

From Questioning Norms to Critiquing Institutions: Cost, Risk, and Emotion in Chinese Youth's Nonmarriage Decisions

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Abstract

Currently, China faces a significant decline in marriage registrations and a growing prominence of nonmarriage. This study analyses 6,095 user answers from Zhihu on two questions regarding nonmarriage. Using high-frequency word analysis, LDA topic modeling, and sentiment analysis, it explores the complex reasons and emotional tendencies behind Chinese young people's choice of nonmarriage. The research finds that young people's explanations for nonmarriage exhibit clear stages and progression, with their nonmarriage logic shifting from questioning marital norms to systematically critiquing institutional factors. The perceived sanctity and inevitability of marriage in personal life are being challenged. As discussions deepen, criticism extends further to systemic issues behind marriage, including social structures, economic pressures, legal frameworks, and patriarchal culture. Meanwhile, the social environment and popular culture continually construct legitimising narratives for nonmarriage, while online emotional polarisation amplifies risk perception and accelerates the social diffusion of nonmarriage preferences.

Keywords

Marriage; Marriage Intention; Nonmarriage; Emotional Polarisation; Risk Perception

1. Introduction

With China's socioeconomic transformation, individualism has gradually gained ground, and marriage is no longer viewed as the sole destination in life. More and more young people are choosing to postpone marriage or even opting for lifelong nonmarriage [1]. Although the Chinese government has introduced multiple marriage incentive policies, the Statistical Bulletin on Civil Affairs Development 2024 shows that the number of marriage registrations in China in 2024 was 6.106 million, still a decrease of 1.574 million compared to 2023, a year-on-year decline of approximately 20.5%. If sustained, this trend has profound implications for fertility,

labor supply, and social welfare systems. Existing research mostly uses methods such as questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews, which has certain limitations in sample size. This study mines 6,095 answers from Zhihu, applying high-frequency word analysis, LDA topic modeling, and sentiment analysis to uncover the layered logic and emotional dynamics behind Chinese youth's nonmarriage decisions.

2. Literature Review

Current research on factors influencing young people's marriage intention mainly revolves around subjective factors (values, cultural environment) and objective factors (the cost of marriage, family policy, social institutions). Subjectively, people nowadays increasingly pursue compatibility in values and spirit, and research has found that the demonstration effect from people around negatively impacts young people's marriage intentions [2]. From the objective level, the high costs of marriage (such as dowry, property, the cost of childbearing and rearing, etc.) significantly reduce the intention to marry. While some family policies may offset these costs [3], their effectiveness remains debated [4]. From the perspective of risk society theory, systemic risks are transferred to individuals, pushing them toward risk-averse choices [5] like nonmarriage. Simultaneously, online emotional contagion can amplify group anxiety and polarise attitudes toward marriage. This social sentiment with characteristics of group polarisation can greatly interfere with the public's judgment and reflection on marriage issues.

3. Materials and Methods

This study uses the content related to nonmarriage under the 'marriage' topic on Zhihu for analysis and exploration. Zhihu is a high-quality Chinese Q&A community and an original content platform for creators. Female users account for about 43% of its user base, and young users aged 15–35 account for as high as 95% [6]. The study takes answers to two open-ended questions on Zhihu as data collection objects: 'Why are you unwilling to get married?' and 'Are many young people of marriageable age not wanting to get married anymore?' As of the data crawling time, 20:06 on July 20, 2025, 6,095 valid answers were collected.

First, the Jieba Chinese word segmentation tool was used to segment the 6,095 valid samples. Then, high-frequency word analysis, LDA (Latent Dirichlet Allocation) topic analysis, and sentiment analysis based on Deepseek-V3-1-250821 were performed on the cleaned text. Considering the unsatisfactory effect of using the SnowNLP library for sentiment analysis, this study accessed DeepSeek to obtain sentiment scores before conducting data analysis and visualisation. Sentiment scores range from 0 to 1, with scores approaching 0 indicating more negative emotions and scores approaching 1 indicating more positive emotions.

4. Results

4.1. Individual Choice and Structural Constraints: the Overall Analysis of Responses

4.1.1. Temporal Distribution: Stage Peaks Driven by Events

Figure 1 illustrates that from January 2016 to June 2025, the volume of answers shows a declining trend, with multiple small peaks appearing. This pattern indicates that marriage issues have attracted public attention during this period, but the number of answers in other time intervals is generally low. Overall, it can be divided into three development stages: January 2016 – September 2017, October 2017 – August 2020, and September 2020 – June 2025. From January 2016 to September 2017, the answer volume was at a relatively high level, with several distinct peaks appearing; from October 2017 to August 2020, this stage gradually declined from high activity, with multiple rebounds in between; from September 2020 to June 2025, the answer volume entered a lower range, but there was a slight rebound in the first half of 2022.

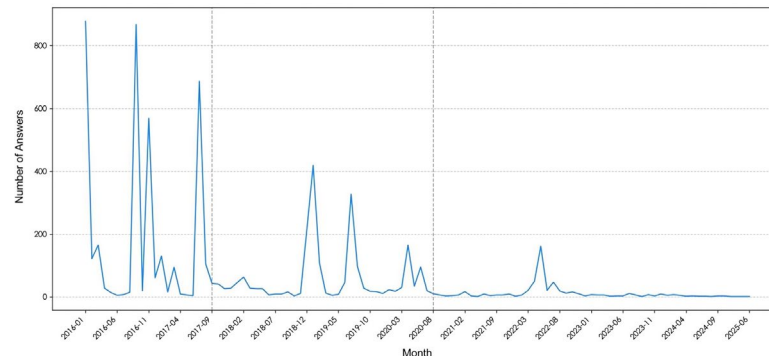


Figure 1. Monthly answer count from January 14, 2016, to June 4, 2025

In China, discussions on marriage issues have persisted for many years. As discussions deepen, angles for exploration gradually diminish, and the public's willingness to discuss also decreases. Meanwhile, according to Zhihu's 2024 mid-year and second-quarter financial report, its average monthly active users were about 84.8 million, a year-on-year decrease of 20%, indicating significant user loss. Under the combined effect of these two factors, the volume of answers exhibits an overall declining trend. However, driven by specific policy milestones (such as the implementation of the universal two-child policy, the establishment of the divorce cooling-off period, etc.), the intensity of relevant discussions periodically surged, producing small peaks in answer volume.

4.1.2. Overall Characteristics of Sentiment Trend

After analysing the emotional tendency of answers to related questions on Zhihu using DeepSeek, it is known that: from the general emotional distribution, negative emotions account for 53.3%, positive emotions 41.8%, while neutral emotions only

account for 4.8%, showing an obvious phenomenon of emotional polarisation. However, the distribution of sentiment scores is relatively uniform, with a mean sentiment score of 0.48, indicating that the emotional intensity is still in a moderate range.

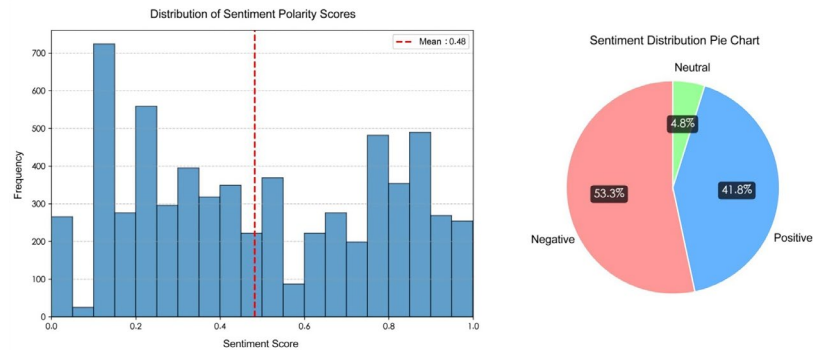


Figure 2. Emotional tendency distribution

4.1.3. Topic Modeling of the Response Content

Based on the model's perplexity and coherence score, the optimal number of topics was determined to be 6. Then, through LDA topic modeling, the discussions of Chinese young people on the topic of nonmarriage were summarised into six core topics (see Table 1). These topics reveal that nonmarriage is driven not only by individual preference but also by multiple realistic factors.

Table 1. Topic distribution and top keywords from Zhihu answers

Topics	Top Topic Keywords
Active Choice by Single People (n=1889, 31.0%)	get married, idea, single, now, don't want, choice, suitable, life
Consideration of Child-Rearing Costs (n=1127, 18.5%)	child, excellent, economy, family, take care of, condition, enough, grandma
Sincerity-Centric Marriage Demands (n=980, 16.1%)	encounter, like, other, get married, life, sincerity, necessary, lifetime
Utilitarian Turn in Marriage Decisions (n=825, 13.5%)	marriage, family, get married, love, parents, youth, relationship, society
Drive for Self-development and Autonomy (n=764, 12.5%)	study, like, independent, now, requirement, place, daily life, idea
Marriage Dilemmas from the Female Perspective (n=510, 8.4%)	women, boyfriend, men, female, agree, daughter, many, trouble

Firstly, many Chinese youth consider nonmarriage as an 'active choice by single people' now. Improved material conditions allow Chinese youth to forgo economic mutual assistance through marriage, and the diversification of social methods effectively replaces the emotional functions of traditional marriage. The utility derived from singlehood exceeds the expected utility of marriage for a growing segment of youth.

In the traditional Chinese family, marriage and fertility have always been deeply bound together, making 'consideration of child-rearing costs' an unavoidable core topic when Chinese youth mention marriage issues. Nowadays, the popularisation of

refined and scientific parenting pattern [6] has significantly increased child-rearing costs. When one's own conditions are insufficient to support this responsibility, nonmarriage becomes a risk-aversion strategy.

The topic of 'sincerity-centric marriage demands' reflects that some young people long for idealised love and have higher requirements for intimate relationships. These young people are not opposed to marriage, but have not yet encountered someone they truly love.

There are also discussions about the 'utilitarian turn in marriage decisions'. Due to rising living and marriage costs, marriage is not just an emotional bond but a calculated weighing of pros and cons. 'Partnership marriage' is accepted by many people. They see their partner as a roommate, with the core purpose of marriage being to form a family to enhance the ability to cope with uncertain risks.

In the discussions on 'drive for self-development and autonomy', many young people believe that marriage will limit personal growth and development opportunities. At this age, they prefer to invest time and energy into self-improvement rather than determining their future life too early through marriage.

In the topic of 'marriage dilemmas from the female perspective', keywords mainly include 'women', 'trouble', 'boyfriend', 'men', etc. In China, women often face dual risks in the public and private spheres within marriage [7]: career interruption and unequal domestic burdens.

4.2. Discourse Features and Emotional Inclinations across Stages

In the discussions across the three development stages, the keyword 'child' appears many times in the answers. The loss of control and painful experience of the childbearing body, the oppression of parenting standards, the dilemma between career and family, and family relationship crises cause Chinese youth to feel fear towards fertility [6]. Due to the deep binding of marriage and fertility in China, the uncertainty and risks brought by childbearing not only lead to the fear of procreation but also generate gamophobia among youth. However, answers from different stages still present different discourse characteristics and emotional tendencies generally. The nonmarriage logic of Chinese youth gradually shifts from questioning marriage concepts to systematic critique of institutions.

4.2.1. The First Stage: January 2016 to September 2017

With the rise of individualism in China [8], young people's pursuit of freedom and autonomy has become increasingly strong. During this stage, single subculture gradually became popular in China, leading to China's fourth wave of singlehood [9]. Many young people no longer regard marriage as a standard life paradigm [6]. They feel satisfied with their current free single life, believing that entering marriage might reduce their quality of life. However, they do not completely reject emotional

contradictions. Moreover, discourse characteristics and emotional tendencies in different stages show a pattern of 'layered evolution'. Young people's nonmarriage logic is gradually shifting from questioning marriage concepts to systematic critique of institutions. The sanctity and inevitability of marriage in the personal life course are being challenged, with more and more Chinese youth no longer viewing it as a necessity in life. As discussions deepen, the focus of critique gradually extends to systemic factors behind China's marriage institution, including social structure, economic pressure, legal systems, and patriarchal culture. Nonmarriage has not only become a personal lifestyle but also a form of critique and resistance by Chinese young people towards the current socio-economic structure, reflecting individuals' adaptive strategies in the risk society. Furthermore, the social environment and popular culture continuously construct legitimising narratives for nonmarriage, and online emotional polarisation further accelerates the formation of group consensus and the diffusion of risk perception.

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