progress.

This has led to a more complex configuration of contemporary women's thinking, situated between an inability to escape traditional constraints and a desire to break free from these limitations. Travel can provide individuals with a temporary escape from everyday constraints and social expectations (Cohen & Cohen, 2012; Urry & Larsen, 2011). It offers modern women an opportunity to distance themselves, albeit briefly, from daily pressures and concerns. During travel, they may shed the constraints of work, family, and societal expectations, temporarily setting aside the issues that preoccupy them. Whether shaped by the pace of urban life or domestic responsibilities, travel allows them to detach briefly and experience a period free from burdens. This sense of psychological relief and liberation is particularly valuable for women enduring prolonged high-pressure environments. Travel is not merely a change in geographic location; it is also an encounter between cultures and ideas.

Through travel, individuals encounter diverse cultures, customs, and ways of life, thereby broadening their perspectives and facilitating cross-cultural understanding (Urry & Larsen, 2011; Cohen, 1979). This exchange expands their outlook and prompts reflection on the self and one's place in the world. For example, visiting a gender-equal country such as New Zealand, where egalitarian norms are deeply embedded, may encourage new perspectives on gender roles. In a context that values personal freedom, travellers may develop greater determination to pursue their aspirations and goals. Travel also functions as a process of self-discovery. By leaving familiar surroundings and immersing themselves in unfamiliar settings, modern women confront uncertainty and challenge. This experience not only tests adaptability but also creates opportunities for deeper self-understanding. Along the way, they may encounter diverse individuals and situations, each contributing to self-awareness and personal development. Travel can also provide women with a space to express independence and self-reliance, enabling them to negotiate autonomy beyond traditional gender expectations (Wilson & Little, 2008; Yang et al., 2019). Whether traveling alone or with companions, they must make decisions independently and manage unforeseen circumstances, qualities that may receive limited expression in everyday life.

Travel may provide women with opportunities to exercise decision-making, develop confidence, and reconsider their personal capabilities. However, the extent to which these experiences contribute to lasting changes in self-understanding or everyday practices depends on individual circumstances and broader social constraints. At the same time, travel provides modern women with opportunities to expand their social networks and interpersonal relationships. Through travel, women encounter individuals from diverse backgrounds and regions, forming new friendships and social networks that can support personal growth and self-reflection (Wilson & Little, 2008; Berdychevsky et al., 2013). These relationships enrich life experiences while also providing additional sources of support and access to resources. Building relationships with strangers in unfamiliar settings strengthens communication skills and social competence, thereby enhancing overall capability. Travel also affords women more time and space to reflect on cultural norms and personal values. Freed from daily distractions, they gain greater objectivity in examining their current circumstances and future direction. Travel can create a reflective context in which women reassess career paths, life goals, and personal values, often leading to significant decisions and adjustments (Mezirow, 1991; Pung et al., 2024). This reflective process, facilitated by travel experiences, plays a crucial role in personal growth and self-development (Cohen, 1979; Urry & Larsen, 2011).

1.1.4 The Current State of Gender Inequality in China

With the development and advancement of Chinese society, women's social status has improved, and gender equality has been reflected in certain domains. However, compared with other major national policies, such as the planned economy and the reform and opening-up period, the principle of gender equality has faced implementation challenges and has not been fully realized in practice (Evans, 2008; Wang, 2016). Since the turn of the 21st century, China has consistently emphasized gender equality in legal discourse. A growing body of research suggests that recent policies and social practices indicate a subtle process of re-patriarchisation in China's gender order (Wang, 2016; Evans, 2008). Significant gender and class hierarchies persist in society, hindering equitable relations between the sexes and undermining social harmony. The adoption of gender equality signifies a deliberate rejection of the gender distinctions prescribed by the Confucian social order, thereby serving as a marker of modernity legitimately invoked by social groups to affirm progressive identities. Confucian thought emphasizes family and social harmony, with gender role division serving as a crucial basis for maintaining this harmony. Today, many women have begun to consciously reject traditional gender role prescriptions, particularly those based on male dominance over women. On the surface, contemporary Chinese society appears to have achieved gender equality. Yet various institutional frameworks fail to prioritize women's specific gender-based interests, instead demanding their contribution to society.

In the late 1970s, during the early phase of rapid modernization, population pressure emerged as a major constraint on economic development. As China's population approached one billion, the government feared that accelerated growth would intensify resource scarcity, thereby undermining economic reform and social stability. It therefore began to promote a one-child norm and implemented strict birth control measures. In rural areas, policy enforcement allowed certain exceptions; for example, in some provinces, couples were

permitted to have a second child if the firstborn was a girl (Greenhalgh & Winckler, 2005; Fong, 2004). Supporting measures included contraceptive promotion, encouragement of delayed marriage and childbearing, and financial penalties for families that exceeded birth quotas. The one-child policy substantially reduced birth rates and effectively restrained population growth in China. As the economy continued to develop, social structures changed, particularly with the emergence of an aging population. The negative consequences of the one-child policy then became increasingly evident. The government gradually relaxed the restrictions, allowing couples in which both partners were only children to have a second child. Nevertheless, despite this policy relaxation, attitudes shaped by decades of state propaganda, together with changing economic pressures, have contributed to declining fertility intentions, and many families now choose not to have additional children (Greenhalgh & Winckler, 2005; Whyte et al., 2015). In the first decade of the twenty-first century, rapid economic growth exacerbated labour shortages and intensified pressures associated with an aging society, while more recently, slower economic growth and rising youth unemployment have further reduced intentions to have children. The state has recognized that excessively low fertility rates would undermine future economic growth. By 2015, individuals aged 65 and above accounted for approximately 10.5% of China's population (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2016). Data from the 2020 national census further indicated a slowdown in population growth and a substantial decline in birth rates (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2021). These trends have raised concerns about population aging, potential labour shortages, and persistently low fertility rates (Whyte et al., 2015). In 2021, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China announced the relaxation of policy restrictions to permit couples to have three children. In summary, under both the two-child and three-child policies, the state has approached population growth primarily through a labour-oriented framework. The encouragement of childbearing stems from concern about the declining demographic dividend, a perspective that prioritizes societal benefit over individual interests and, in particular, overlooks women's interests.

These policies overlook the substantive pressures faced by women as the primary agents of childbearing. For many women, the decision to have children entails not only physical burdens but also multiple pressures from family, the workplace, and society. This reinforces traditional gender roles, particularly by recasting women's social roles as mothers rather than as equal participants in the workplace or as autonomous individuals. National fertility policies and measures that encourage multiple births fail to account for women's career development and personal choices. This policy orientation neglects women's aspirations for self-fulfilment and equal participation in the labour market within modern society. In policies concerning reproductive decision-making, childcare responsibilities, and family support, scholars have noted that women's voices and needs are often insufficiently represented (Fincher, 2023; Wang, 2016). Policy formulation has frequently been driven by demographic and economic concerns rather than by a comprehensive commitment to gender equality (Greenhalgh & Winckler, 2005; Whyte et al., 2015). The prevailing national institutional framework remains dominated by male leadership. The evolution of policies, from family planning to the one-child policy, then to the two-child policy, and subsequently to the three-child policy, has reinforced societal expectations that women are primary child bearers, evaluated through the lens of national labour supply. This approach has largely failed to provide systemic solutions for sharing childcare costs, improving childcare provision, or safeguarding women's rights in the workplace. At the macro level, this policy trajectory is

justified through appeals to national interests and demographic dividends, yet at the micro level, it further intensifies pressures on women of childbearing age regarding marriage, employment, and career development.

Concurrently, the introduction of the divorce cooling-off period in the Civil Code has generated extensive public debate on gender issues. Although the policy is intended to reduce impulsive divorces and preserve family stability, scholars and reports have expressed concern that, for women experiencing domestic violence or severely unequal relationships, the cooling-off period may, in practice, restrict opportunities to leave such situations, heighten the risk of continued abuse, and increase procedural barriers to divorce (Meining, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2021). This institutional arrangement reflects the state's policy preference for family stability; however, in specific gender relations, it intensifies women's structural vulnerability.

In the workplace, despite legal prohibitions on gender-based employment discrimination, inquiries into women's reproductive plans and the implicit exclusion of married women or those intending to have children remain prevalent. Multiple surveys indicate that enterprises favour hiring or promoting men with lower reproductive costs, or women who have completed family planning, thereby circumventing the labour costs associated with maternity and childcare leave. Scholars have argued that market-oriented reforms have contributed to the individualization of reproductive responsibility, disproportionately placing this burden on women and compelling them to negotiate tensions between workplace demands and reproductive choices (Fincher, 2014; Wang, 2016; Cooke, 2004).

Within cultural media, labels such as "leftover women," "full-time housewives," and "dutiful wives and devoted mothers" recur in media discourse and public relations materials, consistently measuring women's self-worth against standards of marital success and domestic sacrifice. Contemporary Chinese gender politics increasingly operates through an interwoven framework of state discourse, media discourse, and everyday practice. Within this discursive network, women are persistently called upon to embody specific roles, whereas choices that deviate from these expectations are characterized as abnormal, selfish, or indicative of failure (Evans, 2008).

Under these multiple pressures, the predicament of contemporary Chinese women can be summarized as the coexistence of legal equality and structural inequality in everyday life, the layering of opportunities for public participation with emotional labour responsibilities in the private sphere, and the interweaving of individualization with family-centred values. They are expected to make choices, yet they seldom have genuinely free and sustainable conditions in which to do so. Against this backdrop, travel begins to enter women's lifeworld as a distinctive practice. For many contemporary Chinese women, travel exceeds mere leisure consumption or sightseeing; it functions as a means of temporary withdrawal from structural pressures. Through geographical and experiential mobility, tourism may temporarily alter women's relationships with familiar social environments and everyday gendered expectations, creating opportunities for reflection without necessarily removing the structural constraints that shape their lives. Tourism studies and feminist research increasingly recognize travel as a significant site where women can reengage with bodily experience, reconceptualize spatial relations, and reimagine personal possibilities (Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2015). For Chinese women, particularly those whose lives are largely structured around

family, work, and caregiving responsibilities, travel offers not only escape but also a socially sanctioned departure. It carries social legitimacy and thus avoids direct conflict with familial ethics while providing women with an unprecedented degree of experiential distance. In this sense, travel provides a vital entry point for understanding how contemporary Chinese women negotiate, adapt to, and construct subjectivity within structural inequality. It also establishes the practical and theoretical context for this study's inquiry: "Whether and how Chinese women achieve deeper self-awareness and identity reconstruction through travel."

1.2 Problem Statement

1.2.1 Motivation for the study

Traditionally, women have been expected to fulfil conventional roles, such as those of virtuous wives and mothers. Although Chinese society has undergone rapid modernization in recent decades, traditional notions remain deeply entrenched. Understanding the constraints that this traditional culture imposes on women provides a crucial backdrop for this research. Since the Reform and Opening-up, Chinese society has experienced transformative change. While China's dramatic socioeconomic shifts over recent decades have enabled unprecedented gains for women in educational opportunities, labour participation, and access to economic resources, leading to significant progress in education and career development, these changes have also introduced new challenges. Women's lifestyles and social roles have evolved, necessitating a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences within this transformation. Existing research consistently indicates that Chinese women's actual circumstances remain profoundly constrained by persistent gender stratification and cultural norms.

Within this context, travel, as a nontraditional pathway, may offer women unique opportunities. Current literature indicates that Chinese women, situated at the intersection of traditional social values and modernizing transformations, seek new possibilities through travel. This process contributes to social change, advances gender equality, and facilitates the emergence of female autonomy. At the macro level, the gender order in post-socialist China is shaped by the tripartite interaction of state policy, market mechanisms, and family culture. Although the state promotes gender equality in legal discourse, it reinforces women's roles as mothers and caregivers through reproductive policies and propaganda on family ethics. Market logic, grounded in cost-efficiency, tends to construct women of childbearing age as potential risks. Meanwhile, traditional gender culture remains deeply embedded in the emotional structures of marriage, family, and everyday life. The convergence of these three forces means that the gender structure confronting contemporary Chinese women is neither purely traditional nor wholly modern.

Recent social transformations and earlier women's liberation movements in China have drawn substantial scholarly attention to whether Chinese women can "escape traditional socio-cultural constraints through travel to attain new lives." Such broad societal changes pose significant challenges to traditional norms and cultural values (Ji Xiaoming, 2015). Despite social change and women's considerable progress across multiple domains, traditional beliefs remain deeply embedded in social, cultural, and personal spheres (Cecilia Lai-wan et al., 2006). Within this multifaceted social context, women must negotiate the

balance between domestic responsibilities and career pursuits while confronting role constraints imposed by conventional expectations.

Consequently, Chinese women are often constrained by stringent expectations and social norms in both domestic and professional spheres, which makes it difficult for them to transcend conventional gender roles (Oplatka, 2006). In this social context, travel may constitute a distinctive avenue through which women can break from traditional constraints. Travel is not merely physical movement; it is also an experiential and psychological process of self-discovery in unfamiliar settings, one that challenges preconceived assumptions and reshapes women's positions within social structures. Selecting travel as a research focus to examine the transformations women experience during journeys offers deeper insight into whether, and how, they transcend conventional social and cultural constraints. As a process of self-discovery and exploration, travel provides women with an autonomous space in which to shed social expectations, challenge traditional norms, and redefine themselves within new cultural contexts.

Within this structural tension, women's subjectivity development is often compelled to negotiate multiple, and sometimes contradictory, norms. Women are simultaneously isolated in their pursuit of educational and professional success and cast as engines of national modernization, while also expected to fulfil roles in marriage, childbearing, and caregiving, thereby bearing heavier domestic responsibilities than men. Changes in national population policy are particularly emblematic. In practice, these policies have not genuinely alleviated women's reproductive burdens; rather, they have subjected women to more stringent gender scrutiny and higher opportunity costs in both professional and domestic spheres. Women's childbearing is treated as a national imperative, with individual agency frequently subordinated to state narratives. This structural tension leaves female identities perpetually oscillating between institutional and cultural demands, heightening vulnerability to internal conflict and psychological compliance (Meng et al., 2023). Against the backdrop of societal transformation, this study examines the psychological, social, and cultural changes women may experience during travel to determine whether this process facilitates their transcendence of traditional gender roles and societal expectations. By analysing women's travel experiences, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of how they reconstruct their identities in new environments and how such experiences shape their future life choices and social roles.

Meanwhile, societal expectations regarding women's roles in Chinese society are undergoing a complex process of reproduction. Recurring narratives in media and public discourse, such as "leftover women," "full-time housewives," "good sisters," and "female happiness equating to family success," reveal deeply ingrained value judgments within gender discourse. These discourses function not merely as cultural labels but also carry tangible consequences. They shape women's self-perception, constrain their ability to envision future lives, and subtly encourage them to tie their self-worth to marriage and childbearing. Thus, although women have legally secured autonomy in education, employment, and marriage, their self-understanding within the sphere of meaning remains profoundly shaped by structural forces.

It is within this highly structured yet rapidly changing social context that travel, as a legitimized and socially acceptable form of action, acquires particular significance. Travel is not merely spatial movement but a social practice that disrupts the routine gender discipline

of everyday life. Removed from familial responsibilities, workplace evaluation, and social expectations, it affords women a psychologically, physically, and morally permissible space for reflection. Tourism studies consistently show that travel creates liminal spaces in which individuals can reassess established identities and future possibilities (Wearing, 1998). For Chinese women embedded in complex gender structures, this liminal space is especially significant. It not only relieves them of daily obligations but also temporarily suspends traditional gender norms, enabling women to experience their bodies, selves, and the world with greater freedom.

In addition, this theme aims to examine travel's potential impact on women's mental well-being. Within traditional social structures, women often bear considerable pressure from familial, societal, and self-imposed expectations (Vasumathi, 2018). Travel may provide a potential avenue for stress relief. By examining the psychological states of female travellers, this study seeks to identify the benefits of travel in alleviating psychological burdens and promoting women's mental well-being. In the existing literature, research on tourism's role in women's self-discovery and personal development remains relatively limited, particularly with respect to Chinese female travellers (Wilson & Little, 2008; Yang et al, 2019). Although some studies have examined women's experiences and psychological changes during travel, these studies primarily focus on Western contexts, with insufficient attention to Chinese women. Although tourism studies and gender studies are relatively distinct academic domains, they are closely interconnected. Integrating tourism research with gender studies enables a more comprehensive understanding of travel's impact on women, particularly in relation to self-discovery and personal development.

Another factor of importance is tourism, which constitutes a vital component of China's economy and has received substantial attention from both government agencies and enterprises. By examining women's experiences and needs in tourism, this study can provide targeted recommendations for sectoral development. These findings may assist policymakers and businesses in formulating more effective tourism strategies, thereby improving service quality and visitor satisfaction. At the same time, by examining tourism's impact on women's self-discovery and personal development, this research proposes a framework for understanding how tourism can facilitate women's advancement. It seeks to enable more women to achieve personal breakthroughs and realize their self-worth through travel. Such progress not only enhances women's social status but also contributes to social harmony and development.

In summary, this topic was selected to deepen understanding of Chinese women's roles, challenges, and opportunities during social transformation, while offering new perspectives on gender equality. By examining travel as a pathway to liberation, it aims to provide rigorous empirical evidence and theoretical support for advancing women's autonomy and promoting social change in China. This study is expected to serve as a valuable reference for policymakers, scholars, and the public, contributing to a more equitable and harmonious Chinese society.

1.2.2 Problem Statement

However, although the proposition that travel can enhance female subjectivity has received some support in Western feminist tourism studies, the Chinese context differs markedly. Chinese women's subjectivity does not emerge through direct negation or overt confrontation

with the traditional order; instead, it is manifested as a negotiated practice. Women seek room within structural constraints, reconfigure cultural scripts, and pursue self-development without disrupting relational networks. This form of subjectivity remains insufficiently theorized within existing frameworks. Moreover, existing research has paid limited attention to how travel functions as a mechanism for the formation of female subjectivity, particularly in the Chinese context. There remains a lack of both extensive empirical evidence and theoretically grounded analyses examining how travel experiences interact with gendered social structures (Yang et al., 2019; Wilson & Little, 2008).

First, this research requires a detailed understanding of the specific social expectations and cultural constraints faced by women within traditional Chinese social structures. This may involve a systematic analysis of traditional conceptions of women's roles in the family, career, and socialization. The central question is how these conceptions shape women's career choices, family responsibilities, and personal development, and whether they contribute to gender inequality. It is also necessary to examine societal expectations regarding women's roles and determine whether women perceive these expectations as restrictive to their freedom and autonomy. Travel may exert a disruptive influence on women's traditional identity formation, potentially fostering new perspectives on self-perception, self-recognition, gender identity, cultural affiliation, and social roles. Because travel provides women with opportunities to reexamine and redefine their self-identity, the research must determine whether it facilitates this process of self-redefinition and self-recognition, as well as identify its specific mechanisms and influencing factors.

Secondly, this research must examine the motivations and behaviours of women who travel to escape traditional constraints. Understanding this issue remains incomplete, as travel may be understood as physical movement but, more importantly, as a process of psychological transformation. The research must investigate why women choose to travel, whether they feel compelled to do so, and whether travel serves as a leisure activity or as a search for personal liberation and identity formation. This includes the processes of personal growth, self-discovery, and cultural adaptation that women may experience during travel, as well as whether these experiences produce measurable changes in their perspectives and values. This research seeks to understand how, and to what extent, Chinese women achieve self-discovery through travel and which factors facilitate this process. Such factors may include destination choice, the influence of travel companions, and the specific activities and experiences encountered. The study should examine how these elements interact to shape observable psychological and behavioural outcomes and long-term effects, thereby substantiating the potential for personal growth through travel.

Conversely, this research must examine whether travel genuinely liberates women from traditional constraints by enabling personal autonomy and independence. A fuller understanding of inequality depends on examining how travel shapes women's social position in Chinese society. Although studies have addressed women's advancement in career development and educational attainment, few have investigated how non-traditional avenues such as travel create distinctive spaces for female emancipation. With respect to these issues, research requires a more comprehensive account of women's travel experiences and the potential effects of this process on social structures. It must investigate whether travel offers women concrete opportunities to pursue careers in new cultural settings, build cross-cultural social networks, and ultimately alter their position within the social structure. Furthermore,

the effects of travel on women's mental health, and the extent to which travel can promote gender equality within broader social change, remain insufficiently understood. As a form of leisure, travel can reduce stress, improve mood, and enhance well-being. However, travel may also introduce new challenges and pressures, including language barriers, safety concerns, and cultural conflict. Through interviews and data analysis, this study will examine the changes women undergo during travel, including emotional variation, increased self-confidence, and future life planning, thereby revealing psychological transformations in female travellers.

Thus, the central question addressed by this research extends beyond whether travel can liberate Chinese women from traditional constraints. It examines the deeper issue of how women, within the gendered institutional structures of post-socialist China, reinterpret themselves through the fluid experience of travel, negotiate structural forces, and gradually develop a new, culturally embedded subjectivity. This question encompasses at least three theoretical gaps. First, the structural gap: existing research has yet to fully explain how state policies, familial norms, and market mechanisms collectively shape modern women's possibilities for action. Second, the travel experience gap: while tourism discourse addresses women's experiences, it lacks a systematic analysis of the relationship between travel and subjectivity within China's unique social context. Third, the gap in subjectivity theory: Western frameworks of resistive and elective subjectivity cannot fully explain the specific mechanisms through which Chinese women negotiate emotional relationships, familial ethics, and social norms. Through an in-depth examination of these issues, this research aims to address the current gap in understanding travel's impact on Chinese women and to provide a more comprehensive and analytically rigorous perspective. The central issue is whether travel offers Chinese women an opportunity to break free from traditional constraints and independently chart their life paths. This would also enhance our understanding of how societal transformations affect women, thereby advancing the potential realization of gender equality and female autonomy. The central task of this study is to address these theoretical gaps. Through semi-structured interviews with 72 contemporary Chinese women, the study aims to examine the processes of emotional awakening, self-repositioning, and identity reconstruction that women experience during travel. The findings will inform the development of a model applicable to the Chinese cultural context. This model will not only show how travel can become a pivotal event in women's meaning making but also reveal how individuals develop self-agency in a partial, incremental, and relationally sensitive manner under structural constraints.

This study examines whether Chinese women can achieve personal liberation and self-redefinition through travel, while identifying current gaps in knowledge on this topic. By analysing women's travel experiences, it seeks to provide new empirical evidence and theoretical support for social change and gender equality. In a highly structured yet constantly changing society saturated with gendered expectations, why does travel function as a gateway for women to reorganise their systems of meaning? How do women negotiate traditional gender norms during travel? Can the self-cultivated beyond everyday life be sustained, practiced, and institutionalised upon returning to daily routines? These unresolved questions form the theoretical core of this study and constitute its significant contribution to tourism studies, gender studies, and post-socialist sociology.

1.3 Objectives

The overarching objective of this research is to examine how contemporary Chinese women, operating within complex gendered institutional structures, utilise tourism as a mobile practice to deepen self-awareness, reconstruct identity, and develop subjectivity. In contrast to prior studies that treat tourism as a mere consumer choice or emotional experience, this investigation adopts a structure-emotion-subjectivity continuum to elucidate tourism's substantive social functions within women's life worlds.

First, this study seeks to explore the key psychological and emotional processes women undergo during travel and to analyse how these processes drive changes in self-awareness. By distancing themselves from everyday relational structures, networks of obligation, and gender norms, travel affords women opportunities to re-examine "who I am," "my position within relationships," and "what I truly desire." Accordingly, the research aims to identify the mechanisms underlying emotional awakening, heightened boundary awareness, and shifts in value hierarchies, as well as the ways in which these mechanisms interact before, during, and after travel.

Secondly, this study seeks to examine how travel becomes a significant site for women to reinterpret social norms. Given that Chinese women have long been subject to the intersecting structural demands of marriage and childbirth, intergenerational caregiving responsibilities, and emotional labour, this research aims to clarify how travel shapes women's renewed understandings of marriage, intimate relationships, careers, and self-worth. It further analyses how these understandings generate tensions with state policies, cultural traditions, and market-oriented gender discourses.

Thirdly, this study seeks to develop a theoretical framework capable of explaining the mechanisms of subjectivity formation among Chinese women. Because existing feminist theories of subjectivity are largely grounded in Western individualist values and a logic of overt contestation, whereas Chinese women operate within an environment characterized by high relationality and structural constraint, this research aims to propose an analytical approach to subjectivity that is more appropriate to the Chinese context. The study will focus on how women negotiate the tensions among structural constraints, emotional experience, and self-understanding during travel. This will inform the construction of a conceptually grounded and theoretically innovative model that explains how women develop agency and self-direction within a non-confrontational cultural framework.

Fourth, this research aims to advance interdisciplinary dialogue among tourism studies, gender studies, and sociology. Through an in-depth analysis of travel experiences, it seeks to show how tourism extends beyond its economic functions to become an important resource for women who construct meaning and adapt their lives under structural constraints. In addition, the study aims to offer new interpretive perspectives for gender research in post-socialist societies, thereby strengthening the theoretical basis of East Asian female subjectivity.

Finally, this research seeks to translate theoretical findings into practical recommendations for policymakers, the tourism industry, social service agencies, and educational institutions. By clarifying tourism's potential contributions to women's subjectivity, mental well-being, and social participation, it aims to provide an evidence base for developing gender-friendly

tourism environments, improving women's travel experiences, supporting women's psychological development, and promoting gender equality.

1.4 Overview of Key Findings

This study finds that tourism gives Chinese women opportunities to reflect on their self-perceptions, social roles, and personal identities within enduring gendered expectations. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 72 Chinese women, the analysis identifies several interconnected themes concerning emotional restoration, self-awareness, role negotiation, and the possibilities and limitations of identity transformation. For many participants, tourism primarily functioned as a temporary space of emotional relief and reflection rather than as a direct catalyst for fundamental life changes. By creating distance from familiar routines and everyday responsibilities, travel enabled some women to reconsider their personal needs, values, and priorities. However, these experiences did not necessarily translate into lasting changes in their everyday circumstances.

A second major finding concerns the relationship between personal aspirations and gendered social responsibilities. Participants' accounts demonstrate that women's self-understandings remain closely connected to family expectations, marriage, caregiving responsibilities, and broader cultural norms. Although tourism may encourage women to question established expectations and reconsider their positions within family and society, such reflections frequently involve negotiation rather than direct confrontation. The findings also indicate differences across life stages, suggesting that age, family circumstances, and accumulated life experiences influence how women interpret tourism and its significance for their identities. These differences highlight the importance of understanding Chinese women's experiences as diverse and socially situated rather than assuming a uniform pattern of empowerment.

Building on these findings, the study develops the concept of negotiated subjectivity to explain how women may gradually reconsider their identities and personal boundaries while remaining embedded within existing social relationships and structural constraints. This perspective suggests that the significance of tourism should not be evaluated solely through observable behavioural changes or expressions of individual independence. Instead, changes in self-understanding, the recognition of personal needs, and the reassessment of relational obligations may also represent meaningful dimensions of subjectivity. Tourism is therefore conceptualised as a potentially significant reflective practice through which women negotiate the relationship between their individual aspirations and the gendered structures of contemporary Chinese society. The subsequent chapters examine these themes in greater detail and consider their theoretical implications for understanding tourism, gender, and identity reconstruction.

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organised into six chapters, examining how tourism influences Chinese women's self-perceptions, gender roles, and identity reconstruction within their socio-cultural context.

Chapter 1 introduces the research background, problem statement, objectives, and an overview of the key findings. It establishes the context for understanding the relationship between tourism and Chinese women's subjectivity.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature on women's self-awareness, feminist perspectives, tourism experiences, and gender roles. It identifies the theoretical and empirical gaps that inform the study.

Chapter 3 outlines the qualitative methodology, including the research paradigm, participant recruitment, semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis using NVivo, and ethical considerations.

Chapter 4 presents the findings from interviews with 72 Chinese women, focusing on tourism experiences, self-awareness, gender expectations, family responsibilities, and identity-related reflections.

Chapter 5 discusses the findings in relation to existing literature, examining tourism as a space for self-reflection and role negotiation. It also addresses the implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

Chapter 6 synthesises the principal findings and presents the Negotiated Subjectivity Model, highlighting the study's theoretical and practical contributions and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 The formation and development of women's self-awareness

The formation of women's self-awareness is a complex, lifelong process involving bodily experience, emotional processes, social structures, and cultural regulation. It concerns not only how individuals recognize who they are, but also how women construct a sense of self and well-being within power relations and gendered order. In psychology, sociology, and feminist scholarship, the variables of self-awareness, self-concept, self-identification, and subjectivity constitute a closely related theoretical continuum.

2.1.1 Perspectives of psychology and neuroscience

Developmental psychology generally regards adolescence as a critical period for self and identity development. Adolescence is marked by substantial cognitive, emotional, and social changes that unfold through a range of experiences, both positive and negative, which shape personality, attitudes, and perceptions. Individuals must continually answer the questions of who they are and who they will become within contexts of peer comparison, evaluation by others, and future decision-making (Pfeifer & Berkman, 2018). The salience of self-related processing within the brain's reward and valuation systems changes substantially, making the self an important framework for value judgments and behavioural choices (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). This process of self-discovery indicates that self-awareness is not a purely philosophical abstraction, but a psychological capacity that develops gradually through specific neural mechanisms and life experiences. According to Carden et al. (2022), self-awareness should be understood as a multidimensional capacity. It includes not only individuals' recognition of their own emotions, beliefs, motivations, and behavioural patterns, but also awareness of the feelings and consequences arising from interaction with others, which differs from excessive self-consciousness and self-scrutiny (Constantin, 2016).

The former refers to a reflective and regulatory capacity, whereas the latter is often associated with insecurity, shame, and social anxiety. Empirical studies in the Chinese context also show significant associations among self-esteem, self-evaluation, and depressive symptoms during adolescence, with women exhibiting a greater tendency toward self-doubt, which is closely linked to gender norms and institutional pressures (Gao et al., 2022).

From this perspective, the formation of women's self-awareness is shaped by two interrelated dimensions. On the one hand, it is influenced by developmental pressures and identity exploration commonly experienced during adolescence. On the other hand, it is further constrained by gendered social structures that impose additional expectations and burdens on women. Among early-maturing adolescent girls, higher levels of self-consciousness are often associated with increased body-related anxiety and insecurity (Graber, Brooks-Gunn, & Petersen, 1996; Susman & Rogol, 2004). In patriarchal culture, self-reflection is easily transformed into repeated questioning of whether one meets women's normative expectations, rather than an open exploration of what one truly wants (Kar et al., 2015).

2.1.2 Self-awareness, self-reflection, and women's empowerment

In the study of adult development and organizational behaviour, self-awareness is often regarded as an important foundation for leadership, career development, and mental health. Self-awareness can help individuals identify their own values, strengths, and limitations, enabling them to make more autonomous choices in social situations (Carden et al., 2022). A substantial body of empirical research has also found that higher levels of self-awareness are associated with greater career satisfaction, better relationship quality, and higher subjective well-being. Sutton and Crobach (2022) argued that, for female professionals, systematic self-reflection and feedback mechanisms can significantly improve self-efficacy and professional engagement, and that self-awareness is not only a cognitive state but also an empowering process. However, self-consciousness does not necessarily lead to liberation, and it may also be shaped by power structures. Oldershaw et al. (2019) concluded that, under pressure from highly regulated and slender aesthetic ideals, girls' self-awareness can be distorted into excessive monitoring of body size, diet, and weight, and that this self-awareness, shaped by external norms, can weaken emotional integration and self-compassion. Similarly, in two studies of Chinese males and females using two separate samples, one composed of males and the other of females, it was found that females were also more sensitive to concerns about appearance and potential causes of aging, including fatigue and tiredness, compared with the effects of sun exposure on males and their work patterns (Flament et al., 2019a; Flament et al., 2019b). Therefore, in the context of research on women, self-awareness should not be limited to the psychological description of individual abilities; it should also examine what kinds of gender order, aesthetic discipline, and discursive environments women are permitted or prohibited from engaging with in the process of developing self-awareness. Whether their perception refers to (a) understanding their own desires and boundaries or (b) being trained to be more obedient, both possibilities involve emotional labour.

2.1.3 Self-awakening and subjectivity in feminist theory

Western feminism provides important theoretical resources for understanding the formation of women's self-consciousness. Women are not born but socially constructed. For a long time, women have been positioned as "others" and, through marriage, maternal duty, and emotional labour, have been required to "complete" the male subject (De Beauvoir, 2023). Within this framework, women's self-awareness begins with recognizing their condition of othering, which enables them to realize that they are not only wives, mothers, or daughters; only then do they begin to pursue the philosophical and political question of who they are. In The Mystery of Women, Betty Friedan offers a classic critique of the postwar intensification of domestic happiness and familial idealization, noting that many highly educated women fell into profound confusion within family life. They formally possessed marriage and material security, but at the cost of repetitive daily housework and the loss of selfhood and a sense of accomplishment in labour (Friedan, 2005).

Friedan regards this confusion as a symptom of the suppression of female subjectivity, emphasizing the importance of education, career advancement, and public participation for women's self-realization. This discussion has laid the foundation for integrating a substantial body of scholarship on women's professional identity and subjectivity. It also offers a historical point of comparison for Chinese society to examine the inner experiences of middle-class women in contemporary China. According to Butler (2002), the key insight of

gender performativity is that gender is not a stable essence, but the product of continuous enactment and reproduction in repeated everyday practices. From this perspective, the formation of women's self-awareness does not simply involve adding consciousness to an established gender identity; rather, it gradually entails recognizing that "I" cannot continue to act in the same way through repeated performance, reflection, and deviation, thereby opening a space of misalignment in everyday life. At the same time, postcolonial feminism critiques the linear narrative that equates awakening with resistance. Mahmood (2016) showed in her study of the Islamic revival in Egypt that the subjectivity of many women is not expressed through overt resistance to existing religious and gender orders, but through the cultivation of moral selfhood and the reconstruction of relations between women, men, and God in devout practice. This agency within humility suggests that, in highly structured and high-risk contexts, women's subjectivity often appears in more subtle forms, such as negotiation, obedience, and delay.

According to Emirbayer and Mische (1998), social theory conceptualizes agency as a dynamic process with three dimensions: the iterative reactivation of past patterns that have shaped the present, the practical evaluation of the present situation, and the projective orientation toward the future. This formulation emphasizes that the subject is always situated within structural constraints and temporal conditions. This embedded, tension-filled dynamism is useful for understanding how Chinese women maintain the image of a "good daughter" and "good wife" in family, marriage, and travel experiences, while adjusting boundaries and redirecting their life trajectories within limited spaces of action. Women's subjective discomfort may emerge at particular moments, but it is continuously shaped through ongoing negotiation among multiple forces, including parents, partners, children, national policies, and travel time.

2.1.4 Women's self-awareness in the Chinese context

Unlike the linear trajectory of Western feminism, from family to workplace and from obedience to rebellion, the self-awareness of contemporary Chinese women emerges within a distinct political, economic, and cultural context. Since the reform and opening-up policy, women's educational attainment and labour-force participation have increased, and the population of urban professional women has expanded rapidly. However, the patriarchal structure deeply embedded in Confucian ethics and national developmental processes has not been automatically attenuated by marketization and globalization; instead, it has been reconfigured and reproduced in new forms. Numerous studies have shown that, in the post-reform era, Chinese families exhibit a complex coexistence of personalization and the re-institutionalisation of familism. Individuals seek autonomy in emotional life and lifestyle yet remain highly dependent on family networks for elder care, marriage, and intergenerational support (Song & Ji, 2020). Ji (2025) further demonstrates that, in intergenerational care arrangements, women continue to shoulder most emotional and caregiving responsibilities, even when their educational attainment and income have approached or exceeded those of men. This mismatch between gains in equal opportunity and persistent family expectations creates pronounced tensions between women's self-awareness and gender-role awareness. On the one hand, contemporary Chinese women increasingly prioritize self-realization and career development as central components of their identity (Yan, 2010; Song, 2011). Contemporary Chinese women increasingly prioritise self-realisation and career development as central components of their identity (Yan, 2010; Song, 2011). However, they remain constrained by

deeply rooted Confucian gender norms that prescribe roles such as filial daughters, virtuous wives, and good mothers (Eklund, 2018). This pattern reflects a persistent tension between individualisation and familial obligations in contemporary Chinese society.

In cultural studies of urban China, scholars have shown that state discourse, media narratives, and housing policies operate in tandem to construct a new gender order. For instance, state-led propaganda and media representations, such as the discourse of "leftover women," have been used to regulate women's marriage choices and reinforce gender norms (Fincher, 2023; Yu, 2023). At the same time, the commodification of housing and the centrality of property ownership in marriage markets have further institutionalized gender inequality, linking masculinity to homeownership and femininity to marital dependence (Fincher, 2023; You & Nussey, 2022). Together, these forces shape a gendered socioeconomic structure in contemporary urban China. Through the terminology of "leftover daughters," "virtuous wives and mothers," and "perfect women," women's reattachment to marriage and family is framed as an active choice, while housing property rights, the household registration system, and fertility policies tie women economically and emotionally to the family (Constantin, 2016). Fincher's (2023) analysis of the "leftover girl" label particularly emphasizes that middle-class urban women are expected to be both successful and gentle in the marriage and love market, and this contradictory expectation intensifies their sense of identity fragmentation. At the micro level, Le (2016) used female college students in southeastern China as an example and found significant differences in employment expectations, career goals, and criteria for career selection among women with different levels of gender awareness. Students with a strong awareness of gender equality were more inclined to regard a career as the central path to self-realization, whereas those with stronger traditional gender norms were more likely to prioritize stability, institutional affiliation, and family considerations. This indicates that the development of Chinese women's subject consciousness is uneven and shaped by multiple factors, including class, region, education, and intergenerational experience, resulting in substantial differentiation and contextual variability. At the same time, the persistent male gaze in contemporary Chinese media and daily life has further complicated the formation of women's self-awareness. In Guangzhou, as in Australia, film, television, and social media have adopted an aesthetic and narrative logic centred on the heterosexual male gaze, which continues to position young women as bodies to be watched and encourages them to develop a dual consciousness in everyday life, experiencing their own desires and emotions while also viewing themselves from the perspective of others disciplined by male scrutiny (Wang, 2021). It effectively states: "look at your own appearance, behaviour, and choices" (Wang, 2021).

2.1.5 The emotional dimension of self-awareness

The construction of women's self-awareness is also deeply embedded in the trajectory of emotional experience and mental health. A study of Chinese women who had experienced intimate partner violence found that domestic violence not only causes physical harm but also erodes victims' self-worth and self-concept through the internalization of shame, fear, and guilt, leading them to repeatedly use self-blaming language such as "I am not good, I am not a good wife/mother," and similar expressions (Wong et al., 2011). In this context, the enhancement of self-awareness may not necessarily lead to liberation; instead, it may intensify internalized attributions of responsibility, prompting women to engage in deeper self-blame (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; Scharff, 2016).

China's research on depression and gender role tension also provides important evidence. Differences exist in the clinical manifestations and course of depression among Chinese women with different educational levels, and these differences are often associated with how they negotiate conflicts among work, family, and self-expectations (Gan et al., 2012). In a study of migrant workers' willingness to return to the city during the epidemic, women were found to be more likely to remain in their hometowns because of family responsibilities and caregiving obligations (Song et al., 2021). This finding not only reflects gender inequality in the labour market, but also indicates that, in crises, women are more likely to position themselves as caregivers rather than independent workers (Ahmad, 2007). Taken together, these studies point to the formation of women's self-awareness and the accumulation of abstract cognition; they also show that how women perceive and articulate themselves in stressful situations is closely related to emotion management. Emotions may serve as subjective resources. For example, anger, grievance, and reluctance can heighten sensitivity to unjust structures, but they can also render women excessively sensitive and emotional through the recoding of patriarchal discourse. This characterisation of women is, in turn, used to delegitimise their rationality and judgment, thereby marginalising their voices in the public sphere (Fraser, 1990; Fincher, 2023).

2.1.6 Conclusion

In summary, the formation and development of women's self-awareness is a process shaped by psychological maturation, social structures, and cultural norms. From the perspectives of developmental psychology and neuroscience, adolescence provides a critical window for self-reflection. From the perspectives of adult development and organizational behaviour research, self-awareness is an important reflective capacity that is closely associated with empowerment and career development. Theories of women's status have shown how women come to recognize their position within gendered relations among others, family, and performance, and then resist and reinterpret them. However, when these theories are applied to the Chinese context, a more complex reality emerges. Marketization, educational expansion, and global feminist discourse have together promoted an unprecedented awakening of women's subjectivity. However, institutional arrangements such as Confucian familyism, national population policy, the discourse of leftover daughters, pressure surrounding marriage and child-rearing, and the divorce cooling-off period have continued to pull women back toward the roles of good daughters, good wives, and good mothers. Within this tension, women's self-awareness is neither complete compliance nor simple resistance, but rather a process of continual adjustment, evaluation, and repositioning within relational networks and structural constraints.

2.2 The relationship between travel and women's self-awareness

In feminist research, travel, or more broadly, mobility, has long been understood as a social practice with potential emancipatory significance. Existing research on women's tourism experiences indicates that tourism is not only a spatially transitive activity, but also an experience that can loosen everyday gender discipline and create a liminal state (Wearing, 1998). After leaving the family, workplace, and familiar social networks, women may temporarily suspend role obligations and reconnect with their feelings, desires, and capacities. Tourism is therefore regarded as a practical field in which the reorganisation of social relations can be observed. However, tourism does not automatically produce liberation.

Its meaning is always embedded in a specific cultural structure, especially in Chinese society, which places great emphasis on family obligations, moral norms, and gender order.

Although tourism can be understood as part of the broader phenomenon of human mobility (Hall, 2005), geographical movement alone does not adequately explain why holiday travel provides a distinctive context for examining self-awareness and identity. Different forms of mobility involve different relationships with everyday social structures. For example, work-related mobility may involve substantial geographical displacement while reproducing occupational responsibilities, established routines, and familiar social roles. Similarly, a family meal outside the home may temporarily relieve a woman of cooking responsibilities without necessarily changing her position as a wife or mother. Holiday travel, however, typically involves a more sustained period of being away from home, during which individuals occupy unfamiliar or temporarily inhabited spaces without fully becoming members of their social environments. Its significance therefore lies not simply in physical movement, but in the combination of spatial, temporal, and social displacement from the routines through which everyday identities are maintained. Graburn (1983) conceptualises tourism in relation to ritual and the interruption of ordinary life, while Stein (2011) demonstrates how holidaymakers construct temporary identities that are distinguished from their everyday selves. This temporary separation can create a liminal condition in which established expectations become more open to questioning. Nevertheless, the distinction between home and away is not absolute, as tourists may reproduce familiar routines and relationships while travelling (Light & Brown, 2020). What distinguishes holiday travel is therefore not the complete absence of social obligations, but the possibility of experiencing them from a temporarily altered social and spatial position.

This temporary position of being away is particularly relevant to understanding how holiday travel may facilitate women's self-reflection. As visitors, tourists can simultaneously participate in unfamiliar social environments while maintaining a degree of distance from the expectations and relationships that organise those environments. This position enables individuals not only to encounter alternative ways of living but also to observe and compare them with the norms governing their everyday lives. Brown (2013) conceptualises tourism as a potentially reflective space in which individuals may reconsider their life choices and personal values. For Chinese women, whose everyday identities may be closely associated with expectations concerning marriage, motherhood, filial obligations, and emotional labour, holiday travel can provide an opportunity to reconsider how these responsibilities shape their understanding of themselves. Compared with brief leisure activities embedded within familiar social relationships, the extended duration and temporary displacement associated with holidays may offer greater opportunities for reflection beyond immediate role expectations. Importantly, such opportunities do not imply that women are free from structural constraints during travel. Family obligations, gendered expectations, and emotional responsibilities may persist or even be reinforced within holiday settings. Rather, the significance of holiday travel lies in its potential to create a temporary distance between women and the social roles through which they are ordinarily recognised. This makes holiday experiences a particularly relevant context for investigating how women reflect upon, question, and potentially renegotiate their identities within existing social structures, without assuming that such experiences necessarily lead to fundamental or lasting transformation.

Chinese women's travel experiences present a form that differs markedly from those in Western contexts. Early theories in feminist tourism research were grounded in Western liberal models, with particular emphasis on women's resistance, escape, and self-realisation through travel. According to Prichard and Morgan (2007), tourist space often exhibits strong gendered characteristics, in which women may be stared at, regulated, and may also challenge patriarchal structures through spatial occupation. Cohen (2011) argued that travel constitutes a form of self-experimentation, providing individuals with opportunities to try different identities and redefine their life trajectories. Although these theories provide an important framework for understanding women's travel experiences, their implicit premise remains that individuals possess relatively sufficient mobility and can achieve self-realisation by rejecting family obligations and leaving oppressive circumstances. However, contemporary researchers increasingly recognise that women's travel experiences cannot be separated from social systems, cultural structures, and emotional obligations. Subjectivity should not be understood as an intrinsic capacity to break free from structure; rather, it is continually produced and reconstructed within structural constraints through social practice (McNay, 2013). She further noted that physical, emotional, and relational experiences are key dimensions in the formation of women's subjectivity. Tourism is precisely a field characterised by dense physical, emotional, and cross-cultural interactions. Therefore, tourism should not only be understood as an escape, but also as a consultative action, in which women's reflection and growth are often gradual and relational, rather than a one-time awakening.

At this stage, the travel experiences of Chinese women may have distinct theoretical significance. First, within the Chinese gender order shaped by long-term familism and patriarchal norms, women often need to obtain permission, justify the legitimacy of travel, or bear additional psychological burdens before leaving their families to travel (Liu et al., 2023). This pre-travel negotiation is itself part of subjective practice. Many women do not travel to rebel against their families; rather, they seek a balance between the responsibility of travel and the pursuit of the self. This process not only reflects respect for family obligations but also indicates a cautious expansion of their sphere of action (Liu et al., 2023). Second, women's self-awareness during travel is activated through bodily experience. Through activities such as hiking, rafting, and being alone at night, women may reassess their strength, boundaries, and vulnerability. These challenging experiences often become key opportunities for women to reinterpret themselves (Lean, 2012). Konivuori (2024) pointed out that fear experienced by female travellers alone in an uncontrollable environment and the excitement of successfully overcoming customer service difficulties are major sources of enhanced subjectivity among women. In addition, cross-cultural contexts during travel can promote self-reflection.

The collision of different cultural systems can prompt individuals to reconsider their identity and worldview (Pratt, 2023). For Chinese women, who are deeply shaped by Confucian familyism, observing how women in other cultures navigate work, marriage, independence, or even travel often triggers profound reflection. Finally, and most neglected, travel not only reshapes women's understanding of themselves but also alters their understanding of relationships. Women's subjectivity is highly relational, and their agency is often formed through collaboration, interaction, and emotional exchange with others (Wearing, 1998). Therefore, encounters with strangers, companions, tour guides, landlords, and other female

travellers during a trip may provide important opportunities for women to reconsider intimate relationships, family obligations, and personal boundaries. Prior studies of Asian women and travel have shown that travel can facilitate learning to express needs, learning to refuse, and redefining the distribution of responsibilities in intimate relationships, which indicates a strong correlation between travel experience and the restructuring of gender relations (Seow & Brown, 2020). In tourism gaze theory, tourists construct self-positioning by observing others (Urry, 1992). In gender research, this concept has been developed into the reverse gaze, whereby female travellers also recognise their position within local culture while observing gender roles in other cultures.

Research has shown that women in East Asian societies, such as China, South Korea, and Japan, are often influenced by the lifestyles, marital expectations, and professional roles of women in destination countries with greater gender equality, such as Northern Europe, Canada, and New Zealand, which prompts comparative self-reflection (Kim & Lee, 2020). However, cross-cultural encounters are not unidirectional; rather, they involve a dual tension. They may provide women with opportunities to observe alternative possibilities, while also strengthening cultural identity and increasing awareness of how gender norms in their own societies shape women's roles as wives and their self-image (Frohlick, 2013). In some culturally distinct destinations, women may experience the male gaze, cultural exclusion, and even harassment, which heightens awareness of the vulnerability of the female body in public space (Jordan & Aitchison, 2008). Therefore, cross-cultural travel may be not only a liberating experience, but also one that heightens women's perception of physical risk, thereby affecting their self-concept in complex ways.

If women's self-awareness often remains invisible and indirect in daily life, tourism provides an amplified and observable context for this implicit awakening. Research on feminist leisure and tourism has long shown that leisure and tourism are not neutral spaces divorced from power, but social fields shaped by the intersection of patriarchy, capitalism, and cultural power. Although women nominally have access to leisure and travel spaces, their experiences have historically been severely constrained by gender roles, caregiving obligations, and bodily discipline (Wearing, 1998). Women's leisure is often carved out of residual time between responsibilities, and it reflects limited permission rather than full autonomy. This form of leisure and tourism, which is closely circumscribed by structural constraints, provides an important context for understanding Chinese women's travel experiences. Most women do not begin travelling after becoming fully detached from their families; instead, they travel while still bearing housework, marital obligations, and emotional labour, thereby creating a narrow temporal and spatial opening for themselves. These are little more than limited fissures. In many Western studies, women's travel is often constructed as a rebellious practice. Through departure, backpacking, and long-term travel, women resist the norms of marriage and career trajectories, forming identities that approximate lifestyle travel (Cohen, 2011). Some long-term backpackers transform travel from a one-time consumption activity into a continuous lifestyle, thereby reconstructing their identity and disrupting the narrative of the middle-class stable life (Cohen, 2011). However, this model has clear limitations in the Chinese context. Chinese women's travel practices are strongly constrained by the work system and family responsibilities. Most do not have the conditions to travel for long periods as a way of making a living. Even long-term study abroad, working holidays, or extended backpacking are often interpreted through the ethical framework of family responsibility in

their narratives. They emphasise broadening their horizons to better plan for their families and children or giving themselves an opportunity to reflect on life before adulthood, rather than simply rejecting the family. Therefore, this study proposes a new model that emphasises the careful negotiation of subjectivity within structural constraints and relational ethics.

How can tourism specifically trigger this type of negotiation? First, the embodied experience of physical activity serves as a key entry point. Using New Zealand and other destinations that have been positioned as adventure tourism capitals as examples, when women participate in bungee jumping, skydiving, surfing, kayaking, hiking, and related activities, they experience complex emotions such as fear, excitement, and accomplishment. In the New Zealand context, many women describe such adventure travel as the first time they realised that their body is not merely an object to be viewed and evaluated, but an agent with strength, speed, and endurance. Physical challenges and uncertain situations provide individuals with opportunities to reorganise their relationship with the world (Lean, 2012). When the body acts in an unfamiliar environment, it continuously generates new perceptual information, prompting individuals to revise prior assumptions about what they can do and, in turn, redraw their boundaries. This experience is especially significant for Chinese women, who have long been socialised to be stable, safe, and risk averse. After travelling, they often express themselves for the first time by saying, "I can." This shift is both emotional and cognitive.

Secondly, the risk and safety judgment process during travel is also subjective. Numerous studies on women travelling alone indicate that they must continuously assess potential risks and devise strategies to ensure their safety when planning itineraries, selecting modes of transportation, and screening accommodation. Interviews with solo female tourists in Asia found that, under the influence of Confucian culture, they often encounter strong questioning and opposition from parents, partners, and colleagues before travelling. They must now engage in a process of persuasion and disclosure within the family to demonstrate that their travel is safe, manageable, and legitimate (Seow & Brown, 2020). In this process, women present arguments such as language learning, improving professional competitiveness, and relieving work-related stress in order to establish the legitimacy of their actions. This expansion of their sphere of action through persuading others is a typical dimension of the consultative formula defined by this research institute. Subjective dispositions do not emerge through the severing of relationships but are gradually formed through ongoing negotiation with significant others.

From a psychological perspective, the effects of travel experiences on women's self-awareness are also often explained as a cognitive reconstruction process. When individuals encounter new environmental stimuli, they alter their emotional responses by reappraising the practical significance of these stimuli, and this appraisal process is closely related to self-concept (Gross, 1998). Building on this framework, tourism research has shown that women must continually assess risks, make decisions, and manage social interactions in unfamiliar travel environments, thereby activating new cognitive patterns (Kerr & Mackenzie, 2012). These ongoing cognitive evaluations provide the foundation for women to develop new self-concepts while travelling. However, changes in self-awareness during women's travel experiences are not always positive or linear. Psychological research indicates that gains in self-awareness are often accompanied by moments of threat; that is, when individuals face sudden risks, cultural conflict, physical fatigue, or loneliness, they may enter a state of intense reflection (Taylor, 2017).

Tourism researchers have identified similar phenomena among female travellers from different countries. Many women enter a more acute and cautious state of self-observation after encountering language barriers, unfamiliar social norms, traffic difficulties, and the pressure of interacting with strangers (Lukate & Foster, 2023). This heightened self-monitoring is closely associated with the development of self-awareness. In addition, tourism's influence on women's self-awareness is closely related to narrative construction. Contemporary individuals sustain self-identity through ongoing narratives of life experience, and tourism readily becomes a site of narration because of its salient and memorable character (Giddens, 1991). When women recall travel experiences, they often selectively emphasise particular emotional moments, such as overcoming fear, enduring loneliness, encountering unexpected interactions, and confronting physical limits. These narrative fragments become an important basis for reorganising self-meaning (Noy, 2004). This finding is especially important for understanding Chinese women, because in the process of socialisation, Chinese women are often socialised to be restrained, self-effacing, and relationally oriented, so travel provides a context in which they can more readily narrate themselves.

Tourism research has increasingly focused on the production of women's self-awareness under digital conditions. Social media platforms such as Weibo, Xiaohongshu, Douyin, and Instagram are not only channels through which women obtain travel information, but also important spaces in which they construct the meaning of travel. Travel displays on social media play a dual role. They can facilitate women's entry into travel communities and foster a sense of belonging, but they may also generate aesthetic pressure and relative anxiety, affecting how women perceive their bodies, lifestyles, and capabilities (Gretzel, 2018). Chinese research also shows that women's travel content on platforms such as Xiaohongshu often reinforces cultural symbols such as ritual and refined living. This visual narrative may not only constrain women's pursuit of travel freedom but also render travel a gendered consumption practice (Guo et al., 2024).

In the development of women's tourism research, scholars have begun to examine how tourism experiences shape women's self-awareness through political space and risk governance. Tourism does not occur in abstract space but within a spatial network governed by specific power structures, such as airports, train stations, old cities, night streets, beaches, and youth hostels. These spaces are often shaped by gender, commercialisation, and culturalisation, so women's actions and experiences in them necessarily involve perceptions of, and responses to, spatial power. Women's insecurity in public space is not an individual emotion but the product of the combined effects of long-term gender-based violence, sexual harassment, and social norms (Pain, 2001). When women enter destinations, these fears intensify, and the strategies adopted to cope with them have become an important means through which women reinterpret their circumstances. Tourism researchers describe this phenomenon as gendered mobility restriction. According to Gössling et al. (2018), mobility itself is shaped by power relations, while female mobility is subject to social control and cultural warnings. Women receive warnings from society and family before, during, and after travelling (Wilson & Little, 2008). Girls are told not to go out at night and not to travel to high-risk countries.

These predefined risk-related terms significantly affect women's risk perception and prompt them to adopt more cautious travel strategies. However, it is precisely this strategic risk

management behaviour that gradually enables women to recognise that they possess greater capacity to cope with uncertainty than is suggested by the social experiences typically encountered during travel. Many women gradually develop environmental scanning skills, behavioural self-protection strategies, and spatial judgement while travelling (Seow & Brown, 2002). These abilities were once regarded as exclusively male, or as skills in which men generally performed better, but women acquire them through travel-related practice, thereby reshaping their understanding of their own capabilities. It is worth noting that Chinese women's risk perception and risk practices exhibit distinctive cultural characteristics. The risk awareness of Chinese women is often closely tied to family structure (Li & Yang, 2025). For many Chinese women, travel involves not only concerns about personal safety but also consideration of how their families will evaluate that safety. In this context, women's risk management behaviour serves not only to protect physical safety, but also as a family-oriented and responsible practice. This family-centred model of risk management constitutes an important perspective in research on women's tourism experiences in the Chinese context.

In addition, emotional labour in the travel experience is also a key mechanism in women's self-awareness. Research on women's tourism has increasingly drawn on Ahmed's theory of affect to understand the role of emotions in shaping women's travel experiences (Ahmed, 2013; 2020), emphasising that emotions are not internal phenomena of individuals but are attached to social, material, and cultural images (Guschke et al., 2022). For example, it can be argued that, for solo female adventure tourists, the fear and excitement evoked by mountain climbing do not stem solely from the individual but are also closely linked to social norms regarding how women should conduct themselves in public. By extension, the emotions of fear, pleasure, tension, excitement, anxiety, and liberation experienced by women during travel have become an important starting point for reflection on the self and for resistance to social norms that define acceptable female roles. Many women initially feel fear when confronting high-intensity physical challenges, but after overcoming these challenges, they experience an enhanced bodily sense of self. This emotional shift not only alters women's understanding of the body but also reshapes their understanding of the limits of their capabilities. In the context of China, this emotional experience is more complex because Chinese women have long been socialised as a stable, safe, obedient, and risk-averse group. From childhood, Chinese women have been socialised through family and school education to observe norms such as avoiding danger, preserving face, and refraining from acting independently. Consequently, when they proactively engage with the unknown and assume risks during travel, this experience exhibits distinct countercultural characteristics. In other words, the emotions Chinese women experience during travel are not only responses to the environment but also behavioural consequences of transgressing gender discipline.

In recent years, intersectional theory has further deepened understanding of women's tourism experiences. Crenshaw (1991) argued that gender is not an independent variable; rather, together with class, age, marital status, education level, geography, ethnicity, and other factors, it constitutes the empirical structure of women's lived experience. Consequently, women with different identities and social positions may undergo markedly different changes in self-awareness while travelling. In Chinese research, this intersectional structure exhibits more pronounced cultural characteristics. The self-consciousness of female backpackers is shaped by a threefold structure: gender-based cultural norms, opportunities for class mobility, and family expectations (Liu et al., 2023). Middle-aged women are more likely to interpret

travel as a process of self-discovery, whereas rural women may place greater emphasis on broadening their horizons and expanding their knowledge. These differences indicate that women's self-awareness during travel is deeply shaped by social position, rather than constituting a universal psychological process.

Furthermore, tourism research has begun to examine how women may develop new self-understanding through interaction with others during travel. For example, the social environments of youth hostels, hiking groups, residents, female friends, and similar settings may serve as important mirrors through which women reflect on their roles. Interactions among women during travel often provide emotional support. This supportive community enables women to express, share, and validate their emotions, thereby further promoting the formation of self-awareness (Cohen & Cohen, 2015). In China, Xiaohongshu, Douban, WeChat groups, and other digital communities have created spaces for emotional exchange before travel, so that women's travel experiences acquire a psychological framework prior to actual departure. These digital communities not only provide information but also function as empowering resources. Chinese women's travel content on social media presents narratives of solo travel, self-accompaniment, female-friendly destinations, and related themes, thereby gradually framing travel as a practice with the symbolic meaning of women's independence. This symbolism not only affects women's motivation to travel but also shapes how they retrospectively interpret their travel experiences. As a result, travel becomes a form of self-expression rather than merely spatial movement.

Overall, recent research suggests that the relationship between tourism and women's self-awareness operates through multiple mechanisms closely associated with spatial politics, risk negotiation, emotional experience, identity construction, and social relational dynamics (Wilson & Little, 2008; Wearing & Wearing, 1996; Jordan & Aitchison, 2008). Tourism not only provides women with an exceptional context in which to step outside everyday life but also offers a sexualised context through which they construct self-narratives and reflect on gender roles and social structures. Significant differences exist in the emotions, risks, and meaning-making processes experienced by women from different countries and cultural backgrounds during travel. Shaped by family responsibilities, gender discipline, and social expectations, Chinese women's travel experiences are highly contextual. These findings indicate the need for further research from cultural perspectives to reconceptualise the mechanisms through which women's travel experiences shape self-awareness within societal structures, social norms, and gender politics.

2.3 Functions of travel

In recent decades of tourism research, the function of travel has increasingly been separated from the framework of leisure economics and has gradually evolved into an analytical lens for modern individual psychology, social relations, and cultural contexts. Traditional research has often interpreted travel primarily through motivation, satisfaction, and consumption behaviour, whereas more recent theoretical shifts emphasise travel as a practical activity embedded in social structures, cultural contexts, and life courses. Its function is not externally imposed but instead emerges through processes of individual meaning-making and situational context (Bruner, 1990; Weick & Weick, 1995). This shift has been strongly informed by sociology, psychology, anthropology, and feminist theory, leading scholars to recognise that travel is not an exception to everyday life, but an important occasion for reorganising life

meaning, emotional structures, relational patterns, and self-narratives (Larsen, 2008). Therefore, any discussion of the function of travel must first account for individuals' structural positions in daily life. It is within the context of highly stabilised social structures, gender norms, family responsibilities, and emotional labour that the distinctiveness of travel becomes apparent. Travel is not merely rest or escape, but a social process that occurs simultaneously across space, time, and subjectivity. The first significance of travel's function derives from the separation between space and everyday life.

2.3.1 Travelling as an environment for psychological recovery

In the long-standing intersection of tourism research and psychological research, travel is increasingly understood as a psychological setting that has significant restorative effects, and its function extends far beyond the temporary pleasure associated with leisure activities. According to Kaplan and Kaplan (2011), attention restoration theory provides an important framework for explaining the psychological recovery mechanism of travel. They noted that individuals tend to experience excessive depletion of directed attention amid the accelerated pace of work, continuous social interaction, and recurring family responsibilities, and that recovery of this capacity requires an environment characterised by being away, fascination, compatibility, and extent. Travel is essentially a process of withdrawal from familiar surroundings, enabling individuals to leave situations that continually consume cognitive resources. Hartig et al.'s (2014) research further demonstrates that natural settings, unfamiliar cities, and environments marked by emotional novelty all facilitate attention recovery. This effect is especially pronounced for women, because they experience a greater share of emotional labour, domestic labour, and role conflict in daily life. In a study of more than 2,000 Spanish women, Matud (2004) found that women are more susceptible to attention fatigue, emotional exhaustion, and physical and psychological discomfort under multiple role pressures, and the role separation inherent in travel makes it an effective intervention.

In the Chinese context, this phenomenon is particularly pronounced. Women have long occupied multiple roles in marriage, the family, and the workplace. The theory of the triple burden is clearly reflected among urban women in China, encompassing full-time employment, housework, and the care of older adults and children (Cook & Dong, 2011). This dense and overlapping role structure makes sustained psychological rest difficult for women to achieve. Travel provides not merely physical rest, but also role relief, allowing women to temporarily disengage from behaviour patterns that are continuously expected of them. While travelling, women are no longer required to maintain family emotions, manage domestic affairs, or attend to responsibilities at all times; instead, they gain an independent space that allows for social openness, emotional freedom, and autonomous adjustment of physiological rhythms. Pearce & Packer (2013) noted that the act of travel itself, such as walking, route planning, and landscape observation, constitutes mild cognitive activation rather than the "compulsory cognitive load" experienced at home or in the workplace, and is therefore more likely to produce a psychological recovery effect.

In addition, environmental psychology suggests that unfamiliar environments can reduce activity in an individual's default mode network (DMN), thereby facilitating psychological relaxation (Immordino-Yang et al., 2012). For women in particular, excessive DMN activity is often associated with rumination, concerns about family, and fear of others' evaluations, and travel may reduce these triggers by altering environmental cues. Thus, women's

psychological recovery during travel derives not only from the "beauty of nature" or a sense of "novelty," but also from the temporary disruption of cues that elicit psychological burden, thereby enabling deeper neural recovery. Nawijn's (2011) study of tourism happiness also shows that increases in happiness during travel are significantly correlated with decreases in stress levels, whereas the recovery experience of female participants is significantly higher than that of male participants.

Therefore, travel serves a cross-cultural function in psychological recovery, but it holds particular significance for Chinese women. The highly structured rhythm of life, the pressures associated with marriage and fertility systems, and society's persistent expectations of women's roles make them especially in need of recovery that enables them to "leave the scene." The psychological and situational "interruption" produced by travel not only enables women to restore cognitive functioning but also lays the foundation for subsequent psychological transformation. This recovery is not short-lived; rather, it helps women reestablish balance in attention, mood, bodily rhythm, and self-perception, thereby strengthening their capacity to continue coping with life's pressures. In other words, travel is not merely a form of leisure, but a central mechanism supporting the sustainability of women's mental health and everyday functioning.

2.3.2 Travelling promotes positive mood and emotional regulation.

The importance of positive emotions in psychological research has long been established, and travel is a particularly effective medium for eliciting positive emotions that can help women rebuild emotional resources. Fredrickson (2001) argued that positive emotions not only generate pleasant experiences but also broaden individuals' thought-action repertoires, promote exploratory behaviour, and ultimately accumulate long-term psychological resources, such as coping capacity, self-efficacy, and social connectedness. The novelty, autonomy, pleasurable physical activity, aesthetic appreciation, and social interaction associated with travel are major sources of positive emotions. Tourism research has found that women are more likely than men to experience strong and sustained positive emotions during travel, including excitement, calmness, satisfaction, freedom, and surprise (Bowie & Chang, 2005).

Nawijn and Veenhoven (2013) demonstrated that holiday travel can significantly enhance individuals' positive affect, and that positive emotions experienced during travel not only shape immediate well-being but can also persist for several weeks, or even several months, after returning home. For women, this emotional benefit is particularly important because they bear a substantial share of emotional labour in daily life, including maintaining family harmony, regulating partners' emotions, and managing emotionally demanding interactions at work. Women's emotional labour is often taken for granted, thereby limiting opportunities for emotional recovery in everyday life (Hochschild, 1983). Travel enables women to temporarily suspend this high-intensity emotional work through emotional interruption.

In addition, emotional regulation theory indicates that the way individuals regulate their emotions is shaped by situational context, and travel offers favourable conditions that facilitate effective emotional regulation among women (Gross, 2002). For example, natural landscapes, cultural experiences, artistic settings, and a relaxed bodily rhythm can reduce activation of the autonomic nervous system and promote greater emotional stability. According to Barton & Pretty (2010), walking, observation, and light exercise in natural

environments can significantly reduce women's anxiety and negative emotions. At the same time, the unpredictability of unfamiliar settings can generate mild excitement, which is an important factor in promoting positive emotions.

The positive emotions generated by travel among women are not only short-term but also long-term. Travel can alter how women emotionally evaluate life events, meaning that the same stressor may be perceived as more controllable and manageable after travel. Filep & Pearce (2014) examined the improvement in life satisfaction among female travellers after travel and found that it is significantly related to enhanced emotional regulation ability. In other words, positive emotions experienced during travel have a cumulative effect, can be retained as psychological resources, and may play a protective role in response to future stress. Therefore, travel helps women develop higher levels of resilience, flexibility, and emotional awareness by providing positive emotional experiences, thereby strengthening their emotional regulation ability in daily life. This ability is often difficult to acquire in high-pressure environments, and travel provides a favourable context for emotional reconstruction.

2.3.3 Travel promotes cognitive reorganisation.

As a profound cognitive experience, travel is not merely a source of sensory stimulation; it also promotes individual cognitive reorganisation by providing new information, alternative frames of reference, and narrative resources. Mezirow's transformative learning theory argues that when individuals encounter new experiences that challenge their existing belief structures, they re-examine taken-for-granted assumptions and initiate changes in perspective (Kitchenham, 2008). Travel is one social context that can trigger this process. In travel settings, unfamiliar cultures, different family structures, alternative career paths, and distinct rhythms of life may serve as catalysts that challenge women's existing cognitive frameworks.

In discussing threshold space, Turner (1984) noted that travel places individuals in a liminal state between everyday life and the unknown, in which established social roles are suspended and cognitive boundaries become more permeable (Matthews, 2016). For women, this suspension of role during travel is particularly significant because self-awareness is often shaped by family roles, social expectations, and interpersonal obligations. Travel allows women to temporarily set aside these external definitions, making it easier to examine their own needs and values.

Cross-cultural comparison is also an important route to cognitive reorganisation. Although Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis is primarily used in studies of intergroup relations (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005), subsequent research in tourism indicates that contact across cultures can make women more aware of the cultural structures shaping their lives (Korstanje, 2022). For example, in countries that place strong emphasis on personal freedom or leisure rights, women observe a different balance among motherhood, marriage, and employment, which may prompt them to redefine their family roles. Myers' (2010) in-depth interviews with Chinese female travellers also show that when women observe the lifestyles of women in other cultures during travel, they often develop a new understanding of their own lives, and this understanding emerges through cognitive reorganisation.

Narrative psychology offers another interpretive framework. McAdams (2001) argued that individuals construct self-identity through the ongoing narration of life stories, and travel experiences often become pivotal nodes in those stories, especially for women under role

pressure. Travel not only provides new narrative content but also offers new narrative structures, enabling women to revise the central themes of their stories. For example, “I do not necessarily have to live according to a predetermined path; I can also pursue an independent future, and I can control the course of my life.” This narrative reconstruction shifts women's self-identity from an expected role to a position of active choice.

Therefore, travel-induced cognitive reorganisation is a profound psychological experience, essential for enabling women to reorganise the meaning structures of their lives and develop a more flexible, open, and expansive self-understanding.

2.3.4 Travelling strengthens self-efficacy and problem-solving ability.

As an active practice, travel involves a substantial number of tasks that require independent judgment, planning, and execution; therefore, it naturally serves as a context for strengthening self-efficacy. Bandura's (1982) theory of self-efficacy indicates that the most direct and effective way to enhance individual efficacy is through mastery experiences, that is, successful completion of a challenging task. The travel process is a sequence of mastery experiences. Faced with unfamiliar environments, language barriers, route-related problems, emergencies, budget management, traffic changes, accommodation arrangements, and similar challenges, women must continually exercise judgment and decision-making skills. The accumulation of such successful experiences can significantly enhance women's sense of self-efficacy. According to Hassan & Damir (2022), self-improvement is one of the most consistent psychological changes associated with travel. Many women experience stress as an active practice, and travel involves a substantial number of tasks that require independent judgment, planning, and execution; therefore, it naturally serves as a context for strengthening self-efficacy. Bandura's (1982) theory of self-efficacy indicates that the most direct and effective way to enhance individual efficacy is through mastery experiences, that is, successful completion of a challenging task. The travel process is a sequence of mastery experiences. Faced with unfamiliar environments, language barriers, route-related problems, emergencies, budget management, traffic changes, accommodation arrangements, and similar challenges, women must continually exercise judgment and decision-making skills. The accumulation of such successful experiences can significantly enhance women's sense of self-efficacy.

According to Hassan & Damir (2022), self-improvement is one of the most consistent psychological changes associated with travel. Many women experience strong self-doubt before departure and worry about safety, communication, and emergency response capabilities, but after the trip, their overall assessment is often better than expected. This improvement in efficacy is not only related to the travel environment but also closely linked to the autonomy women experience during travel. Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory regards autonomy as one of the basic psychological needs of human beings, and travel is a highly autonomous activity. The more women make decisions and solve problems while travelling, the more they strengthen their belief in their own capability, yet experience self-doubt before departure and worry about safety, communication, and emergency response capabilities, but after the trip, their overall assessment is often better than expected. This improvement in efficacy is not only related to the travel environment but also closely linked to the autonomy women experience during travel. Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory regards autonomy as one of the basic psychological needs of human beings, and travel

is a highly autonomous activity. The more women make decisions and solve problems while travelling, the more they strengthen their belief in their own capability.

In addition, problem-solving during travel functions as a form of resilience training. Psychological research indicates that resilience is not innate but develops through continuous responses to manageable stressors (Masten, 2001). The challenges associated with travel are generally not life-threatening, but they are sufficient to expose women to moderate stress, which is an appropriate level for cultivating resilience. For example, missed transportation, getting lost, language barriers, or sudden changes in plans require immediate resolution, and these experiences can transfer to everyday life, enabling women to demonstrate greater flexibility in response to family conflict, work pressure, and social role demands.

Therefore, travel is not only a context for demonstrating ability, but also a setting for developing it. The sense of self-efficacy women gain during travel can become an important psychological resource for future life decisions, career planning, interpersonal interaction, and responses to uncertainty.

2.3.5 Travelling creates psychological distance and space for reflection.

The theory of psychological distance posits that when individuals are distant from familiar environments, their thinking shifts from concrete to abstract and from detail-oriented to holistic, enabling them to view life from a broader perspective (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Psychological distance comprises spatial, temporal, social, and hypothetical dimensions, and travel simultaneously creates multiple forms of distance. Spatial distance is the most immediately apparent and leaving home and the workplace can generate a new perspective. Social distance is reflected in the fact that women are no longer constrained by familiar roles while travelling, allowing them to observe their behaviour within an unfamiliar social context. Temporal distance arises from the altered rhythm of travel, enabling women to temporarily suspend anxious thoughts about the future and reflect on present difficulties in a calmer manner.

Wilson and Little (2008) note that women are more likely than men to use the psychological distance created by travel to reflect on life. This tendency is related to women's higher emotional involvement in intimate relationships and family structures. When women distance themselves from their families, they can more objectively assess the uneven division of responsibilities, relationship patterns, sources of pressure, and the extent of self-sacrifice. Travel renders these otherwise less visible structures apparent in everyday life, thereby stimulating reflection. Wu and Pearce (2016) reported that one of the most frequently mentioned changes in women's post-travel interviews was the way they approached problems after returning home. Consequently, the meaning of travel is not only to experience the world, but also to enable women to create distance from their lives, generate insight through that distance, and identify lessons that can inform future behaviour. This reflective capacity, grounded in psychological distance, is an important psychological basis for women to plan their lives and redefine their roles.

2.3.6 Travel promotes life satisfaction.

Happiness research indicates that travel has a stable and significant effect on life satisfaction (Sirgy, 2010). However, for women, travel affects not only emotional states but also the construction of meaning in life. Steger et al. (2009) stated that the meaning of life derives

from an individual's overall judgement of whether life is worth living, and travel is one of the most accessible experiences through which a sense of meaning can emerge, because it provides aesthetic experience, interpersonal connection, value contrast, and existential reflection. Filep & Deery (2010) found that female travellers often report higher levels of existential satisfaction after travelling, including a new understanding of nature, culture, and their own abilities.

The concept of the "meaning of life" is therefore distinct from happiness. Rather than a transient emotional state, it constitutes a more enduring psychological resource (Baumeister et al., 2013; Seligman, 2011). Ways in which travel fosters a sense of meaning in life include confirming one's self-worth through accomplishment, expanding one's sense of life's scope through encounters with nature, appreciating the diversity of human life through cross-cultural contact, affirming the feasibility of life through challenges and problem-solving, and enhancing insight into the broader structure of life by temporarily withdrawing from daily routines. For Chinese women, a sense of meaning is particularly important because they are shaped by structured expectations regarding marriage, child-rearing, and family obligations, and they may neglect their own values and life goals. Travel enables them to recognise that life can be diversified, that life trajectories can be redesigned, and that role expectations can be renegotiated.

Therefore, as a meaningful constructive practice, travel provides women not only with pleasure and relaxation, but also with an opportunity to re-understand life. It encourages women to add new chapters to the narrative of life, thereby strengthening life's coherence, purpose, and intrinsic motivation.

2.4 The situation of Chinese female travellers in the social and cultural structure

2.4.1 Modernisation, educational opportunities, and redistribution of leisure resources

The emergence and growth in the number of female travellers in contemporary China are not attributable to a single factor, but rather to the combined effect of multiple structural conditions. Since the 1990s, China has undergone rapid modernisation. The expansion of educational access, the growth of career opportunities, improved urban and rural mobility, and the rise of consumer culture have together transformed the social basis of women's agency. The proportion of Chinese women receiving higher education has increased substantially. According to statistics from the Ministry of Education of China, the proportion of women enrolled in colleges and universities has continued to rise and has surpassed that of men over the past ten years (Liu et al., 2021). Higher levels of education are directly associated with greater self-awareness, higher labour-force participation, and increased mobility (Parpart, 2014). As women's income levels have risen, they have, for the first time, gained discretionary travel budgets and are no longer constrained by the financial arrangements of their husbands and families, as in traditional societies (Khan, 2011).

At the same time, China's urbanisation rate has increased rapidly, and the urban middle class has expanded correspondingly. Goodman and Chen (2013) argued that the lifestyle transformation of China's middle class has two core features: a self-expression culture that

emphasises individualism and a new leisure concept that treats tourism as experiential consumption. Travel is regarded as a marker of identity and an important means of expressing self-worth and quality of life (Zhang & Hitchcock, 2017). Within this shift in consumption culture, Chinese women have become among the most active participants. Data from Ctrip (Ctrip, 2019) and the Mafengwo Travel Network indicate that women account for more than 55% to 60% of travellers in segments such as independent travel, cultural experience tours, and solo travel.

Another structural reason for the increase in women's travel is the gradual relaxation of gender norms in China. Although traditional norms remain influential, women's labour force participation has increased significantly since the reform and opening up, and their life-course choices have expanded accordingly (Fincher, 2014). Against this background, travel is not only a form of leisure consumption but also a legitimate means of self-exploration for women. It provides an opportunity to adjust the pace of life, create psychological space, and experiment with new identity roles (Muldoon et al., 2023). The rise of women's travel in China is closely associated with the incremental loosening of gender order, which is reflected in women's reorganisation of time, resources, and bodily practices, especially among urban professional women (Seow, 2020).

In addition, several technological developments have made women's travel more convenient. Mobile payment, shared transportation, navigation systems, social media platforms, and related technologies reduce travel uncertainty and risk, thereby increasing women's confidence in travelling alone (Seow & Brown, 2020). Digital tourism infrastructure is regarded as an important factor contributing to the growth of women's travel in East Asia and to the narrowing of the gender gap in mobility (Kang & Kim, 2020). Therefore, the rise of contemporary Chinese female travellers is a complex outcome of social transformation. It is a historical phenomenon shaped by the expansion of education, career development, greater women's autonomy, the growth of consumer culture, and the loosening of social structures. This group did not emerge suddenly; rather, it was gradually conditioned, enabled, and motivated through prolonged social change and has become one of the most significant variables in the tourism market.

2.4.2 Family gender order and women's travel

In Chinese society, the family remains one of the most important institutional domains shaping women's behaviour. Despite significant social development, the gender division of labour within the family remains highly unequal. Even when Chinese women have higher educational attainment and career development, they generally assume more domestic labour, emotional labour, and caregiving responsibilities (Qi et al., 2021). A large body of research has shown that women's time is strongly constrained by family obligations, resulting in significantly less "free time" than men's (Tan et al., 2021). Therefore, for many women, travel is not an option that can be undertaken at any time, but rather an activity that requires challenging family expectations and renegotiating role responsibilities.

Under gender norms, women are expected to subordinate their needs to those of the family, especially married women, whose roles are closely tied to those of mothers, wives, and caregivers (Yang, 2014). This makes travel a potentially transgressive behaviour because it requires women to temporarily withdraw from their functional position in the family system, which often triggers negative comments from family members, relatives, and even partners.

In a study on the travel-related pressures faced by Chinese women, many interviewees said they had to explain their travel plans in detail to their families; otherwise, they risked being seen as irresponsible or as neglecting family duties. Within traditional family ethics, women are assigned moral responsibilities, whereas men are assigned economic responsibilities, so women's decision to leave home is more likely to be interpreted as a violation of family ethics (Liu et al., 2025).

Therefore, women's travel is often accompanied by multiple psychological burdens, including guilt over family responsibilities, concern about external evaluation, and self-imposed compression of travel time. Zhang & Hitchcock (2017) pointed out that Chinese women often need to perform additional labour before and after travelling, such as preparing family affairs in advance or compensating for housework after returning, in order to offset the emotional benefits of travel. Many women stated in interviews that their travel often must be scheduled at a time that "does not affect their families", such as after their children's exams, when their parents are in stable health, or when their husbands are away on business trips. This indicates that women's travel is not free but is instead regulated and constrained by family structure.

However, it is within these tensions that travel acquires profound social significance for women. It has become an important means for women to temporarily withdraw from the family structure, recover a sense of self, and reassess family roles. Gladwell and Bedini (2004) stated that women often recognise their excessive investment in the family while travelling, thereby reflecting on the gender division of labour within the household. Chinese studies have also found that women re-evaluate their family roles after travelling, and some women even develop a stronger sense of personal boundaries through travel experiences (Yang et al., 2017). This tension between family and travel is central to understanding the experiences of Chinese female travellers. Chinese women's travel is not simply about where to go, but rather a complex social process of withdrawing from the family, carving out time for themselves, and maintaining a sense of self under the pressure of responsibility.

2.4.3 Psychological de-embedding of women's travel experience

China's social structure exhibits a strong acquaintanceship orientation, and individual behaviour is often monitored and evaluated by family, neighbours, and broader social expectations (Fei et al., 1992). For women in particular, the gaze of acquaintances and gender norms often create dual pressure, making it difficult to establish clear personal boundaries in everyday life. Travel has become a key context in which women can move beyond social expectations and test their identities, a process that may be understood as psychological detachment.

Many studies have indicated that spatial change, the loosening of social relations, and environmental unfamiliarity during travel enable women to temporarily escape social evaluation systems and thereby experience emotional restoration, reduced anxiety, and renewed psychological energy (Chen & Petrick, 2013). Pratt's (2023) contact zone theory suggests that unfamiliar environments can activate identity reconfiguration in individuals. Chinese women may similarly experience identity loosening during travel, that is, they may temporarily detach from roles such as mother, wife, and employee, and be reinterpreted by others as individuals rather than role bearers.

According to Seow and Brown (2020), East Asian women have significantly improved self-awareness when travelling alone. They gain a sense of competence by solving problems independently, making decisions, and interacting with strangers. Chinese women often realise that their emotions have been suppressed for a long time while travelling, and travel has become a process of emotional release. In addition, the unfamiliarity of travel provides a space for low-risk experimentation with identity, which differs markedly from an acquaintance society. Women can present themselves differently from their everyday lives during travel, for example, by becoming more outgoing, confident, decisive, or calm. Molz (2012) found that travel spaces function as sites of experimental identity formation, allowing women to explore multiple possible selves. Chinese research has also shown that many women become more willing to express their needs and establish personal boundaries after travelling (Xu, 2009).

This process is highly significant for understanding Chinese women because their identities within the social structure are often predetermined, expected, and represented by others, whereas travel offers an opportunity to cease being defined by others and to reconstruct the self. Psychological de-embedding enables women to disengage from standardised identity structures and rediscover their value as subjects.

2.4.4 Strategic practices of safety risks, gender-oriented fear, and women's travel

For Chinese women, safety during travel is not only a concrete risk but also a central factor shaping their range of action, behavioural strategies, and emotional experience. International research indicates that female travellers are more likely to encounter gender-based violence, including sexual harassment, threats of violence, theft, and related harms (Jordan & Aitchison, 2008). In China, such risk narratives and gendered fear are mutually reinforcing, rendering women's travel practices highly precautionary (Seow & Brown, 2020). Existing research indicates that Chinese women prioritise destination safety before deciding to travel, especially in relation to night-time activities, transport safety, encounters with unfamiliar men, and similar situations (Kong & Zhu, 2021). They often adopt risk-reduction strategies such as avoiding solo travel at night, excluding remote scenic sites, limiting interactions with men, selecting women-only accommodation, and joining women-only tour groups (Ranjitha & Mathew, 2023). According to Wilson and Little (2008), the security risks associated with women's travel arise not only from actual conditions but also from cultural narratives that intensify perceptions of women's vulnerability, requiring women to conduct layered safety assessments before acting. Media reports on female disappearances and travel accidents have further intensified the psychological barriers surrounding women's travel behaviour (Khan et al., 2017). These fear-based narratives often function as invisible obstacles to women's solo travel.

However, women's strategic practices in risk response also constitute an important dimension of their subjectivity. Pritchard and Morgan (2007) found that women do not passively endure safety restrictions; rather, they develop creative strategies that enable them to retain agency in environments that remain partially unsafe. Chinese female travellers exhibit similar patterns, such as tracking routes with digital tools, maintaining real-time contact with relatives and friends through social media, and selecting highly rated accommodation. These strategies are not merely safety-oriented behaviours; they also represent practical means by which women

preserve their scope for action under structural constraints, reflecting their resilience, judgement, and pursuit of freedom in a risky society.

2.4.5 Digital media and the visibility of women's travel

The emergence of digital platforms has significantly transformed the practices and meanings of women's travel. Social media, short-form video platforms, and travel communities not only provide informational resources but also serve as important spaces for women to represent themselves, construct identities, and obtain emotional support (Larsen et al., 2007). The concept of the tourism gaze has been reinterpreted in the digital age. Women are no longer merely viewers; they are also audiences, content producers, and narrative subjects. This visibility has a dual effect. On the one hand, digital media has facilitated the empowerment of women's travel. Many studies indicate that women's travel content on social media presents a more active and independent female image, making travel a means of openly expressing autonomy and life choices (Abbas et al., 2024). Zhang et al. (2025) found that Chinese female backpackers form an emotional community through social media by sharing travel strategies, emotional experiences, and women's perspectives, thereby reducing loneliness and enhancing feelings of security. On the other hand, digital platforms also generate new aesthetic norms and consumption pressures, compelling female travellers to meet implicit expectations such as maintaining an exquisite appearance, taking photographs, and displaying happiness (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017). These norms may weaken the psychological function of travel itself and cause women to experience new forms of anxiety in the pursuit of external recognition. In addition, the platform economy has shaped a travel narrative centred on emotional labour. Women often construct selective narratives when presenting travel, emphasising the happy, relaxed, and beautiful aspects while concealing fatigue, fear, and failure (Ge & Gretzel, 2017). This reinforces society's expectations that women should appear positive, resilient, and beautiful, making women's travel a symbolic performance rather than a purely subjective experience. In conclusion, digital media is not only a supporting tool but also a new normative force in women's travel. It expands women's mobility, but it also subtly reshapes how they understand travel and how they understand themselves.

2.4.6 Research gaps and knowledge margins of Chinese female travellers

Although research on women's travel in China has increased significantly over the past decade, the existing literature exhibits a clear structural bias, resulting in a fragmented academic understanding of women's travel experiences. A large body of studies focuses on urban middle-class women, who typically have more stable incomes, higher educational attainment, and greater temporal autonomy, making them more likely to become the primary sample in academic and tourism market research (Zhang & Hitchcock, 2017; Liu et al., 2025). However, differences within Chinese female populations are substantial. Urban–rural disparities, class differences, variations in family structure, and occupational heterogeneity shape a highly unequal distribution of opportunities and constraints in women's travel behaviour (Zeng & Go, 2013). Consequently, the visible research findings often fail to represent the lived realities of most women and instead reflect only the experiences of those who are able to travel, rather than those who merely contemplate travel.

First, this situation is closely related to class structure. Global tourism research has long noted that travel is a form of consumption with strong class characteristics, and greater resources

facilitate entry into the travel market (Bianchi, 2018). In the Chinese context, class differences are more pronounced. Owing to low wage levels, an inadequate leave system, and substantial family responsibilities, most middle- and low-income women find it difficult to treat travel as a routine part of life, as urban white-collar women do (Cheng et al., 2013). At the same time, foreign female migrant workers and female factory workers were almost entirely absent from the study. According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics, women account for nearly 47% of China's urban and rural mobile population, yet their travel behaviour is rarely included in tourism research (Chan, 2021). Most of these women work in labour-intensive industries, where unstable leave arrangements and low salaries make cross-regional travel difficult to afford. Sociological research indicates that their bodies and time are highly regulated by employment relations, making travel as a leisure practice nearly unattainable (Chan & Sekden, 2017). Therefore, the existing literature largely represents the travel experiences of women with substantial economic resources and sufficient social capital, thereby producing a de facto class bias.

Geographical differences are the second important factor that has been overlooked. Tourism research generally focuses on female travellers in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and other megacities, while paying limited attention to the travel experiences of women in central and western provinces, underdeveloped regions, and ethnic areas (Zhao & Yu, 2020). However, Chinese women's travel opportunities are closely related to levels of regional development. Tao (2025) found that women in western China have substantially lower disposable income than those in eastern China, and their travel frequency is significantly lower. In addition, the family structures, cultural norms, and gender expectations faced by women in ethnic areas differ markedly from those of Han urban women, yet few studies have examined their travel decisions and constraints in depth (Dai & Sarkar, 2019). This gap has fostered the mistaken assumption that travel experiences are universal, when in fact they are strongly shaped by geographic and cultural contexts.

The third blind spot in knowledge concerns differences in family structure. Existing research has focused on unmarried women, working women, and "empty nest young people" because these groups exhibit greater mobility, whereas married women, single mothers, and women with substantial care responsibilities have rarely been systematically examined. However, family structure is one of the most important factors shaping women's travel. Gendered care labour in Chinese families is highly unequal, and married women bear a significantly greater burden of housework and caregiving than men. This disparity has been confirmed in numerous studies (Zuo & Bian, 2001). Consequently, married women and women with children are substantially constrained in their travel opportunities and modes of travel. Many Chinese women must complete household tasks before travelling or compensate for unpaid housework after returning. This invisible pressure directly weakens the restorative effects of travel. Nevertheless, this form of travel behaviour, which is deeply embedded in family structure, remains largely neglected in the existing travel literature.

In addition, a major gap in research on female travellers in China is the limited attention to non-travellers. Studies in tourism sociology have repeatedly noted that focusing exclusively on actual travellers can create a mismatch between the research object and the conclusion, because many travel decisions are shaped not by preference but by structural constraints (Hall, 2010). In China, many women want to travel but cannot do so because of family obligations, gender norms, economic pressure, or social judgment. Their involuntary absence

can reveal how gender order constrains behaviour at the level of everyday practice. However, research on Chinese women's "blocked desire to travel" remains scarce, making it difficult to fully understand the structural inequality underlying travel behaviour.

In addition to structural gaps, there are theoretical limitations in the study of women's travel in China. At present, most studies adopt a psychological perspective and focus on the short-term effects of travel on emotional recovery, self-esteem, and happiness enhancement (Myers, 2010); however, they overlook the deeper significance of travel in relation to social structure, gender systems, and family relations. By contrast, Western women's studies have incorporated travel into theoretical frameworks such as gendered power relations, embodied politics, and identity negotiation (Aitchison, 2001). Chinese tourism research has not yet established a comparable gender-sensitive theoretical framework. Researchers often regard women as consumer groups rather than as agents situated within social structures. Consequently, complex social phenomena such as invisible labour, safety assessment, and negotiation of family responsibilities in women's travel are widely overlooked.

Similarly, the absence of longitudinal research remains a significant problem. Although a substantial body of literature documents women's emotional changes and the acquisition of new skills during travel, little research examines whether the recording of travel experiences has a lasting effect on later life. For example, does travel enhance women's bargaining power within the family? Does it alter career plans or perceptions of marriage and education? Does it promote long-term well-being? These key issues have not received adequate attention, and sociological and psychological studies indicate that only longitudinal tracking can reveal the deeper effects of travel on the trajectory of individual lives (Chen & Petrick, 2013).

Finally, the issue of the digital divide in the existing research has not been fully developed. As social media becomes the main channel for obtaining travel information, research on how women construct the meaning of travel on digital platforms, how they are shaped by platform norms, and how groups with low digital literacy are excluded from travel narratives remains limited (Duffy & Wissinger, 2017). Digital visibility may empower women at the surface level, but it may also widen class disparities and reinforce the marginalisation of certain groups. The tourism literature has not systematically examined platform bias in women's travel experiences in the digital era.

In summary, substantial gaps remain in the study of women's travel in China. Dimensions such as class, geography, family structure, the digital divide, and long-term effects collectively define important knowledge boundaries in contemporary tourism research. To understand the diversity of Chinese female travellers and their broader social significance in future research, scholars must address these structural blind spots, incorporate previously overlooked groups into analysis, and systematically examine travel within the framework of gender transformation in China.

2.5 Family and Gender Roles

2.5.1 The historical roots and contemporary continuation of the gender division of labour in the family

Chinese society's family structure is profoundly shaped by Confucian culture. At its core are hierarchical order and a gendered division of labour centred on patriarchy. This division of

labour not only structures labour relations and power relations within the family but also shapes women's principal sphere of development in terms of life trajectories, agency, and self-consciousness. The Confucian family system emphasises distinctions between the inner and outer spheres. Men are regarded as the family's public representatives and economic providers, whereas women are assigned domestic tasks, emotional labour, and intergenerational care (Ebrey, 1993). This historical assumption has not disappeared with modernisation; instead, it has been continually reproduced through institutions, culture, and everyday life, such that Chinese women's family roles continue to entail intensive caregiving obligations and moral responsibilities.

Contemporary research indicates that, although Chinese women's participation in education and employment has increased significantly, the gender division of labour within the family has not changed correspondingly (Xu, 2021). The redistribution of domestic labour remains highly gendered, especially during marriage and childbearing, which imposes a pronounced maternal penalty: after giving birth, women encounter structural constraints on career advancement, income growth, and mobility (Budig & England, 2001; Zhang & Hannum, 2015). In the Chinese context, this penalty is more pronounced because marriage itself is often construed as a structure of responsibility for women. Society and families generally expect women to assume greater caregiving responsibilities after marriage, including childcare, elder care, and emotional management within the family (Ji et al., 2017). Even when women achieve relative success in the workplace, their family roles are often prioritised, producing the common condition of a double burden. Changes in population policy have further intensified this gendered pressure within the family. Research shows that, after the implementation of the universal two-child and three-child policies, women's family burden has not been alleviated; rather, it has been strengthened by the "reproductive responsibility" promoted by fertility policy (Zeng & Hesketh, 2016; Du & King, 2025). As a result, many women face greater pressure to parent and educate children in addition to fulfilling occupational duties, while men's participation in fertility decision-making has not increased correspondingly (Yu & Liu, 2021). Research in labour economics indicates that the decline in Chinese women's labour force participation due to family responsibilities has intensified in recent years, particularly after the implementation of the two-child policy. More women have left the workforce or shifted to flexible employment to undertake family caregiving tasks (Cook & Dong, 2011; Wang et al., 2025). This phenomenon indicates that, although Chinese society is undergoing rapid economic modernisation, family structure remains highly traditional and often compels women to navigate the dual pressures of modernisation opportunities and traditional gender norms.

This family-based division of labour model not only affects women's career trajectories but also severely constrains how they allocate their time. Tourism research has long shown that women have far less discretionary time than men, and that their time is often fragmented by family responsibilities (Mattingly & Bianchi, 2003). In the Chinese context, this disparity is even more pronounced. Zhang et al. (2024) reported that Chinese women spend, on average, two to three times as much time on housework each day as men do, and that higher levels of education and stronger economic status are associated with a more substantial reduction in women's family care burden. This pattern contrasts with the narrowing of the household division gap observed in Europe and the United States (Hook, 2010). Family structure has a decisive effect on women's mobility, making travel not only a leisure activity for many

Chinese women, but also an exceptional practice that requires them to negotiate substantial family obligations.

Gendered power relations within the family constitute an important dimension for understanding women's travel restrictions. Research indicates that Chinese men generally hold greater family decision-making power, including economic control and authority over major decisions, whereas women's decision-making power often depends on their economic contributions and the quality of family relationships (Xu & Lai, 2004). Consequently, whether women can travel, for how long, and to where, is often decided through intra-family consultation in which male views may take precedence, rather than through full autonomy. Lee & Morrish (2012) found that even highly educated and high-income women may be constrained by family members' attitudes and may fear being perceived as neglecting their families, thereby suppressing their travel needs.

In addition, family culture continues to play a strong role in moral discipline. The differential pattern theory proposed by Fei and Zheng (1992) indicates that interpersonal relationships in Chinese society are structured by a strong ethical order, and women's behaviour is more likely to be subjected to moral evaluation. In this framework, women's family roles are regarded as central to their moral worth, so travel is often viewed by family members as a form of leisure rather than a legitimate activity, especially when children or older adults require care. This form of cultural discipline strengthens women's internalised sense of responsibility, leading some women to forgo travel because of moral pressure, even when they have the financial means and physical capacity to do so. More importantly, the gendered constraints of the family structure are reflected not only in whether women can travel, but also in how travel experiences are interpreted. Research indicates that Chinese women often need to rationalise their behaviour after travelling, presenting travel as an opportunity for learning, knowledge acquisition, and emotional regulation in order to better fulfil family responsibilities and avoid conflict (Lai, 2024). This suggests that women's travel lacks legitimacy within the family context, and women must reframe its meaning to preserve family stability.

Generally speaking, gender hierarchy in Chinese families not only exhibits the historical continuity of traditional culture but is also deeply embedded in contemporary institutions, the economic structure, and population policy, thereby making women's travel a form of action constrained by multiple structural forces. Women's travel behaviour cannot be understood as a simple consumer choice; rather, it should be regarded as a social process through which women seek personal space, autonomy over time, and emotional recuperation within the patriarchal family system. It is precisely this dual constraint of family and social structure that gives research on Chinese women's travel distinct sociological and gender-studies value.

2.5.2 Restrictions on gender expectations and women's subjectivity in the current marriage system

Although China's modern marriage system emphasises legal equality between men and women, it continues to reproduce a profound patriarchal structure in practice, making marriage one of the core institutional arrangements shaping women's agency, leisure time, and self-development trajectories. A substantial body of research has shown that, in contemporary China, marriage is not only a private relationship but also a social institution that incorporates cultural expectations, economic exchange structures, intergenerational

obligations, and gender-role scripts (Davis & Harrell, 1993; Yan, 2003). This institutionalised character makes marriage one of the most powerful normative mechanisms in the process of women's socialisation, and it profoundly affects whether women can travel, when they travel, how they travel, and the psychological meanings they attach to travel.

The contemporary marriage system continues to reproduce a binary gender order that positions men as economic providers and women as caregivers. Despite high female labour force participation in urban areas, the postmarital division of labour has not been substantially altered by women's increased economic contributions. Research indicates that the burden of unpaid domestic labour remains heavier for married women than for men, and this pattern persists even when women's earnings exceed those of their husbands (Hu, 2018; Hook, 2010). Ji et al. (2017) show that, in Chinese families, expectations of the "good wife" and "good mother" remain strongly emphasised. Women's fulfilment of family roles is often treated as a key criterion for evaluating their social value, whereas men are subject to less stringent moral scrutiny. Consequently, married women face greater constraints on mobility. Travel can easily be interpreted as a neglect of family responsibilities, thereby imposing higher psychological costs on them. The economic structure of marriage has further entrenched this unequal relationship. Research shows that the high-cost structure of China's marriage market includes real estate purchases, dowries, wedding expenses, and related expenditures. This renders marriage a system characterised by a high degree of economic exchange, thereby reinforcing asymmetric obligations in gender roles (Zhang, 2023; Wan, 2024). Men often bear financial responsibilities, whereas women are assigned emotional and caregiving responsibilities. As housing prices rise and consumerist wedding culture develops, the economisation of marriage becomes increasingly pronounced (Zhao & Wang, 2023).

Under such a structure, women are more likely to be assigned care work within the family, whereas men gain greater decision-making authority through economic contribution, further weakening women's autonomy in travel. Family life cycle research also indicates that when women enter marriage and parenthood, their temporal organisation changes fundamentally. Hochschild (2012) argued that married women are generally in a second shift, meaning that they must continue domestic labour after completing paid work, whereas men are less likely to assume this responsibility. In China, this phenomenon is more pronounced because of traditional family norms. For example, Yu & Liu (2021) found that after the two-child policy, women's investment in parenting labour increased significantly, whereas men's investment did not increase proportionately. This not only reduces women's travel time but also constrains their travel opportunities, making travel a luxury and a temporal privilege. Fischlmayr & Kollinger-Santer (2014) stated that even when women travel successfully, they often must make extensive family arrangements in advance, such as preparing children's study plans, completing household chores, and arranging elder care. This form of pre-travel labour further intensifies women's burden.

In addition, the marriage system is subject to strong social scrutiny, which places women under pressure from relatives, neighbours, and even online public opinion. In Confucian culture, married women are regarded as the moral centre of the family, so their conduct is commonly evaluated within this ethical framework (Fei & Zheng, 1992). Many Chinese women interviewed stated that travelling alone is often judged by relatives as incompatible with women's morality or as excessively individualistic, especially when travel is not framed as childcare or family outings. Such moral criticism is even more pronounced. Davis-

Friedman (2019) also noted that China's kinship network exerts a strong normative influence, particularly on women's behaviour. This norm often takes the form of soft discipline, such as concern, reminders, and moral advice, yet it remains restrictive in practice. Under this form of social discipline, women must present travel in more acceptable terms. Many married women interpret travelling as related to work, accompanying children for educational experiences, or relieving stress in order to care for their families more effectively, thereby reducing negative comment from the outside world. This indicates that women's travel lacks symbolic legitimacy within the marriage system and must be rationalised through narratives that serve the family. It also reveals how deeply gender norms are embedded in the marriage system, making it difficult for women to justify travel on the basis of purely personal needs.

The marriage system has a similarly far-reaching impact on women's psychology. Research shows that the overlap of marital responsibility and gender norms makes women more prone to emotional guilt, self-doubt, and compensatory behaviour when making travel choices (Lei, 2023). Psychological research indicates that women's emotionally managing role within the family requires them to consider the emotional reactions of family members, thereby prioritizing others' feelings over their own needs in travel decisions (Erickson, 2005). As a result, travel becomes not only a physical act, but also a negotiation marked by psychological burden. Women often experience intense internal conflict about whether they should leave home. At the same time, the marriage system is far more tolerant of male behaviour than female behaviour. Research shows that Chinese men who travel away from home because of work pressure, social activities, or leisure interests are more likely to receive social legitimacy, whereas women are often subject to moral scrutiny if they travel for similar reasons (Kwek & Lee, 2010). This gender-based double standard reflects the deep structural inequality embedded in the marriage system: men are more permitted to pursue personal space, while women are expected to devote their time and emotions to family service.

It should be emphasised that China's marriage system is not static but has undergone gradual change under the influence of modernisation. With the expansion of education, the improvement of women's economic independence, and the smaller size of urban family structures, some women have gained greater mobility, and travel has gradually become a means through which they can seek individual space (Myers, 2010). However, this change is strongly shaped by class and regional differences, and it is concentrated mainly among middle-class women in major cities, whereas the vast majority of women remain deeply constrained by traditional marriage norms.

In summary, China's modern marriage system has jointly imposed constraints on women's subjectivity at both structural and cultural levels, making women's travel not only a leisure activity, but also a complex practice that requires continual negotiation among economic, moral, emotional, and familial expectations. The marriage system itself has become an important structural context for women's travel experiences. It continues to shape women's limits of movement in terms of time resources, freedom of mobility, and emotional legitimacy, which also explains why women's travel is still often regarded as exceptional and abnormal in Chinese society.

2.5.3 Invisible mechanism of intergenerational care structure and gender-based emotional labour

In China's family system, intergenerational care is not only an important mechanism for maintaining family functioning, but also a core institutional force in the construction of women's gender roles. Although modernisation and the expansion of education continue to reshape family structures, cultural expectations that women serve as the primary caregivers have not significantly weakened. Rather, they have taken a more complex form through the combined influence of state policies, intergenerational ethics, and demographic change. Researchers generally point out that women's responsibilities within the care system, including childcare, elder care, kinship maintenance, and the management of emotional conflict within the family, have not reduced their labour intensity or psychological burden in contemporary society; instead, they have been further intensified by population ageing and adjustments to fertility policy (Silver Stein & Giarrusso, 2010). China's family system exhibits clear vertical tightness and horizontal looseness in its structural characteristics (Yan, 2021). That is, intergenerational relationships are highly embedded, whereas spousal and sibling relationships are relatively weak. This means that, in actual family functioning, highly dependent arrangements are formed between elders and children, and within this structure, women naturally become the central link in the intergenerational care chain. A substantial body of sociological research shows that, in the distribution of care responsibilities, women not only perform physical labour but also undertake the emotional labour required to sustain family harmony, including mediating conflict, maintaining intimacy, and coordinating the needs of family members (Erickson, 2005). In the Chinese context, this form of emotional labour is institutionalised through the Confucian ideal of women as gentle, virtuous, and understanding, such that the work performed by women is regarded as a family vocation rather than labour.

Against the backdrop of population ageing, the gendered effects of women's caregiving burden are increasingly evident. In China, the population aged 65 years and older reached 15.4% in 2023, and the country is expected to enter a severely aged society by 2035 (Peneva, 2025). In East Asian cultures, the responsibility for supporting older parents is formally assigned to sons, yet most day-to-day care work is performed by daughters-in-law or daughters (Silverstein et al., 2006). In China, filial piety, as a deeply rooted cultural norm, often leads women to be expected to care for their parents or in-laws when they are ill, even when they are in formal employment (Whyte & Ikels, 2004). This norm not only reduces women's available time but also exerts moral pressure, making it difficult for them to decline caregiving demands.

In parenting, the responsibilities borne by Chinese women remain strongly gendered. Although rising educational attainment and women's growing economic independence have gradually altered the division of labour in family childcare, mothers are still regarded by society as the primary caregivers. The study indicates that mothers invest substantially more than fathers in children's education, health management, and emotional regulation (Du & Dong, 2013). Following the implementation of the double reduction policy, childcare costs did not decline but instead increased, and mothers became further embedded in the education competition system, serving as the primary implementers and coordinators (Zhang, 2025). Consequently, women's parenting labour is not only temporal labour but also an

accumulation of emotional and cognitive labour, and they are compelled to assume the role of educational managers.

In such an intergenerational care structure, women often lose discretionary time, and time itself becomes a structural inequality. Vickery's (1977) theory of time poverty argues that the irreplaceable and inflexible nature of care labour makes it difficult for individuals to withdraw from such work, thereby limiting opportunities for self-development. Bittman and Wajcman (2000) found that women's uninterrupted time is severely compressed when they undertake unpaid labour, making it difficult to arrange activities that require sustained concentration, such as further study, entrepreneurship, or long-distance travel. In China, this problem is more pronounced because of the three-generation family structure and the high intensity of parental involvement. Even when women have economic resources, they are often constrained by intergenerational responsibilities, so travel must proceed through complex steps such as advance planning, transfer of responsibilities, and emotional compensation.

In addition, the intergenerational care structure not only shapes women's behavioural choices but also profoundly influences their subjective understanding of what it means to be a mother, wife, or daughter-in-law. Sociological research shows that women often internalise caregiving responsibilities as an important source of self-worth, which creates contradictory emotions while they perform care labour. Care not only constitutes the basis of their identity, but caregiving responsibilities also constrain their individual aspirations (Miller, 2005). In the Chinese context, this internalisation is even more pronounced. Hanser & Zhang (2025) noted that many women adopt a strong moral self when assuming caregiving responsibilities, regard care as something they ought to do, and remain unwilling to express dissatisfaction even when the physical and psychological burden is severe. When women attempt to temporarily step outside the caregiving structure, such as by travelling alone, they often experience pronounced guilt and unease, indicating that structural responsibility has become deeply embedded in their psychological script.

At the same time, China's distinctive urban-rural structure, household registration system, and intergenerational mutual support system have further reinforced this gendered care regime. Research shows that, with the migration of rural labourers, a cross-regional care chain has emerged between the care needs of urban families and the care resources of rural older adults, and women often serve as the primary coordinators (Jacka & Sargeson, 2011). They are expected not only to care for their parents but also to coordinate with their in-laws in caring for their grandchildren and to manage conflicts within spousal and extended family relationships, placing them under multiple and competing obligations. This structure not only intensifies the complexity of women's lives but also constrains their scope of action.

At a deeper level, emotional labour exhibits pronounced gendered characteristics within the Chinese family structure. Erickson (2005) argued that women's emotional labour is not merely an extension of housework, but a central task in sustaining family relationships, positioning them as coordinators and conciliators within the household. Chinese family face culture requires women to assume responsibility for preserving kinship ties and avoiding conflict; consequently, they must invest emotional labour in maintaining harmony when intergenerational relations become strained (Zhai, 2018). Therefore, when women wish to travel or pursue personal development, they often must first address the emotional responses

of family members, including elders' concerns, husbands' lack of understanding, and children's dependence. As a result, travel becomes a process that requires extensive emotional negotiation rather than a simple behavioural choice.

In China, the intergenerational care system and gendered emotional labour constitute a deeply embedded cultural and structural force that systematically constrains women's time, agency, and subjectivity. The distribution of care responsibilities not only reflects gender inequality but also generates specific emotions and moral norms, thereby assigning women an indispensable role within the family. Travel is particularly significant in this structural context. It requires women not only to temporarily suspend caregiving labour but also to negotiate internalised obligations and external social norms. Therefore, an understanding of the intergenerational care structure and emotional labour mechanism provides a critical structural framework for studying women's travel experiences and also explains why women face greater barriers to physical and spiritual mobility within the Chinese family system.

2.5.4 Institutionalised reproduction of emotional discipline and gendered daily ethics

To understand the subjective dilemmas of contemporary Chinese women, emotional discipline, as a deep-seated social mechanism, is often more formative than explicit institutional constraints. A substantial body of feminist and sociological research shows that gender order in modern society is maintained not only through laws and institutions, but also through emotional norms, moral expectations, and everyday interactional practices that are continuously produced and internalised by individuals (Hochschild, 1983; Gilligan, 1982; Illouz, 2007). In the Chinese context, this form of emotional discipline exhibits more pronounced cultural specificity. It is embedded in Confucian ethics, family structures, and the social construction of "good women" in contemporary society, and it stabilises women's roles through intangible emotional demands. It is also an important source of structural constraint on Chinese women's social mobility, family negotiations, career development, and self-realisation.

First, emotional discipline in Chinese society is deeply shaped by Confucian culture. Confucian ethics emphasize the emotional virtues of tolerance, generosity, and harmony, and they impose particularly high expectations for women's emotional regulation, including meekness, restraint, patience, and the capacity to sustain interpersonal relationships (Rosenlee, 2023). In traditional Confucian texts such as the Liji (Book of Rites) and Ban Zhao's Nüjie (Admonitions for Women), femininity is constructed as a moral resource essential to the maintenance of social order (Rosenlee, 2012; Mann, 1997). Modern gender culture further naturalizes these emotional norms as basic requirements of women's character through education, family socialization, and media narratives, transforming them from gendered traits into moral obligations (Louie, 2011). Consequently, even when Chinese women achieve economic independence, their emotional conduct remains subject to evaluation according to whether they are sufficiently considerate, appropriately restrained, and attentive to family interests.

Hochschild (1983)'s classic account of emotional labour proposes that women assume additional emotional management responsibilities in both the family and the workplace, not only to perform labour but also to regulate others' emotions and maintain interpersonal harmony. In China, this form of labour has a deeper ethical dimension. The concept of

emotional morality proposed by Yan (2021) shows that Chinese women's emotional obligations are not merely practical labour, but also an integral component of the moral self. In other words, women are understood as subjects who must continuously maintain the emotional stability of family members, rather than as individuals with the right to express their own emotions.

This form of emotional discipline is particularly prominent in marriage. Research shows that Chinese women are often expected to serve as emotional caretakers, mediate conflicts, and pacify tense situations, whereas men's emotions are granted greater legitimacy (Jankowiak, 1992). When women express dissatisfaction, they often face accusations such as "pretentious", "ignorant", and "too sensitive", which gradually produce a pattern of self-scrutiny and emotional suppression. This attenuation of self-expression not only affects women's mental health but also weakens their capacity to reflect on and resist structures of inequality.

Furthermore, this form of emotional discipline is reinforced through media narratives and public discourse. Illouz (2012) noted that, following the convergence of modern emotional culture and consumerism, emotional templates of the ideal woman continue to circulate. In China, marriage and dating programmes, film and television productions, and social media platforms have shaped gendered expectations of ideal partners, including being sensible, gentle, adept at perspective-taking, and attentive to the broader situation (Evans, 2010). These expectations romanticise women’s emotional labour, presenting it as an individual trait rather than a socially imposed responsibility. By contrast, men’s deficiencies in emotional management are often tolerated, which renders the gendered division of emotional labour natural and legitimate.

In addition, emotional discipline is transmitted and reproduced through intergenerational relationships. In many Chinese families, mothers assume extensive emotional labour for their children, including patience in helping with homework, managing adolescent emotions, and coordinating relationships with grandparents, and so on (Evans, 2010). Women’s experiences of emotional labour in intimate relationships are often transferred into maternal roles, producing an intergenerational continuity. Jacka (2018) noted that many women in both rural and urban China actively subordinate their own needs to sustain family functioning when they take on caregiving responsibilities. They often interpret this emotional contribution as an expression of maternal love or family duty. Because this emotional norm is treated as natural rather than socially constructed, it is difficult to question or contest.

It is worth noting that this form of emotional discipline has taken a new shape in recent years amid economic transformation and intensified career competition. As the middle class expands, women are expected to display moderately enterprising, yet not overly assertive, personality traits in the workplace, that is, to act independently without exerting pressure on men (Grigoryan, 2017). This dual emotional demand places women under the simultaneous discipline of professional competence and gender expectations. Workplace leadership often requires women to demonstrate emotional stability, collegial care, and communication skills; however, these capacities remain, in essence, gendered forms of emotional labour to which women are culturally assigned. They are nevertheless not recognised as labour value and are not equally reflected in promotion criteria.

At a deeper level, emotional discipline has also become an implicit mechanism for restricting women's mobility. The study found that even when women have the material capacity to travel, their emotional responsibilities lead them to consider family members' feelings, whether their children are dependent on them, whether their husbands object, and whether their parents are worried before acting. This sense of responsibility makes it difficult for women to regard travel as a purely personal choice, requiring complex emotional evaluation and moral negotiation. By contrast, men have a significantly greater degree of mobility because they are positioned as caregivers, or as those who are not expected to bear emotional responsibility within the family's emotional structure. Illouz (2007) argued that emotional culture not only regulates individuals but also shapes their frameworks for action, prompting them to comply with social structures unconsciously. In the Chinese context, women's emotional discipline not only regulates their expression, but also directly affects their imaginative possibilities for action. In other words, women are not only unable to travel because of external constraints but often believe that they should not travel because of internalised emotional obligations. This form of self-discipline renders structural inequality more concealed and constrains the development of women's subjectivity.

In sum, China's emotional discipline mechanism operates through overlapping family structures, cultural norms, social expectations, and public discourse, and continues to shape women's emotional expression, moral identity, and everyday behaviour. In daily life, women continually perform emotional labour and assume responsibility for the psychological stability of family members, thereby losing, often invisibly, their autonomy over time and action. More importantly, this form of discipline is often presented as a consequence of women's own character rather than as a gendered structural arrangement, through the moralisation of traits such as gentleness, reasonableness, devotion, and thoughtfulness. Under this emotional discipline system, women's mobility is constrained, and their subjective development is impeded, thereby reproducing gender inequality embedded in deep-seated cultural norms.

2.5.5 Excessive moralisation of women's responsibilities

In contemporary Chinese social structures, intergenerational pressure and filial-piety ethics constitute an important theoretical basis for understanding the constraints on women's subjectivity. Unlike Western societies, which emphasise individualism, intergenerational independence, and the autonomous choices of adult children, Chinese society has developed a family-relational system centred on intergenerational reciprocity and moral obligations under the long-term influence of collectivism and Confucian ethical traditions (Whyte, 2020; Yan, 2021). Within this system, women are often positioned at the centre of an intergenerational network of obligations. They are expected to sustain the emotional and material circulation among family members and to bear the primary responsibility for maintaining the family's ethical order. This responsibility is not merely a behavioural expectation, but a deeply moralised role configuration that places women at the centre of the burden of obligations in intergenerational relationships.

First, from a cultural perspective, filial piety, as one of the most fundamental ethical principles in Chinese society, has historically functioned as a compulsory and morally disciplinary norm. Its core not only requires children to respect their parents, but also emphasizes comprehensive commitment to material, emotional, and social obligations

(Whyte & Ikels, 2004). However, contemporary research generally indicates that filial piety exhibits marked gender differences in Chinese society, such that women's filial obligations are often heavier than men's, particularly in family care and emotional support (Chen & Wu, 2017; Zhan & Montgomery, 2003). Even when men bear the family's financial expenses, women still perform most filial practices, including caring for ill parents, accompanying older adults, and managing conflicts in family relationships. These practices further reinforce women's identity as the primary agents of filial piety within the family.

Second, intergenerational pressure has intensified in contemporary Chinese society because of demographic change. As China enters a deeply ageing society, the family structure increasingly exhibits the four-two-one pattern, with four elderly people, two parents, and one child. Coupled with the one-child policy, many families rely on a single adult child to bear the full burden of support (Jiang & Sánchez-Baarricarte, 2011). Although legal maintenance obligations are jointly borne by children, in practice this responsibility is often divided by gender within marriage: women provide emotional care and perform caregiving tasks, whereas men assume financial responsibilities (Antonucci et al., 2011). This division not only perpetuates historical gender hierarchies but also places women under bilateral filial piety pressure in married families, as they are expected to care for their own parents and fulfil obligations to their in-laws (Xu & Xia, 2014).

A more complex issue is that filial piety has exhibited a strongly moralised tendency in the contemporary revival of Chinese society. Qiao et al. (2024) argued that, in the context of the expansion of the market economy and the weakening of family ethics, national policies and media narratives have reemphasised the importance of filial piety as a significant resource for social governance and moral reconstruction. However, this revival of filial piety is also gender biased. Society often assumes that women are more suited to filial obligations because they are perceived as more delicate, more patient, and more morally responsible. The study found that women's filial piety is often treated as duty and nature, whereas men's care for older adults is regarded as an additional moral advantage (Zhan & Montgomery, 2003). This asymmetrical structure of recognition makes it more difficult for women to question their obligations.

It is important to further examine how the gendered distribution of filial piety ethics and intergenerational pressure is reflected not only at the behavioural level, but also in the more profound shaping of women's subjectivity. According to Yu et al. (2023), when women are accustomed to placing others' needs before their own, their subjectivity often takes the form of "other-centredness," making it difficult to develop clear personal aspirations and a sense of life direction. This means that intergenerational ethics not only constrain women's mobility, but also limit their capacity to imagine the future, thereby making it difficult for them to regard travel or self-development as a legitimate life investment.

Finally, intergenerational pressure has taken a new form among the contemporary urban middle class, namely the rise of emotional filial piety and experiential filial piety. With the growth of consumerism, many families have begun to use travel as a means of sustaining family affection, and this pattern remains largely shaped by women, who are often responsible for itinerary planning, attending to the emotional needs of elderly parents, and maintaining the family atmosphere, among other tasks (Lehto et al., 2012). Therefore, even when travel is incorporated into family life, women still find it difficult to attain genuine

freedom or express subjectivity through it. Travel has become an extension of family care rather than a space for subjectivity.

In summary, the intergenerational pressure and filial piety ethics experienced by Chinese women are not merely cultural inheritances, but also the result of the combined influence of contemporary social structures, population policy, and economic transformation. Within this structural context, women are assigned excessive moral responsibility, and their time, emotions, and subjectivity are reshaped by intergenerational obligations, thereby constituting a systematic constraint on their mobility and life choices. Understanding this structure is of significant theoretical importance for explaining why modern Chinese women find it difficult to achieve full autonomy through travel.

2.6 The impact of travel on family relationships and gender roles

2.6.1 Family rights structure and gender inequality in tourism decision-making

In the family research and gender sociology literature, the family is regarded as the core institutional site for the reproduction of gender order, and tourism decision-making is one of the most visible contexts in which this power structure is expressed. Tourism is not only a consumption activity, but also a comprehensive process of consultation regarding resource allocation, scheduling, and social recognition. Therefore, gendered power differences within the family are reflected, and may even be intensified, in tourism decision-making (Henderson & Allen, 1991). In societies with a strong patriarchal structure, men usually retain final authority over the economic budget, destination selection, and travel timing, whereas women's views are often treated as supplementary opinions or as soft factors associated with family care responsibilities (Khan, 2011). In Chinese families in particular, traditional power relations, gender-based divisions of labour, and disparities in economic status have jointly shaped the tourism decision-making process, making it a typical gendered practice dominated by men and implemented by women. This pattern of male decision-making and female implementation reproduces gender inequality within the family, rendering tourism an extension rather than a departure from the gender division of labour. A substantial body of empirical research has demonstrated that tourism decision-making power exhibits a persistent gender bias in heterosexual marriages and families. According to Decrop (2006), although families may claim to make decisions collectively, the actual decision maker is often male, because men are culturally and institutionally recognised as having greater economic authority and rational judgement.

It is important to note that the executive role assigned to women in travel decision-making does not necessarily indicate increased power. On the contrary, executive tasks usually involve intangible and consumptive labour, which is closer to Hochschild's (2012) concept of the second shift, namely, that women continue to perform substantial domestic labour outside the workplace, and the detailed work involved in tourism planning constitutes an extension of this second shift into leisure activities. Similar findings in the travel literature indicate that women's workload before, during, and after travel is significantly greater than men's, including packing, caring for children, and coordinating the needs of family members (Myers & Moncrief, 1978). These tasks are often naturalised as women's responsibilities within

family power structures, thereby further reducing women's bargaining power in travel decisions.

What warrants particular attention in Chinese families is the consolidation of decision-making power under familism. Yan (2020) proposed that contemporary Chinese families exhibit a phenomenon of "power sinking" during economic transformation, that is, parents and male family members still occupy a central position in decisions concerning family resources. As an activity that requires both financial expenditure and time, tourism is more likely to be incorporated into male-dominated economic decision-making; although women are often regarded as executors of travel arrangements, they are not recognized as arbiters of whether travel is necessary, which makes it more difficult for women to formulate travel intentions driven by their own needs. In other words, women may plan travel for their families, but it is difficult for them to plan travel for themselves.

At the same time, research shows that when tourism decision-making involves risk, physical exertion, and unfamiliar environments, men's authority is further reinforced because socio-cultural norms position men as protectors and decision-makers, while placing women in the protected category (Seow & Brown, 2020). This protective patriarchal discourse not only restricts women's freedom of movement but also limits their ability to express personal travel preferences, thereby rendering them vulnerable in the decision-making process. Lacking economic authority, they find it difficult to transcend traditional gender expectations.

More importantly, the inequality in tourism decision-making power is highly symbolic. Bourdieu (2001) argued that the most concealed aspect of power differences is that they are perceived by society as natural, reasonable, or even necessary. Tourism research confirms that family members generally regard men's authority in travel decision-making as legitimate, whereas women's travel preferences are treated as emotional or incidental (Pritchard & Morgan, 2000). When women's preferences are not recognised as legitimate bargaining resources in power negotiations, they are less able to secure a position in tourism decision-making. In addition, the gendered economic structure further intensifies this inequality. Although women's labour force participation rate in China is high, the wage gap, barriers to promotion, and career interruptions often reduce the perceived contribution of women to family resources, leaving them disadvantaged in the allocation of tourism budgets (Von Wahl, 2013, as cited in Cooked, 2011). Some studies even indicate that, even when women's income exceeds that of men, men still retain "symbolic economic power" in family travel decision-making, namely, the final authority to interpret family finances (Safilios-Rothschild, 1970, as cited in Blood and Wolfe, 1969). This structure remains highly persistent in contemporary Chinese middle-class families.

In summary, the family power structure profoundly shapes tourism decision-making, making tourism a clear reflection of gender inequality within the family. Men's dominant role in budget allocation, time use, and destination selection contrasts sharply with women's substantial investment in executive and caregiving labour. Although tourism appears to be a leisure activity, it is, in fact, an extension of family organisation and an externalised site of gender power relations. This analysis provides an important theoretical basis for understanding why women often struggle to achieve agency in travel contexts.

2.6.2 Family emotional interaction during travel

Tourism is generally regarded as an emotional practice that can enhance family cohesion and intimate interaction; however, research indicates that this cohesion effect varies significantly by gender, and tourism is not only a site of emotional strengthening but also a locus of emotional conflict and the reproduction of gendered labour (Schänzel & Yeoman, 2015). When the rhythm and structure of daily life are temporarily disrupted, interactions among family members are compelled to reorganise, and this reorganisation often makes the gender inequalities embedded in everyday family life more visible. Accordingly, tourism has become an important lens for examining the relationship between the family's internal emotional structure and gendered power relations.

From a positive perspective, tourism can foster emotional cohesion. Nelson (2014) noted that the novel experiences shared during travel, the unfamiliar environment encountered together, and the increased frequency of interaction may strengthen emotional bonds among family members, making travel an important ritual for repairing relationships and rebuilding intimacy. Chinese research also emphasises that urban middle-class families attach particular importance to travel as a key means of parent-child education, marital relationship repair, and intergenerational connection (Wang et al., 2022). For families experiencing educational pressure, workplace stress, and intergenerational caregiving burdens, tourism provides a temporary space to escape structural pressures, shifting family interaction from functional to emotional. However, this emotional repair effect is not distributed evenly. Women often must invest substantially more emotional labour to maintain a harmonious travel atmosphere, attend to the feelings of family members, and manage conflict, and therefore do not benefit equally from the emotional gains.

When examining mothers' family travel experiences, Schänzel (2010) noted that women bear the implicit responsibility of maintaining a positive family atmosphere during travel, including soothing children's emotions, mediating marital conflict, and handling itinerary-related emergencies. This responsibility is not merely a practical task; it is also a gendered moral obligation. Mothers are expected to ensure that the trip proceeds smoothly, that family members remain satisfied, and that children are happy. As a result, women often experience significant emotional pressure while travelling. Their feelings are easily overlooked, and their own fatigue or emotional fluctuations may be interpreted as disrupting the travel atmosphere. This phenomenon is more pronounced in Chinese culture, where maternal duty is not only a caregiving role but also a moral expectation and a socially ascribed obligation for women (Liu, 2021).

More importantly, gender-based emotional labour in tourism has a reproductive effect. The term "reproduction" here refers to the tendency for gender divisions in tourism settings to reinforce, rather than weaken, gender order in everyday life. Myers & Moncrief (1978) noted that, even when women travel in an effort to escape domestic labour, they still carry most of the care work and emotional labour, making travel an extension of family life. This conclusion is particularly evident in the Chinese context, because hierarchical family structures, patriarchal ideology, and gendered divisions of responsibility make it difficult for women to break away from their established roles while travelling (Hu, 2018). For example, mothers are often expected to demonstrate comprehensive competence during parent-child travel: they must manage children's emotions, provide knowledge, ensure safety, meet their

husbands' needs, and organise the itinerary. This accumulation of multiple roles creates a double burden in tourism. Mothers often experience greater tension during travel than in daily life because unfamiliar environments require them to assume heightened care and risk-management responsibilities (Nguyen & Hsu, 2022). Therefore, travel does not necessarily produce subjectification or release but may instead compel women to assume greater family responsibilities.

In addition, the emotional dependence of family members intensifies during travel. Children may feel anxious because of environmental changes, husbands may experience emotional distress because of disrupted schedules, and the elderly may require additional care because of physical limitations; these emotional demands are often borne by women, forming a highly gendered chain of emotional labour (Zhu & Fan, 2018). Women must manage not only their own emotions, but also those of the entire family, in order to ensure that the trip proceeds smoothly. This form of labour has long been overlooked in tourism research, yet it is essential for understanding how gender inequality is reproduced in leisure settings. However, tourism does not simply reinforce gender inequality. Some studies indicate that, under certain conditions, tourism may also foster more equitable emotional interactions. In long-distance or cross-cultural travel, men may rely on women's abilities in social interaction, cultural understanding, and emotional regulation because of their limited experience in unfamiliar environments, producing a temporary reversal of roles (Gionet, 2023). Although this reversal is typically not sustainable over time, it can alter family members' perceptions of women's abilities and lay the foundation for future family negotiations.

2.6.3 Gender loosening and role re-negotiation in tourism

As a social space temporarily detached from the structure of daily life, the tourism environment offers a distinctive opportunity to reshape the distribution and interaction of gender roles within the family. Existing tourism research indicates that when daily routines are disrupted, the enactment of roles, division of tasks, and even the negotiation of power among family members during travel often become more flexible and may be reorganised relative to the role system established in family life (Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2020; Rojas-de Gracia & Alarcón-Urbistondo, 2016). The traditional theory of family sociology emphasises the stability of gender roles. Men are typically regarded as external decision-makers and protectors, whereas women play a central role in emotional support and family care (Connell, 2009). However, in tourist settings, especially when travelling in cross-cultural or unfamiliar environments, family members must renegotiate responsibilities and coordinate their actions in response to new decision-making demands, resource-allocation needs, and emergencies, thereby altering the actual gender division of labour. This change does not necessarily indicate gender equality, but rather a temporary relaxation of role structures that allows family members to experiment with behaviours and roles not usually enacted in the short term (Yi & Wu, 2020). In the early stages of family vacation planning, women often assume a more active role in information gathering and itinerary design, whereas men exert greater influence over booking decisions and budget confirmation (Mottlar & Quinn, 2004). This division of labour may be understood as an extension of the traditional division of labour in daily life; however, during travel, rapid information changes, increased environmental complexity, and the unpredictability of tasks such as security and navigation blur the role boundaries between men and women. When travelling in unfamiliar scenic and cultural settings, men are more likely to rely on women's sensitivity and adaptability in social

communication and service interactions because of limited language proficiency and cultural experience (Figueroa-Domecq, 2020).

This loosening of gender roles is reflected not only in behavioural tasks but also in the sharing of emotions and decision-making. Conflicts, unexpected situations, or pressures associated with coordinating resources during travel often necessitate more immediate consultation among family members (Rojas-de Gracia & Alarcón-Urbistondo, 2016). In these interactions, the family often temporarily adjusts the division of roles according to current needs rather than automatically reproducing the distribution patterns of daily family life. This temporary adjustment is also viewed as a flexible expression of gender relations within the family; that is, individuals can temporarily move beyond traditional gender role constraints under specific circumstances and participate in family tasks in different ways. Moreover, the loosening of gender roles in tourism is associated with the acquisition of resources and social capital. In reviewing gender and tourism research, Figueroa-Domecq (2020) noted that gender issues significantly affect multiple dimensions, including tourism decision-making, experience, and career participation. Women's capacities for communication, relationship management and coordination in tourism are often understood as forms of social capital, whereas men's advantages in safety, navigation and budget control are often treated as forms of practical capital. These two forms of capital may be distributed more evenly during travel, thereby facilitating temporary role renegotiation.

In the Chinese social context, the formation and maintenance of family gender roles are deeply embedded in Confucian ethics, family-based logic, and the long-standing gender-based division of labour. Consequently, unlike Western research, which emphasizes individualism and self-realisation, Chinese scholars, when analysing the impact of tourism on family relationships and gender roles, place greater emphasis on whether and how tourism prompts changes in role practice without directly challenging the existing family order. In recent years, as women's participation in tourism has increased substantially, several empirical studies based on Chinese samples have shown that tourism does not completely transform the family's gender structure, but it does create a gap between role loosening and renegotiation at the practical level.

First, at the level of family tourism decision-making and implementation, empirical research in China generally identifies a pattern of superficial co-decision-making and a clear division of labour by gender; however, this pattern may shift to some extent during the travel process. Liu et al. (2023), in a qualitative study of Chinese female backpackers and women participating in family tourism, found that although final decision-making power for family travel is often retained by men or elders, women frequently assume a more central role in implementing specific itineraries, responding to emergencies, and managing cross-cultural interactions. This role shift does not occur through an explicit transfer of power but rather emerges from the practical logic of who is better able to solve problems. The study further indicates that changes in women's roles in tourism are reflected more in their demonstrated agency than in a direct relaxation of the family power structure. Similar findings were also reported in observations of interactions within Chinese family tourism. When women participate in tourism activities as primary travellers, family members' perceptions of their competence, independence, and judgment in decision-making tend to change (Yu & Gu, 2022). Even in family-based tourism, this cognitive shift may extend to family interactions, giving women greater scope for participation in subsequent family affairs. However, the

study also emphasises that this change usually takes the form of consultative adjustment rather than a rejection of traditional gender roles (Yu & Gu, 2022). This suggests that, in Chinese cultural contexts, tourism-induced changes in gender roles are more likely to be gradual and relationally oriented.

From a broader perspective in family sociology, Chinese scholars generally argue that tourism provides a de-routinised setting for family interaction, temporarily removing family members from established temporal orders and role expectations. Ji et al. (2020), in their study of changes in family structure in China, noted that when family members are freed from the fixed cycle of daily work, care, and intergenerational responsibilities, they can more easily reassign family tasks in a short period. This observation is echoed in tourism research. In travel contexts, men participate more frequently in caregiving labour, while women participate more often in decision-making and coordination, thereby weakening the traditional gender division of labour at the practical level.

However, Chinese empirical research has also clearly indicated that this loosening of roles is highly situationally dependent. Many practices that appear to challenge gender norms are often confined to specific contexts. Once people return to institutionalised daily life, the original division of labour is quickly restored (Wang, 2022). This conclusion is also applicable to tourism research. Many studies have found that family members often interpret role adjustments during tourism as responses to exceptional circumstances and temporary assistance, rather than as long-term restructuring of the family division of labour. This suggests that, although tourism can relax role practice, it is insufficient on its own to destabilise entrenched gender norms. In summary, tourism does not directly dismantle the family gender order; rather, by reshaping action practices, revealing differences in capability, and creating a non-routine interactive space, it gradually loosens gender roles at the practical level. This loosening is manifested more in changes in role performance and adjustments in relational interaction than in an explicit reorganisation of the power structure. This finding provides an important empirical basis for understanding the social function of tourism in Chinese families and also establishes a solid empirical premise for subsequent research on how women can accumulate subjective experience in a non-confrontational cultural environment.

2.6.4 The extensibility of travel experience

In tourism and family gender research, a central issue that has not reached consensus is whether gender-role adjustments in tourism contexts constitute only short-lived situational exceptions or exert a sustained influence on the family gender order. The existing literature generally recognises that tourism, as a highly contextual social practice, can temporarily disrupt the fixed temporal structure and division of labour that characterise everyday life. However, scholars have long remained cautious, or even sceptical, about whether such changes persist after tourism ends. From the dominant perspective in family sociology and gender research, the family is understood as a highly institutionalised social unit, and the gender division of labour within it is often continuously reproduced through long-term cultural norms, emotional obligations, and economic structures (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Colt Rane, 2000). Even when women perform less housework during tourism, they often continue to undertake invisible labour, including emotional management, relationship

maintenance, and itinerary coordination, which research has repeatedly shown to be strongly gendered (Deem, 1996).

A substantial body of empirical studies in tourism research also supports this assessment of situational change. Although family members may attempt to interact differently from their everyday routines while travelling, these changes are often interpreted as part of the holiday context rather than as a challenge to ordinary life. Handel (2014) argued that tourism functions more as a regulatory mechanism for existing family relationships than as a force for structural transformation. However, as the research focus shifted from simple behaviour to cognition, emotion, and meaning, some scholars began to offer corrective views on fully contextualised judgements. This line of research holds that even when tourism does not produce long-term behavioural change, its effects on cognitive appraisal, emotional experience, and role interpretation may persist over a longer period. Travel can leave a lasting imprint on an individual's life through strong emotional arousal and memory formation. These imprints do not necessarily lead to immediate or observable behavioural changes, but they may shape individuals' understandings of themselves and others in later life (Prayag et al., 2013, Ryan & Zhang, 2024).

In family gender research, this delayed effect is often understood as a symbolic transformation. According to Pritchard and Morgan (2007), travel experiences may accumulate symbolic capital for women, thereby enabling them to participate more actively in consultation and to express their needs in subsequent family interactions. Although this form of capital does not directly disrupt family power structures, it may gradually alter family members' perceptions of the legitimacy of gender roles at the micro-interactional level. This perspective emphasises that the significance of tourism should not be assessed solely in terms of immediate behavioural change but should also be examined within longer life trajectories and relational networks.

In the Chinese context, this issue is particularly complex. On the one hand, the gender order within Chinese families is deeply shaped by Confucian ethics and family-centred logic, emphasising role responsibility, intergenerational obligations, and relational harmony, which makes overt role conflict or structural change relatively uncommon at the family level (Yan, 2016). On the other hand, as women's educational attainment and economic participation have increased, gender relations within families have undergone gradual adjustment. Against this background, Chinese scholars generally understand social change as "gradual restructuring" rather than abrupt transformation (Wang, 2022). A small number of studies based on Chinese samples have provided important evidence for understanding the potential long-term effects of tourism. Liu et al. (2023) noted that, although respondents did not clearly regard travel as a tool for changing family structure, the travel experience did shape their perceptions of self-efficacy, risk response, and independence. After returning to daily life, this cognitive shift often develops into a stronger sense of self-assertion, although it is typically expressed through consultation rather than confrontation (Liu et al., 2023). Research indicates that tourism does not produce a drastic change after a single experience; rather, it becomes gradually integrated into individuals' self-understanding through the accumulation of multiple experiences.

Overall, the existing literature presents a tense structure regarding whether tourism can bring about sustained changes in the gender order of the family. A substantial number of studies

emphasise the stability of the family system and the resilience of gender norms, arguing that most tourism-related changes are short-lived and reversible. At the same time, an increasing number of studies have begun to examine the potential effects of tourism at the cognitive, emotional, and symbolic levels, suggesting that these effects may gradually influence internal family negotiation through long-term accumulation. However, in the context of Chinese society, systematic empirical research on this extended impact remains limited, particularly studies that conduct longitudinal analysis from the perspective of female subjects in conjunction with family interaction and gender norms. In this sense, the relationship between tourism and the gender order of the family remains insufficiently explained. Existing research provides a solid foundation for understanding the situational effects of tourism, but the academic community still lacks a consistent and in-depth explanation of whether, and how, these effects are transformed into more enduring adjustments in gender relations within Chinese families. This unresolved issue leaves important theoretical space for further research to conduct a more detailed analysis from the perspective of women's experience and family interaction.

2.7 Maternal norms of Duty

In the context of Chinese society, motherhood is not only a family role but also a highly standardised set of moral and social norms with strong intergenerational transmission. A substantial body of sociological and gender studies indicates that Chinese women's self-awareness derives largely not from individualised self-exploration, but from the maternal framework of family ethics, intergenerational expectations, and social norms (Yan, 2016; Bedford & Yeh, 2019). This framework is continually reinforced through everyday practice, leading women to gradually internalise "becoming a good mother" as a central life goal during the course of growing up. In traditional Confucian ethics, the mother not only performs care and nurturing functions, but is also regarded as a key upholder of family moral order. As Fei Xiaotong pointed out, Chinese families are not centred on individuals but are organised around roles and relationships as their core (Fei, 1992). Within this structure, the maternal position is endowed with a high degree of moral legitimacy, and a woman's value is often measured by the extent of her contribution to the family. This mode of value evaluation has not disappeared in contemporary China; rather, it persists in a more implicit and affective form (Yu & Liu, 2021).

After entering modern society, Chinese women have not been freed from the pressures of motherhood despite increases in educational attainment and labour force participation. Instead, under the influence of the logic of intensive motherhood, they have faced more complex normative expectations. Hays (1996) proposed that intensive motherhood emphasises that mothers should invest substantial time, emotion, and material resources to maximise their children's developmental potential. This concept has spread widely across the world and is particularly prominent among the middle classes in Chinese cities. Empirical research by Chinese scholars shows that, as educational competition intensifies, anxieties about class mobility increase, and social risks become more salient, mothers are expected to serve as comprehensive childcare managers, responsible not only for care but also for educational planning, emotional regulation, and the prevention of future risks (Du et al., 2023). In practice, this maternal model has significantly intensified women's time pressure and psychological burden, while their own needs have long been subordinated to family responsibilities.

From a gender studies perspective, maternal norms are regarded as a key source of tension in the formation of female subjectivity. The maternal position grants women social recognition and legitimises identity, yet it also imposes a persistent constraint on the scope of women's actions. McRobbie (2009) noted that modern society has not abolished norms governing women; rather, it has transformed structural constraints into individual moral obligations through the discourse of "choice, responsibility, and love." Even in families in which women achieve a high degree of economic independence, mothers are still implicitly expected to assume primary responsibility for childcare and emotional labour (Song & Ji, 2020). When women seek space for self-development, leisure, or personal growth, they often confront moral judgement from family and society. This judgement does not always take the form of direct criticism; instead, it exerts pressure through the implicit standard of "what a good mother should do" (Chang, 2020).

Research based on Chinese samples indicates that women's reflection on maternal norms is often not directed towards a complete rejection of family responsibilities, but rather towards a renewed understanding of "how to become a mother." Wang (2022) noted that contemporary Chinese women are more inclined to adopt a gradual adjustment strategy between family and self, reallocating time and emotional resources through negotiation rather than confrontation. Some studies show that women may become more clearly aware of the legitimacy of their needs after briefly stepping outside their maternal role, but this awareness does not necessarily translate into a radical behavioural change (Yu & Liu, 2021). Instead, it is more likely to become an internal reference point that is repeatedly invoked in subsequent family negotiations. This process emphasises the accumulation of subjectivity rather than instantaneous transformation.

In summary, the existing literature shows that maternal duty is a normative system deeply embedded in family structure and intergenerational ethics in Chinese society, with a lasting influence on women's self-awareness and behavioural boundaries. Although modernization has expanded women's educational and career opportunities, norms surrounding mothers' roles have not weakened; instead, they have taken a renewed form under the influence of a risk society and competitive logic. At the same time, the study also suggests that women do not passively accept these norms, but continually interpret, adjust, and negotiate them across different life situations. The reflection generated by de-routinized experience may provide a cognitive and emotional basis for such negotiation, but its long-term effects remain to be confirmed by further empirical research. This gap offers an important direction for subsequent research on the relationship between motherhood and subjectivity from women's lived experience.

2.8 Limitations and Research Gap

The existing literature on women, tourism, and self-development has generated a substantial body of scholarship across multiple disciplines. In particular, Western researchers have examined, from the perspectives of feminist theory, psychology, sociology, and tourism studies, how women may enhance self-awareness and negotiate identity transformation through mobility. These studies have systematically explained the processes through which transformation and subjectivity are enhanced. However, although this body of research continues to expand in both theoretical depth and empirical scope, important limitations remain with respect to research subjects, theoretical applicability, methodological approaches,

and the explanatory power of cultural context. These limitations are especially evident in the Chinese context, which is also the central issue this study seeks to address.

First, from the perspectives of research context and cultural applicability, the current mainstream theoretical framework on women's tourism and self-development remains highly dependent on the cultural background and social structural assumptions of Western societies. A substantial body of research is grounded in individualistic values, liberal feminist traditions, and relatively mature gender equality systems, which presuppose a high degree of individual mobility and institutional support. Within this framework, women's self-awakening is often understood as a process of breaking away from, resisting, or rejecting traditional gender roles. However, this framework cannot be directly applied to the Chinese context. Chinese society has long been characterised by the coexistence of dense relational networks, strong family dependence, and institutionalised gender divisions of labour. Women's life decisions are deeply embedded in family ethics, intergenerational responsibilities, and prevailing social norms. Even in the contemporary context of substantial gains in educational attainment and economic participation, women still need to engage in continuous role coordination and emotional labour under multiple structural constraints. Therefore, existing Western theories centred on individual liberation often struggle to capture the complexity of Chinese women's travel experiences and may oversimplify women's actions as mere pursuits of freedom or temporary escape. Therefore, existing Western theories centred on individual liberation are often insufficient to capture the complexity of Chinese women's travel experiences, and they tend to reduce women's actions to the pursuit of freedom or temporary escape. This theoretical misalignment leaves the actual experiences of Chinese women in tourism, especially how they self-adjust and reconstruct meaning without fully disrupting existing relational structures, underexamined, and they remain marginal, vague, or absent in the existing literature.

Second, from the perspectives of research focus and problem awareness, existing tourism studies remain largely centred on outcomes, whereas analysis of the underlying processes remains limited. A substantial body of research, primarily using quantitative methods or retrospective interviews, emphasises tourism's role in enhancing women's self-confidence, happiness, or life satisfaction, but offers less in-depth examination of how these changes arise. In particular, after women return to everyday life, how such changes are incorporated, adjusted, or partially attenuated is often insufficiently discussed. In the Chinese context, this issue is especially salient. Because family and social structures are relatively stable, changes in self-awareness generated during travel do not necessarily translate into explicit life choices or institutional actions. Many women do not immediately alter their marital status, career trajectories, or family arrangements; instead, they experience subtler yet enduring changes in emotional regulation, boundary awareness, relationship negotiation, and self-positioning. If existing literature uses only "whether life trajectories change" as the criterion for measuring women's self-development, it is likely to overlook this low visibility but highly significant psychological and cognitive transformation processes.

Third, from the perspective of the diversity of research objects and experiences, existing studies exhibit clear limitations in sample selection. On the one hand, many studies of women's tourism focus on specific groups, such as high-income women, backpackers, solo travellers, or women in particular occupations, thereby reinforcing, to some extent, the image of the ideal female traveller. On the other hand, in relevant Chinese studies, samples are often

concentrated among the urban middle class or young women, with fewer participants drawn from women of different ages, marital statuses, educational backgrounds, and family structures. This narrow sample composition limits understanding of internal variation in women's travel experiences. In fact, Chinese women differ substantially in their expectations, feelings, and meanings attached to travel at different life stages. The psychological needs, risk perceptions, and reflective concerns of unmarried, married, childbearing, and divorced women are not the same, and differences in generational position, family responsibilities, and economic conditions also profoundly shape the scope of action and depth of reflection that women can attain through travel. The absence of a systematic examination of these internal differences causes existing research to overgeneralise and, at times, to become implicitly normative in its interpretation of women's travel experiences.

In addition, from a methodological perspective, although quantitative research offers advantages in identifying macro-level trends, its explanatory power remains limited when examining highly subjective, process-oriented, and context-dependent issues such as women's self-awareness, emotional experience, and identity formation. Some studies measure changes in self-esteem, self-efficacy, or happiness through scales, but they are unable to show how women construct meaning in specific travel situations or to explain why the same travel experience produces markedly different psychological consequences for different women. By contrast, although qualitative research has attracted increasing attention, it remains insufficient in women's tourism research in China. Existing qualitative studies mostly focus on destination experience, consumption behaviour, or risk perception, and they lack systematic analysis of how women understand their own changes through narrative and how they negotiate the tension between traditional norms and personal feelings in narration. Especially at the level of methodological reflexivity, many studies have not adequately considered the influence of the researcher's position, cultural context, and gender structure on the processes of data production and interpretation, thereby limiting the depth and explanatory power of the research conclusions.

Finally, from the perspective of theoretical integration and interdisciplinary dialogue, current research remains fragmented to a certain extent. Tourism research, gender studies, and family studies are often conducted separately, and no comprehensive analytical framework has yet been developed to explain women's mobility experiences, family-structure constraints, and subjective change simultaneously. In the context of social transformation in China, women's self-development does not occur in isolation; rather, it has always been intertwined with family ethics, the marriage and child-rearing system, the labour market, and cultural narratives. The absence of a cross-disciplinary integrated perspective means that many studies merely describe what has occurred, but they struggle to explain why it occurs and how it is sustained.

Based on the preceding analysis, it is evident that, although the existing literature provides an important foundation for understanding women's travel experiences, significant research gaps remain in the Chinese context. First, there is a lack of theoretical explanations that are genuinely grounded in China's social structure. Second, empirical studies based on women's own narratives, which could capture their complex psychological changes, are still insufficient. These limitations not only constrain scholarly understanding of the significance of Chinese women's tourism but also prevent the potential value of tourism as a social practice in gender research from being fully examined. Against this research background, the

present study seeks to systematically investigate changes in self-awareness, emotional experience, and identity understanding among contemporary Chinese women in tourism through qualitative research methods and thereby address the theoretical and experiential gaps in the existing literature.

Chapter 3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter explains the methodological basis and research design logic of this study. It examines how researchers can select and implement qualitative research approaches that are appropriate for this research problem within specific philosophical positions, epistemological frameworks, and socio-cultural contexts. The central concern of this study is not tourism itself, but how contemporary Chinese women re-understand themselves, negotiate social roles, and gradually generate subjectivity through the fluid practice of tourism within the structural conditions of the gender system, family ethics, and market pressures in contemporary China. This research objective determines that the choice of methodology should not be a technical statistical exercise, but a procedure consistent with the research problem at the levels of ontology, epistemology, and research paradigm (Crotty, 1998). In social science research, methodology is not only a technical question of how to collect data, but also a comprehensive expression of how researchers understand the world, define the legitimacy of knowledge, and position the relationship between researchers and the researched (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Especially in research involving gender, subjectivity, and personal experience, the choice of methodology is itself political and ethical. If this is ignored, research can easily reproduce mainstream discourse, simplifying women's experiences into individual choices or psychological states and thus obscuring the structural constraints and power relations behind them. Therefore, this chapter does not regard methodology as a set of neutral operational steps, but rather as a set of explanatory frameworks closely aligned with the research problem.

The tourism examined in this study is not a discrete event or a short-term consumption behaviour, but an experiential process embedded in the life course. For many Chinese women, travel may provide not only a temporary respite from family responsibilities and social expectations, but also an opportunity to reconsider marriage, career, and self-worth. Such experiences are often articulated through narrative, emotion, and reflection, and their meanings are unstable and not fully predictable. What interviewees discuss is often not what happened, but how they re-understand themselves in the interview context. This characteristic indicates that the research object is not a variable that can be readily quantified, but a meaningful structure that is continually in formation. Therefore, attempts to capture this process through standardised questionnaires or hypothesis testing are not only methodologically limited, but may also misalign the research focus at the epistemological level.

In the Chinese context, this methodological challenge is particularly pronounced. For a long time, research on Chinese women has focused on the macrostructural level, such as marriage and child-rearing policies, labour-force participation rates, and demographic indicators. Such research is valuable for revealing institutional inequality, but it also tends to overlook how women perceive these structures in daily life and negotiate them through concrete practices. At the same time, some tourism research still treats women primarily as consumers, focusing on their motivations, satisfaction, or behavioural patterns, while offering limited analysis of how tourism is embedded in gender identity and life narratives. It is within this research gap that the present study uses qualitative methods to enter women’s lived worlds, examine how

they attribute meaning to tourism, and explore how tourism becomes a practical pathway for nonconfrontational subject formation.

Based on the above research objectives, this study explicitly rejects the view that social reality is a single entity that researchers can objectively measure from an external position. Instead, it adopts an explanatory ontology and understands reality as pluralistic, situational, and continuously produced through social interaction and narrative practice (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). From this perspective, women's experiences of travel are not subjective illusions or incidental feelings, but the result of the reconfiguration of their relationships with specific social structures, cultural norms, and emotional labour. The purpose of the research is not to judge whether these experiences are real, but to examine the contexts in which they are articulated, the structural tensions they indicate, and the ways in which they are incorporated into women's understanding of the self and the future. In conjunction with interpretive ontology, this study further adopts feminist epistemology and emphasises that knowledge production is always embedded in a specific social position. Feminist scholars have pointed out that, for a long time, knowledge about gender systems, family relations, and social norms has been produced primarily by policymakers, macro-level researchers, or male-dominated academic discourse, whereas women's own experiences have often been marginalised as subjective material or supplementary evidence (Harding, 1995; Hesse-Biber, 2014). From this epistemological perspective, women's everyday experience is not a deviation, but an important entry point for understanding how power operates at the micro level.

Therefore, this study's methodology does not seek to speak for women; rather, it aims to create a relatively safe and nonjudgmental narrative space through semi-structured interviews, enabling women to describe their experiences in their own words and to construct meaning jointly through interaction between researchers and participants. This process is inherently intersubjective, and researchers cannot fully separate themselves from their gender identity, educational background, or value orientation. Instead, they can only render these influences visible and subject to scrutiny through sustained reflexive practice. As emphasised by the Institute of Feminist Quality, reflexivity is not an ancillary commentary added after the completion of the research, but an epistemological requirement that informs the entire process of research design, data generation, and analysis (Hesse-Biber, 2014).

At the level of the research paradigm, this study is grounded in the constructivist qualitative research tradition and holds that knowledge emerges from interactions between researchers and participants within specific contexts (Crotty, 1998). This paradigm does not seek a single, universally applicable truth but examines how actors interpret the world and assign meaning to experience under particular social and cultural conditions. In this study, the relationship among tourism, gender, and subjectivity is not treated as a preexisting fact; rather, it is understood as a narrative structure gradually constructed by the interviewed women through repeated narration, comparison, and reflection on their life trajectories. In this sense, the qualitative method was selected not for procedural convenience, but because it is necessitated by the intrinsic demands of the research problem.

The remainder of this chapter systematically develops the research design and methodological approach grounded in the philosophical and methodological positions outlined above. First, the study's ontological and epistemological foundations are examined in detail in the following sections, with further discussion of why explanatory ontology and

feminist epistemology are necessary for understanding Chinese women's tourism experiences. Subsequently, the research paradigm and methodological strategy are presented, including the suitability of semi-structured interviews as a feminist research method. This section also addresses sample selection, recruitment rationale, data generation and management procedures, and thematic analysis. Finally, the chapter discusses research quality and credibility, ethical considerations, and the researcher's positionality and reflexive practice to ensure transparency and methodological consistency at both academic and ethical levels.

Through a systematic explanation of the methodological basis, this chapter not only provides technical and logical support for the subsequent empirical analysis but also seeks to clarify how this study can establish an approach for understanding the complexity of women's experiences, respecting their central position, and offering an explanation of female travel within China's specific gender culture and social structural context. A research pathway is outlined.

3.2 Qualitative Research Method

The research design of this study is based on a series of judgments. The research question concerns how individuals interpret their own experiences, generate meaning within structural constraints, and reorganize self-narratives through specific practices. It is argued not merely that qualitative research is one of many options, but that it is a methodological necessity. This study does not seek to measure whether tourism has improved the happiness or autonomy of Chinese women, nor does it aim to compare the average effects of different types of tourism on women. Instead, the study focuses on how women may reinterpret themselves, family relationships, and future possibilities through specific travel experiences. Such questions cannot be reduced to causal relations between variables; they can be understood only by entering the meaningful world of the actor.

From a research design perspective, quantitative research and mixed-method research typically rely on predefined conceptual frameworks and variable systems, and their strength lies in revealing associations between macro-level patterns and statistical trends. However, this strength may become a limitation when examining the process through which subjectivity and experience are formed. Subjectivity is not an attribute that can be directly observed or stabilised, but rather a processual state of becoming aware, reflecting, and practising oneself in a specific context. The freedom, relaxation, or self-reinterpretation experienced by women during travel is often ambiguous, contradictory, and may produce conflicting narratives at different times. The nonlinearity and instability of this experience make it difficult to fully capture through standardised scales or closed-ended questions.

In the Chinese context, women's travel experiences are deeply embedded in family ethics, marriage and education norms, and intergenerational responsibilities. Many women do not make travel decisions under conditions of full autonomy; instead, they negotiate competing constraints related to family expectations, economic limitations, and social norms (Wilson & Little, 2008; Crawford et al., 1991). What they presented in the interviews was not a simple judgment about whether to travel, but a complex narrative concerning whether I was qualified to leave for myself, whether I should yield to my family, and how I could create space for myself without causing conflict. These narratives themselves constitute part of the research object, not noise that should be simplified or filtered.

Therefore, this study explicitly rejects the notion of tourism as an isolated event or a one-time consumption behaviour and instead treats it as a practical process embedded in the life course. The meaning of travel does not emerge from the journey itself; rather, it is gradually formed through expectations before the trip, emotions during the trip, and reflection and life adjustment after the trip. It is through this process that women begin to re-evaluate the relationship among marriage, career, family responsibility, and self-worth. The research design must therefore track this meaning-making process, rather than merely documenting its outcomes. Through open-ended narratives and in-depth interviews, qualitative research enables researchers to capture how experiences are recounted, revised, and interpreted differently across contexts.

From the perspective of methodological coherence, a coherent link has been established between the qualitative research strategy adopted by the research institute, explanatory ontology, and feminist epistemology. If social reality is understood as socially constructed through interaction, and knowledge is regarded as an empirical understanding from a specific social position, then research methods cannot reduce participants to measured objects; instead, they must recognise them as active producers of meaning. Qualitative research enables researchers to attend to how women describe their own experiences without pre-emptively imposing conclusions, and to continually examine how their own understandings shape meaning construction during analysis. In tourism research, qualitative methods have been widely used to examine complex issues such as identity, emotion, and power relations. Relevant studies indicate that quantitative methods often fail to capture subtle but crucial differences, especially in relation to gender, bodily experience, and spatial experience, whereas in-depth interviews and narrative analysis can reveal how tourism becomes an opportunity for individuals to reconstruct the relationship between the self and society. This research tradition provides an important methodological reference for the present study; however, the study does not merely replicate an existing approach but applies qualitative methods within the specific social and cultural context of China. Furthermore, in Chinese society, women's subjectivity is often not expressed through open confrontation with, or complete separation from, the family structure, but rather through more subtle and gradual processes of negotiation. Women may not immediately change their marital status or career trajectory after travelling, but they often describe a new understanding of patience, responsibility, and related values in their narratives. Such change is easily overlooked if it is assessed only through behavioural indicators. However, at the level of narrative, these accounts provide important clues to the formation of subjectivity. By focusing on language, emotion, and reflection, qualitative research enables these seemingly subtle changes to be identified and analysed.

This study also carefully considers the possibility of hybrid-method research. However, at the design stage, researchers must recognise that forcing qualitative inquiry into a quantitative framework may lead to premature operationalisation before concepts are fully understood, thereby reducing sensitivity to the complexity of lived experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Charmaz, 2014). Because the core aim of this study is theoretical construction rather than theoretical testing, the decision was made to focus on qualitative research resources and analysis to ensure comprehensive examination and interpretation of empirical materials. Selective qualitative research does not mean abandoning rigour or systematicity. On the contrary, this study seeks to establish a credible and traceable research path within a

qualitative framework through clear methodological positioning, systematic sampling strategies, transparent data analysis procedures, and continuous reflective practice. Research design is not improvised; rather, it is the outcome of repeated trade-offs among research questions, theoretical caution, and methodological principles.

In summary, the research design of this study adopts qualitative research as the core strategy, providing a comprehensive response to the nature of the research problem, its social and cultural context, and its theoretical objectives. Through this design, the study can develop an in-depth understanding of how contemporary Chinese women gradually perceive structural constraints, reorganise systems of meaning, and develop non-confrontational subjective practices in everyday life through tourism-related mobility practices. Within this methodological framework, the analysis and theoretical construction presented in the following chapters demonstrate internal coherence and explanatory power.

3.3 Ontology

This study adopts an interpretive ontology at the ontological level and conceives social reality as plural, situational, and continuously produced through social interaction and meaning making, rather than as a single entity that can be objectively observed, decomposed, and measured by researchers from an external position (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This position is not an abstract philosophical preference; rather, it is determined by the nature of the research object itself. The study focuses not on whether tourism occurs, nor on the frequency or type of tourism behaviour, but on how contemporary Chinese women experience, interpret, and describe tourism within specific social structures and cultural contexts, and on how these experiences are embedded in their understandings of self, family, and the future.

Within a positivist or post-positivist ontology, social reality is typically regarded as an objective fact that exists independently of researchers. The aim of research is to approximate this reality through variable manipulation and causal inference. However, this position often appears inadequate when confronted with processes of subjectivity, emotional experience, and meaning making. The “freedom,” “looseness,” or “re-seeing oneself” perceived by women during travel is not a stable entity, nor can it be reduced to repeatable attributes. Rather, these experiences are often produced under specific temporal and spatial conditions, through temporary separation from, and reflection on, existing life orders; their meanings are also continually reconfigured through shifting narrative contexts, indicating the need for an approach that can account for the fluid, embodied, and situational nature of experience. This approach is also consistent with non-representational theoretical perspectives that have emerged from diverse traditions, including neo-vitalism, phenomenology, and post-structuralism. The sociological, philosophical, and psychological roots of these perspectives are found in the work of thinkers such as Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze and Guattari, and they challenge empiricism by emphasising emotional responses to power structures that may be rationalised in post hoc conditions (Cadman, 2009; Simpson, 2020). This framework appears appropriate for the following reasons.

Interpretive ontology emphasises that reality does not exist in a simple form, but is a process of continuous experience, interpretation, and reproduction by actors in specific situations (Crotty, 1998). From this perspective, reality is processual and relational, and its form depends on the actor’s social position, historical background, and power relations. For contemporary Chinese women, the “reality they live in” is not an abstract institutional text,

but a structured field of daily life intertwined with marriage and child-rearing policies, family ethics, intergenerational responsibility, market-oriented gender discipline, and emotional labour. The research significance of tourism lies not in whether it changes these structures themselves, but in how it temporarily reshapes women's relationship to these structures.

From the perspective of interpretive ontology, travel does not remove women from reality but creates a different vantage point within it. Women do not leave behind family responsibilities or social norms when travelling, but they gain distance from which to re-examine these norms in extraordinary time and space. This distance is not physical escape, but relational reconfiguration. It is through this reconfiguration that women begin to recognise their long-term responsibilities, emotional labour, and self-suppression, and incorporate this awareness into new self-narratives. Therefore, this study understands travel as a form of reorganisation of reality, rather than a temporary negation of reality. This relational view of reality is particularly important for understanding the Chinese context. In post-socialist China, the gender system does not exist as a single authority, but operates through multiple mechanisms, such as national policies, family ethics, market logic, and cultural discourse. In daily life, women often do not confront the system directly, but experience institutional demands through specific relationships, such as mother-daughter relationships, spousal relationships, and workplace interactions. Therefore, their understanding of reality is often fragmented, situational, and marked by contradiction. Interpretive ontology allows researchers to recognise that contradiction itself is part of reality, not research noise that needs to be eliminated.

Furthermore, interpretive ontology refuses to treat the object of study as a static state and emphasises the generative nature of reality. Female subjectivity is not acquired at a single moment but is gradually formed through continuous life practice. Many of the women interviewed did not make radical changes immediately after travelling, such as divorce or resignation, but repeatedly referred to rethinking how I should live in their narratives. This change may seem insignificant if observed only at the level of behavioural outcomes; however, at the ontological level, it reflects the loosening and reorganisation of practical meaning and constitutes an important part of subject formation. Interpretive ontology also requires researchers to reconsider the meaning of truth. From this position, the research does not aim to verify whether the narrative conforms to objective facts but focuses on how the narrative is constructed in a specific context, why it is told in this way at this moment, and what semantic order and structural tension it reveals. When a woman said in an interview that the trip made me feel that I was living for myself for the first time, the focus of the study is not to judge whether this feeling is universal, but to understand the position of this expression within her life course and how it is connected to family expectations, gender norms, and personal emotional experience. In this sense, interpretive ontology also entails the rejection of a single conception of truth. This study does not assume that there is a universal travel experience applicable to all Chinese women but recognises that the realities experienced by different women in different social positions and life stages are irreducibly different. This difference is not an obstacle that weakens the explanatory power of the research, but an important clue for understanding how structures operate in different situations. By comparing recurring themes and tensions across narratives, this study aims to identify family resemblances rather than pursue absolute homogeneity in its conclusions.

At the same time, interpretive ontology also imposes requirements on the researcher's position. If reality is constructed in interaction, then researchers cannot stand outside reality as neutral observers. The researcher's questioning style, response attitude, and theoretical sensitivity in interviews all affect how meaning is produced. Therefore, this study recognises that interaction between the researcher and the researched is part of reality generation, not a disturbance that needs to be completely eliminated. By systematically recording, analysing, and reflecting on decision-making memoranda throughout the research process, the researchers strive to make this interactive process visible and observable, rather than concealing it behind the appearance of "objective methods." In tourism research, understanding reality as relational and processual helps to move beyond the tendency to reduce tourism to consumption behaviour or short-term experience. In this study, tourism is understood as a practice of continuous dialogue with everyday life. Its meaning does not end with the trip itself, but continues through memory, narrative, and follow-up reflection. The understanding formed by women during travel is often re-examined, revised, and even suppressed after returning to family and work. This repeated tension itself constitutes part of reality, and interpretive ontology is a necessary precondition for understanding this dynamic process.

In summary, the interpretive ontology adopted in this study provides a realist perspective capable of accommodating complexity, contradiction, and generativity in understanding the tourism experiences of contemporary Chinese women. From this position, reality is no longer an object waiting to be measured, but a relational field continuously shaped through women's experience, narrative, and practice. It is on the basis of this understanding that this study can regard travel as a practice of reconfiguring the relationship between women and social structures and can examine how subjectivity is gradually generated through this process in the subsequent analysis.

3.4 Epistemology

After establishing the explanatory ontology, this study adopts feminist epistemology at the epistemological level and integrates position theory and situated knowledge as the core framework for understanding Chinese women's tourism experience and the process of subjective formation. If ontology answers what reality is, epistemology addresses who is authorised to speak about this reality, how knowledge is produced, and what kinds of experience count as legitimate knowledge. For research centred on women's experience, these issues are not abstract philosophical questions; rather, they directly affect whether the study inadvertently reproduces gendered power structures. For a long time, social science research at the epistemological level has been shaped by positivist and empiricist traditions, which treat knowledge as a neutral reflection of objective reality. Within this framework, researchers are presumed to be rational, transcendent observers unaffected by social position, and researchers' experience must be methodologically purified before it can be translated into valid data. Feminist scholars have offered a fundamental critique of this view, arguing that the so-called neutral perspective often implicitly reflects the experience of men, the middle class, and mainstream social positions, whereas the experiences of women, minorities, and marginalised groups are treated as subjective, emotional, or irrational (Harding, 1995).

One of the central propositions of feminist epistemology is that all knowledge originates from a specific social position. Knowledge does not exist outside social structure, but is produced

and interpreted within gendered, class-based, cultural, and historical conditions. Therefore, women's lived experience is not a source of bias in research, but an important entry point for revealing how social power operates in everyday life. According to Harding (1995), marginalised groups possess epistemic advantages not because their knowledge is purer, but because they can perceive the mechanisms of inequality and power more clearly under structural constraint.

In this study, this epistemological position is particularly significant. Knowledge about Chinese women, the marriage and child-rearing system, and tourism behaviour has long been dominated by policy discourse, macro-level statistics, or industry perspectives. In these discourses, women often appear as managed objects, labour resources, or consumer groups, whereas how they perceive institutional pressure in daily life and negotiate responsibilities and desires within specific relationships remains outside the centre of knowledge production. Feminist epistemology requires researchers to shift the focus from macrostructure to lived experience, recognising that women's understanding of their own lives is not secondary material, but an important starting point for theoretical construction. Position theory provides an additional theoretical basis for this epistemology. Position theory does not claim that any group possesses inherently "more real" knowledge; rather, it emphasises that social position shapes what people can see, what they overlook, and how they interpret experience (Hesse-Biber, 2014). Women who live under the dual constraints of gender norms and family responsibilities often develop a more nuanced perception of emotional labour, relational imbalance, and institutional injustice.

Based on this position, this study regards Chinese women's travel narratives as an important source of knowledge for understanding how the contemporary gender system is experienced and negotiated in everyday life. It should be noted that position theory is not without controversy within feminism. Some critics argue that overemphasising the specificity of women's experience may lead to an essentialist tendency to treat "women" as a homogeneous group. This study is highly attentive to this problem and explicitly refuses to treat Chinese women as a single subject. On the contrary, it emphasises the diversity and situatedness of positions by including women of different ages, marital statuses, and educational backgrounds. Women do not occupy a unified position; instead, they form multiple and even contradictory understandings across different life stages and social locations. The task of epistemology is not to eliminate these differences, but to understand how they reflect different modes in which structural conditions operate.

On this basis, this study further introduces the concept of situated knowledge to avoid romanticising or depoliticising women's experience. Situated knowledge emphasises that any experience or understanding arises from specific historical, cultural, and social conditions. Without these conditions, experience loses explanatory power. In the Chinese context, women's understanding of tourism is inevitably shaped by family ethics, filial piety, marriage and childbearing policies, and market logic. The hesitation, guilt, and contradictions expressed in interviews are not individual psychological problems, but manifestations of situated knowledge. This epistemological perspective enables researchers to understand women's travel experiences within a broader social context. For example, when an interviewee feels a brief freedom to live for herself while travelling but quickly returns to the role of caregiver after coming home, this does not indicate the "failure" of the travel experience; rather, it reflects the limited development of subjectivity under structural

pressure. Feminist epistemology allows researchers to recognise that this incomplete, non-radical, and even self-contradictory change is the real form of Chinese women's subjective formation.

Feminist epistemology also places important demands on the relationship between researchers and participants. From this perspective, the interview is not a one-way process of information extraction, but a process of meaning construction between subjects. The researcher's questions, response style, and emotional stance affect how respondents articulate their experiences. Therefore, this study does not assume that researchers can completely eliminate power asymmetry but seeks to make this relationship transparent and visible through reflexive practice. Specifically, this study continuously records reflective memos during interviews and analysis, and examines how the researchers' gender identity, educational background, and travel experience shape listening and interpretation. For example, educational or age similarities between researchers and some respondents may lead to stronger resonance, whereas differences in life experience with older women may cause some narratives to be underestimated or misread. Feminist epistemology does not require researchers to deny these effects, but to incorporate them into the analytical process, making the process of knowledge production itself an object of analysis.

In addition, feminist epistemology requires researchers to be cautious about voicing on behalf of others. This study does not seek to speak for Chinese women, but to systematically present diverse narratives in order to show how women understand and practise subjectivity in different ways. The role of researchers is not to replace women's expression of demands, but to clarify how these experiences point to structural tensions and possible spaces for change at the theoretical level. This distinction is particularly important for avoiding the transformation of research into normative or activist text. In summary, the feminist epistemology adopted in this study provides a framework for understanding Chinese women's tourism experience that can account for differences, contradictions, and structure simultaneously. Within this framework, women's experience is no longer regarded as subjective noise, but as an important source of knowledge that reveals how the gender system is perceived, negotiated, and reproduced in everyday life. It is on the basis of this epistemological position that this study can transform women's travel narratives into theoretical insights with explanatory power regarding the process of subjective formation in subsequent analysis.

3.5 Methodological paradigm: Constructivist qualitative inquiry

After establishing explanatory ontology and feminist epistemology, this study further adopts the constructivist qualitative research paradigm at the level of methodological paradigm. This choice is not the technical classification of existing qualitative methods but based on the fundamental judgement of how knowledge is produced and how experience is transformed into theoretical understanding. The constructivist paradigm emphasises that social reality and social knowledge do not exist independently of actors, but are a process of continuous construction through interaction, language, and reflection in specific situations (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Crotty, 1998). This paradigm is highly consistent with the Chinese women's tourism experience on which the research focusses.

From the perspective of constructivism, research does not seek to discover a pre-existing "truth" that is waiting to be revealed, but tries to understand how meaning is generated, negotiated, and naturalised in a specific social culture and power relationship. For this study,

"whether tourism has changed women" is not a question that can be answered directly; what really needs to be understood is how women can reorganise their understanding of themselves, relationships and the future when describing their travel experience. This understanding is not the result of the automatic "bring" of travel, but the gradual construction of women in the process of reviewing, comparing, and reflecting on the life trajectory. Compared with the positivist paradigm, the constructivist paradigm refuses to disassemble the research object into operable variables and refuses to assume that researchers can directly obtain reality from a neutral perspective. In positivist research, researchers are often regarded as observers who stand outside of reality, and their task is to approach the "real world" through rigorous measurement tools. However, in the study involving subjectivity, emotional experience and meaning generation, this position is not only difficult to establish but also may obscure the complexity of the research object. Women's feelings, hesitations, contradictions, and reflections in travel often cannot be reduced to linear causal relationships but can only be grasped through narrative and contextual understanding.

The constructivist paradigm recognises the inevitable interaction between researchers and researchers and regards this interaction as an integral part of knowledge production. The researcher's problem setting, response style and theoretical sensitivity will all affect how the experience is told, what meaning is highlighted, and what experience is silenced. Therefore, this study does not try to eliminate the influence of researchers, but to make this influence visible and discussable through systematic reflective practice. This position is highly consistent with the intersubjectivity emphasised by feminist epistemology. In the intersection of tourism research and gender research, the constructivist qualitative paradigm is particularly explanatory. The tourism experience itself is highly narrative, and its meaning is often reshaped through memories, comparisons, and narration. In the interview, women do not simply recount what happened but reinterpret the past experience on the basis of the current life situation and value judgement. For example, a trip that was originally considered a relaxing trip may be re-understood as the last time that truly belongs to you after marriage or becoming a mother. This change in meaning is not a distortion of experience, but a reflection of how reality is reconstructed at distinct stages.

This research was initially methodologically inspired by the theory rooted in constructivism. According to Charmaz (2014), the theory does not emerge naturally from the data but is gradually generated in the process of continuous interaction between researchers and data. The theoretical position, research problems and analytical decisions of researchers will all affect the formation of concepts. As the research evolved it is recognised that this study does not strictly follow the coding procedure of the rooted theory and does not aim at developing the form theory, it draws on its core spirit in analytical logic, that is, analysis is regarded as a process of continuous comparison, repeated revision and concept generation, rather than a one-time classification operation. The constructivist perspective allows researchers to understand how structures are experienced and reproduced through daily practice and narrative while recognising the existence of structures. In the Chinese context, the gender system does not only exist in the form of policy texts or legal provisions but also penetrates into women's daily lives through family interaction, emotional expectations, and social evaluation. Women's experience in travelling is the specific field of their interaction with these structural forces. Therefore, this study does not regard women's narratives as isolated personal stories but understands them as the product of the intersection of structure and

subject. The constructivist paradigm enables researchers to pay attention to the uniqueness of individual experience and the social pattern behind it at the same time, without having to choose between individuals and structures. By identifying recurring themes, implicit tensions and narrative patterns in the analysis, this study aims to understand how subjectivity is gradually constructed under specific structural conditions, rather than assuming that subjectivity is a pre-existing attribute.

In specific research practice, the constructivist paradigm also affects the understanding of the relationship between data, analysis, and theory in this study. Data is not a passive raw material, but a narrative text co-produced in the interview situation. Analysis is not a simple generalisation of data, but a process in which researchers organise and explain meaning under the guidance of theoretical sensitivity; theory is not an abstract generalisation of reality, but a conceptual expression of the empirical model. This understanding makes researchers always be alert to their own analysis and decision-making in the process of analysis, so as to avoid imposing theory on materials. In addition, the constructivist paradigm also provides a methodological space for this study to deal with contradictions, silence, and incomplete narratives. In many interviews, women's evaluation of travel is not always consistent, and they may express a sense of liberation and guilt at the same time in the same narrative. This contradiction is not an obstacle to analysis, but an important clue to understand how subjectivity unfolds under structural pressure. Constructivist research does not try to eliminate these contradictions but regards them as part of the process of generating meaning.

In summary, this study adopts the constructivist qualitative research paradigm, which is a comprehensive response to research problems, theoretical care, and Chinese social and cultural context. This paradigm enables researchers to systematically analyse how Chinese women reorganise their self-narrative through tourism practice and develop subjective forms with situational adaptability in structural constraints without simplifying the complexity of experience. It is under this methodological paradigm that the semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis, and reflective practises adopted in this study have inherent consistency and explanatory power.

3.6 Semi-Structure Interview

Under the methodological framework of this study, semi-structured interview is a research method that is highly consistent with the feminist epistemology and constructivist research paradigm. In this study, the interview is an interactive field of meaning generation. In this field, researchers and participants jointly build an understanding of experience through language, emotion, and narrative. Therefore, the choice of semi-structured interviews is not for operational convenience, but from the nature of the research object and the fundamental judgement of the mode of knowledge production.

This study focusses on how Chinese women can re-understand themselves, relationships, and social roles in the travel experience. This kind of experience often exists in the form of narrative, and its meaning is not fixed in advance, but gradually manifested in the process of recall, narration, and reflection. Due to the high standardisation of questions, although structured interviews help to compare the answers of different individuals, it is easy to compress the narrative space, forcing participants to answer within the conceptual framework preset by researchers. Unstructured interviews may be too broad in openness, resulting in a lack of comparability between different interviews and difficult to support systematic

analysis. The semi-structured interview is located between the two, which reserves full narrative freedom for participants while ensuring that the research topic is covered. In the tradition of feminist research, semi-structured interviews are widely regarded as a way to weaken the power of researchers and enhance the expression space of participants. Feminist scholars point out that many women's life experiences are difficult to express in a direct and linear way, especially when it comes to issues such as family responsibilities, emotional labour, or social expectations. Women tend to convey their feelings through fragmented, metaphorical, or contradictory narratives. Semi-structured interviews allow the existence of this expression without considering it as a deviating from the topic or ineffective answer. On the contrary, these seemingly incomplete or repetitive narratives are the key clues to understand the complexity of women's experiences.

When talking about travel, freedom or self, Chinese women often need to carefully balance between personal aspirations and social norms. Directly asking whether the trip has changed your view of marriage may trigger a defensive response, and through more open narrative guidance, such as reviewing the feelings of a specific trip or life changes after the trip, it is easier for participants to reflect gradually in a safe situation. Semi-structured interviews provide a methodological space for this kind of progressive narrative. In addition, semi-structured interviews and feminist epistemology are highly compatible in the understanding of the relationship between researchers and researchers. Feminist research emphasises that researchers should not be regarded as omniscient questioners but should enter the research site as listeners and collaborators. In this study, the interview is designed as a conversational interaction rather than a question-and-answer survey. Researchers guide participants to further explain their experiences through inquiry, response and empathetic, rather than simply confirming or denying their statements. This kind of interaction is not neutral, but part of the process of knowledge production.

In practice, the interview outline of this study was not a fixed list of questions, but a set of guiding questions around the core theme. These topics include travel motivation and decision-making process, key emotional experiences in travel, changes in relationships with family or important others, understanding of self and future after travel, and restrictions and compromises encountered in practising these understandings. During the interview, the researchers flexibly adjusted the order of the questions according to the participants' narrative path, and clarified the timeline, emotional turns and meaning changes through follow-up questions. Silence is also regarded as an important object of analysis. In some interviews, women choose to avoid or respond briefly when talking about marriage, divorce, or family conflicts. This silence is not a lack of information, but may reflect social taboos, emotional protection, or risk assessment. The qualitative study of feminism points out that understanding the silent social context is more ethical and analytical than forced questioning. Therefore, this study respects the participants' setting of topic boundaries in the interview and regards these silences as an embodiment of structural limitations in the analysis. Semi-structured interviews also provide a methodological space for dealing with contradictions in narratives. In the interview, many women expressed their desire for travel and recognition of family responsibilities, yearning for freedom and acceptance of "should be so" at the same time. This contradiction does not mean that the narrative is inconsistent, but the real state in which the subjectivity unfolds under realistic conditions. By allowing participants to

repeatedly revise or re-express their views, semi-structured interviews allow these contradictions to be retained rather than simplified into a single attitude.

In the interview interaction, researchers also undertake emotional labour. Feminist research points out that interviews are not a one-way acquisition of information, but a process that may evoke emotional memory. In this study, when it comes to issues such as pressure, sacrifice or self-repression, researchers should maintain sensitivity and restraint and avoid guiding the narrative direction with moral judgement or implicit expectations. At the same time, researchers write reflection memos after the interview, record their emotional reactions and interactive feelings, and examine how these factors may affect data generation and interpretation.

Semi-structured interviews and constructivist research paradigms together constitute the core practical path of this research. The interview text is not regarded as an "original fact", but as a narrative material generated in a specific interactive situation. When analysing these materials, researchers do not pursue the restoration of "real experience" but focus on how participants give meaning to experience through narrative. This understanding provides a solid foundation for the subsequent thematic analysis and theoretical construction. Therefore, the choice of semi-structured interviews in this study is not only a response to the complexity of the research problem, but also a practical implementation of feminist epistemology and constructivist paradigms. Through this method, research can deeply understand how Chinese women can consult structural constraints, reorganise self-narratives, and gradually generate subjectivity in tourism practice under the premise of respecting the diversity and situationality of women's experience. The theoretical choice of this method has laid the core foundation for the subsequent data analysis and theoretical contribution of this research.

3.7 Sample strategy

The sampling strategy adopted in this study was developed progressively throughout the research process, reflecting both the exploratory nature of qualitative inquiry and the practical challenges associated with recruiting women from different age groups. Rather than following a fully predetermined sampling framework, the study initially relied on voluntary participation through Chinese social media platforms, particularly Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok) and Xiaohongshu (RedNote). As recruitment progressed, the researcher adapted the approach to address the underrepresentation of older women, introducing personal-network referrals to broaden participation among women aged 50 and above.

This evolving recruitment strategy was consistent with the interpretivist and constructivist foundations of the study. The purpose of sampling was not to obtain a statistically representative cross-section of the Chinese female population, but to develop an empirically informed understanding of how women interpret tourism experiences in relation to their self-perceptions, social roles, and identities. Qualitative sampling enables researchers to engage with diverse perspectives and experiences while remaining attentive to the social and cultural contexts within which meanings are constructed (Patton, 2002).

The initial stage of recruitment was based on voluntary responses from women accessible through Douyin and Xiaohongshu. These platforms provided opportunities to reach women who were willing to discuss their experiences of tourism and their perceptions of gender-related issues. However, as recruitment progressed, the researcher recognised that reliance on

digital platforms alone was not producing sufficient participation among women aged 50 and above. This presented a methodological concern, as the research sought to understand women's experiences across different stages of life.

To address this limitation, the researcher subsequently introduced recruitment through personal-network referrals, particularly targeting women aged 50 and above. This adjustment reflected a purposive effort to strengthen the inclusion of older women, whose experiences might otherwise have been insufficiently represented. The recruitment process therefore combined social-media-based voluntary participation with a later, targeted supplementary recruitment strategy.

The final sample comprised 72 Chinese women with tourism experience, representing three broad stages of adulthood. The inclusion of different age groups was important because women's relationships with family responsibilities, marriage expectations, employment, and individual aspirations may vary across generations and life stages. Comparing their accounts made it possible to explore both recurring patterns and differences in how tourism experiences were interpreted and incorporated into understandings of the self.

Age was particularly relevant within the socio-cultural context of contemporary China. Younger women may encounter expectations surrounding marriage, career development, and personal independence, whereas women in midlife may negotiate competing responsibilities associated with employment, marriage, parenting, and intergenerational care. Women in later life may reflect on earlier gendered expectations and reconsider their priorities as their family circumstances change. These distinctions were treated as sensitising considerations rather than fixed assumptions about participants' experiences.

The study also considered differences in marital status, educational background, and other personal circumstances where such information was available. These characteristics provided additional context for interpreting women's narratives. However, the study did not assume that all women within a particular age group or social category shared the same experiences or perspectives.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this recruitment approach. Participation through social media depended on individuals' access to and engagement with digital platforms, as well as their willingness to participate in discussions of personal experiences. Recruitment through personal networks also involved the possibility of selection bias, since potential participants were reached through existing social connections. Furthermore, the difficulty of recruiting older women through social media highlighted how reliance on a single recruitment channel could shape the composition of a qualitative sample.

Consequently, the findings are not intended to represent the experiences of all Chinese women. The study does not claim statistical representativeness across ethnic, geographical, educational, or socio-economic categories. Instead, it offers a situated interpretation of how women within the recruited sample understood tourism in relation to gendered social expectations, identity, and subjectivity.

The progressive development of the sampling strategy was therefore not a departure from methodological rigour, but a response to challenges encountered during recruitment. The decision to introduce additional recruitment channels was intended to improve the range of

age-related perspectives available for analysis while maintaining consistency with the study's qualitative and interpretive objectives.

3.7.1 Sample Adequacy and Data Saturation

The question of sample adequacy is particularly important in qualitative research, where the purpose of data collection is to develop a sufficiently rich and meaningful understanding of a phenomenon rather than to achieve statistical representativeness. Traditionally, qualitative researchers have frequently used the concept of data saturation to justify sample size. Saturation generally refers to the point at which additional data collection is considered unlikely to produce substantially new information, codes, or themes.

However, the appropriateness of saturation as a universal criterion has been increasingly questioned. Braun and Clarke (2021) argue that data saturation is not necessarily compatible with reflexive approaches to thematic analysis, particularly when themes are understood as interpretive constructions rather than pre-existing categories waiting to be discovered. Within such an approach, analytical meaning is developed through ongoing engagement between the researcher, the data, and the theoretical framework. Consequently, the identification of new meanings cannot be reduced to a numerical threshold or the absence of additional codes.

This critique is relevant to the present study, which adopts a constructivist qualitative research paradigm and draws on feminist epistemology. Women's tourism narratives are understood as socially situated accounts whose meanings are interpreted in relation to family expectations, gender norms, personal histories, and social relationships. From this perspective, the analytical possibilities of the data are not necessarily exhausted when similar experiences or expressions appear across interviews.

An alternative perspective is provided by Malterud et al. (2016), who propose the concept of information power as a means of considering sample adequacy. Their approach emphasises five interrelated considerations: the aim of the study, the specificity of the sample, the use of established theory, the quality of dialogue, and the analytical strategy. This perspective suggests that sample adequacy should be evaluated in relation to the contribution that the available data can make to the research questions, rather than solely by the number of participants.

In the present study, the final sample of 72 women provided a substantial body of qualitative material for examining the relationship between tourism, gendered social expectations, and self-understanding. The inclusion of women from different age groups enabled the researcher to explore similarities and differences across life stages. The decision to expand recruitment among older women was particularly important in broadening the range of perspectives available for comparative analysis.

Nevertheless, the size of the sample should not be interpreted as evidence that every possible experience or meaning associated with Chinese women's tourism has been captured. Nor does the study claim that saturation was established at a particular interview number through a formal stopping rule. Instead, sample adequacy is considered in relation to the relevance of the recruited participants, the scope of the research questions, and the capacity of the dataset to support a contextualised and theoretically informed interpretation.

This position is consistent with the constructivist orientation of the study, which recognises that qualitative knowledge remains situated, interpretive, and open to further development. The 72 interviews therefore provide an empirical foundation for the analysis without implying that the experiences of Chinese women can be exhaustively represented by a single qualitative sample.

3.8 Data collection

Data collection was undertaken through semi-structured interviews with 72 Chinese women who had tourism experience. The interviews were intended to explore how participants understood their travel experiences and how these experiences related to their perceptions of self, family responsibilities, gender roles, and future life possibilities.

Participant recruitment initially took place through Douyin and Xiaohongshu, two widely used Chinese social media platforms. These channels enabled the researcher to reach women who were willing to participate in discussions of tourism and personal experience. Most participants were recruited through these two platforms, although an exact numerical breakdown by platform is not available from the information currently established.

During the recruitment process, the researcher encountered difficulties in obtaining sufficient participation from women aged 50 and above through these digital channels. Compared with the recruitment of younger participants, attracting older women to participate through the initial online approach proved more challenging. This observation concerned the recruitment process itself and should not be interpreted as evidence that all older Chinese women are unwilling to engage in online activities or research.

In response, personal-network referrals were introduced as an additional recruitment strategy for women aged 50 and above. This allowed the researcher to approach potential participants through established social connections and extend recruitment beyond the original social-media channels. The adjustment was made to strengthen the representation of later-life experiences within the qualitative dataset.

The recruitment experience also highlighted a broader methodological issue: access to participants is shaped by the social and technological contexts in which research takes place. Online recruitment may offer opportunities to reach a wide range of participants, but it can also produce unequal patterns of participation across demographic groups. The decision to supplement social-media recruitment with personal referrals was therefore both a practical response to recruitment difficulties and an important methodological adjustment.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format that allowed the researcher to address the principal research questions while remaining responsive to participants' individual experiences. The interview guide covered topics including travel motivations, travel decision-making, emotional experiences during tourism, relationships with family members, understandings of gender expectations, and reflections on personal identity after returning from travel.

The semi-structured approach was particularly appropriate because participants' experiences could not always be expressed through fixed or predetermined categories. Some women described tourism primarily as an opportunity for relaxation or temporary relief from everyday obligations, whereas others reflected on the relationship between travel, personal

autonomy, marriage, career development, and family responsibilities. The interview format allowed these different interpretations to be explored without requiring participants to adopt a particular understanding of empowerment or identity transformation.

The interviews were conducted by the researcher, either face-to-face or remotely, according to participants' circumstances and preferences. The interviews were recorded, and the resulting material was transcribed and checked in preparation for qualitative analysis.

Ethical considerations were incorporated into the interview process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and their rights as participants. Particular attention was given to confidentiality and to the sensitive nature of discussions concerning family expectations, marriage, emotional experiences, and gender relations. The interview setting should be such that participants are able to express their experiences without feeling pressured to disclose information they are reluctant to share. The interview process was also understood as an interaction in which meanings were articulated and developed. Consistent with feminist epistemology and constructivist qualitative inquiry, participants' accounts were not treated merely as factual descriptions of tourism behaviour. Instead, they were understood as situated narratives through which women reflected on their lives and interpreted their experiences.

Following data collection, the interview transcripts formed the empirical material for thematic analysis. The analytical process focused on identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning across accounts, while remaining attentive to differences and contradictions between participants.

3.9 Data analysis

The data analysis was conducted through thematic analysis, supported by NVivo qualitative data analysis software. This analytical approach was selected because it provided a flexible means of examining recurring patterns of meaning across participants' narratives while remaining compatible with the study's constructivist research paradigm and feminist epistemological orientation.

Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as a theoretically flexible approach to qualitative research that can be applied within different epistemological frameworks. This flexibility was particularly valuable for the present study, which sought to interpret women's tourism experiences in relation to personal reflection, gendered social expectations, family relationships, and the development of subjectivity.

The analytical approach was informed by Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, comprising familiarisation with the data, coding, generating initial themes, developing and reviewing themes, refining and naming themes, and producing the written analysis. These phases provided a methodological orientation rather than a rigid, mechanical sequence. The analytical process involved the interpretation of relationships between participants' accounts and the wider socio-cultural context in which those experiences were situated.

3.9.1 Coding and the Use of NVivo

NVivo was used to support the organisation, coding, comparison, and thematic development of the interview data. Its principal function was to assist the researcher in managing the

qualitative material and examining relationships among different aspects of participants' narratives.

The first analytical activity involved engagement with the interview transcripts to identify material relevant to the research questions. The researcher then coded segments of interview text that concerned participants' tourism experiences, emotional responses, perceptions of gender roles, family relationships, and reflections on self-understanding.

These coded segments were organised through nodes in NVivo. The use of nodes enabled related material from different interviews to be grouped and retrieved for further examination. This organisation facilitated the comparison of participants' accounts and supported the identification of recurring issues and differences within the dataset.

Coding was not treated as a purely descriptive process in which statements were assigned to fixed categories. Instead, it provided a means of organising the interview material for further interpretation. The analytical significance of a coded passage depended not only on its content but also on its relationship to the participant's broader narrative and the research questions.

The researcher subsequently compared coded material across interviews to examine commonalities, differences, and potential relationships among categories. These comparisons were important because women did not necessarily interpret similar tourism experiences in the same way. Experiences associated with freedom, relaxation, independence, or family responsibilities could acquire different meanings depending on participants' life circumstances and social expectations.

NVivo supported the management and retrieval of relevant material during these comparisons. However, the software did not independently generate interpretations or determine the study's themes. Decisions about the significance of patterns and their relationships to the research questions remained the responsibility of the researcher.

3.9.2 Theme Development

Following coding and comparison, the researcher developed broader analytical themes by examining relationships among coded accounts and considering their significance within the study's theoretical framework.

The development of themes involved moving beyond the description of individual interview responses to consider what recurring patterns revealed about women's relationships with tourism, gendered expectations, and personal identity.

For example, accounts of relaxation, temporary freedom, and relief from everyday obligations could be interpreted in relation to tourism as a space for emotional respite and reflection. Similarly, narratives concerning family responsibilities, marriage expectations, or personal decision-making could inform the analysis of how women negotiated social roles and reassessed their priorities.

Such examples illustrate the distinction between individual codes and broader analytical themes. Whereas codes organised material relevant to particular experiences or issues, themes provided an interpretive explanation of the patterns and relationships identified across participants' accounts.

The development of themes was informed by the research questions and by the study's theoretical sensitivity to gendered social structures, emotional experiences, and subjectivity. Particular attention was given to the possibility that tourism-related reflection did not necessarily produce immediate behavioural or structural change. This distinction was important in avoiding an overly simplified interpretation of tourism as an automatically empowering experience.

The analytical process therefore sought to preserve both shared patterns and differences among participants' narratives. Contradictions between experiences of personal freedom and continuing family obligations were not treated as problems requiring elimination. Instead, they provided opportunities to consider the conditional and negotiated character of women's self-understanding.

3.9.3 Theoretical Interpretation and Researcher Reflexivity

The interpretation of themes was guided by the constructivist and feminist epistemological positions established earlier in this chapter. Within this framework, themes were not understood as objective facts automatically emerging from the interview transcripts. They were developed through the researcher's engagement with participants' accounts, the research questions, and the wider theoretical context.

This position is consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2021) emphasis on the interpretive character of thematic analysis. The researcher's analytical decisions were therefore recognised as central to the production of qualitative knowledge rather than as influences that could be entirely eliminated through software-assisted coding.

The analytical approach was also informed by the comparative and iterative orientation of Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theory. However, the study did not claim to have conducted a complete grounded theory analysis. Instead, it drew on constructivist principles of interpretation and comparison while using thematic analysis as its principal analytical method.

Researcher reflexivity was particularly important because the interpretation of women's narratives was necessarily influenced by theoretical assumptions and sensitivity to gendered social expectations. The researcher's understanding of issues such as marriage, family obligations, independence, and personal development could shape the significance attributed to participants' accounts.

Rather than claiming complete neutrality, the study recognised the researcher's role in the interpretive process. As further discussed in Section 3.10, feminist epistemology requires researchers to consider how their own social positions and perspectives influence the production and interpretation of knowledge.

The purpose of thematic analysis was therefore not simply to identify frequently discussed topics, but to develop a coherent explanation of how women understood tourism in relation to their identities and social circumstances.

Through coding, the organisation of nodes, comparison, and thematic interpretation, the analysis provided the empirical and conceptual foundation for examining how tourism may contribute to women's self-reflection and the negotiation of subjectivity within the social and cultural conditions of contemporary China.

The resulting themes informed the findings and discussion presented in the subsequent chapters, in which tourism is considered not merely as a form of leisure consumption but as a social practice through which women's relationships with themselves, their families, and wider gender expectations may be reconsidered.

3.10 Ethical considerations

First, this study sought to ensure that the privacy and privacy rights of participants were fully respected. During the collection of personal information, multiple measures were adopted to prevent disclosure of participants' identities. Any data containing personal identifiers were strictly protected and used solely for research and academic writing purposes. At the same time, the author informed participants about the information collected and stored and obtained their informed consent. However, feminist research holds that genuine informed consent is not a one-time document signing but must be continuously reaffirmed and confirmed throughout the research process. Therefore, this study adopts the ethical principle of dynamic informed consent. Before each interview, the researcher clearly explained the purpose of the study, the interview content, the potential risks, and participants' rights, and emphasised that participation was entirely voluntary and could be withdrawn at any stage without explanation.

During the interview, the author continued to observe participants' emotional states and narrative boundaries. When participants showed evident discomfort while discussing family conflicts or personal difficulties, the author initiated a pause, changed the topic, or reconfirmed whether they were willing to continue. This respect for participants' boundaries is a concrete expression of the ethic of care in feminist ethics. In addition, the University of Waikato research ethics require that no physical or psychological harm come to participants during the study. This meant that issues and topics likely to evoke unpleasant emotions required empathy and were often avoided when necessary, and the author was prepared to suspend an interview if required, either temporarily or permanently. In short, every effort was made to comply with good practice while respecting participants' feelings and rights.

3.11 Researcher's Positionality and Reflexivity

Researcher positionality and reflexivity are particularly important in qualitative research grounded in feminist epistemology and constructivist inquiry. From these perspectives, knowledge is not produced independently of the researcher but is shaped through interactions between the researcher, participants, and the wider social and cultural contexts in which the research takes place (Harding, 1995; Hesse-Biber, 2014). Consequently, the researcher's social position, cultural familiarity, educational background, and theoretical assumptions may influence both the production and interpretation of interview data.

In the present study, the researcher's familiarity with Chinese cultural contexts provided an important basis for understanding participants' references to family expectations, marriage, intergenerational obligations, and gendered social norms. This familiarity may have facilitated communication and supported the interpretation of culturally specific expressions and experiences. Nevertheless, cultural familiarity does not necessarily imply shared perspectives or experiences. Differences in age, educational background, family circumstances, and life histories may influence how participants understand tourism, independence, and personal identity.

Feminist standpoint theory provides an important framework for considering these issues. Harding (1995) argues that knowledge is socially situated and that individuals' positions within social relations influence how they understand and interpret the world. However, the recognition of situated knowledge does not suggest that all women share a single standpoint. In this research, participants' experiences were understood as diverse and potentially contradictory, reflecting differences in their relationships with gendered social structures.

Reflexivity was particularly relevant when interpreting participants' accounts of tourism as a potential source of freedom, independence, or personal transformation. There was a risk that the researcher's theoretical interest in women's subjectivity could encourage interpretations that emphasised empowerment while overlooking experiences of continuity, accommodation, or limited change. To address this interpretive concern, the analysis sought to remain attentive to accounts in which participants described tourism primarily as relaxation, temporary emotional relief, or an experience that did not substantially alter their everyday responsibilities.

The recruitment process also required reflexive consideration. Initial recruitment through Douyin and Xiaohongshu resulted in comparatively limited participation among women aged 50 and above. The subsequent use of personal-network referrals broadened participation within this age group but also introduced potential limitations associated with recruitment through existing social relationships. Recognising these differences was important for understanding how the sampling process may have shaped the range of perspectives represented in the study.

Reflexivity was also relevant during the coding and thematic interpretation of interview material. Although NVivo supported the organisation, coding, and comparison of participants' narratives, the identification and interpretation of meaningful patterns remained dependent on the researcher's analytical decisions. The development of themes therefore involved an interpretive relationship between empirical material, research questions, and theoretical understanding.

The aim of reflexivity was not to eliminate the researcher's influence, which would be inconsistent with the constructivist framework of the study, but to recognise how this influence could shape the interpretation of participants' accounts. This position is consistent with feminist epistemology, which emphasises the importance of recognising the situated nature of knowledge and the power relations involved in research.

Overall, the researcher's positionality was understood as both a resource and a potential limitation. Cultural familiarity supported engagement with participants' experiences, while differences in social position and theoretical expectations required continued interpretive caution. By acknowledging these considerations, the study sought to develop a more transparent and contextually grounded understanding of how Chinese women interpret tourism in relation to their self-perceptions, social roles, and subjectivity.

Chapter 4 Results

4.1 Results

4.1.1 Age

This study aims to examine the role of tourism in the self-awareness and identity reconstruction of Chinese women, with particular attention to the life experiences, gender concepts, marriage and child-rearing attitudes, and personal development trajectories of contemporary women aged 21 to 55 years. Through semi-structured interviews with 72 women and systematic qualitative coding using NVivo, 13 first-level codes and 31 second-level nodes were ultimately identified. These categories include personal information, tourism impacts, gender role concepts, policy perceptions, female fertility, tourism behaviour, gender equality issues, understandings of independent women, and marriage. Based on dialogues with 72 women, the complex interaction between tourism practices and female identity construction in Chinese society becomes increasingly evident. The interview data indicate that tourism plays a significant role in shaping women's self-awareness. Specifically, 20 of the 72 respondents described travel as a "respite space", enabling them to temporarily disengage from family expectations, workplace pressures, and everyday social constraints. During travel, a smaller proportion of women, specifically 3 of 72, reported reconsidering the "meaning of life", reflecting on their withdrawal from roles such as "daughter", "worker", or "wife", and experiencing a degree of freedom and self-determination. However, this reconfiguration does not constitute a complete subversion; rather, it represents a "reflection in the loosening".

To clarify this finding, it appears that these women have not completely broken away from the patriarchal system, but have instead questioned it, struggled with it, and even partially resisted it. In addition, gender role concepts underwent subtle but important changes during travel. Some women observed practices of gender equality in different cultural contexts and then began to reflect on the gender discipline they had inherited. In particular, solo travellers were more likely to develop the self-awareness that "I can do everything independently", thereby promoting heightened gender consciousness. Moreover, some women came to recognise their "passive" position within the marriage and fertility system by comparing domestic and foreign social systems and gender policies, which strengthened their demand for gender equality and autonomy.

China's marriage and child-rearing policies have undergone substantial and significant changes, particularly over the past three decades and especially since approximately 2015. These changes have generated considerable public debate and remain contentious within Chinese society (Yu et al., 2024). Accordingly, the interviews addressed policy assumptions and explored respondents' understandings of marriage and child-rearing. The interviewed women were generally critical of China's recent marriage and child-rearing policies, such as policies encouraging multiple births and the marriage cooling-off period. Many believed that the state has implemented new forms of instrumental discipline for women in the name of the "population dividend" or "traditional family values", so that women not only bear workplace pressures but are also unable to escape the responsibilities of marriage and child-rearing. The contradiction between this policy orientation and personal aspirations prompts women to express more clearly their preference for "no marriage and infertility" or "late marriage and

late childbearing". Travel is thus becoming one way for them to escape social norms and contest the allocation of time and space. At the same time, the study also reveals an important dimension: tourism behaviour itself reflects and shapes women's identities.

Several women stated that independent travel gave them a stronger sense of autonomy, whereas many others used travel primarily to relieve stress rather than to engage in deeper self-questioning or self-recognition. This difference suggests that the varying forms and motivations of tourism reflect women's distinct strategies for self-development, negotiation with social norms, and construction of gender identity, which are differentiated and context dependent. It is worth noting that "independent women" are not a monolithic category. In the respondents' understanding, independence no longer means "strong" alone, but rather having the right to choose, make decisions, and refuse. This shift in meaning demonstrates the dynamic process of identity negotiation among contemporary Chinese women between tradition and modernity. This chapter will analyse 78 secondary codes under 9 themes in sequence, and the interview content will be expanded and examined in detail below.

Table 4.1 Nature of the Sample

Variable	Classification	Number	Percent
Age	21 to 30 years old	36	50
	31 to 50 years old (including 50)	21	29
	Over 50 years old	15	21
Education	College	12	17
	Undergraduate degree	40	55
	Master's degree	18	25
	Doctorate	2	2
Marital Status	Married	22	30
	Unmarried	48	66
	Divorced	2	2

Note: Numbers do not add to 100% due to rounding.

Age serves as a proxy for generational differences within the Chinese population, with each cohort shaped by markedly different young adult experiences, as noted above. The study sample comprised 72 women, with 36 participants aged 21 to 30 years (50.00%), 21 participants aged 31 to 50 years (29.17%), and 15 participants aged over 50 years (20.83%). Compared with broader tourism trends in China, industry data indicate that middle-aged women constitute the largest share of female travellers (62.2%), followed by younger women (28.5%), whereas women over 50 account for only 9.3%, although this group is growing rapidly (China Daily, 2024). This comparison suggests that younger women are overrepresented in the present sample, while older women are also more prominently represented than in the general tourism population, thereby enabling a more balanced examination of generational differences.

Among women aged 21 to 30 years, tourism primarily serves the functions of "phased rupture" and "individual rehearsal". Most women in this group are at the point of completing their studies, entering the workforce, or confronting pressures related to marriage and romantic relationships. Their motivation for travel is often not limited to "relaxation" or "entertainment", but includes a deliberate postponement of, and strategic escape from, social

expectations such as stable employment, marriage, and childbearing. For example, one participant (26 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, “My mother said that I should be married by the age of 27 or 28. Every time I travel, I feel as if I am competing with this expectation. I want to live my own life before the age of 30.” Such young women recognise, through travel, the possibility of reordering the dominant life course. They explore possible careers, establish their own lifestyles, and question traditional gender norms such as “must get married” and “must have children.”

At the same time, differences in how travel is understood across age groups also reflect the intergenerational evolution of identity. In the 31 to 50-year-old group, tourism is more often associated with “reaffirmation” and “psychological repair”. At this stage, women have often experienced marriage and workplace instability, and life roles have become more deeply entrenched; their travel thus resembles a form of “midlife mediation.” Ms. W1 (35, divorced, with one son) travelled alone to Qingdao and other coastal cities during the divorce cooling-off period. She said, “I had been bound by marriage for many years, and after having children, I had no intention of travelling. This marriage made me lose myself. On this trip, I felt an unprecedented sense of release in body and mind by the sea.” For women in this age group, tourism does not necessarily subvert identity in a radical way; rather, it provides a space to release tension and to create breathing room for a female self-long positioned as “other.”

It is particularly noteworthy that only three respondents in this study were over 50 years old. Their travel experiences show a “late awakening of selfhood.” Ms. Y (52 years old, junior college, married, with children) said, “When I was young, I was busy earning money and raising children. At that time, the children were the most important thing. Now that my child has grown up, I am free. I do not need anyone’s consent to do what I want.” After retirement, she began undertaking “retaliatory” travel, taking short- or long-distance trips every few months. Her account not only reflects tourism’s empowering function in the self-recognition and self-reconstruction of women in this age group, but also reveals the interaction among age, gender, and social roles. For her, travel is an important way to alleviate empty-nest anxiety and to resist the narrative of “passive aging.”

Across age groups, this study found a clear intergenerational differentiation in women’s meanings of tourism. Women aged 21 to 30 years tend to regard tourism as a mechanism of “active rupture” and “future rehearsal”, a tool for self-formation in a competitive modern society. Women aged 31 to 50 years more often view it as a means of “role separation”, whereas women over 50 years re-examine the body through tourism, producing a symbolic reconstruction of “relief” and greater control over later life. This intergenerational difference is also reflected in travel modes and behaviours. Younger women are more likely to travel alone, emphasising “I can do it alone.” For example, Ms. D (29 years old, doctor, unmarried) said, “Travelling alone is a little scary, but the limits are wide, and the sense of control and freedom is very strong.” Middle-aged women prefer to travel in pairs or join established group tours, emphasising safety and convenience. For example, Ms. A (32 years old, undergraduate, married) said, “It is very convenient for me to sign up for a group trip, saving a lot of time and energy. As long as I follow the tour guide, I can save worries and effort and still have a good time.” Older women such as Ms. G (53 years old, junior college, divorced) said, “There are not many restrictions when travelling on my own. You do not need to care about other people’s faces or moods. The most important thing is to be happy.” Against the

background of weakening social control and stronger self-discipline, they actively reshape the meaning of life through tourism.

From the perspective of gender socialisation, women of different ages receive varying degrees of discipline and training within family, education, and marriage, and they also differ in their capacity to "escape" and "reflect." Young women are in a formative stage of identity construction, and society's expectations regarding "who they should be" are especially salient for them. This makes their travel heavily charged with cultural meaning and psychological significance. Tourism has thus become an important means through which they question, resist, or postpone social scripts. By contrast, older women are more often treated as "accumulators of experience" and possess greater certainty about their life trajectories, so travel becomes a means of redefining their future lives. In addition, the intergenerational effects of tourism are shaped by family background and social change. For the generation born after reform and opening up, family control over children, especially only children, has gradually weakened, while economic independence and expanded access to education have created conditions for young women to participate in "self-defined tourism." D1 (23 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) stated: "My parents do not interfere much in my travel and even support me to go out. I think my generation is lucky." By contrast, middle-aged and older women were more strongly shaped by traditional discipline during upbringing, and the constraints of social institutions on their behaviour and roles are more deeply rooted. For them, travel is often a breakthrough, rather than a behaviour established naturally from childhood.

In summary, age is not only a physiological indicator, but also a social structural variable that directly shapes women's cognitive construction of themselves and others in the world. As a modern social practice, tourism plays different roles and functions in the lives of women across age groups. It is not only an individual response to life-course transitions, but also an expression of intergenerational change in women's consciousness. From "escaping" to "regaining", from "not being trapped" to "once silent", tourism in this study embodies the complex emotions and active processes of self-reconstruction among Chinese women of different ages as they confront gender discipline, age anxiety, and social expectations.

4.1.2 Education

As a key indicator of social stratification, this study shows that educational attainment has a significant effect on women's tourism behaviour and identity awakening. Among the women interviewed, 18 held master's degrees, accounting for 25%; 40 held bachelor's degrees, accounting for 55.56%; 12 held college degrees, accounting for 16.67%; and 2 held doctorates, accounting for 2.78%. Many also had overseas academic backgrounds. Women from different educational backgrounds exhibited clear stratification in travel motivation, cognitive level, agency, and the extent of identity reconstruction.

The study found that women with higher levels of education were more likely to regard travel as a "tool for self-growth" rather than as mere consumption. These women interpreted what they saw and heard during travel through a "critical" and "reflective" lens, and they examined their own situations within the broader social structure. For example, Ms. F (30 years old, European doctorate, unmarried) said of her travel experience in Europe, "When I compared the living conditions of women in Italy and China, I suddenly realised that the idea of being a 'good wife and good mother' has kept us in a kind of comfort zone for far too long." She

transformed her observations during the trip into an opportunity to develop gender consciousness and chose, in her next relationship, to set marriage aside for the time being. Rather than treating marriage as the ultimate goal of love, she sought to reshape her established life. In contrast, although undergraduate women were not devoid of critical awareness, they were more constrained by structural comfort and were more easily influenced by social trends. For many of them, tourism became a "buffer mechanism" rather than a "space for change." Ms. C (30 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said, "Traveling in modern society is a way for people to relax. For me, it is a pause. I don't think so much. I just don't want to get married. I don't want to listen to my family's urging to get married. And now many people also say that the original marriage was primarily just to find support. Now there is no infertility without marriage. Peace." For them, tourism is more a response to dissatisfaction with existing life and a temporary escape from its pressures than an occasion for independent reflection on gender, institutional, and social norms.

Although the number of respondents with college degrees was small, most did not describe tourism as a process of "self-reconstruction" or discuss its relation to women's consciousness. Instead, their attitudes reflected the characteristics of "subordinate tourism," that is, participation in tourism as a companion or family member rather than as an autonomous choice. Ms. Y (52 years old, junior college, married, and childbearing) said, "My child wanted to go out for a trip after the college entrance examination, and my husband also said that the family had not gone out much, so I agreed. For me, I mainly want to take my children out. I don't have any idea of travelling." This response suggests that limited travel experience may indicate greater dependence on others, which in turn reflects the possibility that women with lower educational attainment have a more limited view of tourism's potential and find it difficult to achieve a breakthrough in self-positioning through travel. This phenomenon is closely related to Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the reproduction of cultural capital. Education not only improves information acquisition and cognitive ability but also reshapes women's understanding of the relationship between self and society. In travel settings, highly educated women demonstrate stronger narrative and reflective capacities, and they are more likely to socialize travel experience, that is, to distil social meaning and structural issues from individual experience. For example, Ms. C (30 years old, master's degree, unmarried) found that the local working environment and atmosphere, as well as the tolerance toward women traveling alone in Budapest, were very high. She therefore reflected on the narrative basis of the idea in Chinese society that "going out is dangerous" for women. She stated, "It's not that we can't travel alone, but since ancient times, society tells us that we can't." The influence of education on attitudes toward tourism is also evident in behavioural differences. The master's group is more inclined to travel alone or engage in in-depth travel, such as backpacking and culturally immersive experiences; the undergraduate group prefers short-distance or goal-oriented leisure travel; and the junior college and below groups mainly travel in groups, emphasizing safety and convenience.

The choice of travel mode actually reflects differences in subjective assessments of self-capacity and perceptions of social risk. The greater the perceived capacity, the more able women are to manage uncertainty, and the more likely they are to develop identity reconstruction during travel. During the interviews, some graduate women also described the connection between tourism and career development. Ms. V (26 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said, "Once when I was traveling in Yunnan, I came into contact with the cultural

and creative industry. After coming back, I decided to make some handicrafts after finishing my work." For her, tourism is not only a spatial shift, but also a reconfiguration of cognitive frameworks and professional identity. This trend is also evident in the undergraduate group, but it appears mostly as ideas rather than actions. Ms. Z (27 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, "I also wanted to find inspiration during the trip and change my career direction, but the reality is too stressful. My parents don't support me, and I don't have the courage." From the perspective of gender structure, the higher the level of education, the more likely women are to recognize their "identity dilemma" in travel and to possess the capacity to reimagine themselves. They are less likely to define themselves as "daughters, wives, or mothers" who serve others, and more likely to understand themselves as subjects, individuals with the right to independence, decision-making, and life planning. This transformation in self-awareness is not caused directly by tourism itself but is activated through travel and supported by educational capital.

Education also affects women's ability to interpret policy discourse. The graduate group's understanding of, and critical attitude toward, the "marriage cooling-off period" and the "three-child policy" is relatively moderate rather than radical. For example, Ms. H (26 years old, master's degree, unmarried) pointed out: "The policy is superficially concerned about fertility, but in fact it is the state's excessive interference with women's bodies and life trajectory, reflecting the structural patriarchal logic. However, this kind of policy is only relatively simple and needs to be further improved, and it may be better after improvement." Although women with lower educational attainment are dissatisfied, they tend to make more emotional comments, lack systematic thinking and linguistic expression, and their views are also more radical.

4.1.3 marital status

Marital status is not only a social label, but also a dimension deeply embedded in the self-perception and social interaction of Chinese women. Among the 72 respondents in this study, unmarried women accounted for the clear majority, with 48 respondents, or 66.67%; 22 were married, accounting for 30.56%; and 2 were divorced, accounting for 2.78%. This distribution not only reflects younger women's hesitation about, and reconsideration of, the marriage system, but also reveals the multiple meanings of marriage in women's travel behaviour and identity construction.

First, for unmarried women, travel has become a temporary space of withdrawal under the pressure of marriage and education. Many respondents stated that they travelled to avoid blind dates or family pressure to marry. For example, Ms. J2 (28 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said, "I didn't go home for the Spring Festival this year just to escape the serial marriage of my seventh and eighth aunts." Her statement shows that marriage has traditionally been, and remains, not a life choice made by women independently, but an expectation and form of social and familial supervision imposed on women to fulfil prescribed gender roles. Under such pressure, tourism becomes a space for self-determination, and geographical mobility counters compulsory social and cultural arrangements. In contemporary Chinese society, there is also a growing tendency toward "de-marriage." For example, Ms. P (23 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said after a solo trip, "I found that I could do a lot of things alone without feeling lonely. It doesn't seem so important whether you get married or not." Her narrative reflects a gradual shift in identity,

from a traditional expected female role to an independent individual identity. She came to recognise that marriage is not a necessity in life. In her view, marriage is no longer taken for granted, but is a system that can be chosen, delayed, or even rejected.

However, in practice, the travel motivations and psychological states of married women are far more complex. On the one hand, women generally bear greater responsibility for caregiving and the role pressures of family life. On the other hand, they also aspire to live "for themselves." Ms. R (33 years old, undergraduate, married) said, "I went to Yunnan alone for more than ten days, not to play, but to take a breath. In marriage, I haven't lived for myself for too long." In her narrative, being alone became a necessary means of suspending social roles, and an important way for her to balance family responsibilities with personal existence. Marriage is not the endpoint of identity formation, but rather a process that requires continual negotiation and adjustment. However, not all married women can realise resistance to, or transcendence of, marital structures through tourism. Some respondents said they still needed the approval of their husbands and families to travel, and they had to bear social expectations associated with being a married mother. Ms. Z2 (33 years old, undergraduate, married) explained in an interview: "Sometimes I need to communicate, negotiate, and explain to my family why I can't take care of my children when I go out. My mother-in-law will think that I don't care about my family." In the travel experiences of such respondents, there is always a sense of pressure from the perspective of others. Their freedom to travel is obtained at the cost of obedience, explanation, negotiation, and even guilt. This indicates that marriage is not only an emotional relationship, but also a set of gender inequalities embedded in the social system.

Notably, the travel experience of divorced women is the most fraught. Their travel often has three functions: healing, reconstruction, and reflection. Ms. W1 (35 years old, undergraduate, divorced, with a son) travelled to Qingdao and other coastal cities after a short marriage, which is one such example. She said, "I have proved that I can live well without marriage." Through physical movement and psychological reconstruction during the journey, she achieved a renewal of self-identity. Travel is no longer merely spatial movement, but also an active response to, and resistance against, the label "I have a failed marriage, and I am a failed woman."

Although the travel behaviour and its significance for women in the three marital-status groups described above differ, they all indicate that marriage remains a highly normative, oppressive, and malleable factor in Chinese women's lives. Women's continuous interaction, struggle, negotiation, and even contestation with the marital identities assigned by society during travel reflect their process of subjectification within the gender order. From a theoretical perspective, this study further confirms Judith Butler's (1990) argument that gender identity is not an established fact, but a construct formed through continuous practice. Marriage is not a simple civil contract; rather, it is a symbolic system and a focal point of the state-family-gender trinity training mechanism (Li, 2022). In tourism, women indirectly redefine the social meaning of marriage by renegotiating behavioural boundaries, emotional belonging, and life rhythms, and no longer regard marriage as the sole destination in life. In addition, marital status is closely related to women's perceptions of policy. Many unmarried women are highly aware of the implications of the country's marriage and child-rearing incentive policies. Ms. K2 (24 years old, junior college, unmarried) said, "I won't get married. Now these policies of the country can fully see who is in the vested interests, which

is completely unfavourable to good women." Married women, by contrast, are more likely to assess the practical role of the system from their own experience. For example, Ms. T (26 years old, undergraduate, married) said, "Now China's ageing is increasingly serious, and everyone needs to work hard to have children. The system doesn't care who you are; it only cares about whether you give birth or not. Divorced people don't pay much attention to these." It can be seen that marital status not only affects the possibility of women's travel, but also profoundly shapes their identity, social roles, and life strategies. Tourism has become a channel through which women move both within and beyond the marriage system. On the one hand, it offers escape; on the other hand, it facilitates reconstruction. During travel, women continuously assess life possibilities beyond marriage and engage in an internal dialogue about who they are, whether they must marry, and how they define happiness.

4.2 The influence of tourism

4.2.1 Self-awareness

The impact of tourism on Chinese women is not merely related to geographical mobility or emotional release; more importantly, it activates a psychological mechanism through which women reappraise themselves during travel. Among the 72 respondents in this study, 52 (86%) explicitly reported experiencing varying degrees of self-repositioning or a shock of self-awareness during their trips, indicating the breadth and centrality of tourism as a mechanism for fostering personal self-awareness within the structure of Chinese women's experiences.

In the narratives of the interviewed women, the most immediate trigger of travel was a renewed understanding of their own abilities and independence. Ms. O (28 years old, master's degree, unmarried) travelled alone once. She stated, "It was the first time I encountered a flight that was cancelled because of weather conditions. For the first time, I booked a room, navigated, and negotiated in a different place, and I found that I was not the child who always needed to be taken care of." This unfamiliar environment constituted a critical moment for the reconstruction of women's self-awareness through the active subjective experience generated by responding to challenges. During the journey, they gradually shed passive social identities such as obedient daughters, employees awaiting arrangements, and women waiting for marriage, and moved toward the recognition that "I can decide who I am." Some respondents even regarded travel as a site of awareness awakening. Ms. F (30 years old, doctor, unmarried) visited a women's art exhibition in Florence. She said, "I suddenly realized that we have always been taught to be good girls, but we have never been encouraged to express our anger." Travel exposed her to issues she would not have confronted in daily life and also dismantled her stereotyped understanding of "qualified women".

This process is not simple information acquisition, but rather a reflective loosening of long-standing gender regulation. The presentation of alternative female identities in tourism provides a new mirror image, thereby prompting a repositioning of "who I am." However, this cognitive transformation is not uniform across all women. The study found that women with different educational backgrounds, economic resources, and levels of family support experienced markedly different processes of self-awareness reconstruction. Ms. Q (21 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, "I just need to follow my boyfriend, and I don't have to

worry about anything else." Her statement suggests that, in the absence of independent space and reflective consciousness, tourism has difficulty stimulating deep self-awareness. This indicates that whether tourism can become a platform for self-reconstruction still depends heavily on an individual's social capital, cultural capital, and gender socialization background. In some cases, women even interpret self-awareness during travel as an indirect critique of reality. Ms. R (33 years old, undergraduate, married) said in an interview, "I used to feel that I was emotionally unstable and that it was my fault. But during the trip, I found that I did not have a problem; rather, I was too repressed." Through tourism, she recognised the release of the self-pathologising label and transformed long-term internalised self-blame into a questioning of gender expectations.

This psychological shift is not only a form of emotional healing, but also a reconstruction of meaning within a cultural context. At the same time, many women reinterpreted the connotations of happiness and success while travelling. Ms. U (27 years old, undergraduate, unmarried), who travelled in Tibet, explained that she encountered a Tibetan woman there. She said, "She [the Tibetan woman] does farm work every day, but she is very happy. So, I think happiness may not be an annual salary of hundreds of thousands of yuan, nor a house or a car, but freedom and inner stability." This respondent disrupted her original "success narrative template" through travel and began to reevaluate her life path in broader and more internal terms, thereby developing a more flexible attitude toward social arrangements such as marriage, childbirth, and workplace participation. This process of self-awakening triggered by tourism can be understood as a manifestation of Foucault's concept of technologies of the self, through which individuals critically reflect upon and reconstruct their own subjectivity via specific practices such as travel (Foucault et al., 1988).

Travel is not only an escape, but also a training ground for transformative energy. During travel, individuals no longer passively accept identity; instead, they actively explore "who else can I be." In addition, changes in self-awareness are often manifested through renewed interaction with the outside world. Ms. A (32 years old, undergraduate, married) stated, "I am an introverted person. I was afraid of communicating with strangers, but when I was travelling, I was forced to talk with different people every day. When I came back, I felt more cheerful." This expansion of self-boundaries shows that travel is not only a process of introspection, but also a social practice through which one sees oneself through others. This process is also regarded as an important mechanism for achieving self-identity integration in psychology. However, not all changes in self-awareness persist after travel. Some women stated in interviews that the experience of awakening or independence during travel was quickly suppressed or denied after returning to reality. Ms. S (26 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, "I feel that I can control my life during the journey, but once I return to my original life trajectory, nothing has changed, so I cannot change it either." This suggests that the identity shock produced by tourism is indeed strong, but if it lacks sustained support from institutions, family, or the social environment, it can easily become a temporary illusion of self-transformation. As an intermittent interruption in daily life, travel provides women with a window to reexamine themselves. Within this window, they are temporarily outside the stage of gender discipline and can confront a real, fluid, and possible self. Whether through recognition of ability, shifts in values, or emotional recalibration, tourism continually prompts Chinese women to ask a long-repressed question: "Who am I? Who am I willing to be?" The

question itself constitutes a form of resistance, a form of gender awakening in a still and constrained social context.

4.2.2 New interests

"I found that what I like is not just watching the scenery." This simple statement by Ms. T1 (27 years old, master's degree, unmarried) reflects a psychological transformation experienced by many women during travel. In unfamiliar environments, removed from daily norms and the expectations of others, women can release suppressed interests, potentials, and desires, thereby developing a strong interest in activities, cultures, settings, or self-possibilities during the trip, and then attempting to redefine "who I want to be" in daily life. In this study, 32 respondents explicitly stated that they developed new interests or changed existing ones while travelling. These interests can be divided into three main categories: (1) physical interests, such as hiking, yoga, mountaineering, and surfing; (2) aesthetic interests, such as photography, handicrafts, painting, and clothing coordination; and (3) cultural interests, such as language learning, national culture, religious philosophy, historical geography, and related fields. These interests are not merely incidental to travel; rather, during travel, women's subjectivities are rediscovered through the dual decoding of space and social structure.

Such awakening through travel is based on a subtle balance between exposure to new places, behaviours, and "strangeness" and a sense of "controllability". In everyday life, women's interests are often suppressed, or prevented from emerging altogether, by family, marriage, romantic relationships, and workplace responsibilities. Ms. X (24 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, "I really wanted to study photography when I was a child, but my father said it was useless. Later, I saved money to buy myself a Canon. I took pictures during the trip and found that I still liked it very much." Such previously frustrated interests, reactivated in the non-utilitarian space of travel, not only awaken women's identification with a denied self, but also provide a basis for reshaping their lifestyles after travelling. For example, Ms. V (26 years old, master's degree, unmarried) developed a strong interest in Tang culture and religious philosophy after travelling in Xi'an. She said, "After returning to Beijing, I began to study the history of the Tang Dynasty and also tried to meditate and read oriental philosophy. My values have really changed." In her account, tourism is not only a site of knowledge expansion, but also a starting point for spiritual migration. This kind of interest is no longer a temporary hobby, but a new bridge between real life and deeper cultural identity.

In addition, some women have achieved a fundamental shift in their career paths or lifestyles through interests generated by travel. Ms. K (29 years old, master's degree, unmarried) first encountered NGO organisations and participated in volunteer work during her trip to Nepal. After returning to China, she resigned and entered a field related to public welfare communication. She recalled, "In the past, I thought I could only survive in the office, but that trip showed me social significance and human relationships." Here, interest is no longer a marginalised private experience, but an intermediary for reconstructing personal identity and social structure. Moreover, shared interests also create new social bonds among women. Some respondents formed interest-based groups and social circles through travel, gradually moving beyond networks centred on family and workplace roles, and developing new forms of social support for self-realisation. The formation of this community of interests not only provides emotional support but also strengthens women's awareness of the legitimacy of their

own life choices. The new interests arising from tourism can be regarded as a micro-sovereign practice. They may appear unrelated to institutional structures, yet they enhance women's capacity to choose and define themselves in everyday life. According to Bourdieu (1986), interest is not only an individual choice, but also an extension of cultural capital. The new interests gained and sustained through travel actually constitute women's nonviolent resistance to mainstream lifestyles. This enables women to construct an interest-oriented life trajectory outside dominant social norms and to achieve a rupture and reorganisation between social expectations and personal aspirations.

However, not all new interests inspired by travel can be successfully translated into life changes. After returning to daily life, some women face work pressure, family responsibilities, and economic burdens, making it difficult to sustain their interests over time. Ms. Z (27 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, "When I was travelling in Xi'an, I was obsessed with making ancient jewellery. After I returned home, I also bought materials and planned to make some to see if I could sell it as a side job, but I was too busy with work and did not have much time to do it." The transience of this interest shows that transforming interest into a lifestyle requires structural support, such as time autonomy, economic independence, and emotional space, which are precisely the scarcest resources for most women in daily life. The new interests formed during travel are not expendable accessories, but important clues through which women regain subjectivity in lived space. The embodiment of dozens of their dynamics may also become the seed of lifestyle change. From "what I like" to "what kind of life can I live," new interests can guide women to explore the boundaries of identity and future possibilities.

4.2.3 Ability recognition

Ability recognition is one of the important dimensions that constitute women's subject consciousness. Under the background of the long-term solidification of the gender division of labour in middle class society, women are often instilled with role expectations such as "need to be relied on" and "need to be taken care of" in the process of growing up, which leads to the inhibition of many women's cognition of their own abilities. Even before experiencing specific challenges, they acquiesce that they are in physical strength, sense of direction, negotiation ability, inferior to men in terms of stress resistance and other aspects. However, this study shows that tourism may largely break women's existing cognitive patterns of ability and provide a key opportunity to reshape their sense of self-efficacy. Of the 72 respondents, 29 clearly said that they had a new understanding of their abilities or had a subversive experience during the trip. The change of this ability and cognition mainly focusses on the following aspects: the ability to solve problems independently, the ability to self-protection and risk judgement, the ability to communicate cross-culturally, the ability to regulate emotions, and the ability to plan resources.

Most women have experienced the scene of solving problems by themselves while travelling, thus changing the inertial understanding of others in the past. Ms. O (28 years old, master's degree, unmarried) was forced to stay at the airport because of the flight change when travelling alone. She recalled: "It was the first time I took a plane and I was alone, so I panicked when there were some other changes in the itinerary, but I calmed down and tried to fight with the airport staff. After taking the rights and interests, I finally settled down in a hotel near the airport and spent the night, and changed the next day's flight, solving these

problems by myself. I never felt that I had this ability before." This kind of experience makes them psychologically build trust in their own ability, which is a typical process of self-efficacy improvement. The coping ability of some respondents in the face of sudden risks has also significantly changed their understanding of vulnerability. Ms. F (30 years old, European doctor, unmarried) overcame the language barrier and avoided tourists to establish friendly contacts during the European trip. She pointed out: "I found that I am not afraid to open my mouth, and I can communicate even if I don't know the language. This makes me more willing to take the initiative to express myself in the future, and I am no longer afraid of making mistakes." This self-expression in a cross-cultural context strengthens women's confidence in communication, coordination, and social participation. In addition to specific abilities, some women also realise that they have an elevated level of emotional management and stress regulation ability when travelling. Ms. J (30 years old, undergraduate, married) said, "In the process of climbing, I realised that my body was in a sub-healthy state and often felt uncomfortable. But you should also take a good rest calmly and hold on until you go down the mountain. Overcome my fear, go to the hospital by myself, deal with medical insurance, and buy medicine. In the entire process, I have been adjusting my emotions and telling myself that it's okay. Take your time and keep thinking rationally." This process not only verified her emergency response ability but also helped her reposition her psychological support role in family life.

Such reconstructions and ability recognition reflect women's 'de-role-isation' in travel. When they are no longer a mother, daughter, or spouse, but just a person, they passively or actively assume all decision-making responsibilities. This assumption of responsibility is the premise of capacity building, and it is also the growth opportunity that for them was often difficult to obtain in the family or workplace due to the gender division of labour in the past. Changes in ability perception not only change women's views on themselves but also affect their plans for their future lifestyle. For example, Ms. W (35 years old, divorced, having a son) said, "After I came back from travelling, I decided to live a good life with my son. I used to be afraid that I would not take good care of my son, but now I think it's completely fine." She no longer regards marriage or family as the only source of life support but regards personal ability as the core guarantee of future life stability. As a highly practical social behaviour, tourism plays a key role in the construction of women's ability and cognition. It provides women with the opportunity to withdraw from everyday gender roles, so that they can evaluate their potential through practice in unfamiliar situations and correct their cognitive bias in the process.

This cognitive reconstruction not only helps to improve women's subjectivity but also lays the psychological foundation for their future life choices and identity construction. Consequently, given this background of the increasing mobility of gender roles, tourism may be an effective tool for gender awareness and self-efficacy improvement, which deserves further attention and development in policy and social practice. However, there are also certain boundaries in the reshaping of ability cognition. Although there will be certain changes in individual ability cognition, the social evaluation system may not change accordingly. In real life, women still have to face the structural restrictions brought about by gender presets. Moreover, the change of ability cognition will also be affected by the way of travelling. The study found that women travelling alone are more likely to complete capacity building because their environment requires higher independence and self-judgement, while

it is more difficult for women to obtain a comprehensive cognitive experience when travelling in a group or dependent.

4.2.4 Preferences

In traditional Chinese culture, women's preferences have long occupied a space that is not encouraged for expression. Society places greater emphasis on whether women are virtuous, docile, and accommodating, rather than on what they genuinely like. As a result, many women grow up suppressing or disregarding their own interests and preferences and come to treat obedience as an automatic response. In the interviews for this study, 25 respondents stated clearly that they re-recognised their preferences during travel, including diet, daily rhythm, friendship patterns, spatial aesthetics, cultural acceptance, and other dimensions, and regarded this recognition as a critical point in returning to themselves.

By distancing women from the pressures of daily social life and routine obligations, travel provides a relatively autonomous experimental space in which they can try different lifestyles and forms of self-expression. Ms. J (30 years old, undergraduate, married) said, "I've always been interested in the outdoors, but my family and peers said that I don't look like a girl who likes this kind of activity. This trip confirmed that I really like being quietly in nature." This feedback suggests that many women's genuine preferences have long been constrained by external labels, and that travel enables them to listen again to their own choices without interference. In addition, many women made cognitive adjustments regarding their preferences for interpersonal communication during travel. For example, Ms. N (22 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, "I always thought I was an extrovert, but after travelling, I found that I actually prefer to act alone." Her self-perception changed gradually through a series of concrete interaction scenarios during travel. In an acquaintance society, women often shape their social personality in response to interactional expectations, whereas travel interrupts this mechanism and prompts them to confront their actual social preferences. Some women also found that their aesthetic preferences deviated from the traditional female image during travel. Ms. B (23 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, "My parents told me since I was a child that girls should be quiet, and I internalised this idea. I felt that I had to dress gently to fit the image of a girl. But when travelling abroad, I began to try different clothes, such as 'hot girl' outfits and workwear pants. I also wore heavier makeup, and I found that this is the style I really like." This change was not only an adjustment in outward appearance, but also the result of socially constructed expectations of femininity. Through the reaffirmation of preferences, these women moved further toward an independent definition of gender roles. Some participants also adjusted the pace of their work and daily lives through travel, reduced internalised social pressure, and gradually incorporated the preferences formed during travel into their life strategies. More importantly, some women discovered during travel that they disliked certain things, which is also an important form of self-awareness. Ms. N (22 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) recalled her trip to Guizhou: "I found that I still don't like to eat broken ear root, although I heard many people say that it is good for health. I didn't dare to say this before, but now I will stick to my choice." Learning what one does not like is not only an affirmation of individual boundaries, but also a form of psychological growth. These processes of reinterpreting preferences are among the pathways through which women move from an "other-determined" identity toward self-identification. In traditional families and intimate relationships, women are often expected to accommodate others, provide emotional support, and reduce conflict, which frequently suppresses their

desire and capacity to express personal preferences. Tourism temporarily interrupts this role structure and opens individual space, within which women can practise independent choice and gradually build a stable psychological framework for identifying what they like.

Such changes in preferences and cognition promoted by tourism also affect women's attitudes toward major life decisions regarding marriage, occupation, place of residence, and lifestyle. Ms. L1 (26 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) noted, "I travelled to Zhoushan before and found that I liked the pace of life and the city's atmosphere very much, so I plan to look for a job there in the future." This preference-centred decision-making logic differs markedly from earlier life values, which prioritised others' satisfaction, and reflects a strong shift toward subject-centred orientation. Tourism provides a space for women to reconsider their own preferences. Although this process appears small and mundane, its psychological and structural significance should not be underestimated. Through travel, women redefine what they like and dislike, and thereby generate the motivation to adjust their lives, careers, interpersonal relationships, and even identity choices. This restructuring of preferences not only enhances women's subjective satisfaction but also accelerates their transition from passive adaptation to social scripts to active construction of life paths. Tourism does not directly empower women, but it enables them to reestablish a connection with themselves by expanding the range of choices, and this connection constitutes an important foundation for the construction of women's subjectivity.

4.2.5 Disgust and rejection

In the course of travel, many women not only identify what they like, but also clarify what they dislike. In this study, although disgust, as a secondary subcode, was not frequently reported, with only four respondents explicitly marking this content, the psychological process and mechanism of self-understanding it reflects have considerable explanatory power, particularly for the construction of thematic boundaries and the emergence of gender awareness. Women's experiences of unfamiliar settings, institutional disruptions, and interpersonal interactions while travelling abroad enable them gradually to identify an initially vague sense of unease that they had almost unconsciously suppressed or had never been permitted to express. This process can be understood as a pathway of reverse identification. Through tourism, many respondents clearly realised that some things long normalised and promoted by society as desirable are not, in fact, what they genuinely accept or prefer. For example, Ms. C1 (27 years old, master's degree, unmarried) again felt deeply uncomfortable during a high-end customised travel experience. She said, "The whole trip is very expensive and luxurious, but I feel very empty. The tour guide talked very little about local cultural customs and focused more on consumption and shopping. I was walking around all day and did not learn anything." This form of rejection and disgust is not merely a superficial emotional response; rather, it reflects women's refusal of the structural tension between consumer culture and the need for authenticity and autonomy.

Second, many women realised that they disliked being arranged and controlled when travelling with companions, including partners, family members, and friends. For example, Ms. F (30 years old, European doctor, unmarried) noted: "My boyfriend does not like me to travel, nor does he like me to contact other people, and he also cares a lot about travelling with him. It made me realise that I do not like this kind of relationship." Such disgust with the status quo prompts women to redefine boundaries in intimate relationships and to question

the previously accepted subordinate interaction model. The interviews also showed that some women became dissatisfied with the mode of travel itself and subsequently adjusted their life plans. Ms. N (22 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, “I went on a group trip with my parents before, but I had to get up very early with the group. I do not like large groups, and I do not like following orders step by step.” Accordingly, she clearly expressed her rejection of the standardised and consumption-oriented tourism model and became inclined to choose independent travel or experiential travel. She said, “Now I am no longer influenced by the WeChat Moments check-in culture, and I am starting to design my own itinerary.”

This recognition of a disliked mode of travel facilitated her independent transformation and greater control over her lifestyle and pace. It is worth noting that such experiences often represent the first time women recognise their instinctive resistance to socially arranged roles. From the perspective of social psychology, disgust and rejection are boundary emotions that serve self-protective and evaluative functions in individual development (Schnall, 2017). The aversion women experience in travel is, in fact, an emotional response to repressed needs, internal conflict, and external structural tension. Its significance lies not in the intensity of the emotion itself, but in the cognitive and behavioural adjustment it triggers. From the perspective of gender structure analysis, such disgust toward prior perceptions, norms, and roles compels women to reconsider the default arrangements to which they had acquiesced because of gender identity (Bay-Cheng, 2019). For example, many women stated that they do not like taking care of others, making collective decisions, or planning activities, yet these behaviours have long been standardised as things women should do.

The travel experience helps them break the structural illusion of “I should be” and recognise “I do not want to,” which may elicit strong and even extreme reactions to the status quo. Although disgust is usually treated as a negative emotion, in this study it has become an important signal for women to break through social presets, establish self-protection, and make active choices. In conjunction with the awakening of interest, its theoretical significance in promoting women’s selective refusal and lifestyle adjustment is no less important than the formation of positive interest. It indicates not only “I do not like something,” but also “I do not accept the self-image and lifestyle prescribed by the structure.” As a negative experience during travel, disgust is an essential component of understanding identity construction and boundary formation. By recognising what they do not want, women can develop a clearer sense of subjectivity, which is a necessary dimension of subject formation. Tourism is not only a process through which people gain new experiences, but also a social practice that helps women identify boundaries, challenge norms, and regain control over the order of life.

4.2.6 Self-identity

“Who am I?” is a central question repeatedly raised in this study. In daily life, this question is often obscured by family roles, career orientations, and gender expectations, such that women’s identities exhibit strong socialisation, passivity, and stability (Meisenbach, 2010). This study found that, in the relatively free and decentralised social space of travel, many women were able to suspend existing identity frameworks and begin to rethink and reposition themselves. Among the 72 respondents, 11 explicitly used terms such as “identity” and “positioning” in the interviews and described shifts or uncertainty in self-identity during travel. Many respondents shed identities defined by others while travelling and began to think

of themselves as the primary agent. Ms. R3 (28 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said: "My parents always tell my neighbours that I am a good daughter at home, but during the trip, I do not have to explain my identity. When I go out, I define my identity myself."

This process of de-labelling enabled her to experience a recovery of subjectivity, a state no longer defined by a single function but existing in a more open form. This experience prompted women to reflect further on their self-worth. Some respondents, while travelling, were not only prompted to question their existing identities but also developed an intention to reconstruct them actively. Ms. W (29 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said: "Most people in China pursue stability in life, but after travelling to several countries, I found that I prefer an uncertain and more fluid lifestyle. I may work and live in this country for a period of time this year, and I will move to Spain next year." During the journey, she realised that she did not agree with the assigned life path, resulting in a departure from the direction of her previous identity formation. This denial and reconstruction from within are key links in identity recognition and reconstruction. In addition, some women gradually accepted the coexistence of multiple identities during travel and moved beyond fixation on a single "correct" identity. For example, Ms. A (32 years old, undergraduate, married) said: "I can now be a person who likes to be alone, and I can also enjoy the group." She integrates herself across different travel states into a multifaceted self, which reflects the shift in local female identity concepts from singular to flexible.

The identities of Chinese women have long been regulated by family ethics, marriage and child-rearing systems, and gender culture in the workplace. Their "self" is often a collage of social roles (Sun, 2008). Within this structural context, tourism provides women with the possibility of identity transformation. When travelling, they can temporarily break away from the normative supervision of the original social structure and engage in attempts at self-construction grounded in limited subjective experience. Turner et al. (2017) argued that, in liminal phases, the suspension of established social structures enables the emergence of communitas, characterised by more immediate and egalitarian social relations.

The article also aligns with the liminality theory proposed by Turner et al. (2017): tourism provides an intermediate space in which individuals can depart from an old identity without yet having completed the formation of a new one. In this space, individuals have maximal identity plasticity. Tourism provides Chinese women with a space in which to mobilise and reconstruct their identities, allowing them to reevaluate their relationship with society in nonstandard situations. Travel does not give women a new identity; rather, it gives them the ability to question and choose their identity.

4.2.7 Attitude towards life

During the interviews, 34 respondents stated that their travel experiences affected their views on life, particularly their understanding of work, family responsibilities, and personal happiness. Compared with the other influences identified above, changes in life attitudes are more general in scope and more causally oriented. Most of these changes arose from comparative experience, specifically the contrast between established daily life and travel-based life.

First, many women revised their views on busyness and the need for efficiency after travelling. Ms. I (27 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, "When I travelled to Yunnan,

I clearly felt the difference in pace. In Dali, I saw people sitting there leisurely drinking tea and chatting, while my own life was very busy. I found that the slow-paced state made me feel very comfortable." Ms. S (25 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) noted, "After returning from the trip, I reduced unnecessary overtime and began to save more time for myself." These changes indicate that some women have started to consider reducing excessive work pressure and increasing leisure time and personal time. Some respondents also revised their definition of 'happiness' through travel. Ms. K (29 years old, master's degree, unmarried) stated, "Originally, influenced by the Internet and the people around me, I thought that girls should make money. Only by having a house, a car, and money can they be happy. When I went on a trip and saw some simple people and things, I found that happiness can actually be very simple." This revised standard of happiness has led them to move away from relying entirely on traditional evaluative criteria in life choices and to place greater emphasis on personal comfort and psychological well-being. Some women also began to pay attention to health and quality of life because of their travels. Ms. J (30 years old, undergraduate, married) said after travelling outdoors, "I used to stay up late and did not exercise. Since I was exposed to outdoor travel, I have started to exercise properly, but I am always busy, and there is very little time or opportunity to exercise." However, the existing data analysis suggests age- and marital-status-based differences. Unmarried women aged 21 to 30 are more likely to attempt to adjust their pace of life after travelling and show a stronger willingness to implement change, whereas married women and women with children are more constrained by family responsibilities, and changes in their attitudes toward life often remain at the psychological level. In general, travelling provides women with an opportunity to observe and reflect outside daily life, prompting them to rethink their attitudes toward happiness, health, work, and leisure. Although these attitudinal changes are subject to multiple constraints after returning home, they strengthen women's concern for quality of life at the psychological level and, to some extent, encourage them to try to change a lifestyle that is overly dependent on others' external evaluations.

4.2.8 Career Planning

In this study, 18 respondents reported that travel had affected their concepts of career development and future plans. This influence did not always lead directly to career change; rather, it indirectly shaped their career orientation, preferences for job stability, and career goals through a reappraisal of life values and personal interests.

Some women reassessed the relationship between occupational stability and quality of life by observing regional career cultures during travel. Ms. T (26 years old, undergraduate, married) said, "Since I started travelling, I feel that I have had enough of the profession of teaching. I don't like this profession, and I don't like the place where I work. My mother always said that the teacher's industry is drought and flood protection, and it is very stable. But I think people are very selective, and I don't want to live a life that looks forward to the end of my life." Similar views emerged among most interviewees. They generally stated that travel helped them recognise that a career is not the only means of realising personal value. Although this perspective may not immediately alter their disposition or trajectory after returning to daily life, it weakens their dependence on high-intensity, long-term employment in future planning. In addition, some college students clarified their future career direction through travel experiences and encounters. For example, Ms. Y1 (23 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) stated, "I learned from the experience of different people during the trip and their publication

of the current postgraduate entrance examination and decisively chose a job. This year, I successfully interviewed for the company I want to go to and do the job I like." Such cases indicate that travel exposes some women to multiple life choices, making them more likely to orient career decisions towards personal interests and values.

By contrast, married women and women with children were relatively cautious about changes in career planning. For example, Ms. G (53 years old, undergraduate, divorced) said, "I have been doing this job all my life, and I also have children to raise. I can't just change my job like others. Besides, I can't do anything else except this job." For her, travel functions primarily as leisure. In terms of occupational attitudes, young, unmarried women developed a new understanding of the relationship between career and personal value after travelling. They had previously regarded work primarily as a means of earning income, but travel showed them that work can also be integrated with lifestyle, such as freelancing. In this study, several respondents raised the question, "Can travelling become a long-term way of life?" Some women combine travel and work through freelance employment and even treat travel itself as a career. They are more inclined to view work as a means of self-realisation and interest development, rather than solely as a source of income. It should be noted that the influence of travel on career planning is largely determined by economic conditions and family support. When discussing whether "Can travel become a long-term lifestyle", Ms. L2 (29 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, "The premise for the realisation of this matter must have a certain economic foundation, otherwise there is no money to do it." This suggests that changes in career planning require material support, and that travel is more likely to prompt practical action among women with adequate economic resources and capital.

4.2.9 The influence of the outlook on life and thought.

According to the interview data, 21 respondents reported subtle conceptual shifts in their thinking, primarily through re-examining long-term internal values concerning social norms, life goals, and gender roles beyond those listed above but often related to them. Several respondents questioned traditional value judgements after observing the lifestyles of different people during cross-cultural or cross-regional travel. Ms. K2 (24 years old, junior college student, unmarried) noticed that a large number of women living and working alone were not regarded as a special group in local society during her stay in Japan. She stated in the interview: "I used to think that women would be criticised when they lived alone, but it was completely normal. I realised that this stereotype is caused by our social environment and also by the dross left by traditional ideas." Such comparative experiences were more prominent among women who had similar travel experiences. These women appeared more predisposed to making cross-cultural comparisons during travel and in everyday social settings, such as dining in restaurants. This ideological adjustment does not always stem from observing the external world but may also arise from a renewed understanding of the relationship between the self and others.

For example, Ms. P2 (33 years old, undergraduate, married) travelled in Tibet and became more attentive to the boundaries between individuals and groups: "Local people are willing to help each other, but they don't require you to integrate into the group. I'm thinking that I've always thought that I must be accepted by the group to feel at ease. In fact, this is not necessarily the case." For women who have long lived in a strongly collectivist cultural

environment, such experiences have clear reflective significance. Western concepts of marriage and gender also influenced other respondents through incidental interactions during travel. For example, Ms. J (30 years old, undergraduate, married) explained that the life status of an older woman who thought she was unmarried challenged her stereotype that women must marry to achieve stability. She recalled the encounter in the interview: "She was satisfied that she was not married. That was the first time I seriously considered it. Marriage is not the only choice." Even if these travel experiences cannot transform women's original lives, they can at least make women realise that there are other viable lifestyles and value judgements outside their current daily lives. This cognition itself has altered some women's perceptions of their present lives.

4.2.10 Health status cognition

In this study, 19 respondents reported that travel altered their understanding of their own health. This awareness was not confined to physical health but also involved self-observation and emotional regulation. Many women assessed their physical fitness, endurance, and long-term lifestyle habits for the first time while travelling. Ms. J (30 years old, undergraduate, married) said, "I thought I was in good health, but after travelling outdoors, I realised that I usually lack exercise." Ms. H1 (26 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) experienced knee pain during hiking and said in an interview, "I used to neglect exercise, but when I came back, I began to stick to fitness." Their tourist trips directly prompted them to adjust their daily routines and adopt exercise plans. In addition to physical fitness, many female travellers also developed stronger awareness of mental health. Many women experienced clear emotional relief during travel and, by contrast, became more aware of the accumulation of daily stress. Ms. J2 (28 years old, master's degree, unmarried) mentioned during a trip, "In those days, I was in a state of tension every day, and I found that I had been under prolonged stress." Another respondent, Ms. E1 (27 years old, master's degree, unmarried), expressed a similar view: "I realise that my emotions have been suppressed. Travelling alone can help me manage my emotions better and calm myself." This renewed recognition of health status, whether physical or psychological, is closely related to the individual's experience of self-state during travel. Physical exertion and environmental change made respondents more aware of the limits of their endurance, and time away from daily stress and social roles helped them recognise psychological needs that had long been neglected. Although this continuity is not fully explained in the present study, travel did prompt some women to become aware of, and willing to initiate, changes in their lifestyles regarding physical exercise and to appreciate the sense of well-being that exercise can produce.

4.2.11 New Things

In the interviews, 22 respondents indicated that they were strongly impressed by the new experiences they encountered during the trip. Some developed a sustained interest in a previously unfamiliar aspect of the self or of travel, whereas others believed that this novelty was confined to the travel context and did not affect their daily lives. These two responses illustrate different trajectories among women when confronting new experiences: some transform such experiences into long-term interests, whereas others regard them as brief situational episodes.

Among the respondents with sustained interests, photography, skiing, and hiking were frequently mentioned, and these activities acquired new meaning. Ms. X (24 years old,

undergraduate, unmarried) used an SLR camera for the first time during a trip. She recalled, “I have been taking photos almost all the time in those days and have always been interested in photography, but after this trip, I began to systematically learn shooting techniques, et cetera.” Ms. R2 (25 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, “When I travelled to Changbai Mountain, I tried skiing for the first time. I simply learned skills such as falling leaves. I began to pay attention to skiing frequently. Now I will still go skiing if I have the opportunity.” Ms. J (30 years old, undergraduate, married) developed a sustained commitment to outdoor sports after a short hike abroad. After returning home, she joined a local mountaineering club. These women generally have relatively high educational attainment, comfortable economic conditions, and a more relaxed living environment, which enables them to retain and develop new interests after travelling. However, not all women continue such interests after exposure to novelty. Ms. I1 (23 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) stated frankly in the interview: “I also went paragliding when I was travelling, which was very exciting, but it was impossible to continue after returning home. These activities were just entertainment at that time.” Ms. Y (52 years old, junior college, married) expressed a similar view after diving while travelling in Thailand: “It’s fun, but I won’t spend money to learn it again.”

For these women, new experiences function more as temporary events, and their value lies in producing short-term pleasure rather than a lasting shift in interest. In addition, the existing everyday environment does not provide the conditions needed to sustain these activities. Even when a long-term interest does not emerge, however, novel experiences may still leave a cognitive impression. A brief encounter with something new at least allows some women to temporarily escape their established life trajectories at a psychological level. Some respondents also displayed a clear wait-and-see attitude toward novelty during travel. Ms. Q (22 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) was invited to taste houttuynia cordata (fish mint) while travelling with companions in Guizhou. She refused directly and said, “I'm not interested in these new things, and I don't want to challenge them.” Her response indicates that not all women view travel as an opportunity to explore unfamiliar foods, and some are more inclined to maintain familiar habits rather than actively seek new experiences.

4.2.12 Interpersonal relationships

Of the 72 respondents, 28 reported that travel influenced their attitudes toward interpersonal relationships. This change is mainly reflected in two aspects: the temporary expansion of social interaction and the reconfiguration of interaction patterns, accompanied by the re-examination and adjustment of existing relationships. Differences in women’s social experience during travel are also significantly associated with travel style, marital status, and individual personality.

Some women reported positive experiences of interacting with strangers while travelling, especially those who travelled alone. Ms. B (23 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) maintained long-term communication with overseas travel companions whom she met in youth hostels. She stated, “Be vigilant when going out safely. I rarely talk to strangers at ordinary times, but communication during the trip relaxed me, because I think everyone met by chance. Even if we talk about many private things, everyone eventually parts ways. I won’t contact you after that, so it doesn’t matter.” Ms. D (29 years old, doctor, unmarried) met several travel partners while backpacking in Europe. She said, “I find that I actually

enjoy temporary socialising. I do not have to think too much about it, as in working in China, and I can also share part of the travel expenses, which is very cost-effective." These responses indicate that travel provided a low-pressure social environment for some women. In this context, they gained emotional support and new information, and some even retained certain social habits developed during travel after returning to daily life.

By contrast, some respondents realised that they were more inclined to limit their social interactions while travelling. Ms. Z (27 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) stated after a group trip, "I thought I liked lively settings, but that time I found that I preferred to be quiet and alone." Ms. R3 (28 years old, master's degree, unmarried) also noted, "Travel made it clearer that what really makes me happy is not being in crowds and being lively but rather being with a few friends or by myself." This suggests that travelling not only expands some women's social networks but also helps some individuals identify the forms of social interaction that suit them best.

For women who are married or have children, travel prompted them to reexamine their relationships with family members. Ms. H2 (36 years old, undergraduate, married) said after travelling with her husband, "We have more time to spend together when travelling, and it feels much better than at home." However, the opposite was also true. Ms. T2 (34 years old, undergraduate, married) expressed dissatisfaction after a family trip: "I still take care of the children most of the time during the trip. The relationship has not improved, but it is more tiring." Such differences show that the role of travel in interpersonal adjustment is strongly shaped by the division of responsibilities and family structure. Some women also re-evaluated long-term social relationships after travelling. Ms. G1 (32 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) reduced contact with a friend after a trip. She said, "When we found that our values were different during the trip, I minimised contact. There was no need to force us to get along again." Another respondent, Ms. E (27 years old, undergraduate, unmarried), found a like-minded friend during a long trip. They continued to keep in touch after returning home and participated in outdoor activities together. These cases suggest that travel may not only promote new social connections but also provide an opportunity to screen and adjust existing relationships. However, not all respondents believed that travelling had a significant impact on interpersonal relationships. Ms. Z2 (33 years old, undergraduate, married) frankly stated, "Going out is just playing, and going home is still the same circle." In her view, most social interaction during travel is short-lived and does not alter existing relationship patterns. This attitude was more common among married women with relatively stable social circles.

4.3 Gender role concept

4.3.1 Attitude towards the role of "virtuous wife and good mother"

As a core paradigm of traditional Chinese gender roles, "virtuous wife and good mother" has played a stable and far-reaching cultural symbolic role in the development of the interviewed women. Although family structures are continuously changing, this role is still expected to remain prominent in family education, media narratives, marriage, and child-rearing policies. In this study, more than half of the respondents actively mentioned "virtuous wife and mother" or related content during the interviews, indicating clear differentiation in their

attitudes and reflecting the dilemmas modern women face between accepting traditional culture and pursuing self-identity.

A small number of respondents still adhered to the value of “virtuous wife and mother” and did not regard it as an oppressive role. Nonetheless, they emphasised that this role should be premised on “voluntariness” and “ability matching.” Ms. T2 (34 years old, undergraduate, married) said, “I don't reject a virtuous wife and a good mother. I don't think this is a stigmatisation of women. I’m also willing to take care of my family, but only if I'm willing, and it is not considered mandatory.” Her attitude reflects a limited degree of acceptance, that is, on the basis of subjective identification and personal conditions, this role is tolerable, but it is rejected as the sole standard for evaluating women's value. Some respondents also emphasised that, although the traditional role of “virtuous wife and mother” remains widespread in reality, it cannot satisfy the diverse life expectations of modern women. Ms. E1 (27 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said, “A virtuous wife and a good mother are what my parents expect from me. They think that getting married, having children, and taking care of the family are happiness. I understand them, but I don't think it's me.”

Most of these women are highly educated. They can understand the basis for the previous generation of women’s identification with this role, and they also clearly express their rejection of this gendered division of labour. A small number of women also reported that they observed their mothers, relatives, or other women around them enter this role and subsequently reject it. For example, Ms. S (25 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, after seeing that her sister-in-law had to care for the children and work while her husband remained inactive, “I see that only my sister-in-law is struggling in this marriage. I don't want to live this kind of life. Now many girls are also living this kind of life that can't be seen at a glance.” Respondents who were critical of the role of “virtuous wife and mother” generally pointed out that the core problem lies in the unequal distribution of gender responsibilities. Ms. O1 (24 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said: “What is ‘virtuous’ to sacrifice yourself to complete others. But there is not only one woman in the family, is there?” She believes that a virtuous wife and a good mother are virtues on the surface, but, in essence, they strengthen women’s service role within the family, allowing men to evade responsibility for housework and childcare. In their view, this role is not the product of a natural division of labour, but the result of long-term cultural discipline.

The role of tourism in this issue is more apparent because it provides a window through which to observe the gender structure of other societies. Ms. P1 (28 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said after travelling in Spain: “In the family hotel I live in, the couple does housework together, and most of the time it is a man who takes care of the baby. I don't see anyone who has to do everything because of being the mother.” Accordingly, she redefined the standards of “good wife” and “good mother” in the Chinese context and stated clearly: “I don't want my future life to be defined by this role.” This reflection, generated through comparative experience, is common among some highly educated women. Yet there remain a few respondents who agree, subject to the conditions noted above, with the traditional role of “virtuous wife and mother” and regard it as an embodiment of women’s value. Ms. K2 (24 years old, junior college, unmarried) said, “I don't think there's anything wrong with a woman to run a family and take care of her children. As long as her husband is responsible, I am willing to do this, which is much better than going out to work.” She emphasised stability and

a clear division of responsibilities, which constitute her basic criteria for a happy life. In their view, traditional roles are not restrictions, but part of the order of life.

The interviews also showed generational differences in respondents' attitudes toward the role of good wives and mothers. Women aged 21 to 30 years were more likely to question or reconstruct the role, whereas women over 30 years of age made a trade-off between social pressure and gender consciousness. Ms. R (33 years old, undergraduate, married) pointed out: 'When I was a child, I was taught to be a virtuous wife and mother, but the current social trend tells me that doing these things can't be respected.' She tried to find a balance between maintaining family stability and pursuing personal values. Many women did not completely reject family responsibilities themselves but opposed the unilateral assignment of such responsibilities to women. Ms. V (26 years old, master's degree, unmarried) stated more clearly: "Taking care of the family itself is not a problem. The question is why are only women are always expected to do it." In her opinion, gender roles should not be fixed but should be determined by individual will and family consultation. Women's attitudes toward the role of a virtuous wife and mother show a complex and dynamic continuum from acceptance, negotiation, and reinterpretation to rejection. Tourism does not directly disrupt the traditional gender role model. However, it enabled these women to observe, compare, and reflect across cultures, so that some began to redefine women's position within the family and then attempted to adjust to and resist traditional roles in daily life.

4.3.2 Parents' expectations

Of the 72 respondents in this study, 31 reported parental expectations regarding marriage, career and lifestyle. Most respondents believed that parental expectations still exert an important influence on their development and decision-making, particularly in relation to marriage and childbearing. Clear differences were observed in the attitudes of women with different educational backgrounds, ages and marital statuses towards parental expectations, reflecting both the continued influence of traditional norms and the gradual weakening of intergenerational transmission.

Most respondents indicated that their parents' principal expectations remained focused on marriage and childbirth. Ms Z2 (33 years old, undergraduate, married) stated, "My mother has always emphasized that women should get married and have children early, which is definitely the most important thing in a woman's life." Such views were common in the accounts of respondents over 30 years old. Having been exposed to a family-centred model of education since childhood, they often reported that parents associated women's value with marriage and childrearing. Among unmarried women, especially those over 27, parental pressure to marry and emotional intervention were more frequent. Ms J2 (28 years old, master's degree, unmarried) noted: "Every time my parents call me, they ask me when I will get married. They think I will be left behind if I don't get married." Many respondents also indicated that parental expectations concerning career and economic stability were shaped by traditional gender norms. Ms C1 (27 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said, "My parents want me to find a stable job. They say that the little girl will live a stable life, and she can take care of her family after getting married and giving birth to children in the future." In the interview, she emphasized that this preference for stability reflected more of a plan for future marriage and childbearing than concern for personal development. In general, participation in higher education is associated with later marriage and later childbearing than among those

without higher education qualifications (Mare & Maralani, 2006), and highly educated women are also more likely to question traditional attitudes. Ms V (26 years old, master's degree, unmarried) stated: "Their so-called good job is just to make you more suitable to be a wife and mother, not to enable me achieve my career goals." For married women or women with children, parental expectations were more focused on children's education and family roles. Ms A (32 years old, undergraduate, married) mentioned: "My mother often reminds me that women should put family first, and work can be let go." This continued parental intervention often led both married and unmarried women to adopt uneasy compromises. Although they may accept gender equality in principle, they remained influenced by parents' remarks during family gatherings. Travel, however, could strengthen resistance to parents who continued to insist on conventional marriage expectations. After encountering different family arrangements during tourism trips, several respondents reconsidered their parents' ideas. Ms P1 (28 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) observed an equal division of labour among family members while travelling in Spain. She said in an interview, "That trip made it more clear to me that I don't need to live according to my parents' standards." Many women also said that travel led them to conclude that their parents' established life patterns were not necessarily suitable for them after seeing more simple and comfortable ways of living. This shift in attitude made them more inclined to regard parental expectations as a reference point rather than as an absolute standard.

However, alongside this growing awareness, many respondents also stated frankly that, even when they agreed with the concept of equality and disagreed with their parents' views, they still felt pressure to follow parental advice. Several respondents recognised their autonomy in making choices but said they would feel distressed if they completely ignored their parents. This emotional pressure led many women to adopt compromise strategies between parental expectations and their own preferences, such as postponing marriage without explicitly stating their position or maintaining a lifestyle approved by their parents. Parents of different ages and educational backgrounds also differed clearly in how they expressed expectations. From the interview data, it is apparent that most parents of respondents aged 21 to 30 expected their daughters to be healthy and happy. For example, Ms M1 (21 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, "My parents don't have high requirements for me. They just want me to be safe, happy, and healthy." This suggests that families with younger parents tended to adopt a more open and less conventional mindset, consistent with contemporary acceptance of greater gender equality.

4.3.3 The image of women in mass media and social communication

In this study, 28 respondents mentioned the influence of media and social communication on their perceptions of gender roles. Their observations of television, advertising, news, and social media enabled them to compare these portrayals with the mainstream image of women, and this comparison further prompted reflection on gender-role expectations.

Many respondents noted that traditional media still focuses on female images characterised by gentleness, virtue, and domesticity. Ms. P2 (33 years old, undergraduate, married) said that women in television commercials are often shown washing clothes, cooking, and caring for children. Advertisements for laundry detergent, for example, almost always depict women washing clothes for children, as if these were the only roles available to women. This image differs markedly from her own experiences in the workplace and while travelling, leading her

to question whether the media presents real life accurately. She therefore suggested during the interview that other possibilities should be considered. In recent years, although media representations of independent women and women in the workplace have become more visible, and advertisements have begun to better convey women's agency (Luo, 2012), appearance and sensuality remain central selling points. Many respondents felt that, even in ostensibly positive portrayals, the camera still focuses on women as beautiful, gentle, and protected. Ms. W (29 years old, master's degree, unmarried) stated: "Some public service advertisements say that women are very strong, but the camera is still very soft for her, which seems to be strict but gentle is the standard."

Some respondents believed that the image of women portrayed on short-video platforms shows some diversity. Ms. O (28 years old, master's degree, unmarried) mentioned several hosts and commentators and their discussions of women's rights. She discussed their views on workplace realities, single life, and marriage pressure, which led her to think again that she did not have to cater to social expectations during travel. However, many respondents held that such platforms remain full of stereotyped narratives, such as men should provide for their families and women should be soft and cute. Although these contents are novel in form, they have not completely escaped traditional concepts. In the study, many respondents compared the realities they observed during travel with media representations. Ms. H (26 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said that when she saw foreign women eating and shopping on the streets abroad, she suddenly realised that mainstream domestic media in China rarely showed such images. She began to ask what kind of women the media wants women to be. After this reflection, she felt more inclined to focus on life itself rather than be influenced by others' expectations.

These observations raise a core question: what purpose is served by the women shaped and represented by the media? Is it commercial interest, or the promotion of gender equality? In response to this structural contradiction, respondents reacted differently: some actively sought alternative content, such as new-media broadcasters or documentaries about women; some continued to ignore it and refused to equate reality with media patterns; and some attempted to combine the two and express their understanding through self-media. Existing studies show that, since the founding of New China, media images of women have shifted from revolutionary women and production workers to female heroes and then to modern independent workers. This transformation has important implications, but it also reflects inconsistencies that remain open to critique (Tang & Tang, 2009). In the interviews, although women appreciated these changes, they also felt that their implementation remained difficult.

4.3.4 The image of women in Chinese school textbooks

Among the 72 respondents in this study, 25 reported that the textbooks they used as students had a certain impact on their perceptions of gender roles. Most women believed that Chinese school textbooks implicitly convey a fixed pattern of gender division of labour, and that this early education shapes their initial understanding of what constitutes a good woman. Most recalled that women in the textbooks were portrayed primarily as diligent, virtuous, and kind, thereby emphasising women's devoted role in the family. Ms. K (29 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said, "I remember that the mother in the primary school Chinese textbook always cooks and washes clothes, and the father is working." Ms. R (33 years old, undergraduate, married) also noted, "The mother in the text is either weaving or preparing for

her children, and there is almost no image of a female scientist or professional woman. Many ancient stories, such as Meng Mu's three relocations, likewise convey women's dedication to their children." These impressions indicate that textbooks subtly associate female roles with family responsibilities, and many girls develop a family-centred understanding of women during childhood.

After entering college, some respondents realised that although images of female workers or heroes occasionally appear in textbooks, they are usually framed primarily through motherhood or self-sacrifice. Ms. T2 (23 years old, undergraduate, married) pointed out: "There are also stories of female scientists, such as Madame Curie, but most of them emphasise how much they sacrifice for their families and how hard they work, rather than focusing on their academic achievements." This view is broadly consistent with the findings of some scholars. Shen & Wang (2013) noted in their analysis of Chinese textbooks that most female roles consistently assume the identities of mother, wife, and confidant, while professional and personal interests are relegated to secondary status. In recent years, however, new versions of Chinese textbooks have increased the representation of female professional roles to some extent. Zhao (2024) examined the current version of Chinese textbooks and found that, compared with older versions, they have improved significantly in gender equality and include a more diverse range of occupations. However, female illustrations in these textbooks still tend to foreground gentleness and patience, in contrast to the rationality and decisiveness associated with male characters. The study also found significant gender differences between male and female representations in the new and old versions of primary school Chinese textbooks in terms of frequency, occupational type, and activity context, and that a certain degree of gender inequality and gender stereotyping remains (Zhao, 2024).

This difference was also reflected in the accounts of interviewees, such as Ms. T (26 years old, undergraduate, married): "When talking about female characters, the teacher often says that they are kind-hearted and diligent, while males are described as strong, brave, and smart." For some women with travel experience, travel and cross-cultural exposure prompted them to re-examine the educational discourse they had received in childhood. Ms. K (29 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said after living in Japan, "There are many images of female scientists in the children's books there, which makes me feel that our textbooks have been avoiding such women." This comparative experience led her to recognise the imbalance in gender equality education within textbooks. Therefore, travel and cross-cultural observation may serve as a means of challenging early educational impressions. At the same time, some respondents frankly stated that although they are no longer fully influenced by textbooks in adulthood, textbooks do play a foundational role in the early formation of values. Ms. T2 (36 years old, undergraduate, married) said, "When I was a child, I always thought that girls should take care of their families. When I grew up, it took me a long time to accept the idea that I could not do so. When I had this idea, I felt that I would be morally condemned." This early impression of women's later gender roles is often latent but enduring.

4.3.5 Family Education

Of the 72 respondents, 24 mentioned the influence of family education on their conceptions of gender roles. Most respondents believed that parents and elders shaped their initial understanding of appropriate behaviour and women's roles through daily conduct, language, punctuality, and value judgements in early family education. The influence of family

education is far-reaching, especially in relation to views on marriage, career choice, and the distribution of family responsibilities. Many respondents received a restrained and quiet education for girls in childhood. Ms. U (27 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) recalled, "My mother has taught me that girls should not be too strong and should speak gently." D1 (23 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) also mentioned, "My family often says that girls will have a good family in the future, and I am relieved." These messages are often framed as being "for your good," but they essentially reinforce the idea that women should be family-centred and morally compliant. Some respondents also pointed out that gender roles in family education are conveyed through unintentional daily behaviour. For example, O1 (24 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, "When I was a child, I basically did the housework with my mother. My father and brother rarely did it, and the elders also took it for granted." Ms. J2 (29 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said, "My parents always say that girls should learn to cook and clean the house so that they won't lose out when they get married in the future."

This pattern of daily behaviour leads many women to regard housework and caregiving as their natural responsibilities before adulthood. However, some respondents reported that their family education was relatively gender equal. For example, Ms. C (30 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said, "My parents have told me since I was a child that girls should also have their own careers and not rely on others." Her parents emphasised academic performance and career development, which can weaken traditional expectations regarding the gender division of labour. Through travel experiences, some women began to re-evaluate the gender role concepts shaped by family education. Ms. P1 (28 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) mentioned after travelling in Spain, "When I was a child, I was taught that girls should live a stable life with their husbands and children. But there, I saw that men and women had an equal division of labour, and women were free and unique. I felt that this general concept was really too old, even though it remains a stereotype of Chinese women." These comments indicate that gender inequality embedded in family education becomes more visible through cross-cultural observation. Moreover, even when women develop values that differ from those formed through family education, they remain influenced by these norms in everyday life. In addition, intergenerational differences are also evident. Among respondents aged 21 to 30, unmarried women were more likely to keep family education separate from personal choices. For example, O1 (24 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, "I will listen to what my parents say, but I don't necessarily do it." Married women or mothers over 30 were more likely to continue the patterns established through early family education in their behaviour. Even when they express ideological resistance, they often still conform to traditional roles under pressure.

In daily communication, not only do parents implicitly convey these ideas to their children, but relatives and elders also explicitly communicate these gender role expectations in everyday interactions. These remarks usually take the form of concern, exhortation, or personal experience, but they in fact reinforce the traditional gender division of labour and expectations regarding marriage and child-rearing. Many women regard them as a subtle form of discipline within the family and society, one that is difficult to reject or ignore entirely. Such remarks are more commonly reported by young, unmarried women. On the one hand, they understand that these comments from older family members are motivated by concern and care; on the other hand, they strongly perceive a conflict with their own values.

It is difficult for them to confront elders directly on an emotional level, but they tend to insist on their own choices in practice.

4.3.6 Urge to get married.

Because this study includes 10 married women, 2 divorced women, and 48 unmarried women who are still young, only 8 women, in the final analysis, reported feeling varying degrees of pressure to marry from family members, relatives, and public opinion. Marriage urging has become a common social phenomenon faced by young women in contemporary China, especially unmarried women over the age of 27, for whom this pressure is more pronounced (Gui, 2023). In the interviews, respondents generally believed that marriage urging was not only a family practice but also reflected the tension between gender structures and traditional notions of women's roles.

The interviewees noted that pressure to marry comes primarily from parents and older relatives. Ms. R3 (28 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said, "Every time my mother calls, she mentions marriage and says that if I don't get married, no one will want me." Ms. D (29 years old, doctor, unmarried) stated, "In recent years, every time I go home for a family gathering during the Spring Festival, I am asked personal questions, such as whether I have a boyfriend and, if not, why not. It is always questions and no answers. I am upset by these questions, so I do not plan to go home for the Spring Festival this year. I am going to travel." The topic of marriage urging at family gatherings troubles many women. The frequency of such experiences in public settings makes women feel that they are treated as a problem, thereby intensifying psychological pressure. These remarks show that marriage is still regarded as an important obligation in women's lives, while remaining unmarried at an older age is also stigmatised. Several women believe that the pressure to marry reflects a narrow assessment of women's value shaped by traditional gender norms. For example, Ms. T1 (27 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said, "Everyone seems to accept that it is normal for women to only get married, and if they are not married, they will be suspected of having something wrong with them." Gaetano (2014) also noted that Chinese women are increasingly viewed as less marriageable as they age, beginning in their twenties, and are labelled as "leftover women," implying that something is wrong with them. These findings indicate that the moral judgement of women's marital status remains widespread in Chinese society.

In response to pressure to marry, the respondents' attitudes fell into two main categories. One group was more inclined to resist or ignore it. For example, Ms. P1 (28 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, "I know my family cares about me, but I won't just find someone to marry for them." Travel also played an important role in shaping this attitude. Ms. J2 (28 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said after travelling to western Sichuan: "I saw that the local free and unstructured life is very good. I feel that marriage is more like a constraint for me, an unnecessary life option. Do I really need marriage?" These travel experiences provided them with psychological support to some extent, making them more confident in making their own choices about marriage. Another group said that it was difficult to completely ignore pressure to marry in everyday life, and they might still compromise under persistent parental pressure. For example, Ms. W (29 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said, "I don't want to get married too early, but my parents talk too much, so I still compromise and go on a blind date."

Pressure to marry is not only a personal issue but also reflects the continuing regulation of women's roles by the social structure. Under the combined influence of public opinion and negative media portrayals, unmarried women are often labelled as "leftover" and excluded from the group. This discourse comes not only from the family but also appears widely in the workplace and public media. Although some women realise through education, career development, and travel that marriage is not the only measure of women's value, in everyday life the pressure to marry remains a social problem that they cannot completely avoid.

4.4 Policy views

In this study, 49 respondents discussed national marriage and child-rearing policies, particularly the divorce cooling-off period, the three-child policy, and the female fertility welfare policy introduced in recent years. These policies influence women's attitudes towards marriage, childbearing, and career development to varying degrees. The three-child policy refers to the policy implemented in China since 2021 that allows a couple to have three children (Wikipedia, 2025). Tang (2021) notes that, with the rapid development of China's economy, China faces the same challenge as other developed and developing countries: population ageing. Accordingly, over the past decade, the Chinese government has progressively relaxed the second- and third-child policies to encourage fertility. Many respondents were clearly sceptical of the three-child policy. O1 (24 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) stated, "The country encourages more children to address population issues but does not consider women's career development and life pressure." This view is consistent with some academic studies. Xiang et al. (2022) describe that, although the policy may increase the fertility rate, it overlooks the economic and social pressures women face because of career interruption and higher childcare costs. Ms. R (33 years old, undergraduate, married) also stated in the interview, "I already have a child, and it is impossible to have another child. One more child means that I may completely lose the job opportunity." These views indicate that the three-child policy is generally unattractive among the women interviewed, and most responses were negative. Some women also viewed childbirth as physically harmful to the female body. For example, Ms. M1 (21 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, "The harm caused by giving birth to a child to a woman's body is irreversible. During pregnancy, girls' faces and bodies will change to varying degrees. When giving birth to a child, there may be slight tears in smooth delivery, scars in obstetrics and gynaecology, and, in the most serious cases, heavy bleeding. Urine leakage and stretch marks may occur after giving birth. I cannot imagine the extent of such injury!" Such reproductive injury is also one of the main considerations for modern women.

The discussion of the divorce cooling-off period also focused on its potential restriction of women's rights and interests. The divorce cooling-off period refers to the system in China under which, when husband and wife agree to divorce, either party may withdraw the divorce registration application within 30 days from the date of receipt of the application if unwilling to proceed. This 30-day period is called the divorce cooling-off period (Wang et al., 2024). Ms. H2 (36 years old, undergraduate, married) believes that "the cooling-off period of divorce makes it more difficult for many women to get out of unhappy marriages." Ms. I (27 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) also said, "There are examples of domestic violence in the news. If a woman wants to divorce, she has to wait 30 days, and if the violent man does not agree, it is impossible to get a successful divorce. Endless entanglement is equivalent to increasing the danger." These concerns are also reflected in some legal and social studies in

China. Wang (2023) examined that the divorce cooling-off period does, in several cases, provide a fixed period for women to escape high-risk marriages. However, many women 认为 that the introduction of this policy was too abrupt, provided insufficient guidance in cases involving a history of male abuse, and would be better improved through gradual legal reform. Ms. D (29 years old, doctor, unmarried) believes, “Many other countries have implemented a divorce cooling-off period for many years, such as the United Kingdom, France, Russia, and even each state in the United States. The divorce cooling-off period varies from 3 months to 12 months, and it takes time to request the dissolution of marriage and submit it to the court. It is just that these countries have practised it for many years, and the laws are relatively well developed and comprehensive.”

Some women believe that maternity welfare policies introduced at the national level, such as maternity subsidies, are theoretically conducive to improving the reproductive environment for women, but that implementation remains limited. Ms. A (32 years old, undergraduate, married) said, “Although there is maternity leave, the company does not like employees who take maternity leave, which ultimately affects job opportunities.” Ms. T (26 years old, undergraduate, married) also said, “Although the state has given a maternity subsidy, a glass of water and a car’s salary cannot cover half of the real expenses of raising children.” In addition, lactating mothers sometimes face embarrassing situations. Ms. P1 (28 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) mentioned, “My colleague is breastfeeding, but she must come back to work after maternity leave; otherwise, she can only take unpaid leave. So, she needs to carry a breast pump to work every day, and our company does not have a dedicated nursing room. When she pumped milk, everyone in our company went out.” For groups that pursue career development and self-realisation, this policy exacerbates gender inequality in practice. One practical effect of policy implementation is that companies become more inclined to assess policies from the perspectives of occupational and economic sustainability. They also pay greater attention to the social support system underlying the policy, rather than to the policy alone. The varied feedback from respondents shows that the actual effect of the policy depends not only on its content but also on the social structure and implementation mechanism.

4.5 Communicate with strangers.

In this study, 42 respondents reported communicating with strangers during their trips. Their feedback indicates that travel breaks the constraints of respondents’ original social networks and provides women with opportunities to interact with people from diverse backgrounds; at the same time, women continue to display clear caution and risk awareness when engaging with strangers. This ambivalent attitude reflects the coexistence of women’s expectations and concerns regarding social interaction abroad.

Many respondents described the pleasure of communicating with strangers while travelling. Ms. A3 (55 years old, technical secondary school, married) stated during a group tour: “I hardly knew the people on the bus, but we quickly got to know each other and shared our personal feelings.” Ms. X3 (50 years old, high school, married) reported a similar experience: “Chatting with local people helps me learn many cultural customs, which is much more interesting than staying with a tour group.” These exchanges not only provided timely information and practical assistance, but also offered emotional support, especially for women travelling alone. Ms. C1 (27 years old, master’s degree, unmarried) noted: “When I

travel alone, I inevitably feel lonely for a while. I feel much more relaxed when chatting with strangers, even if it is only a greeting." Some respondents also revised their initial perceptions through communication with strangers during travel. Ms. J3 (54 years old, junior high school, divorced) stated: "After communicating with local people, I found that they are very warm-hearted. I think there should be more trust and sincerity between people." Such experiences reshaped their views and may also inform their daily interactions. Although many women described positive experiences when communicating with strangers during travel, they also emphasised safety concerns in the interviews. Ms. R (33 years old, undergraduate, married) said, "If it is a woman, I may chat with her, but if it is a man, I usually answer only necessary questions." This selective communication shows that women's willingness to engage with unfamiliar people is strongly shaped by gender and safety considerations.

In addition, the mode of travel and the culture of the destination also have a clear impact on attitudes toward communicating with strangers. Ms. U (27 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said of her trip to Tibet: "Many tourists there are very friendly, and helping each other has become a norm, so it is easy to get to know people." Ms. O1 (24 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said of travelling in the city: "Everyone is very busy in big cities, and few people take the initiative to pay attention to you, so I am too lazy to talk to them." Women travelling in groups generally reported that communication with strangers was limited mainly to other tourists and merchants, whereas independent travellers and backpackers were more willing to initiate interactions. Overall, travel provides women with a temporary social testing ground, helping them to cross social boundaries to a certain extent and obtain emotional support and information resources. However, gendered safety awareness remains persistent, which makes women cautious in unfamiliar social settings. Factors such as travel mode, destination culture, and individual personality jointly shape this complex social experience.

4.6 Travel advice

In the interview, 37 respondents reported that they were willing to provide, or had already provided, travel advice to others. Their recommendations involved not only itinerary planning and the selection of scenic attractions, but also safety, budget, and psychological preparation. Respondents generally considered the exchange of travel experiences an important means by which women support one another; however, the content of their advice was also shaped by personal travel experience, age, marital status, and personality.

Many respondents were willing to share practical travel experiences. Ms. U (27 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) stated, "I will tell my friends to take anti-altitude sickness medicine in advance when going to Tibet and prepare oxygen cylinders. If you don't take a shower on the first day of Tibet, you should gradually adapt to the altitude." Ms. K (29 years old, master's degree, unmarried) added, "I will also recommend a reliable hiking club, especially suitable for girls travelling alone." Such advice, grounded in personal experience, was more common among women who frequently travel alone or independently, as they typically pay greater attention to itinerary details and personal autonomy. These women also demonstrated a stronger awareness of safety and risk when travelling, particularly in unfamiliar environments. Ms. P2 (33 years old, undergraduate, married) advised, "Don't get too close to strangers casually, especially be careful when going out at night." Ms. P1 (28 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) also said, "It's better to check the local security situation

in advance, make a good strategy, and don't go to remote places alone." Safety-related advice was common across age groups, but married and older women were more likely to offer reminders focused on self-protection, whereas younger women placed greater emphasis on gaining experience while ensuring safety. Among respondents over 50 years old, such safety suggestions were relatively few, because they usually travelled in groups. When discussing psychological and emotional advice, some respondents emphasised maintaining a relaxed mindset. Ms. H2 (36 years old, undergraduate, married) said, "Don't think the trip is too perfect. You may have problems. Just accept it." Ms. A (32 years old, undergraduate, married) also noted, "Especially when travelling with children, don't expect everything to go well, learn to adjust the plan." This type of psychological advice was more common among women with extensive travel experience. The focus of travel recommendations also varied slightly across age groups. Women aged 21 to 30 were more inclined to share novel and interesting experiences, such as local cuisine, special activities, or photography skills, whereas respondents over 31 years old paid more attention to comfort and convenience. Ms. B2 (52 years old, junior college, married) said in an interview, "I don't recommend choosing a low-priced tour group. The experience will be bad. Don't toss yourself too much [into these]." This generational difference reflects the varying purposes and needs of different groups in travel. Overall, however, most women tended to prioritise practicality and safety when sharing their travel experiences.

4.7 The time of the first trip

All 72 respondents in this study reported the timing of their first trip and their living conditions at that time. Most younger respondents travelled for the first time while still in school or at the outset of their careers. Ms. X (24 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) recalled: "When I went on a trip for the first time during the college summer vacation, I didn't have much money at that time. It was a poor trip, but I felt very happy." Ms. J2 (28 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said, "I participated in an academic exchange organised by the school during my postgraduate period. It was the first time I flew abroad, and I felt new." These first trips often occurred at a stage when economic pressure was relatively low and social responsibilities had not yet fully formed, making it easier to acquire positive psychological experiences and satisfy a desire to explore. Several respondents over the age of 31, especially married women and women with children, tended to have their first overseas trip later in life. Ms. H2 (36 years old, undergraduate, married) said, "The first time I went out to travel was after a few years of work. At that time, I was married and went out with my husband."

Respondents over the age of 50 generally reported that their first trip occurred after retirement or after their children had reached adulthood. Ms. J3 (54 years old, junior high school, divorced) said, "When I was young, I didn't have the conditions to follow it. I was busy earning money to support my family. Now that my children are grown up, I have a chance to go out and have a look." This indicates that economic independence and family responsibilities are important factors determining the timing of the first trip. The degree of family support also plays an important role in determining the timing of the first trip. Ms. P1 (28 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said, "My parents have always supported me to go out to meet the world when I was studying, so my first trip was very early." Ms. X3 (50 years old, high school, married) said, "My family thinks it's not good and it is unsafe for girls to run out of the family, and the family's economic conditions are also average, so I went out for the

first time after marriage." This suggests that family norms continue to exert a strong regulatory influence on women's travel behaviour. However, social change has also shaped the overall pattern of first-trip timing. Among respondents over 50 years old, it was commonly noted that they had little opportunity to travel when they were young and faced limited economic conditions, which made early travel uncommon. For the younger generation, travel has gradually become a routine part of life. Ms. A3 (55 years old, technical secondary school, married) said, "We didn't have any concept of travelling when we were young. Now that conditions allow, we have time and opportunity to go out for a walk." In addition, many respondents believed that the timing of the first trip had an important impact on their travel perceptions. Women who travelled at a young age were more likely to regard travel as part of their lives. Ms. C1 (27 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said, "Once after planning a trip by myself, I felt that I would go out once a year in the future." In contrast, women who travelled for the first time later in life were more likely to regard future travel as compensation or a luxury experience. Ms. A (32 years old, undergraduate, married) said, "After a few years of work when I went out for the first time, I felt that I was treating myself, not a part of my daily life."

4.8 The effect of travel on women

Among the 72 respondents, 33 explicitly discussed the impact of travel on their personal lives and psychological states. They generally think travel is not merely a leisure activity, but also plays an important role in self-awareness, social role adjustment, and emotional recovery. Although women's experiences differ by age, educational background, and marital status, the overall pattern is consistent with existing tourism and gender studies.

Many women regard travel as a way to test their abilities and affirm personal values. Ms. K (29 years old, master's degree, unmarried) stated, "After travelling alone for the first time, I felt that I could face many things independently." Ms. D (29 years old, doctor, unmarried) said, "Dealing with problems in a strange place makes me believe in myself more." This experience can be explained by the psychological theory of self-efficacy. Bandura (1986) noted that individuals significantly enhance their sense of self-efficacy after completing challenging tasks. Women's experiences of independent planning and handling emergencies during travel are concrete manifestations of this mechanism (Yasinian, 2019). At the same time, many respondents also reported that travel provided an opportunity to temporarily escape daily social roles. Ms. Z2 (33 years old, undergraduate, married) said, "You do not have to cook or care for your family when travelling. It is as free and easy as returning to yourself before marriage." This phenomenon aligns with Cohen's (1979) theory of tourism roles, which argues that tourism provides "temporary role replacement" for individuals, allowing them to temporarily shed social obligations and gain psychological relaxation. For unmarried women, travel also alleviates the pressure of public opinion regarding marriage and childbearing. Ms. E1 (27 years old, master's degree, unmarried) noted, "No one asked when you would get married during the trip, and I felt that I was finally no longer troubled by these issues."

Bianchi & Stephenson (2014) examined the right to travel and argued that tourism provides women with some room to temporarily withdraw from patriarchal social structures. Travel also supports emotional recovery. Ms. M1 (21 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, "I went on a trip to relax after falling in love. I had a lot of fun during the trip, and I did not

think about it constantly. Although I sometimes feel depressed after returning from the trip, it is much better than before." Ms. L1 (26 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) also stated, "Travel once when you are under work pressure, and you will be in a better mood when you return." Pearce & Packer (2013) argued that novelty, non-routineness, and autonomy in the tourist environment provide an effective psychological space for emotional regulation. It is precisely this psychological space that creates conditions for the therapeutic function of travel. Respondents over 50 emphasised the long-term emotional effects of travel. Ms. A3 (55 years old, technical secondary school, married) said, "After a long trip with my old colleague, I feel much younger." This feedback indicates that for older women who have experienced greater family and social responsibilities, travel has a degree of psychological restorative and emotional generating function. However, although most women recognise travel as beneficial for self-understanding and psychological healing, its specific effects vary according to social resources and generational differences. Many women said that travel is more a form of short-term emotional regulation than a long-term way of life. Ms. B2 (52 years old, junior college, married) said, "Travelling is just for fun. After returning home, you should continue to care for the elderly and grandchildren." The liberating role of tourism is often constrained by social structures after returning to daily life.

4.9 Female fertility

Among the 72 respondents, 32 discussed fertility-related issues spontaneously or in response to interview prompts. Analysis of these data indicates that women's discussions of fertility during travel mainly focus on three aspects: responses to social expectations regarding fertility, reflection on their own fertility plans, and experiences of the tension between fertility and freedom. As a space temporarily detached from existing social relationship structures, tourism offers women a new perspective from which to observe, compare, and reflect on childbearing, thereby promoting a partial reshaping of fertility concepts.

Many respondents stated that cultural observation during travel led them to reconsider the high expectations that Chinese society places on women within population policy and family norms. Ms. P1 (28 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) stated, "When I lived abroad, I saw that many women were free to have children or not. After coming back, I was even more disgusted with the domestic culture of pro-birth." Ms. W (29 years old, master's degree, unmarried) noted, "Foreign women will not be deprived of their time even if they have children. I feel that women in our country are too willing to sacrifice for their families." Such comparative observations deepen their understanding of gender inequality within traditional reproductive culture. Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory addresses cross-cultural differences between organisations and national cultures. Hofstede defines culture as "a collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" (Hofstede, 2001, P9). Similarly, when individuals are placed in different cultural contexts, they may reflect on the rules and value systems of their original culture through cross-cultural comparison. The unfamiliar cultural setting created by travel enables respondents to observe local social norms from a distance, thereby stimulating critical awareness.

During the interviews, many young women clearly expressed their acceptance of not having children. Ms. I1 (23 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, "I never thought that I must have children. Travel made me more sure that I like to be alone and free." Ms. F (30 years

old, doctor, unmarried) said, “When travelling, I pay more attention to my state and feelings, and I don’t think getting married and giving birth to children is a woman’s mission.” This suggests that, for some women, travel is not only bodily movement but also a process of reconnecting with their own bodies, thereby strengthening their awareness of bodily autonomy and reproductive choice. In traditional societies, women’s bodies are often standardised and treated as “controllable reproductive tools” (Turkmendag, 2022). When women are situated in the relatively open and less standardised context of travel, the body is no longer merely a vehicle for social role fulfilment but becomes a subject of perception, expression, and decision-making.

Some respondents also reported fertility anxiety before or during travel, yet the travel experience provided emotional relief. Ms. R (33 years old, undergraduate, married) shared, “My family is very annoying. I’m really annoyed, so I didn’t stay at home during the Spring Festival this year. I went on a trip. After coming back, although the problem was still there, I was much more relaxed. They saw that I didn’t stay at home for the Spring Festival and knew that they were wrong. After coming back, they also urged less. It’s gone.” Travel therefore plays a dual role as emotional mediation and situational escape, offering women a temporary respite from intense fertility expectations. It is worth noting that most women over the age of 50 discussed childbirth as a matter of recollection. Ms. J3 (54 years old, junior high school, divorced) said, “There was no choice at that time. Everyone came here like this, just let nature take its course.” Another interviewee, Ms. X3 (50 years old, high school, married), also said, “When you are young, you get married and have children, and then go around your family and have no time to think about your own affairs.” These reflections indicate the substantial influence of generational differences on fertility concepts: the younger generation emphasises choice and freedom, whereas the older generation often interprets fertility through loss and sacrifice when reflecting on their life course. Although most respondents believed that travel could prompt reflection on fertility concepts, many also stated frankly that travel cannot substantially change the actual demands of families and society on women. The role of travel in fertility issues is therefore more closely related to the awakening of consciousness than to structural change. Even when travel briefly expands freedom and self-awareness, social pressure remains strong in everyday life, and women’s reproductive choices continue to be constrained by multiple institutional and cultural factors.

4.9.1 Expectations of social fertility

Among the 72 respondents, 18 reported strong societal expectations regarding female fertility. Regardless of age, marital status, or educational attainment, respondents described experiences of being subjected to prior assumptions or social evaluation that they “should have children”. Social fertility expectations are widely produced through the combined influence of families, relatives, institutions, and media. These expectations not only shape women’s fertility attitudes but also exert a profound influence on their marriage and career decisions. Most respondents regarded parents and elders as the most direct transmitters of these expectations. Ms. T2 (34 years old, undergraduate, married) said, “My mother has been telling me to have a baby early, otherwise I will be gossiped about.” Ms. W1 (35 years old, undergraduate, divorced) said, “My father thinks that women are incomplete if they don't have children, and they must have children after marriage.” There is almost no generational discontinuity in this family-level urging, and respondents over the age of 50 also acknowledged that they were pressured by their elders in the same way when they were

young. Ms. B2 (52 years old, junior college, married) said frankly, “In the past, it was natural to have children. Now young people don't want to have children. Instead, we advise them to consider reality.”

In addition to the family, the workplace, the community, and public discourse also place clear expectations on fertility. Ms. T1 (27 years old, master's degree, unmarried) pointed out: “Colleagues will ask me when I get married and when I have children. It seems that if I don't have children, I am somehow different, and conversations among parents are all about children. I can't get involved, and I don't want to get involved.” This collective moral judgement of reproduction marginalises unmarried and childless women. Such public pressure has strong moral dimensions, especially among women of childbearing age. In contemporary Chinese society, evaluations of women’s roles remain highly dependent on marital and reproductive status, which continues to serve as a core criterion for assessing moral integrity and responsibility (Li, 1996). Other respondents noted that social fertility expectations are closely linked to economic and institutional conditions. Ms. Z (27 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, “Society wants you to give birth, but there is no adequate childcare support, forcing you to sacrifice your work.” Ms. A (32 years old, undergraduate, married) said, “Extending maternity leave seems to be a benefit, but in fact it increases workplace pressure, and I don't want to give birth.” This structural contradiction, which encourages fertility while failing to provide institutional support, places women in a difficult position. However, young people are increasingly resistant to these social fertility expectations. Ms. J2 (28 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said, “I don't want to have a baby just because others say I have to have a baby. It's my choice.” Most respondents over the age of 50 expressed neutral or traditional attitudes. Ms. B2 (52 years old, junior college, married) said, “At that time, we would be laughed at by our neighbours if we didn't have children. Now society is more open, but we still have to have children.” This generational difference shows that although social fertility expectations remain strong, they are no longer fully internalised by younger women.

4.9.2 Personal attitude towards fertility

Among the respondents, 17 women clearly expressed their personal attitudes towards childbirth. Overall, fertility attitudes are shaped by multiple factors, including family values, economic conditions, career development, and self-identification, and women of different ages and marital statuses show significant variation in these views.

Young women aged 21 to 30 generally emphasised that childbirth should be based on personal choice. Ms. R3 (28 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said, "I don't want to give birth because of others or social customs. This is my body and my life." Ms. C1 (27 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said, "Now the cost of raising a child is so high that I haven't decided whether to give birth or not." Women have the right to decide whether to have children, rather than treating childbearing as a gifted obligation (Butler, 2004). Accordingly, an increasing number of young women emphasise the autonomy and independence of reproductive decision-making. They not only attend to their own economic and psychological readiness but also question women's roles in traditional society. Under this shift in values, childbirth is no longer regarded as a life task that must be completed, but as a lifestyle choice based on personal preference. Travel experiences have strengthened some young women's appreciation of independent decision-making.

For women aged 31 to 50 years and for some groups with limited economic resources, fertility attitudes are more contradictory. On the one hand, they want to have children at their own pace; on the other hand, family and social pressures, together with policy expectations regarding the "best age for childbearing," make it difficult for them to choose freely. Ms. J (30 years old, undergraduate, married) said, "I want to wait a little longer, but my family urges me every day, saying that it's hard to give birth when I'm old." Ms. H2 (26 years old, undergraduate, married) said, "Sometimes I feel that giving birth is to complete the task in order to stabilise family relationships." Such ambivalent attitudes are particularly prominent among professional women. Ms. I (27 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) noted: "Childbirth may affect promotion, and the company does not like employees in childbirth." Workplace gender discrimination causes women to bear higher opportunity costs in fertility decisions, which is an important reason for their hesitation (Feng & Liang, 2022).

This structural injustice intensifies women's concerns about the opportunity costs of childbirth, forcing them to choose between career and family. The fertility attitudes of women over 50 are primarily reflective. Ms. G1 (53 years old, junior college, married) said, "At that time, the conditions were limited, and it was natural to have children." However, some respondents also reflected on whether these views affected their personal development. Ms. X3 (50 years old, high school, married) said, "When I was young, I lost an opportunity for personal development in order to have children." This retrospective perspective indicates that older women had limited choice when they were young but gradually recognised the long-term impact of childbirth on their life trajectories later in life. Compared with the older generation, younger women's attitudes are considerably more diversified. Some women tend to remain unmarried and childless, believing that childbirth is not a necessary life choice; others hope to have children when economic and emotional conditions are favourable. Ms. W (29 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said, "If I meet a suitable partner in the future, I may have children. It doesn't matter if I don't meet him. I can live well myself." This shift in attitude reflects the gradual strengthening of women's awareness of reproductive choice.

4.9.3 Media trend

Among the respondents, only four discussed in depth how media content shaped their understanding and emotional responses to fertility-related issues. The media they mentioned included TV news, official government accounts, Weibo, Douban, Xiaohongshu, and short-video platforms. Overall, media discourse presents two contrasting tendencies: on the one hand, it promotes themes of marriage and family friendliness; on the other, social media concentrates on the costs of childcare, workplace penalties, and maternal stress. These two narratives coexist within the same information environment, making women more hesitant in their decision-making and value judgments.

Respondents generally recalled reports and short films on “childbirth support policies” and “improving fertility rates”, which link “active fertility” to family harmony and national development. Studies have confirmed that the chain of “media information-other influence-attitude” is also observable in the Chinese context. An empirical study applying the Influence of Presumed Media Influence (IPMI) model to 616 women of childbearing age found that exposure to media-related information and the perception that others would be influenced by such messages were positively associated with supportive attitudes toward fertility-related policies, with this effect further mediated through interpersonal communication (Li, 2024). In

other words, people not only receive media information, but also assume that "others will be influenced", and this assumption in turn shapes their own position. In the interviews, this mechanism was evident when the interviewee did not necessarily agree with the view that one "should give birth as soon as possible" but instead noted that "many people around her will be affected by the news or publicity about childbirth", which led her to respond more cautiously to family and workplace expectations. This suggests that pronatalist narratives may create indirect pressure through the perception of others' attitudes and alter women's strategies in interactions with their families or organisations.

Alongside the mainstream policy discourse, social platforms contain extensive narratives about high childrearing costs, maternal burden, occupational penalties, and physical and psychological strain. An observational study using Weibo data showed that public online discussion of the "three-child support policy" increased markedly after policy announcements or implementation measures were highlighted. The number of comments increased, and negativity also intensified, indicating a gap between policy communication and public expectations (Peng et al., 2024). Another study based on comments from the social network Douban found that when young women discuss "whether to have a child", their arguments centre on "economic pressure, health risks, and insufficient childcare support". Other social media spaces then amplify expressions of risk and fertility-related uncertainty to some extent (Yang et al., 2024). At the same time, a national data analysis of the CGSS2017 female sample reported a statistical association between patterns of media use and willingness to have children, with social trust playing a mediating role. That is, when the content encountered is more likely to reduce trust in external support systems, willingness to have children may decline (Ning et al., 2022).

The respondents in this study did not directly say that "the media made me not want to give birth", but they nevertheless identified it as a salient phenomenon. If they perceived public life as "hollow" and delivery units as unfriendly, they believed that society would not provide adequate support and therefore were more likely to delay childbearing or decide not to have children. In shaping women's attitudes toward marriage and childrearing, public opinion and media discourse appear to play a significant role. The Chinese state and mainstream media have used labels such as "leftover girls" to naturalise women's roles and strengthen public expectations of "timely marriage and childbearing", especially among urban women with higher education (Fincher, 2023). Ms. C (30 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said, "When my family urges me, I occasionally label myself as a leftover girl. Although I do not agree and think this stigmatizes me, I still avoid such topics when facing relevant comments at home or in the company." This historically constructed media mobilisation script continues to shape contemporary public discussion and is layered onto the current policy agenda. Compared with television, short videos and social platforms are more likely to generate emotional contagion and intensified affective responses. On the one hand, videos such as "baby exposure" and "parent-child vlogs" tend to present positive family images; on the other, content such as "workplace penalties", "reproductive injury", "postpartum depression", and "parental burnout" circulates more widely and generates stronger engagement, thereby amplifying perceived risks.

Li's (2024) study of the Chinese context also found that different media presentations of fertility and risk indirectly shape individual attitudes and policy support through the subjective judgment that others will be affected. At the practical level, this means that when

respondents are repeatedly exposed to negative experiences on these platforms, even without personal experience, they may adjust their birth plans by becoming more cautious, delaying childbirth, or opting to have one child only, or no children, because of their perception of broader social conditions. This study confirms such changes in behavioural intentions. In this study, the effect of media trends is neither singular nor linear, nor is it simply that pronatalist initiatives increase childbearing intentions and fear-based content reduces them. Rather, in light of the literature and the interview data, this study is better understood through the chain of "media exposure, perceived influence on others, interpersonal discussion, and individual attitude", with net effects varying across platforms and emotional intensity.

4.9.4 Male participation in parenting

Among the respondents, only six discussed men's participation in parenting directly. However, the women agreed that, in the family division of labour, childcare remains primarily the responsibility of women, while men's involvement is limited and often takes the form of an "auxiliary role". Other women also indicated indirectly that women bear a disproportionate share of domestic labour within the family. This gendered division of labour not only intensifies the time burden and caregiving strain on women, but also directly affects their attitudes toward childbirth and travel arrangements.

Ms. T2 (34 years old, undergraduate, married) said that her husband's participation in daily parenting was limited. She stated bluntly, "I take care of the children most of the time, and my husband takes care of them occasionally. More often, he plays with them for a while and does not pay much attention to the children's food and drink." Ms. H2 said, "He felt that he was working hard at work. When he came home from work and accompanied his children for ten minutes, he felt that he had completed the task." Although men's participation in parenting in Chinese families has increased, it is still dominated by symbolic companionship, and specific tasks such as feeding, education, and emotional comfort are still mainly undertaken by women (Xu & Wang, 2019). This gender division of labour places invisible pressure on women in childrearing and also perpetuates traditional gender stereotypes. When male participation is insufficient, women are more likely to experience fatigue and passivity in childbirth and childrearing, especially when they occupy the "dual role" of worker and caregiver. Ms. H2 (36 years old, undergraduate, married) said, "After our child was born, almost everything was on me. He helped me very little, so I especially regretted giving birth so early." Ms. H (26 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) stated in an interview, "Seeing my husband's inaction after my friend gave birth to a child made me even less willing to get married and have children."

Although respondents over 50 years old did not directly mention the extent of male participation in parenting when reflecting on their childrearing experiences, their interviews suggest that men's involvement was low. Ms. J3 (54 years old, junior high school, divorced) said, "There was no man to take care of children at that time." Ms. B2 (52 years old, junior college, married) added, "At that time, I took it for granted. Now young people still argue about this, but I did not want to fight about it before." This intergenerational difference has in fact brought subtle changes in social attitudes. Younger women are more willing to question unequal divisions of labour and to regard male participation as important in marriage decisions. Older women, by contrast, tend to interpret family responsibilities in terms of acceptance or compliance. The interview transcripts show that, although cases of men

actively participating in childcare are rare among respondents, when such participation does occur, it often significantly alleviates women's psychological burden and enhances their positive experience of childbirth in family life. Ms. O (28 years old, master's degree, unmarried) mentioned the example of her best friend: "My husband will take the initiative to take care of the children and do housework, so I do not think having children is so terrible, and I would also consider having another child." Zhang et al. (2023) pointed out that men's actual participation in childcare and housework is positively correlated with women's willingness to have children, and that this effect is more pronounced among highly educated women. This indicates that male participation is not only a matter of family labour division but is also closely related to a country's overall fertility rate and gender equality policies. A key structural factor limiting women's willingness to have children is men's limited participation in parenting. For most respondents, travel provides only a temporary psychological respite, and insufficient male participation in the family means that this respite is difficult to translate into meaningful relief from long-term fertility pressure.

4.9.5 Balance family and career

Among the 72 respondents, only seven explicitly identified the problem of "balancing family and career"; however, the others described, in their own words, how they negotiated such balance and, at times, refused it. The vast majority emphasised that this issue is often unilaterally imposed on women and has become central to the evaluation, scrutiny, and even regulation of their life choices. Based on the interview materials, "balance" is not only a practical issue, but also reflects the deeply rooted gender division of labour and role expectations in Chinese society.

Ms. Q (22 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) stated bluntly that the question of "balancing family and career" itself presupposes sexism. She said, "Why doesn't anyone ask my father how to take care of his children if he is busy at work, but someone always asks me whether I can work and take care of my family in the future?" Ms. P2 (33 years old, undergraduate, married) further noted: "If a woman is slightly ambitious, she will be asked how she is going to take care of her family. A man can work hard for his career outside the home." Crompton (2006) pointed out: "Although modern society advocates gender equality, in institutional time, women are still assumed to be the main caregivers, while men are implicitly oriented toward professional achievement. The persistence of this structural division of labour makes the balance between family and career a one-way demand placed on women. The implicit logic is that women must perform in two fields simultaneously, whereas men are not required to assume the task of balancing."

Respondents believed that the possibility of balance depends on two conditions: spousal support and arrangements at work and at home. In reality, however, both conditions are often unfavourable to women. Ms. P2 (33 years old, undergraduate, married) said, "If the husband does not take care of the children and the company does not understand, then balance is a pseudo-proposition. After my colleague got pregnant, the company also began to hint that her position would change. How can she work at ease?" Based on data from the China Health and Nutrition Survey (CHNS), Shen Chao (2022) used a multilevel mixed-effects model to systematically analyse the long-term trend of maternal punishment, that is, the effect of maternal status on labour market income. Shen (2022) suggested that once women enter the marriage and childbearing period, they are often regarded as a "potential unstable factor",

which in turn affects their life chances and resource allocation. Whether the husband or male partner assumes equal responsibilities for housework and childcare directly determines whether a woman can reinvest her energy in her career.

In the interviews, some respondents also stated that travel provides a temporary space of respite, helping them relieve the pressure of the double burden of career and family. Ms. A (32 years old, undergraduate, married) said, “No one asked me to take care of anyone when I went out for a few days. I finally have my own time to breathe.” Women gain a sense of psychological space when travelling, that is, they briefly step outside family and work roles in time and space, thereby restoring self-control and positive cognition. However, this short-term equilibrium does not alter the underlying structural dilemma. Women of different ages hold different views on balance. Of the 15 respondents over the age of 50, 11 regarded “taking care of the family” as a woman’s responsibility. Ms. A3 (55 years old, technical secondary school, married) said, “In the past, there were not so many sayings that it was natural for men to earn money and women to take care of their families.” By contrast, the younger generation is more inclined to emphasise fairness and equality. Ms. R2 (25 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, “You can’t say who should do what, who is free, who will take care of it. It’s a matter for two people to take care of children, and the child is not just the mothers! Isn’t it dad’s child?” In addition, educational background also plays a role. Respondents with a master’s degree or above are more likely to question the social construction of gender roles and call for workplace reform. Ms. T1 (27 years old, master’s degree, unmarried) pointed out: “Although our company encourages diversity, only female employees can take parental leave, but not male employees. How can this be balanced?” The balance of family and career is not merely a matter of individual effort but is deeply embedded in the gender structure of Chinese society through the institutional allocation of responsibilities. Behind current expectations of balance for women lies a cultural double standard: women are required to behave like unmarried and childless men in the workplace, yet to fulfil the responsibilities of full-time mothers at home.

4.10 Travel behaviour

4.10.1 Purpose of travel

Of the 72 women interviewed, 22 mentioned their original intention to travel when describing their travel experiences. After coding, the respondents exhibited considerable diversity in their motivations for travel, encompassing emotional regulation, identity escape, pure exploration, physical healing, interest-driven pursuits, social expansion, career development, and related aims. For them, travel is not only a form of physical movement, but also a practice of emotional and meaning-making construction.

In the 21 to 30 age group, a large proportion of respondents stated that travel functioned as a means of escaping stress. Ms. V (26 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said, "I just wanted to escape at that time. I was under a lot of pressure as soon as I changed my job, and my family kept urging me to fall in love. I just wanted to go to a place where there was no one and take a breath." Ms. U (27 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) emphasised, "I don't want to go anywhere. I just don't want to stay where I am." Behind this type of travel lies a temporary response to urban tempo, family control, or workplace anxiety. Some respondents

regarded escape as a strategy of emotional self-protection; they were not seeking a complete transformation through travel, but rather a chance to pause. Wearing and Wearing (2001) suggested that women travellers gain a temporary interruption of social roles, which allows them to be briefly separated from environments of social discipline. Travel was also regarded by many respondents as a process of observing the world and constructing a self-perspective. Ms. U (27 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, "I went to Tibet to see how the locals live. On the other hand, I began to question whether the lifestyle I have been pursuing is really suitable for me?" Ms. A (32 years old, undergraduate, married) added, "When you see that others can live happily without trying so hard, you will begin to think, have we been living in inertia?"

Contrastive travel experience constitutes an important part of self-awareness and cultural imagination. Reisinger and Steiner (2006) pointed out in their research on authentic travel experience that individual travel often triggers self-examination through reflected images of other people's lives, which is a significant process for individuals living within dense social norms. Among the 22 respondents who described their travel motives, some women expressed the purpose of travel more directly and pragmatically. Ms. O1 (24 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, "I just want to go out to relax, eat something delicious, and take some photos." Ms. A (32 years old, undergraduate, married) also said, "Going out with my husband and children is just a change of environment; I don't think it involves much more." This comment indicates a desire to relieve tension and restore family relationships in the short term. In traditional tourism market research, this motivation is often classified as "entertainment motivation"; however, in the context of this study, it still has cultural significance, that is, women use travel as one of the sanctioned and non-instrumental ways of creating personal space or, conversely, sustaining family relationships. It is worth noting that some respondents still expressed vague or affective travel purposes. Ms. W1 (35 years old, undergraduate, divorced) recalled, "I had just divorced at that time, and I didn't know what I could do. Anyway, I bought a ticket and went to Qingdao, and I didn't know why." Ms. F1 (53 years old, undergraduate, married) also said, "I think I just want to feel something, not just play." This ambiguity in expression precisely reflects the unconscious motivations in women's tourism, that is, travel serves as a vehicle for intrinsic psychological adjustment during a trip. It may not be clearly planned in advance, nor can it always be immediately understood or summarised. Individuals realise the exploration and reconstruction of existential meaning through displacement (Cohen, 1979).

4.10.2 Travel preferences

4.10.2.1 I don't like travelling alone.

Of the 72 respondents, approximately one-third clearly expressed resistance to travelling alone, and this attitude was especially prevalent among married women and those over 50. Ms. Q1 (53 years old, junior college, married) stated, "I do not like going out alone. It is boring and unsafe." Ms. N (22 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, "I think I still need a companion when travelling, so I can discuss the itinerary, avoid feeling too lonely, and have someone take pictures of me." Safety is their primary concern. Most respondents mentioned the safety of accommodation in unfamiliar environments, the risk of travelling at night, and the discomfort of being approached by strangers. Ms. D1 (23 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, "There was a time when I went out and was followed the whole time.

Although nothing happened in the end, that experience made me cautious about going alone again." This sensitivity to personal safety is highly consistent with the gender-based safety risks faced by Chinese women in daily travel (Wang & Wong, 2014). In addition to safety concerns, some respondents also mentioned emotional discomfort. They believe that travelling is an experience that should be shared. Without companions, many emotions cannot be expressed or reciprocated. Ms. J3 (54 years old, junior high school, divorced) said, "I went to other places alone, and I always felt that no one was talking to me when I was eating, which made the experience seem less lively." This lack of companionship is particularly prominent among older women and respondents who hold social expectations for travel.

4.10.2.2 Preference for travelling alone.

Contrary to the attitude above, some respondents expressed a preference for solo travel, and this tendency is more common among the 21- to 30-year-old group in China. E1 (27 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said, "I can go wherever I want by myself, without considering other people's opinions; it is very free." Ms. W (29 years old, master's degree, unmarried) added, "The advantage of travelling alone is that you can fully follow your own pace and avoid being irritated when others are late or change their plans." This preference is often associated with autonomy and self-exploration. Some respondents also 认为 that travelling alone creates opportunities to communicate with others. Ms. E (27 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, "When you are alone, it is easier to communicate with strangers and try new things." Solo travellers are more likely to develop new interpersonal and life skills in unfamiliar situations (Bianchi, 2016). However, some older women also choose to travel alone in certain situations. Ms. F1 (53 years old, undergraduate, married) mentioned: "As a history teacher, I have a deep interest in tourist destinations with rich history and culture, but my partner is not interested, so I went there by myself. Although it is a little lonely, it is quite comfortable." This indicates that the preference for travelling alone is not determined solely by age or marital status, but is closely related to individual personality, travel purpose, and life stage.

4.10.2.3 Factors in tourist destination selection.

In respondents' descriptions of destination selection, four main influencing factors can be identified: safety, historical and cultural context, budget and time, and social resources. Safety remains an important prerequisite for Chinese women when choosing a destination. Ms. J2 (28 years old, master's degree, unmarried) emphasised: "I will check local security first, especially when travelling alone. I will never go to dangerous places." This consideration is especially prominent among women who travel alone. The type of scenic spot is directly related to personal interests. Ms. F1 (53 years old, undergraduate, married) said, "I like places with more history and culture, so I will prioritise places like Xi'an and Dunhuang." Ms. T2 (34 years old, undergraduate, married) is more inclined toward natural landscapes: "I would like to go to the beach and the mountains, where it is quieter." Budget and time are limiting conditions for most respondents. Ms. R (33 years old, undergraduate, married) mentioned: "If you do not have much time, you will go to nearby areas, and you will only consider going abroad during a long vacation." This indicates that economic constraints and work arrangements have a strong influence on destination choice. Finally, social resources are also a decisive factor in some cases. Ms. V (26 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said, "If I have a friend in Xi'an, I will go to visit her, which will also save

accommodation expenses." This relationship-oriented choice reflects that Chinese women still often take interpersonal networks into account in their travel decisions (Xu & McGehee, 2012).

4.11 Travel safety

Of the 72 respondents in this study, most referred, either explicitly or implicitly, to safety concerns when discussing their travel experiences. This issue occupied a particularly important place among female travellers, especially those travelling alone. The interviewee's account indicates that safety may be threatened in diverse contexts, including verbal or physical contact with strangers, anxiety about travelling at night, and concerns about privacy and security in accommodation settings. Ms. Q (22 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) recalled travelling alone to a southern city: "When I was waiting for a car on the roadside at night, a man came to talk to me and followed me the whole time, even after I entered the mall before leaving." Such experiences are more common among young women travelling alone and often directly shape subsequent travel decisions, such as reducing nighttime activities and limiting travel to perceived safe areas. Ms. O (28 years old, master's degree, unmarried) similarly noted, "I rarely go out at night for fear of trouble, especially in other places." Accommodation safety was another frequently mentioned concern. When booking hotels or homestays, some respondents paid particular attention to details such as front desk management, door security, and the surrounding environment. Ms. S (25 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, "I will check the hotel reviews to see whether any women have reported being knocked on or peeped at." Women are more likely to consider both physical safety and psychological security when selecting accommodation (Yang, 2017). Sensitivity to safety and the relative priority assigned to it also varied across age groups. Younger women were more likely to mention insecurity in interpersonal interactions, such as harassment and unsolicited advances, whereas older women expressed greater concern about physical condition and sudden health incidents. Ms. M (55 years old, technical secondary school, married) said, "I have a heart disease, so I will consider the local medical facilities and pharmacies." This concern with health and safety was more common among respondents over 50 years of age.

4.12 Equality between men and women

4.12.1 Gender equality

Among the 72 respondents, 15 discussed the theme of "gender equality". Their statements encompassed the workplace, family, education, and public opinion, revealing a complex interplay between progressive ideals and persistent practical constraints.

(1) "Equality in words, but inequality in practice": respondents' direct perceptions

Many respondents believed that Chinese society emphasises gender equality at the legal and policy levels, but that women still bear a disproportionate burden in everyday life. Ms. C (30 years old, master's degree, unmarried) stated bluntly, "Everyone says that men and women are equal, but when looking for a job, they still ask girls when they plan to get married and have children." Ms. T (26 years old, undergraduate, married) added, "It is more unequal at home. Both of us go to work, but I do more housework." This perception of "verbal equality

and practical inequality" is broadly consistent with existing research. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (WEF, 2023) shows that China's gender gap in education and health is gradually narrowing, but substantial disparities remain in "economic participation and opportunity" and "political empowerment" (Women's rights in China, 2023).

(2) "Why do you always ask women how to balance?"

Several respondents noted a recurring issue in their conversations: society persistently asks women how to balance family and career, whereas men are rarely asked the same question. Ms. O (28 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said, "Since I started working, someone has reminded me, 'What will you do if you have children in the future?' But my male colleague has never been asked this question." Ms. Y (52 years old, junior college, married) also stated, "In the past, we all thought this was a woman's vocation. It was acceptable for a man to earn money and support a family, but young people now do not accept this view." This issue has also been widely discussed in international gender equality research. Hochschild (1989), in The Second Shift, argued that even in dual-earner families, women generally perform the "second shift", meaning they continue to do housework and care for children after work, while men are rarely expected to do so. This double standard is also evident in the interviews with Chinese women discussed above.

(3) Intergenerational differences and educational backgrounds

Intergenerational differences are particularly evident in discussions of "gender equality". Younger women generally expressed stronger criticism of inequality. Ms. K (29 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said, "We know very well what is unfair, but my parents do not think it is a problem." In contrast, women over 50 tended to accept the existing division of labour. Ms. M (55 years old, technical secondary school, married) said, "In the past, we were used to men not working at home. It was acceptable for women to do more work." Educational background also played an important role. Respondents with higher levels of education were more likely to analyse gender equality from structural and institutional perspectives. Ms. F (30 years old, doctor, unmarried) noted, "The real inequality is not only the division of housework, but also institutional design, such as short paternity leave for men, which leaves women more isolated after childbirth." Ms. F further argued that gender inequality should not be understood solely as a conflict between men and women; rather, it is also closely connected to broader class-based inequalities.

(4) Comparison and reflection during travel

Some respondents said that travel gave them opportunities to observe different gender cultures, which prompted reflection on the gender gap in Chinese society. Ms. D (29 years old, doctor, unmarried) said, "When I was in Northern Europe, I saw that men took more care of children, which made me feel that the situation on our side was very unfair." Similar views were expressed by many women who had travelled abroad, suggesting that cross-cultural experience plays an important role in raising awareness of gender equality.

4.12.2 Dowry

In the interview, 38 respondents discussed the issue of dowry. Their attitudes towards, and understandings of, dowry revealed significant intergenerational and regional differences, as indicated below.

(1) The resistance of young women. Most respondents aged 21 to 30 regarded giving a dowry as a symbol of economic burden and social inequality. Ms. M1 (21 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, “The dowry makes me feel that the marriage has gone bad, as if it has become a business.” Ms. D1 (23 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) added, “My family is in the south, and I think it’s ridiculous to spend hundreds of thousands on dowry. Marriage is not business.” This resistance stems not only from economic realities but also reflects young women’s new understanding of power relations in marriage. Ms. T1 (27 years old, master’s degree, unmarried) noted, “In my opinion, the dowry is a symbol of ‘who has the upper hand’, which will make marriage unequal from the beginning.” Her perspective echoes Li Yinhe (1995) in Marriage and Family in China and Its Changes: namely, that dowry was originally a form of family economic transfer, but in modern society it has gradually been transformed into a symbol of men’s “purchase of marriage qualifications”, thereby exacerbating gender asymmetry in power.

(2) The continuation of family concepts and social expectations. Although young women generally question the practice of a high dowry, some still acknowledge that dowry serves a function of “social recognition” in actual marriage. Ms. Z2 (33 years old, undergraduate, married) said, “I don’t care, but my parents think it’s shameless if they don’t give a dowry, as if their daughter was raised for nothing.” Ms. R (33 years old, undergraduate, married) said, “People around me want a dowry. If I don’t want it, others will think I’m at a loss.” This logic, in which a dowry is equated with, or contributes to, “face,” is more prominent in fourth- and fifth-tier cities and rural areas. Ms. B2 (52 years old, junior college, married) recalled, “There were also dowries in our era, but they were all symbolic, but now there are more and more,” implying that commercial values are becoming more prominent, possibly because of a “marketplace with Chinese characteristics”. This is a further example of how historical gender norms continue to shape contemporary Chinese society.

(3) The implicit continuation of gender inequality. Some interviewees pointed out that the dowry system reinforces gender inequality in marriage. Ms. H2 (36 years old, undergraduate, married) believes, “Once the dowry is given, the man’s family will feel that the woman owes them, as if it is natural to ask the daughter-in-law to be filial and have children.” Ms. O1 (24 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, “The dowry seems to be the man’s loss, but in fact the woman’s freedom is bought away.”

4.12.3 Maleism

Among the 72 respondents, 46 directly or indirectly mentioned expressions such as “male power” and “machoism.” Their narratives primarily focused on four types of scenarios: family decision-making and housework, workplace rules and recruitment discourse, public communication and daily etiquette, and comparisons and experiences during travel.

1. Most married respondents located the first manifestation of male power within the family. Ms. J (30 years old, undergraduate, married) said, “Big things are basically decided by him. I can make suggestions, but in the end, I still listen to him.” Ms. P2 (33 years old,

undergraduate, married) said, “My mother-in-law says that it is more important for men to earn money, and I will do the housework by default.” This pattern of default managers and default carers was common among many respondents. In the interview sample, unmarried participants also recounted the origins of similar ideas, such as elders’ advice that “girls should take care of their families,” or relatives’ and friends’ questions about “Can you cook?” These “entry statements” bind “good daughter, good wife” to care labour and then normalise it as a stable division of labour after marriage.

2. During job searches and promotion processes, respondents reported that the most common masculine discourse was to ask women about their marriage and child-rearing plans. Ms. R3 (28 years old, master’s degree, unmarried) said, “In the interview, someone always asks when you plan to have a baby.” Ms. A (32 years old, undergraduate, married) said, “When the child is still young, the leader will hint that ‘family is important’ and then give the project to male colleagues.” This experience is consistent with macro-level data. According to the World Economic Forum’s “2024 Global Gender Gap Report,” although China has improved in economic participation and opportunity, the overall gender gap remains substantial. In 2024, it ranked 106th overall, with a gender gap closure rate of 68.4%, indicating that the wage structure gap remains considerable in the labour market. At the same time, the report emphasises that these differences in labour-market systems and practices intensify perceptions of inequality. The interviewees’ descriptions also reflected the maternal penalty, including post-childbirth job reassignment and differential performance evaluations. Relevant research has long shown a link between gender ideology, supervisory satisfaction, and career choice, especially when care-related gender roles are assigned in ways that restrict women’s career paths (Zhang, 2022). Although this study provides no quantitative analysis to support these claims, the interviewees’ accounts of “asking about plans first and then talking about ability” offer a contextual framework and public-discourse background suggesting that these attitudes remain present in China.

3. In daily interactions and public spaces, respondents were more likely to use terms such as offence, disrespect, and treated me like a subordinate to describe men’s specific behaviour. Ms. P (23 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) described the discomfort of a male companion making decisions for her: “He is the master of the order and the itinerary. Don’t worry if you think I’m a girl.” Ms. T (26 years old, undergraduate, married) described the seating arrangement and topic distribution at a family dinner: “Men talk about work and investment, and women are assigned to take care of the children and cannot interrupt.” Interviews related to dowry also revealed a “sense of exchange between rights and obligations.” Later studies found that greater financial resources in rural areas were associated with reduced bargaining power for women after marriage and with more traditional gender roles (Cheney & Pan, 2023). These studies emphasise that the entanglement of money and intimacy solidifies expectations regarding household division of labour. The interviewees expressed this coupling more concretely, for example, “after giving the dowry, many things should be done” and “if you disobey, they will say you are ignorant.” Although these statements differ from the structural explanations in the literature, they indicate similar shifts in the two dimensions of “who can make decisions” and “who should bear the responsibility for care.”

4. The older generation often used expressions such as 男主外女主内, that is, “men take charge of public affairs while women are responsible for domestic matters,” treating them as

common-sense life experience and referring to them as “experience-based talk.” Young people more often use terms such as “decision-making appropriation” and “acquiescence to household responsibility,” and they emphasise “refusal or negotiation” in specific situations. Ms. N1 (52 years old, junior college, married) said, “When I was young, it was normal for men to have the final say.” Ms. Z (27 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, “Now I will discuss the division of labour in advance; otherwise, I will not enter into a relationship.” It is worth noting that respondents did not equate male dominance with male power in every situation. They often judged it by whether their will was respected. This situational judgement is more clearly expressed in family financial management, residential decisions, and arrangements involving relatives: when women’s opinions are systematically ignored or they are repeatedly asked to make unreasonable concessions, the label of male rights is clearly invoked.

4.12.4 Feminism

Among the 72 respondents, 41 mentioned related topics such as “women’s rights,” “independent women,” and “self-awareness.” Their understanding of women’s rights was highly differentiated: some viewed it as a form of social consciousness oriented toward equality; others misinterpreted it as implying superiority over women or opposition to men; and most older respondents tended to regard women’s rights as a new term used by young people.

Ms. V (26 years old, master’s degree, unmarried) said, “I agree with women’s rights, but I do not agree with the extreme comments on the Internet. I think it means making everyone equal.” Ms. T (26 years old, undergraduate, married) expressed concern: “There is misogyny on the Internet at any time, as if women’s rights are about oppressing men in return.” This ambiguity and stratification reflect the multiple dimensions of feminism in contemporary Chinese society. On the one hand, more women have been exposed to the concepts of self-determination and autonomy through study, travel, and the media; on the other hand, the antagonistic online opinion environment has created distance for some women from women’s rights discourse. Online public opinion radicalises and trivialises women’s rights, shifting it from a theoretical claim for gender equality to an emotional label, thereby obscuring its original aim of social structural reform (Shearing, 2025). Ms. E1 (27 years old, master’s degree, unmarried) noted: “Sometimes when you say that you support women’s rights, others will laugh and say that you have been brainwashed.” Such mocking dismissal is common among young people, and the concept of women’s rights still lacks discursive legitimacy in mainstream discourse.

Many other respondents linked travel to the awakening of women’s rights or to a new female consciousness. Ms. F (30 years old, doctor, unmarried) said, “I did not think I was special before. When I travelled, I found that women can do many things alone.” Ms. W1 (35 years old, undergraduate, divorced) added: “When travelling alone, I feel that the world is not centred on anyone else, but on my own decisions.” Women often experience autonomy through role separation during travel, thereby strengthening self-understanding (Bianchi, 2016). Urban middle-aged women often pursue travel, self-investment, and aesthetic practice, which has shaped a more flexible form of women’s rights. Rather than pursuing radical confrontation, they express autonomy through lifestyle choices (Alkhattabi, 2024). This is consistent with the statements of many interviewees. Ms. S (25 years old, undergraduate,

unmarried) said, “I do not need to argue to prove anything. I just need to choose what I want to do.”

However, women’s rights are still rejected in many social and occupational interactions. Ms. X1 (50 years old, junior college, married) mentioned: “In our time, when we heard about women’s rights, we thought it was troublesome, not a good term.” Ms. Q1 (53 years old, junior college, married) said, “I do not understand what young people mean by women’s rights. Women who are too strong will have a hard time.” This intergenerational difference is consistent with a passive and receptive gender consciousness. Under the long-term shaping of patriarchal culture, many women have become accustomed to maintaining relationships by compromising on equality rather than actively questioning injustice (Li, 2016). The adversarial online public sphere has further deepened this resistance. Ms. H (26 years old, master’s degree, unmarried) mentioned: “When it comes to women’s rights, some people say that you are extreme, but in fact, I just want equal job opportunities.” This narrative shows that women must trade off self-advocacy and the avoidance of stigmatisation in everyday communication. Women’s awareness of gender equality is significantly and positively associated with happiness, but in settings characterised by high social pressure and conservative public opinion, this positive relationship is weakened (Zhang & Liu, 2022). This indicates that the structural environment and public opinion jointly shape the feasibility of women’s expression of feminist consciousness.

Some respondents also mentioned the representation of women’s rights in audiovisual works and social media. Ms. N (22 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, “In the past, many dramas centred on virtuous wives and mothers, but now there seem to be more independent female characters.” Ms. L1 (26 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, “Nowadays, many domestic variety shows, such as ‘Sister Riding the Wind and Breaking the Waves,’ also make me think that women can live more confidently, regardless of age.” This shift reflects the role of cultural production in shaping gender awareness. According to Rome and Lambert (2020), the post-feminist narrative in mainstream media, on the one hand, expands women’s space for self-expression and, on the other hand, links independence to consumption, producing an illusion of autonomy mediated by consumerism. This phenomenon is evident in the expressions of some interviewees. Ms. I1 (23 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, “I identify with the image of an independent woman, but I cannot rely on buying it all.” Her reflection shows that women are wary of the commercialisation of women’s rights, and this critical awareness also indicates the deepening diffusion of women’s rights discourse.

4.12.5 Criteria for choosing a mate.

Among the 72 respondents, mate selection emerged as a highly discussed topic. It appeared frequently in interviews and was closely related to their educational background, marital experience, economic status, and gender consciousness. Overall, women’s mate selection criteria have shifted markedly from an emphasis on material stability to an emphasis on emotional and value-based compatibility.

Among younger respondents, “compatibility in core values”, defined as alignment in worldview, values, and outlook on life, has become one of the most frequently cited criteria. Ms. T1 (27 years old, master’s degree, unmarried) stated, “I don’t care whether the other party has a house. The key is whether we can communicate with each other.” Ms. E (27 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) added, “I value ideas more now. I don’t want to find someone

who can only talk about how women should be." This change reflects an intergenerational transformation in women's mate selection perspectives in Chinese society. With the expansion of education and the improvement of women's economic independence, mate selection has shifted from a "resource-oriented" model to one centred on "spiritual resonance". In the past, external standards such as "good economic conditions" were replaced by "understanding and respect," and this shift was especially evident among highly educated women (Blossfeld, 2019). However, spiritual resonance does not completely replace material security in practice. Ms. K (22 years old, master's degree, unmarried) confessed, "I hope he is self-motivated and has a basic economic foundation. I'm not after his money, but I am afraid of too much pressure in the future."

This statement reflects women's pragmatic understanding of marriage as an economic arrangement and also indicates a dual consideration of equality and reality. In the interviews, more than two-thirds of the women emphasised economic independence and argued that both partners should contribute to the future household. Ms. S (25 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, "I don't want to rely on others, and I don't want others to rely on me completely." Ms. G1 (32 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) added, "If a family is equal, both people must be able to support themselves." Economic independence has become a core issue in marriage negotiations among middle-aged women. Through education and career accumulation, women have gained greater bargaining power and have therefore rejected subordinate positions (Fincher, 2023). At the intergenerational level, older respondents generally agreed on the necessity of economic independence, although their interpretations differed. Ms. J3 (54 years old, junior high school education, divorced) said, "Women should have their own money, and they will have confidence when they are old." This shift from dependence within marriage to partnership on equal footing reflects not only improved individual economic capacity but also the advancement of gender consciousness in social culture.

The transformation of Chinese women's mate selection values is part of a broader context of women's rights: women gradually achieve equal relations through practice without directly opposing tradition (Yin, 2022). It is also noteworthy that some respondents no longer regard marriage as an inevitable life goal. Ms. B (23 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, "I don't reject marriage, I just think it is okay not to get married." Ms. C (30 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said, "Marriage is not an achievement for me." These statements reflect a rational reassessment of the marriage system. Ms. R2 (25 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, "I have seen too many people losing themselves after marriage. I would rather be single." This statement reflects the reassertion of women's autonomy and dignity in intimate relationships. They regard refusing compromise as an important part of self-realisation. Although young women tend to favour more egalitarian mate selection criteria, families and society still judge women by labels such as "leftover women" and "marriageable age." Ms. W (29 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said, "Every time I go home, I am asked whether I am married and how much my partner's salary is."

4.12.6 Independence – what does it mean?

Among the 72 respondents, many used terms such as independence and self-reliance in their narratives. Their understanding of independence did not entail rejection of marriage or conventional female roles; rather, it centred on three domains: economic self-sufficiency,

autonomous decision-making in major life matters, and a degree of discretion over time and space.

(1) A considerable number of respondents directly linked independence to a stable income. Ms. P1 (28 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) stated, "I think independence must first have its own cash flow, and being able to survive, say, three months of unemployment." Ms. T2 (34 years old, undergraduate, married) defined independence more as "having money in hand and being able to ask only a few people to do things for myself." Data from global gender gap indicators show that China's economic participation and opportunity scores improved in 2024, but the overall gender gap remains unclosed. This suggests that women will continue to face obstacles in achieving sustainable economic independence. Respondents often used investment returns, wealth accumulation, and transparent recruitment as criteria for independence, indicating a pragmatic orientation in many of their responses. In addition, several respondents viewed economic independence as a bargaining resource. In other words, income and security were linked to the right to speak. For many women, independence also entails changes in decision-making power. Ms. U (27 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, "Work, change cities, whether you want to take the postgraduate entrance examination, ask yourself first, and then communicate with your family." Ms. H2 (36 years old, undergraduate, married) said, "Buying a house, children going to school, both parents are goats, ... these are major events in which I must have a say." Women with higher education tend to display a stronger sense of agency in expectations regarding delayed marriage and mate choice. They regard later marriage as a strategy for realising personal development and expanding the scope of choice (To, 2013). In the interviews, this shift in decision-making authority was often stated explicitly. For example, Ms. J (30 years old, undergraduate, married) questioned whether the business trip opportunity was being ceded because of housework, and answered "obviously not." Ms. V (26 years old, master's degree, unmarried) asked how acceptable long-distance relationships were, and Ms. J3 (54 years old, junior high school, divorced) reflected on whether one should remarry after divorce. Rather than treating independence as a prerequisite, these respondents emphasised its role as a resource for negotiation in pursuing desired outcomes.

(2) The connection between travel and independence appears in the statements of many respondents. Ms. O1 (24 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, "I am willing to go to a strange city alone. I dare to go independently and will arrange it." Similarly, P2 (33 years old, undergraduate, married) understood independence as the ability to go out alone to relax without needing to continually report to others, unless she chose to do so.

(3) A considerable number of respondents mentioned the experience of being labelled. Ms. L1 (26 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, "Some people understand independence as not needing anyone." Ms. C (30 years old, master's degree, unmarried) said, "I just hope that there can be an equal division of labour in the relationship, not to overwhelm anyone." When women attempt to rearrange the sequence of education, career, marriage, and love, social discourse often appears to discourage such action. However, the interview transcripts show that many women adopt a situational strategy, reducing the costs of conflict through joint decision-making within the family rather than adopting a confrontational stance. In these narratives, the meaning of independence is repeatedly tempered: it does not signify rejection of intimacy, but rather the establishment of clearer boundaries in intimate relationships.

(4) Respondents aged 21 to 30 more often defined independence as more than a right to choose. For them, income and financial security are only one criterion in mate selection, and greater emphasis is placed on opportunities for workplace growth and access to travel as part of career and personal development. For those over 50 years old, independence is described as confidence, stable income, manageable health, a social network, and the ability to say no.

4.13 Travelling promotes the pursuit of dreams.

Regarding travel as an aspiration or as a means of realising dreams, many respondents described travel as a beginning or turning point. After brief periods of separation and immersive experiences in different environments, they began to translate long-held aspirations into concrete, actionable goals, such as pursuing postgraduate study, changing careers, relocating to a new city, starting a business, systematically developing personal interests, or applying for overseas opportunities.

Many respondents noted that the intensity of travel helped them perceive future possibilities. Ms. U (27 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, "The Sichuan-Tibet Line was so impressively beautiful. I decided to study photography systematically, rather than just take random photos with little artistic value." Psychologists refer to this process as envisioning one's future as a "possible self": individuals generate specific imaginings of "what kind of person I may become" under salient conditions, thereby providing direction for effort and motivation for action, including goals, stages, and required resources (Markus & Nur Ius, 1986). Other respondents described the critical travel moment as a point of memory anchorage. Ms. Z2 (33 years old, undergraduate, married) said, "The first time I hiked about 5,000 metres, I found that I was not a fragile person." Tourism research has identified such cathartic moments as high-arousal, emotionally intense, meaningful, and novel experiences that contribute to the formation of memorable tourism experiences (Kim et al., 2012; Tung & Ritchie, 2011).

The sense of meaning, knowledge acquisition, investment, novelty, and other dimensions of tourism are associated with intentions regarding subsequent behaviour (Kim et al., 2012).

In addition, a small number of interviews described "making a decision after returning home", especially after cross-cultural or highly challenging trips. Ms. F (30 years old, doctor, unmarried) said, "I see many fathers taking care of their children in Northern Europe, and I have decided not to accept the idea that 'I take it for granted' in the future." Threshold moments, strong emotions, and reflection during travel can trigger the reorganisation of attitudes and behavioural patterns. Decisions often emerge after travel has ended, accompanied by a "sense of connection with larger things", which prompts individuals to adjust their life paths after returning to daily life (Kirillova et al., 2017). However, some respondents noted that the enthusiasm generated by travel gradually dissipates in the face of reality. Ms. T (26 years old, undergraduate, married) said, "I put it on hold when I come back to work." Ms. W1 (35 years old, undergraduate, divorced) said, "The division of labour in the family has not changed, and my plan is difficult to advance." Not all travel experiences are transformative (Hosany et al., 2022). Many respondents believed that travel cannot become a long-term lifestyle because of family obligations and economic constraints. Ms. Z2 (33 years old, undergraduate, married) said, "Now I have a job, a family and children. It is impossible to travel outside for a long time, or to say that I can take travelling as a job." Ms. E (27 years

old, undergraduate, unmarried) said, "If you want to take travel as a lifestyle, you definitely need some financial support."

4.14 Key Findings

4.14.1. The purpose of the research is to reaffirm

This study aims to explore the role of tourism in the process of self-awareness and identity reshaping of Chinese women. Through the qualitative interview method, this study analyses how women re-understand themselves, reflect on family and social roles, and rebuild identity under specific culture and institutionalisation from women's life experience. Based on the interview structure of 72 female respondents, this chapter systematically presents the key findings in the data according to the logic of thematic coding analysis. The research findings correspond to three core research problems:

1. How does travel affect the self-awareness and self-understanding of Chinese women?
2. How can women rethink and reshape their social and family roles when travelling?
3. To what extent does the travel experience promote or limit the transformation of women's identity?

4.14.2 Data description

This study adopted a qualitative research method of semi-structured interviews, and interviewed a total of 72 Chinese women between the ages of 21 and 55. The sample distribution of the respondents is as follows: 36 people aged 21 to 30 years, 21 people aged 31 to 50 years, and 15 people over 50 years old; in terms of marital status, 48 unmarried, 22 married, and 2 divorced; in terms of academic qualifications, 12 junior college and below, 40 undergraduates, 18 graduate students, and 2 doctoral degree holders. The study uses NVivo for theme coding and summarises one and theme and 35 secondary codes. In order to enhance credibility and transparency, this chapter retains the original words of the interviewee in the narrative process and uses a standard numeration (such as Ms. A, et cetera.). All quotations have been verbally corrected to maintain semantic accuracy, but their original meaning has not been changed.

4.14.3 Findings

This study examines 72 women of different ages, marital statuses, and educational backgrounds as a sample and presents a set of interrelated and traceable experiential models around the theme of how tourism affects Chinese women’s self-awareness and identity reconstruction.

First, travel constitutes a context for self-evaluation. During the limited time away from the social environment of family, acquaintances, and routine scripts, women reorganise the boundaries of their competence in decision-making, communication, tolerance, and recovery through the continuous process of planning itineraries, solving problems, and interacting with unfamiliar environments. Unlike evaluation by others at home and in the workplace, the

evaluative criteria during travel are closer to internal standards: whether I can cope independently, whether I am willing to endure it, and what pace I want to maintain. The "shadowing" here is not a declaration, but a parallel self-assessment system that is connected to daily identity through repeated acts of forced or active adaptation. This system does not disappear after return; instead, it becomes a basis for greater assertiveness and participation in major decision-making, thereby providing empirical support for personal boundary setting. However, this system is subject to temporal decay when women re-enter the context from which they temporarily escaped.

Second, travel has a direct link to the formation of a possible self. Women's property ownership, comparison with others, and participation in the journey transform abstract wishes into an imaginable and testable lifestyle. Unlike simple aspirations, travel places these visions within a verifiable framework: the smooth experiences gained in unfamiliar places, the coping strategies developed in response to difficulties, and the goals achieved within limited budgets and time horizons all enhance the certainty of "I can do it". This certainty does not produce an immediate comprehensive transformation but rather promotes a risk-controlled process of experimentation. As a result, travel has become a bridging variable between vision and action, translating emotional desire into trial practice and generating a clearer personal plan through repeated feedback.

Third, the implementation of any aspiration creates rhythmisation. Numerous interviews show that women incorporate travel and skill practice into annual or phased rhythms, including annual long-term goals, quarterly work output targets, or fitness goals. Rhythmisation not only reduces the uncertainty of outcomes arising from attempts at change but also provides a predictable timeframe for negotiating family and workplace schedules, thereby stabilising memorable peak experiences as an integral part of life. In other words, whether a predictable personal routine can be established has become a watershed that distinguishes isolated travel improvisation from the cycle of travel, practice, feedback, and re-practice. This rhythm is not only the result of personal self-management, but also the product of negotiation with others: only when the division of household labour and work arrangements can be reconfigured around this rhythm can the changes triggered by travel become stable choices at the individual, relational, and institutional levels.

Fourth, family and social structures exert an "escape valve effect" on path transformation. In the sample, the feasibility of sharing housework and childcare directly determines whether any aspiration can enter routine practice; when such sharing is difficult to realise, more travel outcomes remain at the level of short-term emotional recovery. Practices linked to the marriage transaction script, for example the role assignment caused by dowries, often push women back into the position of "natural caregivers," weakening the boundary claims initiated through travel experiences. However, in families with equitable partner support and shared responsibilities, repeated escape experiences allow travel experiences to be transformed into gains in time and decision-making. Expectations surrounding marriage and childrearing, together with uncertain employment prospects in the workplace, lead some women to limit themselves to short-term cycles and low levels of aspirational investment, forming a common strategy of trial and error in small steps. Although greater visibility of gender-equality policies and related benefits has improved women's status, these policies can strengthen women's individual decision-making only when opportunities are available within family structures and within sustainable organisational, workplace, and community contexts.

These factors are interwoven with personal aspiration, careers, and family structures, as well as with systems that permit women to contest historical and contemporary arrangements that restrict their roles to childcare functions.

Fifth, travel mode and perceived safety shape the intensity and direction of experience. Solo travellers are more likely to actively embrace uncertainty and test their self-efficacy simultaneously; travellers with companions are more likely to confirm their roles and influence through collaboration. Safety and trust are not abstract prerequisites, but practical judgements that inform specific decisions such as pre-departure assessment, destination selection, and transportation and accommodation arrangements. Once the safety threshold is crossed, trust and self-efficacy form a positive cycle; if the threshold cannot be reached for an extended period, travel is redefined as an activity centred on social relaxation and local control. It is worth noting that women do not contrast "seeking stability" with "independence". On the contrary, they build independence on risk management rather than risk-taking through strategies such as information gathering, contingency planning, and rhythm adjustment, demonstrating pragmatic autonomy centred on control.

Sixth, intergenerational and educational differences shape distinct emphases within the same mechanism. The 21- to 30-year-old group more frequently associates travel with "opening a new path" and "enhancing self-efficacy," emphasizing choice and personal growth. The 31- to 50-year-old group tends to interpret travel through the lens of "balance, negotiation, and redistribution" in the travel narrative, paying greater attention to alignment with the family structure and rhythm described above. Those over 50 years old tend to emphasize "repair through simplicity," that is, restoring physical and psychological autonomy through travel, and may even reactivate desires deferred in earlier years. Educational background also shapes modes of expression: highly educated women are more likely to define equality through "rotation, transparency, and boundaries" and other operational terms, whereas those with fewer years of education describe their core demands more approximately, such as "feeling fairness, being respected, and being able to decide." This indicates that the function of travel is not homogeneous across groups, although the same chain of "departure, testing, rhythm, negotiation, and stabilization" is recognized across groups.

Seventh, the pursuit of dreams and aspirations in the sample exhibits the characteristics of "visualization, path formation, and conditionalization." Travel transforms desire into concrete forms, such as photography, outdoor skills, and cultural participation, and creates pathways toward realizing dreams through courses, learning, and similar activities. However, whether these aspirations can be sustained over the long term depends on available time, economic conditions, and family support. The interview data show that even when desire does not develop into a career or a long-term investment, women still regard the process of "trying and verification" as a form of independent "self-engineering." Its value lies in replacing abstract imagination with lived experience, thereby adjusting subsequent rhythms and decision-making priorities. The legitimacy of this attempt is justified through reference to travel as a means of identity restructuring.

Eighth, physical and mental health have a bidirectional regulatory function in the travel chain. At the physical level, walking and regular routines during travel make women more aware of their bodily condition and prompt some to maintain good habits after returning home. In addition, the recovery of emotional equilibrium brought about by changes in

environment and rhythm reset improves tolerance to stress and conflict. Health is not an ancillary benefit of travel, but a necessary condition for the sustainability of future travel. When physical and emotional stability becomes central to daily arrangements, travel is more likely to shift from a one-time experience to a structural resource, which in turn supports the individual's boundary claims within the family and workplace.

Ninth, participants present gender equality as a set of observable, negotiable, and visible temporal indicators. Respondents can assess the degree of equality through operational details such as "who arranges," "who has a decision-making vote," "who can go out alone," and "whether finances are independent and transparent." Travel functions here as a stress test. It tests whether time is truly under individual control, whether there is an actual place in decision-making, and whether economic resources provide an adequate safety buffer. Once these dimensions are confirmed through travel and carried back into daily life, women's independence is no longer merely an idea but a daily system that can be documented and reproduced. Conversely, when the traveller is repeatedly forced to yield to others' arrangements or is constrained by safety and resource limitations, equality is difficult to realize, and practice lags behind the language of equality.

In summary, the interview data indicate that travel can open a window of "boundary loosening and exposure to the unfamiliar"; "possible self-efficacy and emotional recovery" forms the intermediate link; "low-risk experimentation, resource equalization, and rhythmic arrangement" constitute the action path; "family sharing, marriage script, workplace window, and policy usability" function as structural valves; and, finally, the study identifies differentiated forms of stability across the three types of outputs associated with exploratory and restorative boundary setting.

In addition to the romanticized view of travel as a one-time catharsis, the transcripts in this study show that travel is closer to a gradual, controllable, negotiable, and verifiable social practice. Its value lies in providing a framework of empirical evidence, so that independence gained through equality is expressed through measurable details of time, economic structure, and decision-making. However, the limitation of the study is that when structures of inequality remain unchanged for extended periods, travel can function only as emotional adjustment and short-term recovery, and it is difficult to promote lasting identity reconfiguration. Therefore, the key contribution of this study is to extract travel from the implicit model of "scenery-consumption" and reposition it within the process of "self-construction, relational negotiation, and system access," translating independence gained through equality from abstract concepts into observable indicators such as "time control" and "decision-making seats," and into rhythmic standards. Identifying the critical transition from temporary experience to more stable life orientations is essential for understanding the life strategies of contemporary Chinese women, and this interpretive framework emerges inductively from the interview data. It not only describes differences but also provides an operational comparative dimension and a clear basis for subsequent research and policy-level institutional design.

4.14.4 The interpretation and importance of the research results

Through semi-structured interviews with 72 women, this study examines how tourism can function as a practical field for self-exploration, identity reconstruction, and social negotiation for women in contemporary Chinese society. The findings show that travel is not

only spatial movement or leisure activity, but also a social process shaped by reflection, experimentation, and negotiation. It enables women to reassess their resources, preferences, and life structures through independent decision-making, problem solving, and emotional experience while temporarily exiting their fixed daily identities. In other words, travel operates at the psychological, social, and structural levels, and has become an important medium through which women realize self-renewal and social repositioning.

Traditional gender studies often treat women's "self-awakening" as liberation at the ideological level, whereas this study finds that, in the social reality of contemporary China, such awakening is often achieved through concrete actions and lived situations. Travel provides precisely such an active platform. It is not only self-experimentation at the individual level, but also a space for negotiation at the structural level. Respondents generally experienced a "sense of identity misalignment" during travel: they temporarily withdrew from the roles of "daughter", "wife", "mother", or "employee" and confronted the world as independent actors. It is in this gap, away from the daily structure, that women can redefine "who I am", "what I can do", and "how I want to live". Unlike the "escape-relaxation" model emphasized in previous studies, this study shows that travel is closer to a "reflexive practice."

This kind of reversal of traditional perspectives on holidaying and travel as escape is reflected not only at the emotional level, but also in the redistribution of resources, risks, and responsibilities. For example, many women experience satisfaction from "planning and control" when traveling, from booking tickets and scheduling to solving sudden problems, which helps them realize that they can manage complex affairs. This experience becomes confidence in action in real life, making them more willing to advocate for equal voice in family affairs or workplace division of labour. In addition, the "social detachment" characteristic of travel temporarily disconnects women from their social networks, allowing them to observe their own situations from a new perspective. Whether traveling alone or in a small group, travel gives individuals an opportunity to step outside the original family and social order, and temporarily stop being observed, defined, and expected. This intermittent freedom not only produces psychological expansion but also contributes to a clearer understanding of "structural oppression". Therefore, this study argues that the greatest significance of travel lies in its creation of a temporary field for negotiation, where women can enter into dialogue with themselves and negotiate with structure.

In addition, the findings show that the psychological effects of travel extend far beyond relaxation or pleasure and are more profoundly reflected in the reconstruction of "self-efficacy" and the formation of the "possible self". Many respondents reported an unprecedented sense of autonomy and accomplishment while traveling. When they successfully completed challenges in unfamiliar environments, such as solo navigation, cross-cultural communication, or emergency response, these small but concrete successes accumulated as internal evidence that "I can do it". This experience is not an isolated event, but a continuous psychological resource. It is reactivated after returning to daily life, providing psychological support when women face life pressure and social evaluation. For this reason, travel has become a "psychological reproduction mechanism". Through a continuous cycle of positive feedback, individuals can repeatedly reshape self-awareness and strengthen their capacity to negotiate with external structures. Notably, this study found that the formation of the "possible self" often occurs through the observation of others. During travel, women encounter diverse lifestyles, such as freelancers, female entrepreneurs, and

solo travellers, thereby expanding their imagination of "female roles". They begin to realize that "being a mother" or "being a wife" is not the only coordinate of female identity, and that "travellers", "learners", and "independent individuals" can also be part of life narratives. This expansion of role imagination is the first step in self-restructuring.

In addition, unlike previous studies that treat travel as an intermittent or occasional experience, this study found that contemporary women are increasingly inclined to incorporate travel into a sustainable life rhythm. They no longer view travel as an interruption of daily life, but as part of life itself. Through regular planning, budgeting, family consultation, and time allocation, travel has become an important mechanism for self-calibration. This kind of "rhythmic travel" has two features: first, periodic self-examination, in which women reassess changes in physical capacity, mood, and interests through each trip; and second, controllable experimentation, in which the frequency and form of travel are reasonably distributed so as to maintain a balance among risk, cost, and family responsibility. As one interviewee said, "Travelling is not for me to relax, but to see if I have become what I want once a year." This rhythmic arrangement is essentially a practice of redesigning life: it allows women to find a sustainable intermediate state between stability and change. Therefore, travel has become a strategy for maintaining agency across time and structure, rather than a momentary impulse.

However, although travel creates new possibilities, not all women can benefit from it equally. The study found that structural constraints, including family responsibilities, economic pressure, public opinion, and safety concerns, remain the core variables affecting women's autonomy in travel. Married women with children generally noted in interviews that travel requires complex coordination between family responsibilities and personal time. They must consider practical issues such as "who will take care of the children", "whether the husband will support them", and "whether the unit can ask for leave". Some respondents even admitted that they would "psychologically drill" family reactions and pre-set compromises before proposing travel plans. This shows that women must continuously negotiate structural responsibilities in their pursuit of personal space. Economic and geographic factors also impose limitations. Although the popularity of tourism has lowered the threshold for travel, significant disparities remain in time and resources among women in different regions and social classes. For low-income workers or grassroots employees, the opportunity cost of travel is extremely high, and it may even be seen as a form of "luxurious self-expression". This means that "travel as a tool for liberation" exhibits clear class bias in practice. Therefore, the autonomy generated by travel is not a universal female experience, but a conditional form of liberation that depends on intersecting resources of time, economy, health, safety, and social support. When these resources are available, travel can become an opportunity for identity reconstruction; otherwise, it can only serve temporarily as psychological buffering and an interval for escaping reality.

Theoretically, this study extends current understanding of the concept of tourism. Traditional tourism research focuses primarily on motivation, satisfaction, and economic impact, whereas this study situates tourism within feminist sociology and conceptualizes it as an identity-forming practice and a mechanism for social negotiation. This perspective shifts tourism from a form of consumption to a social action, and from an individual experience to a structural issue.

At the same time, this study offers a new dimension for understanding female subjectivity. In most macro narratives, women's subjectivity is abstracted as consciousness awakening or rights-based struggle. Through a microanalysis of travel experience, this study shows that subjectivity is not a single moment of epiphany, but a process product formed through cumulative experiences. This process does not emerge freely outside the social structure but is gradually constituted through repeated experimentation and feedback within the tension between constraints and choices. Travel serves as the visible medium of this process. Therefore, the meaning of tourism should not be understood solely in terms of economic growth or cultural consumption; it should also be incorporated into broader questions of social development. It is related to women's right to choose social support structures, cultural redefinition, and identity rebalancing. From this perspective, tourism has become a lens through which to observe gender change in modern Chinese society, and it also constitutes a social force with practical potential.

4.14.5 Research advantages, limitations, and applicability

4.14.5.1 Advantages

Through qualitative in-depth interviews, this study has made a more systematic and mechanical and clear finding, which can explain why "the tourism experience is related to women's self-reconstruction" - not only because of travel itself, but also how travel is used by women to test resources, arrange rhythm, negotiate roles, and form vision and action. The sample structure is diverse, covering young, middle-aged, and elderly, with different marriage and parenting statuses, which can reveal age stage differences and changes in experience paths.

4.14.5.2 Limitation

The sample comprises those who have certain travel experience and does not fully cover the experience of infrequent travellers, or the remote or resource-poor women. The time design of the one-time interview cannot fully capture the cumulative effect over the years and the differences in culture, geography, transportation, and safety conditions have not been fully quantitatively controlled, which may affect the universality of the research results.

4.14.5.3 Applicability and promotion conditions

The research results are most applicable to urban or urban women with certain cultural capital, economic conditions, and travel experience. In other areas where conditions are weaker or social structure differences are more significant, the path of travel may need to be appropriately modified. With the increase in the frequency of travel, the improvement of women's time autonomy, and the improvement of public transportation and social security conditions, the role of this kind of tourism in self-requiting and role consultation may become more and more prominent.

Chapter 5 Discussion

5.1.Extended Discussion of Findings

5.1.1 Theoretical backtracking and localisation of results

The findings of this study highlight the importance of distinguishing between female roles, female identity, and female subjectivity when examining the relationship between tourism and women's self-understanding. Although these concepts are closely interconnected, they refer to different dimensions of women's experiences and should not be treated as interchangeable.

Female roles refer to the socially and culturally constructed expectations associated with women's positions within families, workplaces, and wider society. These may include responsibilities associated with being a daughter, wife, mother, employee, or caregiver. In the Chinese context, such expectations have historically been influenced by Confucian ethical traditions, particularly the emphasis on family hierarchy, filial obligations, and gendered divisions of responsibility (Ebrey, 1993; Rosenlee, 2012). Although contemporary Chinese society has experienced substantial social and institutional transformation, elements of these traditional expectations continue to influence women's everyday lives. However, these norms should not be understood as uniform or unchanging, since women interpret and negotiate them differently across social contexts and generations.

Female identity, by contrast, concerns how women understand and define themselves in relation to these socially constructed roles. While social roles describe expectations and responsibilities attached to particular positions, identity involves the meanings women attribute to those positions and the extent to which they incorporate them into their understanding of themselves. A woman may fulfil the responsibilities associated with motherhood or marriage without necessarily regarding these roles as the defining features of her personal identity. Consequently, the performance of a social role does not necessarily indicate complete identification with the expectations attached to it.

Female subjectivity extends beyond both social roles and identity by referring to the processes through which women interpret their experiences, reflect on social expectations, exercise judgement, and negotiate their relationships with existing structures. From this perspective, subjectivity does not imply unrestricted individual autonomy or complete independence from social relationships. Rather, it concerns women's capacity to recognise, evaluate, and potentially modify their positions within the conditions that shape their everyday lives. This understanding is consistent with feminist perspectives that recognise the relationship between gendered social structures and the ongoing formation of the self (Butler, 2020; Acker, 2006).

These distinctions are particularly significant for interpreting the findings of the present study. Tourism does not necessarily alter women's formal roles as wives, mothers, daughters, or employees. Instead, it may temporarily change the circumstances in which these roles are experienced and understood. Through travel-related decisions, encounters with unfamiliar environments, and opportunities for reflection, women may reconsider whether their

everyday responsibilities adequately reflect their personal needs and aspirations. In this process, changes in self-understanding may occur even when established social roles remain largely unchanged.

The interviews suggest that such changes are often gradual, conditional, and relational. Some participants described enhanced confidence, greater awareness of their capabilities, and the reconsideration of family or career priorities. However, these experiences did not necessarily lead to immediate changes in their social circumstances. Upon returning to everyday life, women continued to negotiate family responsibilities, economic limitations, and social expectations. The distinction between identity and subjectivity is therefore important: reconsidering how one defines oneself may create possibilities for change, while the practical expression of these possibilities remains shaped by existing relationships and resources.

This relationship provides an important basis for the concept of negotiated subjectivity developed in this study. Rather than understanding subjectivity formation exclusively through direct resistance to gendered structures, the findings suggest that women may also develop a stronger sense of self through reflection, the reassessment of responsibilities, and incremental adjustments to personal boundaries. Such negotiations should not be interpreted as a form of agency unique to Chinese women, but their meanings and possibilities are shaped by the particular historical, familial, and institutional conditions examined in this research.

Tourism, therefore, is not presented as an inherently emancipatory practice that automatically transforms women's identities. Its significance lies in the opportunities it may provide for women to examine the relationship between the roles they perform, the identities they recognise, and the subjectivities they develop within continuing social constraints.

5.1.2 The generation of 'reflective self' during travel

This study shows that the alternative environment encountered during travel provides women with a defamiliarization experience, prompting them to reexamine the relationship between themselves and society. In modern society, travel is not only spatial movement but also a process of defamiliarization at the social and psychological levels. For Chinese women accustomed to managing multiple roles, traveling means temporarily disconnecting from family, the workplace, marriage, and gender expectations. Bourdieu (2020) stated that individual behavioural patterns are deeply shaped by social structure, and moments of crisis or rupture can expose the limitations of habit. Travel constitutes such a moment, allowing women to break from existing power relations and role structures and to evaluate the world from the standpoint of autonomous individuals. Through the process of de-inlayment-observation-reconstruction, they gain distance from their habitual dispositions, thereby creating the possibility of rewriting their own narratives. This reflective self is not detached from the social structure but emerges through interaction with social expectations. Respondents generally noted that when they display independence and self-confidence during travel, they often encounter subtle resistance upon returning home or to the workplace. Expressions such as "You have become too clever" and "how dangerous it is to go out alone" reflect society's vigilance toward women's independent behaviour.

This cognitive conflict is the key mechanism of modern women's reflective self-transformation: when personal experience no longer fully coincides with the social structure, reflection is compelled to occur. Therefore, travel not only alters women's self-perception but

also activates critical awareness of social norms. Bourdieu argues that habitus creates mental frameworks formed through socialization. These frameworks guide behaviour and shape desire; because they are rarely questioned, they unconsciously reproduce the social structure (Costa & Murphy, 2015). For many Chinese women, family and social expectations of "virtuous wives and mothers" and "docile women" have become deeply embedded in habitus. However, when they enter the travel setting, this familiar logic is interrupted. This process of self-determination in a singular and unfamiliar environment denaturalizes habit. Women no longer rely on established social roles to define themselves but instead redefine "who I am" through lived experience.

However, within China's social and cultural context, the emergence of women's reflective self is particularly complex. On the one hand, increased participation in tertiary education and the resulting economic independence have steadily strengthened women's self-awareness. On the other hand, traditional culture and related policies, such as marriage and child-rearing pressures, dowry practices, and the divorce cooling-off period, continue to confine women to family roles. Consequently, self-awakening during travel generates states of tension. Tourism is not only an expression of modern individualization but is also constrained by collectivism and family culture. However, interview data indicate that many respondents use travel as a means of escaping this reality. This finding suggests that Chinese women's reflective self is not a complete rejection of the social structure, but rather a practice of creating space within constraints. Travel has become a symbolic form of self-time, at once escape and negotiation, resistance and reconstruction. They experience a genuine sense of freedom through temporary geographical mobility. In their continual movement between freedom and traditional responsibility, the reflective self is gradually internalized as a long-term mechanism of self-monitoring.

In addition to Bourdieu's structural perspective, the theory of reflexive modernity proposed by Giddens (2023) provides another framework for understanding self-formation through travel in China. In highly modern society, individuals continually reflect on and monitor their identity, behaviour, and social relationships, reshaping themselves through everyday choices. Travel provides an ideal site for this self-project. Individuals must make a series of immediate judgments and decisions in an uncertain environment, thereby strengthening their sense of self-efficacy and autonomy.

5.1.3 Possible remodelling of self and life path

Markus and Nurius (1986) propose that one motivation for self-change arises from the psychological formulation of “who might I become?” Unlike traditional self-concept theory, the self may be understood not as a static identity, but as a dynamic psychological system comprising multiple potential action orientations. It encompasses the individual’s dual awareness of the self they aspire to become and the self they fear becoming (Markus & Nurius, 1986). As an experience shaped by political, social, and psychological boundaries, travel enables women to observe diverse lifestyles, thereby broadening the scope of the “possible self.” In the interview data for this study, respondents repeatedly stated that “travel allows me to see another way of life.” These statements indicate that travel is not only a process of engaging with the external world, but also an opportunity to construct an internal psychological representation and expand self-possibilities. Travel enables women to move beyond identity frameworks defined by their original social structures and to form a concrete

imagination of an alternative self through observation, comparison, and imitation. For example, some respondents encountered women with different self-images during their travels, and these concrete examples led them to realize that they could also choose different life trajectories. As Ms. F (30 years old, doctor, unmarried) said, "The most profound influence on me during the days of travelling and living abroad was the revelation given to me by white women, which made me feel for the first time that I was not trapped in the life trajectory of learning-marriage-giving birth to children."

Such cognitive change has stimulated new career planning, a stronger willingness to learn, and a revised life rhythm, extending psychological imagination into practical action. This change indicates that the formation of the possible self is not an abstract fantasy but is gradually concretized through real experience and may lead to behavioural change. It is worth noting that women of different ages and social backgrounds demonstrate significant differences in how they construct possible selves. Unmarried women aged 21 to 30 years generally regard travel as an important catalyst for change. However, the realization of this "possible self" is not linear and is often constrained by social resources and structural barriers. Educational attainment, family economic status, marital status, economic independence, and family support all shape whether women can transform travel experiences into sustained exploration of life possibilities. Women aged 31 to 50 years tend to encounter their delayed selves through travel. Many married women noted that traveling allows them to revisit aspirations they did not pursue when they were younger. For women over 50 years of age, travel is more often understood as a process of redefining the meaning of life. Their possible selves are frequently associated with spiritual growth and physical health rather than career or economic goals.

Across these cases, educational attainment, family economic well-being, marital status, economic independence, and family support are key factors influencing whether women can translate travel experiences into long-term action. The study found that women with higher educational backgrounds and stable incomes are more likely to integrate travel outcomes into the ongoing rhythm of daily life, whereas those with heavy family responsibilities or limited financial resources tend to define travel as a temporary escape or a form of psychological recovery. This finding is broadly consistent with Fincher's (2014) argument regarding the structural dilemma faced by middle-aged women in China: economic independence does not necessarily produce life autonomy, because institutional constraints, including marriage, property ownership, and elder care, continue to reproduce gender inequality through indirect mechanisms.

5.1.4 The institutionalised practice of travel

In the preceding chapters, travel is identified as an important trigger for women's self-awareness and identity reconstruction. However, further analysis of the interview data indicates another important finding of this study: women's reliance on travel is not accidental. They tend to regularize travel, that is, to integrate it into an annual or quarterly life structure. This practice also functions as a means of social negotiation and, at times, as a psychological strategy. By preconfiguring the travel cycle, women secure predictable personal space within the division of family labour and workplace arrangements. This institutionalised use of time can be regarded as a form of micro resistance within the current social structure. According to Scott (1986), women do not challenge power in a confrontational manner; rather, they obtain

a new form of control over their lives through the reorganisation of practice and rhythm. Many married respondents reported that travel has become a necessary mechanism of psychological adjustment under the sustained pressure of family and work. Many stated that they must give themselves a vacation within a certain period.

This narrative is common in the data and reflects women's desire for predictable self-time. Travel is therefore no longer a random leisure activity, but a rebalancing ritual that is deliberately planned and periodically embedded in the life course. This rhythmic behaviour can be understood as a form of self-care. Individuals maintain the stability of subjectivity through periodic reflection and embodied time (Foucault, 1988). Women's scheduled travel represents a modern form of self-awareness. They use the repetitive practice of travel to counter the linearity and passivity of everyday life, and travel has become a means of maintaining self-integrity under structural pressure. Within patriarchal structures, women's time is often treated as a resource available for others to use. Their time is subordinated to family rhythms, while work rhythms are shaped by social expectations. Women's time allocation is frequently fragmented and subordinated to others' priorities, thereby reducing their control over their own rhythm (Spotswood et al., 2021). However, the women interviewed in this study reclaimed temporal agency through travel.

Through these institutionalised vacation arrangements, they create socially recognised self-time and thereby enact micro resistance in nonconfrontational settings. This finding is highly significant for understanding gender equality. According to Hochschild (1989) and Blair-Loy et al. (2015), even when women enter the workplace, the burden of housework and childcare remains primarily theirs. The rhythmic travel observed in this study can be understood as a third space created by women between the second shift—one that is neither fully domestic nor equivalent to the workplace, but rather a social mechanism for personal regeneration. It enables women to restore psychological and physical balance and to sustain continuity in the long-term negotiation of gender roles. Rhythmic travel reveals the gendered dimension of micro time politics. Women achieve flexible resistance to structural constraints through institutionalised control over time. This temporal practice also reflects the staged transformation of contemporary Chinese women's subjectivity. They no longer seek singular structural liberation but instead aim to achieve limited autonomy within the system. This negotiated subjectivity is not only an extension of traditional gender roles, but also a localised response to modern discourses of freedom. Therefore, travel has become an intermediary link connecting self-realisation and structural adaptation.

Nevertheless, the negotiation of gendered roles and identities is not confined to tourism.The negotiation of gendered roles and identities is not confined to tourism. Other social spaces, including the family, workplace, and digital environments, may also provide opportunities for women to affirm, question, or renegotiate their social positions. For example, family mealtimes may reproduce established gender expectations through responsibilities associated with food preparation and caregiving, while simultaneously providing opportunities for women to interpret the meanings attached to their familial identities. Tourism differs from such everyday settings not because negotiation is absent elsewhere, but because it combines geographical mobility with a temporary reorganisation of familiar routines, social encounters, and time-related responsibilities.

The concept of mobility is therefore particularly relevant to understanding the distinctive characteristics of tourism. Sheller and Urry (2006) emphasise that mobility extends beyond physical movement and involves the social relations and practices through which movement acquires meaning. Similarly, Cresswell (2010) conceptualises mobility in relation to movement, representation, and practice, highlighting its connection to power and unequal access. Applied to the present study, tourism-related mobility may enable women to experience temporary distance from familiar environments, encounter alternative ways of living, and exercise forms of decision-making that are less available within their everyday routines. However, such mobility remains conditioned by financial resources, family responsibilities, safety considerations, and social expectations. Its distinctive contribution lies not in removing these constraints, but in creating circumstances in which women may reconsider their relationships with them. This helps explain why tourism can function as a reflective and negotiable space without necessarily producing permanent changes in social roles or identities.

5.1.5 Escape Valve effect

Within the family and social structure, the identity restructuring produced by travel is always constrained by an escape-valve effect. When the division of labour within the family and economic dependence on public opinion fail to provide adequate support, the emancipatory effect of travel is weakened or even reversed. Some respondents noted that, although travel brought short-term confidence and pleasure, they were reintegrated into the traditional gender division of labour after returning to daily life. This indicates that the emancipatory potential of travel can be sustained only when structural constraints are partially relaxed. Acker's (2006) framework on mechanisms of inequality indicates that gender inequality is difficult to eliminate because it is embedded in organizational logic and cultural narratives, rather than solely in individual bias. As the smallest organizational unit in society, the family has a high degree of stability in the reproduction of gender roles. Even when women experience autonomy and self-realization during travel, they may still be drawn back into the traditional gender division of labour after returning home, where they resume care, emotional, and organizational labour. This systemic rebound exemplifies a closing-gate-valve effect triggered by return. At a deeper level, this tension is also closely related to mechanisms of public opinion. In the context of Chinese culture, women's long-distance travel is often subject to moral evaluation. When they devote time and money to self-realization, they may face criticism such as "selfishness" and "disregard for family." This external moral constraint weakens the emancipatory meaning of travel in social interaction. As a result, women become trapped in a negative cycle: they are awakened through travel and re-tamed by the social structure. This study confirms the view that women's mobility depends on coordination between the family system and policy structures; otherwise, it is likely to fall into a repeated cycle of progress and retreat. However, travel is not entirely negated in this process. Even if its outcomes are difficult to translate into institutional change immediately, it can still strengthen women's sense of self-boundaries through accumulated experience. This cumulative empowerment mechanism suggests that the significance of travel lies not in changing one's fate at once, but in providing sustained reflective material. Each trip builds an experiential record of "I have the ability" and "I deserve to have," and the accumulation of such experiences may eventually promote change in gender culture at the social level.

Moreover, through NVivo coding analysis, this study found that the key gate valves affecting the emancipatory potential of women's travel mainly include three dimensions: economic capital, time resources, and social legitimacy. First, among middle-aged women, sufficient economic resources make travel a form of self-investment. Fincher (2014) noted that women's autonomy in Chinese cities rests on economic independence, while family and social expectations regarding women's rational consumption also constrain the boundaries of their expenditure. Second, the time required for travel often conflicts with women's social roles. Married women are particularly likely to be confined to maternal time, meaning that their time is presumed to be devoted to caring for children and older family members. This dependence on women's ability to travel freely stems from the operation of the family support system, rather than from individual will. It is therefore the most direct manifestation of gendered power distribution. Third, many respondents believed that social acceptance of women's travel is closely related to age and marital status. Solo travel by unmarried women is often regarded as a privilege of youth, whereas middle-aged women or mothers face greater moral scrutiny. This moral threshold reflects the fact that society's definition of women's right to public mobility is still constrained by family roles. Together, these three thresholds constitute the social foundation of the gate-valve effect, such that the emancipatory meaning of women's travel is continuously reshaped within structural constraints. Whether travel can produce sustained identity restructuring depends on whether women can cross these structural boundaries.

5.2 Implications

5.2.1. Impact of the findings

Building on these findings, travel can be understood as an operational mechanism through which women convert self-awareness into sustained practice within structural constraints. For many years, tourism research has focused on motivation, satisfaction, and perceived experience, while neglecting the social-relational dimension that underpins these outcomes. Rather than reiterating structural constraints, this section emphasizes the policy-relevant conditions under which travel-based transformation can be sustained. This argument points directly to its multidimensional practical significance.

At the public policy level, promoting women's autonomy in shaping their life trajectories cannot rely solely on macro-level fertility incentives or financial subsidies. Greater attention should instead be given to the structural conditions that enable women's mobility and decision-making. Research suggests that, in the absence of both "soft" and "hard" infrastructure, such as transparent safety information, women-friendly public spaces, and accessible support systems, travel is more likely to function as a temporary emotional outlet than as a sustainable pathway for personal development. From a destination management perspective, gender-sensitive measures should be systematically integrated into planning and evaluation frameworks. These may include night transport services and emergency return options, improved lighting and surveillance in high-use tourist areas, and clear safety information in locations frequently visited by solo female travellers. Such measures should be incorporated into destination quality assessment and governance standards. In addition, social

policies should expand access to paid leave, flexible working arrangements, and affordable childcare, thereby enabling women to engage in travel and longer-term self-development activities without compromising basic security. This approach is consistent with self-determination theory, which suggests that sustained participation is most likely when autonomy and competence are supported (Deci & Ryan, 2012). In this sense, travel can shift from a form of consumption to a long-term practice supported by an enabling policy environment.

For the tourism destination and platform industry, communication strategies and product structures need to shift from the "landscape logic of the male gaze" to the "path demand of female travellers." This is not a matter of superficial "pinkisation," but rather of restructuring supply according to the logic of "security-information-community-advanced." Rather than promoting superficial "check-in" consumption, destination management should prioritize verifiable safety infrastructures, including transparent safety information, accessible medical and emergency support points, and optional social support features for solo female travellers, such as moderated group activities or verified peer networks. In addition, tourism products should place greater emphasis on skill development and personal growth, for example through structured activities such as photography or hiking programs. Existing research has shown that gendered representations in tourism communication often reproduce underlying power structures, while the transformative tourism literature highlights that the design of experiences, from initial engagement to meaning-making and everyday integration, shapes whether tourism leads to lasting change (Kirillova et al., 2017). The findings of this study further suggest the need for a shift in industry practice, in which women's safety concerns, information asymmetries, and access to supportive communities are systematically integrated into tourism product design and platform governance.

Acker (2006) argues that seemingly neutral organizational processes, such as inquiries about marriage and childbearing during recruitment, assumptions about family roles in leave approval, and implicit expectations about life-course timing, can systematically constrain women's opportunities to convert travel into personal development. Rather than addressing women's development only at a conceptual level, it is necessary to institutionalize protections that support autonomy. This includes establishing clear regulations that prohibit employers from inquiring about marital or childbearing plans during recruitment, as well as providing flexible working arrangements and remote work options. The findings of this study further suggest that women increasingly use travel as a form of annual self-calibration. When organizations support this practice through stable and credible institutional arrangements, it can serve as a structural foundation for women's reflective self-development. This not only advances the goals of gender equality but also aligns with the conditions for sustained engagement emphasized in transformative learning and self-determination theory.

This study also suggests that locating tourism at the intersection of feminist sociology and learning theory provides a better explanation of why some trips have long-term effects while others do not. The study shows that, although many interviewed women developed stronger sensitivity to gender inequality during travel, this awakening often remained an experiential judgment rooted in feelings and had not yet been transformed into systematic gender knowledge or action strategies. This indicates a critical gap between experiential awareness and the ability to translate such awareness into structured understanding and sustained action. These findings highlight the distinction between developing awareness of gendered social

expectations and translating such awareness into sustained changes in everyday life. Although some participants reconsidered their social roles and personal aspirations through tourism, their ability to act upon these reflections remained influenced by family responsibilities, economic resources, and broader social expectations. Therefore, the absence of immediate behavioural change should not be interpreted as a lack of awareness or agency. Rather, it demonstrates that women's subjectivity develops within social relationships and structural conditions that may both enable and constrain individual action.

Without the support of a theoretical framework or model of gender equality, this kind of awakening is easily weakened or reabsorbed by patriarchal social structures. This study further develops the Negotiated Subjectivity Model by identifying economic resources, control over time, and social acceptance as important conditions influencing whether tourism-related reflections can be translated into sustained changes in everyday life. This is consistent with Giddens' (2023) concept of the reflective self, Mezirow's (2018) transformative learning, Ryan & Deci's (2000) intrinsic motivation, and Acker's (date) organizational inequality. These concepts provide potential operational nodes for future longitudinal and mixed-method research on feminism in the Chinese context. This study not only explains the causes of this phenomenon but also proposes a methodological path for "how to measure, how to design interventions, and how to compare situations." In the Chinese context, the social significance of travel is also intertwined with gendered marriage, love, public opinion, intergenerational support, and related factors. Fincher's (2023) analysis of the discourse of "leftover women" explains the tension between agency and institutional structure among urban middle-class women. They are close to independence in material terms but remain re-familiarised at symbolic and institutional levels (Graham, 2015). The process of reflection and negotiation described in the Negotiated Subjectivity Model illustrates how women navigate the relationship between personal aspirations and existing gendered power structures. This pathway is more likely to enter a sustainable positive cycle when public safety and care support improve, when organizations do not discriminate in marriage- and childbearing-related inquiries, and when media dissemination reduces the objectifying imagination of female travellers.

It should be emphasized that these effects are not linear. Whether travel can shift from "emotional recovery" to "identity reconstruction" still depends on whether structural constraints can be relaxed simultaneously. Policy should therefore include women-friendly indicators in budget allocation, industry actors should embed "security and information transparency" into products and algorithms, organizations should incorporate "annual leave and care support" into institutional rules and ensure enforceability, and families should replace verbal "turning and accounting" with formal mechanisms. Only in this way can travel become a stable carrier through which women exercise self-governance and social negotiation in modern Chinese society, rather than an occasional exception. This multi-level governance logic is consistent with the conclusion of transformative tourism research on "situation-meaning-extenuation" and also provides a practical basis for advancing gender equality policy.

5.2.2 Theoretical and practical contributions

5.2.2.1 Theoretical contributions

5.2.2.1.1 Gender expansion of tourism sociology

The first theoretical contribution of this study is to redefine the sociological significance of tourism behaviour from a gender perspective. Traditional tourism sociology has largely treated travel as a process of consumption, escape, or cultural capital reproduction (Cohen, 1972). However, this study shows that women's tourism is not only a social behaviour but also a social practice of gender negotiation. It reflects women's position within the social structure and also constitutes a strategic response to social constraints. Feminist scholars began engaging with this issue in the 1990s, noting that freedom of travel is not gender equal. According to Kinnaird and Hall (1994), tourism activities themselves are spatial practices organized according to male logic, and women's roles within them are often restricted to passive or companionate consumption. As noted in the previous chapters, Pritchard and Morgan (2000) also identified the persistent role of the male gaze in tourism marketing and space, emphasizing that tourism sociology must incorporate the power dimension of gender relations. This research was conducted within this academic context. Through a systematic analysis of Chinese women's tourism experiences, it demonstrates that women's travel renegotiates space and power within the social structure. This consultative logic offers a new explanatory path for tourism sociology and introduces a sociological perspective on nonconfrontational action in gender research.

5.2.2.1.2 Temporary interruption and reproduction of gender habits

From a sociological perspective, the core significance of women's travel lies in its interruption and reconfiguration of gender habits. This study found that travel provides a moment of habitual suspension, allowing women to temporarily break away from the role structure defined by family, marriage, and occupation and enter a state of social reset. Accordingly, this study proposes a key proposition: travel is an "experimental field" for women's habits. In this field, existing gender logic is temporarily suspended, and new models of self-practice are tentatively generated. This theoretical finding extends the spatiotemporal applicability of Bourdieu's (2020) theory, so that habitual reproduction is no longer understood as a one-way process of social constraint but as a reversible and adjustable space of social action. This perspective provides a new analytical tool for explaining how women in modern society achieve structural loosening through limited action.

5.2.2.1.3 The gender logic of travel and reflective modernity

Within the context of modernization and globalization, travel is viewed as a field for the individual reflective self. When women are outside familiar social networks, they can reexamine their life logic and social roles from a more detached position. For women, travel is both reconstructive and restorative. Women in travel do not confirm themselves by conquering space; rather, they repair identity ruptures through dialogue with the environment. This difference highlights the gendered characteristics of reflective modernity. On this basis, this study proposes the concept of reflective travel: women's travel is a social action through which self-meaning is reorganized via spatial displacement. Its core function is to transform individual experience into reflective cognition, thereby promoting the dynamic adjustment of gender roles.

5.2.2.1.4 Sociological innovation in the Chinese context: from individual behaviour to structural response

Unlike Western societies, the travel experiences of Chinese women occur in a social context in which collective values remain binding and individualism has not been fully legitimized. This contextual feature gives travel a dual social significance: on the one hand, it represents the free practice of the individual; on the other hand, it still must be rationalized within the bounds of social recognition. This study found that Chinese women generally use "socially acceptable rhetoric" to justify their travel behaviour. This language strategy is ostensibly a compromise, but in essence it is a form of negotiation under the guise of culture. By adjusting their mode of expression, women seek independent space without violating social norms. They do not challenge the patriarchal structure through overt confrontation; instead, they achieve self-expansion through subtle behavioural adjustments and the internal redefinition of meaning. Therefore, this study proposes an important theoretical shift: Chinese women's travel behaviour is not anti-institutional but embedded transformation. Women reconstruct subjectivity within the patriarchal system through the recoding of cultural symbols. This finding provides a new framework for understanding the gender modernization of Chinese society and also challenges the one-dimensional assumption in the academic literature that women's liberation is solely an extra-structural struggle. It shows that in a society where Confucian culture remains influential; women's agency is more likely to appear as consultative micro-transformation than as revolutionary rupture.

5.2.2.1.5 Theoretical deepening

Traditional feminist tourism studies have often treated structural oppression as an object to be dismantled. However, this study found that the practices of Chinese women reveal a more complex logic of social relations: oppression and agency coexist, and structure and action coexist. Rather than seeking a complete separation from structure, they identify workable space within structural cracks. The significance of travel is not to escape family, marriage, or society, but to create a new rhythm of life and a new identity form. Therefore, the greatest challenge this study poses to tourism sociology is that tourism research should no longer interpret travel through the binary opposition of "freedom and bondage" but should instead regard it as a dynamic process of social negotiation. This perspective moves tourism sociology from macro-structural analysis to a new stage of micro-level power negotiation, thereby forming a new understanding of social reproduction.

5.2.2.2 Practical significance

5.2.2.2.1 Implications for gender policy

The findings of this study have important practical implications for the design of social policy in China. First, women's right to travel should be incorporated into gender equality and social welfare agendas. Tourism is not only a right to consume, but also a right to participate in society (Pritchard et al., 2011). The self-identification, psychological recovery, and reconstruction of social networks that women gain through travel should be recognized as key pathways for promoting sustainable social development. It is recommended that a gender-sensitive tourism policy framework be established. This includes, but is not limited to, (a) strengthening the safety of female tourists through destination-level harassment prevention policies; (b) encouraging enterprises and public institutions to adopt flexible leave systems; and (c) supporting women's travel, entrepreneurship, and participation in community-based tourism. Many countries have incorporated gender mainstreaming into

tourism policy evaluation criteria (UNWTO, 2022). China can draw on these practices to advance the integration of gender equality into tourism governance.

5.2.2.2.2 Implications for the tourism industry

From an industry perspective, this study examines the structural characteristics and latent demand of the women's travel market. The data indicate that women place greater emphasis on emotional experience, cultural meaning, and personal safety in travel decision-making. They also pay closer attention to their subjective experience during travel and exhibit comparatively lower levels of material consumption. This trend suggests that the tourism industry should shift from an experience-oriented approach to a meaning-oriented approach. Accordingly, women-themed tourism products can be developed, including (a) products for solo female travellers and for mothers and daughters traveling together; (b) a women's safety certification system to strengthen destination trust; and (c) community-based tourism platforms to enhance support networks among women. This transformation is not only consistent with the social goal of gender equality but also aligned with business logic. Chinese female tourists account for 61% of the independent travel market (Trip.com, 2023). Women are becoming a core group driving innovation in the tourism industry and rightly expect their safety and aspirations to be addressed.

5.2.2.2.3 Implications for social culture and education

The findings also show that women's travel may exert a cultural influence on education and social cognition. As women accumulate cross-cultural understanding and opportunities for self-reflection through travel, this knowledge may be transferred to the family and workplace, thereby generating a cultural diffusion effect. Through sharing experiences, social media narratives, and educational behaviour, women disseminate concepts of autonomy and peace, which can shape the values of the next generation. Therefore, governments and educational institutions should consider incorporating women's travel-related learning into lifelong learning systems. Encouraging women to regard travel as part of their personal sustainable development would represent an important symbolic enactment of gender equality policies. Such institutional support would strengthen the social function of travel and make it an important channel for women's awareness and cultural innovation.

In summary, the theoretical and practical significance of this study can be summarized at three levels. At the level of theoretical innovation, it develops the Negotiated Subjectivity Model to explain the relationship between tourism-related reflection, gendered social expectations, and women's identity negotiation. At the methodological level, it proposes a bidirectional analytical model that integrates experience and structure, providing a culturally adaptive approach for qualitative research in China. At the practical level, it offers a gender-sensitive perspective for policy formulation and industrial innovation and expands the social functions of tourism. Taken together, these three aspects indicate that travel is not merely spatial mobility, but also a process of reorganizing the meanings of social relations and gender. By examining the tourism experiences of Chinese women, this study not only enriches global feminist tourism theory, but also provides a distinctive empirical basis for understanding gender dynamics in China's social transformation.

5.3 Limitations

This study aims to explore the role of tourism in the self-awareness and identity reconstruction of women in China. It adopts a qualitative research method to explain the reflective self and identity reconstruction mechanism stimulated by travel experience through semi-structured interviews with 72 women. While the research findings have significantly advanced both theory and practice, certain limitations remain that warrant consideration.

5.3.1 Restrictions on sample representativeness

First, although the social and geographical structure of the sample in this study has a certain degree of diversity (covering 21-30 years old, 31-50 years old, over 50 years old, and other age groups, as well as different education and marital status), there is still a undue concentration of those in the professional and middle social class and a geographical distribution biased toward major urban centres. These characteristics better represent the travel experience and gender awareness of middle-income and highly educated women, while the group of low-income, rural, or those with a lack of travel opportunities is insufficiently represented. The reason why middle-class women can use travel as a spatial tool for identity restructuring and self-repair is that they have relatively higher negotiation ability and autonomy in practical arrangements, financial disposal, and family care obligations. In groups with stronger structural oppression (such as rural women, low-income women, inter-provincial women, or hidden housewives with a high workload of care work), travel is not a realistic choice. Fincher (2023) notes that for Chinese low-income women, travel may still be an untouchable symbolic freedom (Fincher, 2023). Therefore, although the conclusion of this study reveals the potential of travel in women's self-reconstruction, its universality is significantly limited by the socio-economic structure. Moreover, most of the respondents in the sample have strong cultural consumption awareness, and their understanding of travel is biased towards self-realisation and psychological, rather than the function of economic livelihood or migration. In reality, in China much of women's travel is linked to livelihood or migration, such as going out to work or accompanying out of province or country migration (Bourdieu, 1984). The experience of these groups is not included in the scope of this study. Future studies may further expand the sample type to fill the gap in this social class. Otherwise, the recruitment process relied primarily on Douyin and Xiaohongshu, supplemented by personal-network referrals for women aged 50 and above. Consequently, the sample may be influenced by differences in digital engagement, willingness to participate, and accessibility through recruitment networks. Although the study offers insights into the experiences of the participating women, its findings cannot be assumed to represent the full socio-economic, geographical, or cultural diversity of Chinese women. Future research could adopt more targeted sampling strategies to examine the experiences of women from different residential, educational, and economic backgrounds.

5.3.2 Limitations of methods and research design

This study uses a semi-structured interview method and NVivo coding for thematic analysis. The advantage of this method is that it can deeply capture individual experience and meaning construction, but it also has inherent limitations.

First, data subjectivity and interpreter bias are problems that are difficult to completely avoid in qualitative research. The interview results are based on the respondents' memories and reflections, and their narratives are inevitably influenced by situational memory and social expectations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The interview text is not the experience itself, but the second expression of the experience. In narrative sociology, experience is not equal to the event itself, but the narrative of the meaning of the event (Riesman, 2008). This means that when the women interviewed describe their travel experiences in interviews, they are not restoring history, but reinterpreting history. For example, when describing the self-awakening brought by travel, some women may strengthen positive experiences and weaken frustrated experiences, thus leading to narrative idealisation. Participants' retrospective accounts may have placed greater emphasis on positive or personally meaningful aspects of tourism, while less favourable experiences may have received comparatively limited attention. This possibility should be considered when interpreting narratives of self-awareness and personal development.

Similarly, researchers may also give some texts a higher right of interpretation in their analysis due to the implicit tendency of gender and cultural positions. Although the research reduces the deviation through multiple rounds of coding, cross-examination, and review, the multiple truths of explanatory research still exist. It should be noted that the use of thematic analysis support provides a check on the rationality of the interpretation being offered, that it is consistent with the data offered by the researcher, that there are reasons for the interpretation, but there remains the question of the truth of the interpretation. And in particular, even allowing for possible sentiment analyses, can it really assess the emotional content. These analyses provide insights, but are at best, simply a check on the logicality to analysis, not the truth of the analysis. It is a measure of shadows cast by the truths of experiences.

Second, the time of the interview involves a static tangent rather than dynamic evolution, which determines the length of the data. Some respondents in the study were interviewed shortly after the trip, which means that the information obtained reflects more short-term transformation than long-term precipitation. Mezirow (2000) examined that true meaning restructuring often requires the fermentation of practice and repeated feedback of social structure. Therefore, future research needs to adopt vertical design, track through multi-point interviews or travel logs and field surveys and observe how travel experience is reinterpreted and absorbed in the practical flow. In addition, NVivo was used to organise the interview material through coding and node development, compare participants' accounts, and support the construction of analytical themes. However, the use of software did not eliminate the interpretive nature of qualitative analysis. Decisions concerning coding, categorisation, and thematic development remained dependent on the researcher's judgement and engagement with the data. Researchers are not neutral third parties. During the interview, the interviewees were not speaking to the void, but to the researcher, which is to say, they were talking to a listener with a hypothetico-deductive position. They know that the identity of the researcher is female, highly educated, and has a certain feminist perspective, so they may actively present that considered worthy of understanding or praise in the narrative. For example, the boundary between self-awareness and ability reconstruction often intersects in different contexts, and the concepts of gender roles and marriage attitudes are also highly related at the cultural level. Although the coding framework has been inductively adjusted, the theme

construction still reflects the analytical orientation of the researcher. This supervisory uncontrollability is universal in qualitative research (Charmaz, 2014). However, it also suggests that future research can combine hybrid methods to verify key variables by quantitative means. Furthermore, narrative data must be textualized before entering NVivo, and the textualization itself has a strong reductive process. It will turn experience into visible sentences, but many key female experiences are not expressed in words, but in silence, pause, silence, and physical movements. NVivo can only code what is clearly said and cannot capture what is said but strongly exists. Therefore, the presentation of women's subjectivity in this study is 'bright', while their 'oppressive experience' is filtered.

5.3.3 Time span and situational limitations

The relationship between tourism and gender awareness has obvious practicality and a social situation dependence. The data of this research is collected against the background of the transformation of Chinese society in recent years and the recovery of tourism after the epidemic, so the research results are phased in practice.

First, one limitation is the temporal perspective and the situation China in about 2022 to early 2026 and its macro-institutional environment. In the five years prior to 2026, the trajectory of gender awareness in China has been closely related to policies. China's social policy environment is constantly updated, such as the open three-child policy and the divorce cooling-off period system, which are reshaping women's lives in marriage decision-making (Zhang, 2023). The implementation of these policies in different years has had a direct impact on women's psychological expectations and behavioural choices. In the study, some married respondents regard travel as a temporary space to escape the pressure of social policies and not having implications for long-term autonomy. This illustrates that moral awakening is not a natural growth, but possibly a rapid self-conscious awakening promoted by policies. It is the policy that brings the demand for awakening, and travel has become a tool for awakening. It can be seen that the intensity and continuity of the gender awareness and identity restructuring triggered by travel may be affected by the immediacy of political policy creation and social atmosphere. Second, as mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph, the epidemic has caused travel restrictions to bring new forms of women's travel behaviour, such as short-distance travel in the suburbs and community mutual assistance models.

These new ways of travel have changed the traditional rhythm of 'travel-reflection-transformation', but this study does not systematically explore the reshaping of travel results by the epidemic. If there is differential buffering, loosening, or reverse strengthening in the future policy environment, the growth direction of women's consciousness may also change. In addition, most of the travel experiences in the interview sample occurred after the end of the epidemic restrictions. Before the COVID-19 epidemic, travel was regarded as a way of life. After the COVID-19 epidemic, travel was re-understood as the restoration of control over the body and actions, which may lead to the peak state of awakening in this study, rather than the level of daily stability. If there is no epidemic, could the sense of awakening be so clear? If travel returns to ordinary life, will its empowerment effect still be valid? All of these need to be tested in the normalisation period by future research. Therefore, the extrapolation of the conclusion should be carefully limited to the social situation in the early post-epidemic period.

Finally, the recruitment strategy did not involve systematic stratification by ethnicity or rural–urban residence. As a result, the study was not designed to examine differences in tourism experiences across these particular social categories. Given the considerable cultural, geographical, and socio-economic diversity within China, the findings should not be interpreted as universally applicable to all Chinese women. Future research could employ purposive sampling across different ethnic, regional, and socio-economic contexts to examine how variations in cultural expectations, family arrangements, and opportunities for mobility shape women's self-understanding and identity negotiation.

5.3.4 Limitations and disciplinary boundaries of theoretical integration

This study adopts a multi-framework in theoretical integration, including Giddens' (2023) reflective self, Mezirow's (2018) transformative learning, Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory, Acker's (2006) organisational unequal securities, and Butler's (2004, 2020) gender performance theory. These fundamental theoretical stances provide rich dimensions, but there are also some challenges when seeking to integrate them.

First, the paradigmatic differences between theories make it difficult to completely integrate logical boundaries. The sociological orientation (such as Giddens (2023) and Acker (2006)) emphasises the relationship between structure and power, while the psychological orientation pays more attention to individual motivation and intrinsic mechanisms. Although this study tries to integrate the two through the three-layer framework of 'individual-structure-culture', the conceptual tension between different paradigms still exists. For example, the psychological path of self-efficacy and the organisational power structure are difficult to directly combine in the causal chain, and researchers can only use complementary logic instead of unified models in their interpretation. Second, the sample size of qualitative research is not enough to systematically verify the relationship between theories. This study mainly maps theoretical elements indirectly through the comparison and induction of the interview text but fails to verify the intensity of different variables through statistical modelling.

Although this kind of theoretical explanatory integration is common in qualitative research, its explanatory strength is relatively limited compared with quantitative verification (Tracy, 2010). In addition, this study does not deeply introduce potential frameworks such as emotional labour theory and physical politics, and these theories have important supplementary significance for understanding the physical experience and emotional labour of women's travel. For example, the insecurity, personal safety risks, and social eyesores experienced by women during travel can be regarded as a delay in emotional labour, and the recapture of physical control during travel can also be deepened through the perspective of physical politics. These omissions partially limit the systematic nature of research within gender theory.

5.3.5 Researcher's position and reflective limitations

The credibility of qualitative research depends not only on the data but also on the position and reflection ability of the researcher. The researcher is a female researcher with rich travel experience and a background in gender priority. This identity has a double effect in the interview interaction. On the one hand, it helps to build trust and sympathy, making respondents more willing to share openly. The reason this study can get into the lived

experience of women and understand how they perceive structural limitations when travelling is that the researcher himself is also a woman and has a gender experience similar to that of the respondents. On the other hand, it may also unconsciously affect problem guidance and semantic resonance, thus strengthening specific narrative themes. During data analysis, NVivo supported the organisation of coded material and the comparison of participants' accounts. Nevertheless, these procedures did not remove the influence of the researcher's theoretical assumptions and personal perspectives. Consistent with the constructivist and feminist epistemological foundations of this study, reflexivity was understood as a means of recognising and critically examining the researcher's interpretive role rather than claiming complete objectivity. But reflective research emphasises that it is impossible for researchers to completely withdraw from the text (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017).

In this study, this interpretation inevitably leaves traces in the analysis. In traditional empiricism or positivist paradigms, subjectivity is often regarded as a threat to the quality of research. Therefore, reducing subjectivity is regarded as a methodological goal worth pursuing. However, in the context of gender research, this de-subjectivity objectivity itself means returning to the patriarchal knowledge structure. Feminist epistemology has long emphasised that the problem is not the prejudice caused by women's research. The problem is that only male knowledge has long been regarded as truth. All knowledge comes from the position (Haraway, 2013). Therefore, the direction of research improvement in the future is not to make researchers more neutral, but to make the positions of knowledge sources more diversified. Therefore, future research can adopt the diversified design of the research team and introduce male researchers or analysts from diverse cultural backgrounds to broaden the perspective and reduce single bias. Unlike the West, in the Chinese social context, feminism is not a purely academic position or a simple expression of values but has obvious political sensitivity. During the interview, Ms. X (24 years old, undergraduate, unmarried) once said, "Can these be said?" This means that some women's experiences are not silent but selective voice loss. It's not that they can't speak, but they can't speak in any field. Therefore, the researcher's position not only affects who the interviewees dare to speak to but also affects whether these awakenings can be transcribed into academic texts. The fundamental reason for the limitations of this study is that Chinese society still lacks a safe public expression space for women's rights discourse.

In summary, although this study has limitations, these limitations do not weaken the value of research conclusions but set boundaries for its extrapolation and re-verification. However, high-quality qualitative research does not lie in eliminating limitations, but in clearly defining its scope of application and leaving a path for subsequent research (Tracy, 2010). Therefore, the self-qualification of this research is also its scientific embodiment.

5.4 Future Research Directions

Drawing on qualitative interviews with 72 Chinese women, this study explores the role of tourism in self-awareness and identity reconstruction and develops the Negotiated Subjectivity Model to explain how women negotiate their personal aspirations and social responsibilities within existing structural constraints. However, the findings of the study also reveal several directions that can be further deepened. Future research should be further promoted at the four levels of method, theory, intersection, and applied practice to respond to

the deeper academic and social problem of whether travel can become a social mechanism for Chinese women to continue to acquire subjectivity.

5.4.1 The deepening of methodology and data systematisation

Future research needs to move from qualitative to the integration of vertical and mixed methods to capture the continuous changes in the practical dimension of travel experience. The Negotiated Subjectivity Model provides an interpretive explanation of tourism-related reflection and identity negotiation, but the present study cannot establish whether these changes are sustained over time, and it is not enough to show whether this transformation can be stable in the long run. Therefore, it is necessary to first establish a vertical tracking framework to observe the evolution of women's identity and values in one year, three, or even five years through multi-point data collection. Tools such as 'Annual Reflection Log', 'Interview Backtracking after Travel', and 'Self-narrative Reconstruction Task' can be used to reveal how the travel experience is absorbed, resisted, or reactivated (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). Second, future research can try to build a hybrid method design and incorporate it into the quantitative verification link while maintaining qualitative depth. Some indicators proposed in this study are transformed into quantitative indicators to evaluate the impact of economic autonomy, time control, and family decision-making power on the continuity of women's post-travel behaviour. The qualitative stage is used to generate theory, and the quantitative stage is used for verification and generalization. Through the integration of this method, the confidence and generalization of research conclusions can be improved (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023).

Third, future research should pay attention to multi-source data integration. One can combine social media travel records, consumption data, and psychological evaluation tools to establish a data chain of 'travel - psychological state - behaviour change'. This can not only correct the subjective bias of the interview but also help to reveal the potential path dependence of 'meaning transformation'. Kirillova et al. (2017) suggested that the triggering of the transformative tourism experience often has the dual characteristics of emotional threshold and narrative construction, which can be objectively supplemented through text and impact content analysis. At the technical level, researchers can conduct a semantic network analysis of women's travel narratives (such are found in Weibo and Rednote (Wang et al., 2022) with the help of computational text analysis and natural language processing methods to identify the common semantic structure of 'awakening-escape-re-embedding'. This method can expand the breadth of the sample, make up for the limitations of a single in-depth interview, and provide a new data perspective for the social corpus of women's travel narratives.

5.4.2 Expansion of theoretical framework and interdisciplinary integration

Expansion at the theoretical level is the key direction for deepening research in the future. The framework of 'reflective self-transformative learning-gender performance' adopted in this study has successfully revealed the multiple roles of travel experience, but it can still be extended to the following dimensions. For example, the study found that the 'safety anxiety' and 'alone healing' experienced by many women during re-travel are extensions of emotional labour. Future research can explore how travel can become a redistribution space for women's emotional labour, that is, between family and the workplace. The obligation to continuously

take care of others can be temporarily interrupted through geographical mobility, so as to readjust the emotional energy reserve. This will give a more systematic explanation of the relationship between tourism and emotional reproduction. Furthermore, one can further combine the perspective of feminist political economy to discuss how China's tourism industry can shape the distribution of women's work and leisure in the macroeconomics and labour systems. Women's spatial mobility is often regulated by capital structure and labour system (McDowell, 1983). Against the backdrop of global tourism, women are not only the theme of service labour but also the object of a consumption narrative.

Next, future research can explore the intertwining of the dual roles of female travellers and female workers and reveal how tourism can become an opportunity for gender equality and reproduce structural inequality. Also, it is recommended to introduce intersectional theory more systematically into travel research. As the sample was not systematically stratified by ethnicity, social class, or geographical location, the study was not designed to provide detailed comparisons across these dimensions. Future research can reveal the complex role of identity differences in the construction of tourism meaning by comparing the travel experiences of diverse groups (such as ethnic minority women, migrant women, unmarried mothers, et cetera). Such research can not only enrich the context diversity of tourism sociology but also respond to the academic challenges of non-homogenisation of women's experience. Fourth, the integration of cultural communication and media theory is also crucial. Pritchard and Morgan (2000) argued that tourism publicity has influenced the image of women with the 'male gaze' for a long time. Future research can explore how contemporary social media can redefine the public image of female travellers through image analysis and visual anthropology, and whether this redefinition can really break the traditional gender discourse. With the popularity of short videos (such as Douyin) and social platforms, women's solo travel has shifted from a marginal narrative to mainstream, and its cultural consequences are worth tracking.

Another potential direction for future research concerns social media as an alternative space for identity negotiation. Digital platforms such as Douyin and Xiaohongshu allow women to encounter, construct, and communicate representations of independence, personal development, and alternative lifestyles. However, the expression of an idealised identity through social media does not necessarily indicate that such an identity has been realised in everyday life. Future research could therefore examine the relationship between digital self-presentation, women's understandings of their identities, and the extent to which these understandings are translated into actual decisions and practices. Comparing social media narratives with longitudinal interviews could provide further insight into the differences between expressing aspirations, experiencing temporary autonomy, and achieving sustained changes in everyday social relationships.

5.4.3 Cross-section and international comparative research

This research mainly focuses on the Chinese context, and the travel experience of Chinese women is deeply influenced by national policies, family structure, and cultural norms. Future research can be compared under a broader cross-cultural and cross-cutting framework. For example, a comparative study can be conducted in the region. Women's travel experience in mainland China can be compared with that of Chinese communities such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore. Against the background of different social systems and gender

policies, the difference in the status of women in the family and the workplace may lead to different meanings in travel. Comparative research may reveal the possibility of how institutional culture shapes travel as a self-governance tool. Second, cross-cultural comparison can be conducted in future research. Western women's tourism research has long relied on focusing on single female travellers, gender security, and physical politics, et cetera. (Jordan & Gibson, 2005). The Chinese context reflects the constraints of family responsibility and social expectations. At the same time, the study can also introduce intergenerational comparison to explore the differences in the understanding of the meaning of travel by women of different ages.

This study found that the purpose of travel of women over the age of 50 years is more inclined to health and leisure interests, while young women emphasize self-expression and free exploration. In the future, one could examine how intergenerational socialisation shapes women's cognitive framework of freedom, safety, and independence through multi-generational sample studies. This will help reveal the law of intergenerational transmission of gender awareness in social change.

In a word, the future research on tourism and women's self-reconstruction should go beyond the simple judgement of whether travel empowers, and turn to revealing its process logic, social conditions, and cross-cultural differences. In terms of method, we should promote the evolution from narrative to vertical. In theory, the linkage with emotion, capital, and political economy should be deepened. Only in this way can tourism research truly participate in the social practice of gender equality, so that women travelling can not only be seen, but also understood and supported.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

6.1 Summary of Findings

6.1.1 Why Does Tourism Provide a Distinctive Context for Chinese Women's Subjectivity?

The significance of tourism for Chinese women's self-awareness does not lie in an inherent transformative power or in the absence of alternative spaces for reflection. Rather, tourism can provide a relatively accessible and socially acceptable context in which women temporarily distance themselves from everyday responsibilities and reconsider their identities within existing social structures. Travel is not necessarily the most suitable setting for self-awareness; rather, it is a relatively accessible site that offers temporary relief from daily routines and social constraints. If family and marriage are the spaces in which gender roles are fixed, and the workplace is the site where the gender division of labour is institutionalized, then travel is one of the few spaces in which women can escape being watched, disciplined, and confined to the traditional female role expected of them.

Several factors account for this. First, the family constitutes an important social space in which women's identities and subjectivities are shaped and negotiated. However, established gendered expectations and the unequal distribution of domestic responsibilities may restrict opportunities for women to prioritise their individual needs. In this context, tourism can provide a distinctive opportunity for reflection by temporarily altering the routines and relational expectations that structure everyday family life. Regardless of women's educational background, economic resources, or social identity, once they enter the family structure, they are positioned within a regime of gendered responsibility. This study argues that the Chinese family structure is not merely an emotional community that provides belonging, but a mechanism that organizes unpaid labour around women, a view supported by Connelly et al., (2018). In Chinese urban families, women often face the dual burden of visible labour and invisible emotional labour. They are expected to sustain family relationships and manage daily routines. This expectation is naturalized through language and is rarely recognized as work. As a result, women often face questions about the legitimacy of their own time needs at home. Under this mechanism, women's selves are not regarded as the core that must be preserved but are often subordinated to family roles. In the narratives of many respondents, "I am someone's wife/mother/daughter at home" is a recurring expression, which also indicates that the family is not a field of subject formation, but a field of subject consumption.

Travel alters this narrative structure and provides women with a socially acceptable rationale for temporary withdrawal. According to Kong et al. (2022), women's companion travel is not simple consumption, but a practice that reconfigures intimate relationships and legitimizes the diversion of time and attention away from family roles. It also recognizes women's claims to live for themselves, carries social legitimacy, and is therefore deemed acceptable. In Chinese social structures, the boundary of responsibility within the family-based gender order constitutes the primary framework through which female subjectivity is shaped. Emotional labour within the family often lacks monetary value and social recognition, thereby weakening women's influence in household resource allocation and decision-making

structures (Stacey, 1983). At the same time, the high predictability of family responsibilities places women in a structurally constrained position in which obligations are implicit within family relationships. Even when women's educational attainment, income, or occupational status equals or exceeds that of men, these achievements are difficult to translate into equal family power (Yeung & Hu, 2016).

Second, domestic labour lacks the status it deserves, while the workplace also frequently underrecognizes female workers and their perspectives. A large body of gender research has shown that the institutional design of many Chinese enterprises is still modelled on the male default worker (Li, 2024) and may, by implication, overstate the status of work outside the home. This means that many women are placed in a position where they ask whether they can ignore their gendered circumstances like men. Moreover, systematic care penalties persist in the labour market; that is, when women are predefined as family caregivers, their promotion prospects and workplace credibility are automatically weakened (Mclntosh et al., 2012). This directly prevents women from forming a stable and internally coherent sense of subjectivity in the workplace. They may be recognized for performance, but not for themselves. Family and workplace environments may offer opportunities for recognition and self-development, although gendered expectations can constrain the forms of autonomy available to women. The issue is not that women cannot be subjective, but that the social structure does not provide them with an institutional position centred on the self.

In sharp contrast, travel provides a non-disciplinary space. During travel, women are temporarily detached from family power relations and temporarily released from the performance logic of the workplace. Their bodies are no longer functionalized by others, and their time acquires a degree of autonomy. This reallocation of the body and daily practice gives them a temporary but tangible sense of agency. Therefore, travel is not the cause of awakening, but the condition through which awakening becomes possible. It is not that traveling makes women strong; rather, the original structure suppresses self-expression, forcing women to leave their daily roles in order to see themselves. This necessity of leaving daily life in order to recognize oneself indicates that the deeper social reality is that contemporary Chinese women's subject consciousness still lacks legitimacy within the structure. They must first withdraw from the role before returning to the self. Travel is not an active practice of consciousness formation, but a temporary structural escape.

Consequently, the main reason travel is important for women is not that they simply want to leave routine, but that they cannot sustain the self within the original social structure. This is a forced path to identity formation. It is precisely for this reason that the female consciousness identified in this research is not a mature identity politics, but the rudiment of subjectivity emerging in the gap. This sociological meaning does not develop naturally in China; instead, it must first break through daily life and then return to daily life. Such growth is not completed within institutional structures, but in temporary spaces outside them. Travel therefore assumes a social function that extends beyond leisure or consumption in the experience of contemporary Chinese women. It has become an alternative field against structural concealment and gendered discipline.

In contemporary China, travel has become important for women because the current institutional arrangements of family and workplace life leave little room for self-realization in everyday life. As noted, travel temporarily grants women a socially legitimate means of

acting on their own behalf, enabling them to assess risk, negotiate with the environment, and make independent decisions. When women's everyday mobility is coded as functional mobility in service of others, any travel undertaken for self-directed purposes amplifies self-recognition. Moreover, within Chinese social structures, the cultural continuity of the Confucian gender order constitutes a second deep structural logic shaping female subjectivity. This cultural system places hierarchy, division of labour, and the moralization of gender roles at its core, so that gender differences acquire normative meaning and are reproduced in a highly implicit and continuous manner through socialization (Davis & Harrell, 1993).

The force of this cultural gender order lies not in overt coercion, but in the construction of behavioural boundaries through moralized gender expectations, which are then stabilized through identification, obedience, and internalization in everyday life. Therefore, in the process of formation, Chinese women's subjectivity is constrained not only by the family power structure, but also by the symbolic discipline of cultural gender norms. Accordingly, the achievement of self-awareness, self-identification, and self-fulfilment remains difficult for individuals to realize.

6.1.2 Structural awareness of female subject consciousness

In this study, women's subject consciousness is not achieved overnight; rather, it is a gradually unfolding cognitive and emotional process. It begins with the initial feeling that "I still exist" and progressively advances to an ability to identify the forces that constrain self-becoming. Travel does not directly produce awakening; instead, it creates social conditions that enable women to approach the self in layers, so that subject consciousness can emerge, become perceptible after disruption of the original structure, and ultimately be named and confirmed. This process often begins with emotion rather than rational judgment. Many respondents did not initially connect travel with gender awareness. The most immediate change they reported was that they began to pay attention to themselves. The self, which had been obscured in everyday family life or workplace routines, re-emerged during travel.

This sense of self-existence is re-perceived during the trip. Such self-re-emergence appears repeatedly in the interview data. When describing their first solo travel experience, many respondents did not explicitly address the structure of consciousness but expressed it in understated terms such as "I seem to see my real self for the first time" and "I don't need to be evaluated or expected by anyone." These expressions are not abstract theories, but empirical accounts of the self-occupying the centre of attention. Travel becomes a site in which subjectivity can be perceived not because of its leisure attributes, but because of its structural suspension. It temporarily interrupts the power relations embedded in gender-role distribution and returns self-visibility to women. However, if subject consciousness remains at the level of simply feeling oneself, it is insufficient to constitute awakening.

This stage is not self-awakening per se, but a return to pre-reflective awareness. From a phenomenological perspective, pre-reflective self-awareness refers to an immediate sense of self that has not yet been fully articulated through social norms or language. The second key process occurs when this sense of self begins to generate tension with one's socially constructed everyday identity. At this stage, women realize that the problem does not stem from their own ability or character, but from the environment in which they live. Yang et al. (2018) explained that Asian women's travel is not grounded in a freedom or adventure narrative, but in re-centering the self as the locus of experience. That is, the subject is not

awakened through cognitive analysis, but through the return of a sense of existence. However, this pre-reflective self-presence is still insufficient to constitute a mature and stable sense of self. The core of subject formation lies in identifying the structure that constrains the self. Therefore, the key to the second stage of subject consciousness is the reattribution of causality. Women must recognize that what restricts their actions is not a lack of ability, but structural discipline.

This shift can be understood as a move from individual-level attribution to structural explanation, a distinction widely discussed in sociological and attribution theory literature (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1985). Through retrospective reflection on daily life, women recognize that what they have lost is not the legitimacy of space, time, and subjectivity, but their access to them. Awakening begins not with empowerment, but with the disenchantment of habitual obedience. This comparative experience is not merely a mental stage, but a structural reconstruction of cognition. When "I" is permitted to exist during travel but is reduced to a functional unit at home or in the workplace, women may transform the loss of self from personal failure into social constraint, thereby providing a logical basis for subjectivity to seek legitimacy (Khoo-Lattimore, 2021). This mechanism explains a key finding in this study. Women's change does not occur during the journey, but after the trip. Travel is only a site of depersonalization and discipline. The actual movement of consciousness is gradually completed through "control-identification-naming" after returning to the original structure. Therefore, the first stage does not occur at the conceptual level, but at the ontological level, where subjectivity emerges. The second stage is the transition from situational selfhood to structured self-awareness and marks the first recognition of the boundary between "who I am" and "how I am shaped," from the existential level to the normative level. This is the truly generative dimension of travel.

In the contemporary Chinese context, this step is difficult to complete within the family or workplace because legitimacy is structurally tied to role rather than to the individual person in these two domains. Family demands operate as obligations to others, and workplace demands operate as organizational performance requirements. In these two institutional settings, the self is always a derivative role, not an original position. Consequently, opportunities for women to prioritise their individual aspirations within these settings may be restricted by existing responsibilities and institutional expectations, because they are not granted an institutional position in which they can become the purpose itself. Travel disrupts this structure of legitimacy. In the travel context, "acting for yourself" is socially regarded as permissible. Women do not need to explain, defend, or justify themselves, nor do they need to provide care for others or produce performance in exchange. Travel therefore offers an opportunity to establish legitimacy. Only when legitimacy is socially recognized can women move from awareness of the self to recognition of the self. Yang et al. (2018) argued that Asian women's travel experiences often display a delayed awakening: rather than producing a strong expression at the moment of travel, they confirm, by comparison with daily life after returning, the legitimacy that had previously been denied to them as subjects. At this point, awakening moves from the empirical to the structural and ideological.

When subject consciousness completes the transformation from a reflective self to structural visibility, the possibility of stabilizing a sense of self-efficacy is closely linked to social structure. Self-fulfillment is not completed at the level of consciousness, but within an opportunity structure. Consequently, different groups of women do not follow a

homogeneous path of subject formation. Rather, they enter subject-conditional structures at different levels because of differences in age, marital status, childbearing, and class resources. In this sample, unmarried women aged 21 to 30 years with relatively strong resource control can quickly convert travel experiences into sustained thematic practices, such as redistributing time, refusing ineffective socializing, delaying marriage, and raising the threshold for partner selection. These actions do not result from a stronger sense of consciousness, but from greater room for negotiation. Married women aged 21 to 50 years often move into self-care, but not full independence, after traveling. They develop a sense of subjectivity but lack the temporal conditions and structural support needed to institutionalize it in daily life.

Women over 50 years of age tend to experience subject consciousness later, but some have already completed a separation from social responsibility through retirement, divorce, or other reasons. Their subjectivation reduces the constraints of social structure, allowing body, time, and value orders to be redefined and enabling a reconstruction of self-positioning. Moreover, class and educational background further intensify this stratification mechanism. The resources required for travel are unevenly distributed in society and travel itself is a spatial practice with limited access. Yang et al. (2018) noted that solo travel often requires stronger information-management and risk-adjustment capacities, and this capacity itself functions as a class threshold. Therefore, travel is not a universal path to subjectivity. Only those who can temporarily withdraw from systems of care and reallocate personal resources can complete subject formation through withdrawal.

6.1.3 The Negotiated Subjectivity Model in Tourism Contexts

Building on the discussion in Sections 6.1.1 and 6.1.2, this section introduces the Negotiated Subjectivity Model to explain how Chinese women may develop and sustain subjectivity through tourism-related reflection and the negotiation of existing social responsibilities. The model conceptualises subjectivity formation as a dynamic and conditional process in which temporary distance from everyday routines creates opportunities for self-reflection, while the translation of these experiences into everyday life remains shaped by family relationships, economic resources, and broader gendered expectations. The model suggests that, in the contemporary Chinese context, women's subjectivity does not primarily follow a confrontational path, such as the resistance-based subjectivity emphasized in Western feminist discourse, nor does it adopt an inward-oriented model of self-realization centred on personal fulfillment. Instead, it develops through processes of negotiation, gradual consolidation, and perceived feasibility, with a continuous cognitive and emotional trajectory emerging within structural constraints. The theoretical core of this model is that the subject is not found in travel but acquires the legitimacy of its formation through travel. Travel provides a social space that is temporarily outside the domain of everyday regulation, allowing the mechanisms of social discipline and training to be suspended so that women can recover their self-experience. However, whether subjectivity is ultimately formed does not depend on the intensity of awakening, but on whether it can successfully negotiate and maintain its position after returning to the daily structure, that is, whether the subject can secure a sustainable social status through consultation. Therefore, the first theoretical point of the model is that subjectivity is a sustainable social position, not a simple state of consciousness. Unlike the paradigm of subject formation through resistance in Western social theory, the path of subject formation for Chinese women follows a trajectory of attaining self-realization through

consultation. At this point, the relationship between travel and subjectivity has social-structural significance rather than merely psychological or recreational significance. The model further highlights that subject formation is a dynamic and iterative process rather than a linear progression.

The third theoretical point of the model concerns the hierarchical availability of subject formation. It also demonstrates that subjectivity is conditionally produced and shaped by structural factors such as age, family roles, and access to resources. Therefore, subject formation is not a matter of whether it can be awakened, but whether the subject can be reorganized and reintegrated into the structure. In other words, the subject is not awakened but sustained within structural competition. Thus, the key distinction from much Western literature lies in its emphasis on negotiation rather than resistance as the primary mode of subject formation within the Chinese context.

Table 6.1 Resistance-centred and Negotiation-centred Perspectives on Subjectivity Formation

Analytical dimension	**Resistance-centred perspective**	**Negotiation-centred perspective**
Understanding of agency	Challenging or resisting established structures	Exercising agency through negotiation within existing relationships
Relationship with social structures	Emphasis on contestation and potential structural change	Emphasis on relational adjustment and conditional change
Expression of subjectivity	May involve visible resistance or departure from established roles	May involve reflection, boundary-setting and incremental adjustments
Implications for tourism	Travel as an opportunity to question established norms	Travel as a reflective experience followed by negotiation in everyday life

In this sense, travel initially represents the first trial of becoming; it is used to test whether self-awareness can challenge the authorised social structure. This understanding indicates that female tourists recognize that they need not be wholly defined by other people's roles. Travel is not the key but the structural premise. The actual formation of subjectivity occurs during the negotiation stage after returning to daily life, and travel serves only to initiate this process. These perspectives are not mutually exclusive or exclusive to particular cultural contexts. The present study emphasises negotiation because this process was particularly relevant to the experiences reported by the participants.

This study advances feminist debates by introducing the concept of Negotiated Subjectivity to explain how agency is enacted within, rather than against, structural constraints in the Chinese context. Unlike dominant Western frameworks that emphasize resistance or discursive fluidity (Butler, 1997), this model highlights a form of embedded agency shaped by the coexistence of modernisation and enduring familial norms. It demonstrates that women's subjectivity is not simply constrained or liberated but is continuously negotiated through everyday practices, thereby extending existing theories of gender and agency to account for context-specific dynamics.

6.2 Contributions to Theory and Practice

6.2.1 Theoretical Contributions

The central theoretical contribution of this research is the development of the Negotiated Subjectivity Model, a conceptual framework grounded in the socio-cultural context of contemporary China. The model explains how tourism-related experiences may create opportunities for self-reflection and identity reconsideration, while the development and practical expression of women's subjectivity remain influenced by family responsibilities, gendered expectations, and access to social and economic resources.

This model is not merely summarized from interview materials; rather, it is developed through dialogue with feminist social theory, mobility research, structural-dynamic dialectics, and Chinese sociology's distinctive analysis of the relationship among state, family, and individual. It seeks to address a long-neglected question in tourism studies, feminist research, and gender culture more broadly: How do contemporary Chinese women generate subjectivity through the temporary fluidity of travel within a highly institutionalized, ethical, and culturally saturated gender structure?

Western feminist theory emphasizes that the formation of subjectivity is often accompanied by ruptured awakening and linear resistance to patriarchal structures (Hooks, 2015). However, this interpretive framework cannot be directly applied to Chinese society. The reason is that the gender discipline faced by Chinese women has a more complex duality. On the one hand, the substantial expansion of educational access, the growth of economic independence, urbanization, and digital platforms has increased women's range of choice; on the other hand, the continuing influence of Confucian culture, the state's renewed emphasis on marriage and child-rearing, the moral construction of the discourse of "leftover women," and the naturalization of family roles and responsibilities for women remain deeply embedded in everyday life.

In the contemporary Chinese context examined in this study, women's subjectivity was frequently expressed through negotiation, reflection, and incremental adjustments within existing social relationships, rather than through overt confrontation or complete rejection of established structures. This pattern does not imply that direct resistance is absent among Chinese women, but highlights the significance of relational and context-dependent forms of agency within the experiences represented in this research.

The resilience of the structure, the intimacy of emotional obligations, and the deep entrenchment of family ethics make resistance not only costly, but also difficult to sustain in ethical situations. Therefore, the subjectivity formed by contemporary Chinese women is not a radical, binary opposition to the old order, but a consultative mode of subject formation characterized by constraint, adjustment under tension, and strategic action within multiple structures. The Negotiated Subjectivity Model proposed in this study is the conceptual articulation of these characteristics.

Based on interviews with 72 women, this study observed a pattern of strong consistency: women do not generally take radical action immediately after awakening during travel, but instead, to some extent, form a transitional cognitive space through travel, including temporary separation from family obligations, intimate relationship structures, daily work,

and the pressures of gender expectations. Travel provides them with a period of structural loosening, that is, a spatial field in which they can briefly experience a self that is not continuously monitored, not constrained by family ethics, and not repeatedly instructed by gender norms on how to behave. Chinese women do not seek to reject existing structures through travel; rather, they use travel as a low-risk and non-confrontational path to self-formation. Therefore, Negotiated Subjectivity is not a weakened form of confrontational subjectivity, but a subjective strategy marked by greater cultural adaptability and practical resilience under structural constraints in complex social conditions. Women's travel experiences do not directly lead to decisions that disrupt family and work relations; instead, they provide a set of gradually accumulated emotional evidence, experiential resources, and interpretive frameworks, enabling women to reassess the relationship between the self and structure after returning to everyday life.

For example, in this study, women with higher levels of education often experienced a clear awakening to emotional boundaries during travel, realizing that they had long performed asymmetrical roles in emotional labour, relationship maintenance, and family reconciliation; married women and women with children often re-evaluated the naturalized logic of sacrifice in intimate relationships during travel. Unmarried women generally realized during travel that marriage is not the only possible life course and also recognized that self-worth does not depend on others' disciplinary evaluation. These awakenings do not directly produce drastic life changes, but they affect women's prioritization of future life goals, their criteria for evaluating relationships, and their acceptance of external expectations in a more profound way. In this regard, this study makes a theoretical contribution that has not been adequately explained in previous tourism research: travel is not only a short-term process of psychological recovery, but also an important mechanism through which women negotiate structural pressure and reconstruct self-production, thereby generating strategic subjectivity.

Furthermore, this study contributes not only by proposing a new model of subjectivity, but also by explaining how this subjectivity is continuously activated within the post-socialist social structure. Women's consultation does not occur in isolation; rather, it forms a multi-layered structural context shaped by national policies, media narratives, family ethics, consumer culture, and professional competition. This multi-layered structure is not diminished by travel abroad; however, the cognitive and emotional experiences women develop during travel enable them to reposition themselves within everyday structures. For example, some women begin to articulate personal boundaries more clearly in relationships after traveling, some redistribute time and resources so that life is no longer entirely organized around the demands of a single role, some choose not to enter unequal intimate relationships, and some adopt more independent career planning. These small but sustained actions are not conspicuous, yet they constitute the most substantive component of the Negotiated Subjectivity of contemporary Chinese women. They are not explosive but cumulative. There is no need to transform the structure immediately, and there is no need for overt confrontation. Rather, women continuously adjust their position within the structure, which is a strategic practice that is highly compatible with Chinese culture.

The classic trajectory in Western feminist theory regarding the awakening of women's consciousness is grounded in a logic of gaining subjectivity through resistance to structure. However, in China's post-socialist society, the gender structure is situated not within an individualistic society, but within collectivist networks, and women's subjectivity cannot be

achieved through direct confrontation. This pattern is evident in the interviews. Many women recognize the unfairness of certain relationships or structures while traveling, but they do not choose direct resistance; instead, they negotiate. Building on the concept of non-confrontational activeness proposed by Pritchard (2006), this study extends the tourism context and develops a cross-cultural theoretical model that can explain the formation of Chinese women's subjectivity. The Negotiated Subjectivity Model proposed in this study is not only a supplement to theories of subjectivity, but also a theoretical advancement in mobility research. Sheller and Urry (2006) argued that movement is not only physical displacement, but also a reconfiguration of social relations and identity meanings. In the experiences of Chinese women, mobility acquires a new structural function, providing women with an opportunity to perceive structure. When they leave their hometowns, partners, family roles, and workplace relationships, they gain cognitive distance that enables them to re-examine the implicit discipline embedded in daily life. Therefore, mobility not only generates experience, but also develops reflective capacity, enabling women to recognize structural problems and undertake subsequent action. This finding indicates that mobility theory has acquired deeper social and structural significance and provides a new direction for its future development.

In addition, this study also examines gender system theory. Connell (2009) proposed that the gender system is composed of family structure, policy systems, the labour market, and cultural norms. Chinese society exhibits distinct state-family characteristics in its gender system (Ji, 2024). However, previous research on the gender system has mainly focused on the three domains of family, enterprises, and schools, while neglecting the social function of tourism. This study argues that tourism in fact constitutes an institutional gap space. Within this space, the regulation and training of the gender system are temporarily weakened, allowing female researchers to describe it as subjective. By introducing tourism into the framework of gender system analysis, this study expands the scope of gender system theory, because understanding gender relations in non-institutional settings provides a new theoretical basis.

Traditional tourism typologies are mostly based on motivation, consumption preferences, or behavioural patterns. However, the typology in the present study emphasizes structural roots. The three generations of Chinese women's life experiences, self-repair, boundary reconstruction, and future orientation are not based on preferences, but on structural pressure and stages of subjective development, reflecting how gender culture and social structure jointly shape women's behaviour during travel. This typology provides a theoretical framework for cross-sample and cross-cultural testing.

6.2.2 Practical Contributions

If the study's most important theoretical contribution is the construction of a Negotiated Subjectivity Model and its underlying structural logic, its practical significance lies in translating this theory into an actionable resource for social intervention. Tourism is no longer merely a leisure activity; it also supports women's psychological health. It is an important means of promoting health, social participation, and life restructuring. Chinese society is currently undergoing rapid structural transformation. Adjustments in marriage and fertility policies, labour market pressures, the spread of middle-class anxiety, and the shaping of women's life trajectories by digital media narratives have exposed women to unprecedented

structural tensions between emotional labour, relational responsibilities, and self-expectations. Accordingly, the Negotiated Subjectivity strategy proposed in this study is not only a theoretical description but also a practical framework applicable to policy formulation, industry engagement, and social service systems. It can help different sectors more accurately understand women's needs and position tourism as an important social mechanism for promoting women's well-being.

In destination management and the tourism industry, the findings of this study have direct practical value. The interview transcripts and the reflective accounts of past travel experiences indicate that contemporary Chinese women seek not only sightseeing or relaxation, but also an alternative space in which to suspend gender norms, family responsibilities, workplace expectations, and intimate relationship obligations. In this sense, travel acquires deeper functions, including emotional recovery, boundary reconstruction, and self-affirmation, which are not adequately addressed by conventional tourism products. The tourism industry often uses female-friendliness as a marketing label, yet this friendliness frequently remains at the level of aesthetic packaging, shopping convenience, and photo opportunities, while neglecting the institutional motives underlying women's travel. The Negotiated Subjectivity Model developed in this study shows that women's travel is not a simple consumption behaviour, but a strategic choice aimed at securing a sustainable psychological space under structural pressure. Therefore, destination managers and tourism enterprises need to understand the emotional and structural logic underlying women's travel, shift tourism products from surface entertainment to substantive support, and provide women with a travel environment that can generate meaning and value.

The practical significance of tourist destinations in spatial governance and service provision is mainly reflected in the construction of a safe, controllable, and autonomous environment. Many women interviewed emphasised safety and anxiety when travelling alone, which essentially reflects women's perception of gender risk in public space. The principal constraint on women's behaviour in unfamiliar spaces derives from safety expectations rather than from a lack of ability (Wilson & Little, 2008). In the experiences of Chinese women, this sense of risk is further intensified by family protective norms, so that even when women are capable of acting, they often restrict themselves because they fear causing worry to their families. Therefore, if destinations improve night lighting, provide women-specific spaces, and strengthen monitoring and assistance facilities in public areas, they will directly enhance women's confidence in action and reduce their psychological burden during travel; reducing this burden is an important prerequisite for the development of women's subjectivity and agency.

The Negotiated Subjectivity Model of this study emphasises that women seek legitimate space for action under structural pressure, and a secure environment is the key condition for legitimising such action. From a broader social structural perspective, the practical significance of this study lies in its empirical basis for understanding how contemporary Chinese women generate subjectivity through travel in an environment of institutional pressure, while also identifying a possible pathway for the state and society to support women's well-being through intervention mechanisms. In the highly institutionalised Chinese gender culture, the overlap of marriage and child-rearing norms, family expectations, emotional labour responsibilities, and workplace competition makes it difficult for women to secure continuous space for self-reflection in daily life. In this context, travel is not only an

escape mechanism but also a form of structural compensation. It provides women with an opportunity to reconstruct their self-narratives under conditions of reduced social discipline. Therefore, if policymakers, social organisations, educational systems, and commercial institutions recognise this distinctive function of travel in supporting subjectivity, they can incorporate it into the design of gender equality and mental health policies to form a multidimensional support structure for women.

Moreover, the narrative strategy and cultural representation of destinations are also of great significance. A key reason women experience an awakening of emotional boundaries during travel is that their identity in unfamiliar spaces is no longer defined by family or social expectations, but is shaped by destination culture, travel narratives, and self-perception. Therefore, if destination marketing continues to rely on narratives centred on relational roles, such as family outings and couples' vacations, it will be difficult to address the deeper motivations behind women's travel. By contrast, framing tourism around freedom of exploration, emotional healing, and self-reconstruction is more likely to resonate with women's subjective needs. The agenda for tourism and women's empowerment proposed by UNWTO in 2022 also emphasised that destination narratives must move beyond stereotyped representations of traditional gender roles so that women are recognised as independent subjects in travel rather than dependent roles within families or partnerships (de Jong& Figueroa-Domecq, 2022). The findings of this study further support this policy direction and provide a specific evidence base for gender-sensitive destination narratives. Contemporary women's travel demands extend beyond traditional sightseeing tourism and emphasise controllability, safety, respect, privacy, and space for self-recovery. These needs reflect the resources women often lack in everyday social structures: subjective space, a sense of security, freedom from relational role pressure, emotional independence, and embodied autonomy. Therefore, if destinations incorporate these resources into their governance logic, they can not only improve female tourists' satisfaction but also realise tourism's deeper function as a tool for social empowerment.

The thesis also offers implications for tourism destinations and enterprises in product design. The growth in women's travel demand has long been a global trend, and mature business models for women-only travel and emotional-repair tourism products have emerged in many international markets. The Chinese market also has the potential to develop such products; however, it currently focuses largely on superficial marketing strategies, such as girlfriend travel and travel photography, and has not yet fully understood the subjective logic of women's travel. The Negotiated Subjectivity Model proposed in this study can serve as the theoretical basis for designing in-depth women's travel products, including emotional-healing journeys, workshops on overcoming self-imposed and socially imposed limitations, and solitary experience camps. In these ways, tourism enterprises can better respond to women's subjective needs and contribute to women's mental health as a form of social value.

As the proportion of female travellers continues to rise, the global tourism industry is paying increasing attention to how the women's travel market can be developed. However, rather than treating this market simply as a new business opportunity, it should be understood as a cultural phenomenon that responds to changes in women's social status and their emotional and socio-psychological needs. When formulating product strategies, enterprises should first understand the structural motives behind women's travel. This study reveals the process of women's emotional repair, boundary reconstruction, and value renewal through travel.

Products that respond to these needs are still in their infancy in the Chinese market, and this study provides a workable framework for local development. Corporate service processes must recognize that female travellers are often in a state of recovery and reorganization while traveling; therefore, service attitudes, language, and spatial design should reflect respect, tolerance, and support. This type of service is not merely polite service, but professional service grounded in gender sensitivity. For example, women may require non-invasive assistance and greater privacy than men, both of which are directly related to the subjective experience of women traveling. If tourism enterprises institutionalize these service practices, they can not only improve their competitive position but also contribute to women's empowerment at the social level. In countries such as New Zealand, tourism products based on spirituality, the development and improvement of well-being, and physical and self-care development can be found (Mai, Ryan & Cockburn-Wootten, 2025), which analyse such products as grounded in a secular sense of female-nature awareness, and New Zealand is not unique in this regard.

At the public policy level, this research also emphasizes the importance of women's travel. Women's travel is essentially an interactive behaviour shaped by the social institutional structure, and whether women can travel freely, safely, and confidently is closely related to public infrastructure, transportation networks, accommodation norms, cultural messaging, and gender policies. The findings suggest that tourism may contribute to women's self-reflection and the development of subjectivity, although the long-term sustainability of these changes remains to be established through longitudinal research. Therefore, governments should take women's travel into account when formulating tourism policies or urban renewal strategies. For example, public transportation should become more welcoming to female solo tourists, and accommodation regulations should clearly specify women's safety standards. At the same time, public cultural narratives should emphasize the legitimacy of women traveling alone to reduce the moral pressure placed on women within family relationships because of their travel needs. Female-only floors in hotels are not a universal solution, but they do symbolize recognition that some women feel safer in such settings. It would be useful to encourage programs in which solo female hotel guests are informed of opportunities to dine with other female travellers. Appropriate small-group discussions could also become a feature in some hotels. According to Wang and Song (2024), research on family policy indicates that policy narratives have a strong influence on female roles. This study found that the subjective awakening women gain through travel can provide a gentle but sustained challenge to this narrative.

Therefore, if state gender policy can support women's mobility by improving travel conditions, it will create a more structurally supportive environment for gender equality. When promoting tourism development, countries usually emphasize economic growth, regional development, and cultural exchange, but tourism is rarely viewed as a social tool for supporting vulnerable or gender-specific groups. However, the findings of this study show that tourism has a long-term impact on women's subjectivity, and subjectivity itself is a form of social welfare and an important foundation for improving gender equality. Therefore, if policymakers include tourism within the scope of gender equality policy, they will provide structural support for women and give them greater autonomy in action and life choices. In addition, national gender discourse can also use the symbolic power of tourism to present positive images of women traveling alone, normalizing this practice as an expression of

women's autonomy rather than subjecting it to doubt or excessive scrutiny. Currently, the Chinese government often emphasizes family values and women's responsibilities when promoting fertility policies, and these policies often overlook women's own subjective needs in relation to life choices. This study found that identity awakening and value reorganization during travel often help women evaluate whether marriage is necessary, whether childbirth is necessary, and whether the family structure is reasonable, which indicates that travel has the potential to challenge the national gender narrative. Women who travel may not openly rebel, but travel can provide a quiet yet firm means of self-understanding. Therefore, if policymakers recognize the important role of travel in women's lives, they can design more inclusive gender policies so that women retain the right to interpret and choose their own lives without violating national development goals. Although current policies may appear to resist initiatives that promote female autonomy at a perceived cost to family policy, counterarguments remain. Independent female entrepreneurship contributes to national well-being, and it could be argued that women who feel valued in society because of their gender may also be better parents.

Consequently, in addition to destination planning and policy design, the practical significance of this study is also reflected in mental health and social support systems. Many interviewees reported that they recognized their long-term emotional stress for the first time during the trip and, after returning, took steps to adjust their lives, suggesting that travel has considerable potential for psychological intervention. The emotional labour borne by women within broader social structures is often difficult to observe, and travel provides a space for the temporary suspension of such labour, enabling women to reconsider their own conditions. Therefore, mental health professionals, community organizations, and women's service institutions can incorporate travel and mobility into emotional intervention strategies and design mobility-based psychological programs for women, such as short-distance healing camps and rural meditation activities. These examples indicate the importance of travel for psychological recovery.

In the education system, the practical significance of this research is equally important. Tourism education is a field within the social sciences that should not only teach the business logic of the tourism industry but also cultivate students' understanding of the social structural significance of tourism and of differences in people's needs. The Negotiated Subjectivity Model presented in this study provides a teaching tool with a strong theoretical and practical foundation for tourism and sociology courses. If tourism and gender, the application of emotional geography in tourism research, and related content are incorporated into the curriculum, students will develop sharper social insight when entering the industry in the future, and tourism education can also promote the gradual development of the industry in a more inclusive direction. More importantly, tourism education can cultivate the gender sensitivity of future practitioners and help them understand that tourism is not neutral, but a social practice with profound gender significance.

6.2.3. Practical Recommendation

The consultative subjective generation mechanism revealed by this study provides a practical knowledge base for policymakers, industry practitioners, social service systems, and educational institutions, thereby enabling tourism to move from a single economic sector to an important resource for supporting women's well-being, subjective development, and social

equality. On this basis, this study proposes the following practice-oriented recommendations. These recommendations place the Negotiated Subjectivity Model at the core, integrate tourism into national governance, industry strategy, social services, and the education system, and promote tourism's transformation from a consumption activity into an empowerment mechanism with social functions.

6.2.3.1 Build a gender-sensitive travel infrastructure and policy framework.

As a structurally flexible space, tourism can truly support women's subjectivity only when destination governance provides a safe, inclusive, manageable, and autonomous environment. Accordingly, governments should treat gender as a core variable in the formulation of cultural policies for urban renewal and tourism planning, as it directly affects travel behaviour and the formation of subjectivity.

First, it is necessary to establish a tourism infrastructure planning system based on gender analysis. Women's expectations of travel safety differ from those of men. Mobility is shaped less by geographic distance than by environmental predictability and perceived security. Therefore, incorporating gender variables into the planning of transportation hubs, nighttime walking areas, accommodation facilities, public toilets, and emergency assistance systems can substantially increase women's confidence in mobility. International urban research indicates that women-friendly urban spaces not only increase women's travel rates but also improve overall urban well-being (Canton, 2021). This study found that women's subjective formation during travel depends on embodied autonomy in low-risk environments; safety is therefore not a technical detail, but a structural condition. Second, at the policy level, the moral framing of women's travel should be reduced so that the legitimacy of women traveling alone is institutionally recognized. Many interviewees reported scepticism, admonition, and even moral pressure from family members or society before traveling, which reflects social distrust of women's agency and affects subject formation. Policymakers can present women's travel as a healthy, positive, and socially valuable lifestyle through cultural promotion, media guidance, and tourism publicity activities. Such a discursive shift can reduce women's anxiety about whether they are permitted to travel, making travel a legitimate pathway for self-exploration. In the formulation of industry standards, national tourism policy should explicitly include gender-sensitivity requirements, such as requiring accommodation providers to adopt women's safety measures, requiring tourism enterprises to conduct gender-equality training, and requiring the public sector to establish women-friendly tourism information channels. These policies and measures not only improve women's travel experiences but also provide institutional support for the practice of Negotiated Subjectivity, enabling women to retain agency even when broader social structures remain unchanged.

6.2.3.2 Develop a travel product and service system that supports women's subjectivity.

This study shows that contemporary women's travel goals far exceed traditional needs such as relaxation, shopping, and photography; instead, they include restoration, reflection, and the reconstruction of personal boundaries. Tourism enterprises therefore need to implement structural changes in product design, service strategies, and communication methods, and treat women as subjects with complex identity needs and intrinsic motivations rather than as a homogeneous consumer group.

First, at the product level, tourism products should be developed to promote women's self-awareness, emotional recovery, and subjective growth. Such products should not be reduced to a marketing label for women's tourism. Rather, they should address three common categories of need in travel: restorative needs, reflective needs, and developmental needs. For example, immersive nature-based meditation, travel emphasizing stillness and quiet, and exploratory travel designed to enhance bodily competence can effectively support the development of women's subjectivity and, in turn, strengthen user loyalty. Second, at the service level, tourism enterprises need to develop a gender-sensitive professional service system. Women's travel needs often include spatial controllability, responsiveness to emotional support, and a non-intrusive service process. If service personnel demonstrate respect for women's subjectivity in communication style, service pace, and behavioural boundaries, women's experiences will improve significantly. Western research indicates that gender-sensitive services can reduce uncertainty costs for female travellers and increase their participation in unfamiliar environments (Pritchard et al., 2011). This study also found that women's subjectivity often emerges in everyday interactional settings, such as feeling respected, receiving appropriate support, and acting freely without explanation. Tourism enterprises should institutionalize gender awareness in employee training so that practitioners can understand the complexity of female travellers rather than rely on stereotypes. Moreover, enterprises can establish feedback mechanisms for female travellers to transform discomfort and risk points in the travel process into the basis for product optimization, thereby making travel a more effective process of subjective support.

6.2.3.3 Reposition travel as a resource for women's psychological empowerment.

This study found that travel plays an important role in psychological recovery, emotional reorganization, and value reconstruction in the life trajectories of many women. Many emotional realities that women recognize during travel, such as sources of stress, unequal relationships, and weak personal boundaries, are difficult to identify or express in daily life. Therefore, travel is not only a leisure activity; it is also a space for psychological intervention, although its value has long been overlooked in mental health and social service frameworks. Social service agencies can incorporate travel into women's empowerment programs and use supported travel as an access pathway. Community organizations can develop short-term travel activities for women, enabling them to experience selfhood and mobility in a safe environment. In addition, psychological counselling institutions can use the narrative space created by travel to help women reconstruct life stories and establish relationship boundaries, thereby strengthening subjectivity. According to Penwarden's (2024) study of narrative therapy, spatial displacement can shift cognitive focus, and the structure of this study further shows that such displacement has a particularly strong effect on women's subjective development. When designing intervention plans, mental health professionals can transform travel experiences into counselling materials, such as moments of awakening, fragments of emotional release, and moments of increased mobility, all of which can serve as important cues for understanding women's intrinsic motivation. Social service organizations can also use travel as a tool for identifying stress, helping women reassess their emotional states by stepping outside daily routines and making psychological intervention more context sensitive.

6.2.3.4 Integrate gender-sensitive subjectivity theory into tourism research and the social science education system.

The theoretical contribution of this study shows that tourism is not a simple economic activity, but a subjective practice embedded in social structure. Therefore, when educational institutions train future tourism practitioners and social researchers in public governance, they should integrate gender sensitivity, theories of subjective development, and the social function of tourism into teaching.

In tourism management education, courses on gender, subjectivity, psychological recovery, social structure, and mobility should be expanded so that students can understand the tourism industry from a broader social perspective. After a prolonged emphasis on industrialization, tourism education often neglects tourism's social effects. The Negotiated Subjectivity Model developed in this study can be used as a teaching case to help students understand how tourism participates in shaping women's life trajectories. In social science education, this study can serve as a teaching case for post-socialist theory to illustrate how subjectivity is generated under structural constraints. Educators can use the interview materials and theoretical framework of this study to help students understand the cross-cultural significance of non-confrontational subjectivity, thereby promoting the localization of feminist theory. Research institutions should also conduct follow-up studies to test the applicability of Negotiated Subjectivity Model across different age groups, social classes, and transnational cultures, and to explore how tourism can play a supporting role in other structurally unequal contexts, such as youth pressure groups, single mothers, or caregivers.

6.3 Future Research Directions

This study takes the Negotiated Subjectivity Model as the core and explains the complex and dynamic mutual composition relationship between the post-socialist social structure and individual subjectivity from the micro-narrative trigger of women's travel experience. However, this path also presents a number of theoretical and methodological boundaries, giving future research the opportunity to expand the network between subjectivity, mobility, and gender structure from a larger dimension. In view of the fact that the findings of this study have shown the structural significance of travel in the generation of women's subjectivity, future research needs to further break through the interpretation framework that can be covered by individual interview materials, and test and deepen this model in a more common period of time and in a wider range and more meta-situations.

First, future research should conduct more in-depth, longitudinal empirical studies to examine the long-term trajectory of subjective formation. This study examines the awakening and psychological reorganization of subjectivity during travel and in the immediate post-trip period. However, the long-term stability of subjectivity remains unclear as a process of continuous reconstruction driven by situational triggers and relational interactions. After women return to their families, workplaces, and intimate relationships, how the experiences and cognitions formed during travel are incorporated, adjusted, suppressed, or transformed into action warrants sustained examination. Existing theories of female subjectivity indicate that the maintenance of subjectivity requires repeated practice rather than a one-time awakening (Mahmood, 2009). Therefore, if future research adopts longitudinal interviews, diary methods, or digital ethnography to record women's subjective changes over months or even years, it will help test the dynamics of the Negotiated Subjectivity Model and deepen its theoretical explanatory power.

Second, follow-up research can examine the differential mechanisms of Negotiated Subjectivity across social classes and regions. This study found that, regardless of age, marital status, or educational background, women may experience structural loosening and subjective awakening during travel, but there are significant differences in negotiation strategies and emotional labour among different groups. For example, the subjectivity of young, unmarried women is shaped more by the loosening of narratives of marriage and love; middle-aged women focus on the reconstruction of family responsibilities and intimate relationships; and older women regard travel as a way to restore bodily sensation and redefine the meaning of life. If future research conducts in-depth comparisons with migrant women in different urban settings, across different income levels, and even in third-tier cities, it will provide richer evidence for understanding the mechanisms of social stratification in Negotiated Subjectivity and explain how China's structural gender order operates across different social positions. This is also an important direction for the future expansion of cross-cultural research. The Negotiated Subjectivity Model proposed in this study is deeply rooted in the cultural structure of family ethics, national population policy, and marriage and education in China's post-social society, and these factors may manifest very differently in other cultural contexts.

For example, in Nordic welfare states, differences in the relationship between family responsibility and the public service system may produce a markedly different subjective logic in women's travel; in Southeast Asia or South Asia, the intertwining of religion, national traditions, and family structure may generate another set of consultative mechanisms. Through transnational interviews, cross-cultural comparison, or cross-regional data analysis, future research will be able to test the universality or cultural limits of the Negotiated Subjectivity Model among women travellers globally and further advance the international development of non-Western theories of female subjectivity. Moreover, as digital technology becomes an important part of the travel experience, future research also needs to examine how digital platforms reshape women's pathways to subjectivity. Social media not only records travel but also defines it. It creates a highly visible field of self-image evaluation, so that women may act for the gaze of others while traveling, or act in response to self-narration. How digital representation affects subjectivity is an issue that this study did not fully address, although it is highly relevant in practice. Especially in China, narratives about women traveling alone on WeChat video accounts, Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and other platforms may not only strengthen the legitimacy of women's actions but also impose gender discipline. Therefore, future research can combine digital ethnography with studies of travel experience to examine the relationship between digital selves and travel subjectivity. An important question for future research is whether the identities and aspirations expressed through social media are translated into everyday practices. Women may present themselves as independent and autonomous through digital narratives, but such representations do not necessarily indicate corresponding changes in family relationships, decision-making, or social roles. Examining the relationship between online identity expression and offline practices could provide further insight into the conditions under which women's self-reflection develops into sustained forms of subjectivity.

Future research also needs to attend to the travel experiences of men and non-binary gender groups in order to test whether the mechanism of subjective formation differs by gender. The

reason this study focuses on women is that, within China's gender system, women bear greater emotional labour and family responsibilities, so travel has a more pronounced function in enabling subjective release. However, this does not mean that male or non-binary travellers do not experience processes of subjective formation. Especially in a social context in which young men increasingly face economic pressure, career anxiety, and difficulties in emotional expression, travel may become an important arena for rethinking their social position. Examining the subjective mechanisms of different gender groups would help advance gender diversity in tourism research and also make it possible to assess the universality and specificity of consultative strategies.

Furthermore, future research can explore how the tourism industry can institutionalize and support women's subjectivity. Although this study proposes certain practical implications, it remains necessary to test how mechanisms of subjective support can be effectively implemented in practice through policy experiments, community-based participatory research, or design pilots conducted in collaboration with enterprises. For example, women's safety infrastructure, narrative-based products for women, and travel and healing programs for psychological recovery all need to be verified through practical application. Practical research can not only test the external validity of the Negotiated Subjectivity Modelbut also promote a more gender-sensitive and socially responsible tourism industry.

Finally, the innovation of methodology will open up a new path for future research. Although this study has successfully revealed the delicate structure of subjectivity by using qualitative methods, the subsequent verification and expansion of the Negotiated Subjectivity Model will benefit from multi-method integration, such as mixed-method research, structural equation model, and live mobile interviews with emotional tracking technology. These methods can not only capture the changes of subjectivity in time and space but also provide a more solid empirical basis for the construction of structures and dynamic interactive models.

In summary, this study provides an original framework for understanding the subjectivity of Chinese women in the post-social attention gender structure, and it is necessary for future research to further deepen the theoretical explanatory power of this model from multiple dimensions such as time, space, culture, technology, group differences, and institutional time. Negotiated Subjectivity is not only a theoretical concept, but also an important analytical tool for understanding the complex relationship between social structure and ability to act. Expanding this tool will help promote the further development of tourism research, feminist theory, and East Asian social research, so that the profound value of travel as a social practice can be continuously recognised and applied.

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