



Identity Loss in Chinese Married Women: A Corpus-Assisted Discourse Analysis of the No Sense of Home Phenomenon

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Abstract

The identity of married women in China has elicited heated discussion. While this topic is hotly debated, few academic studies have investigated discursive representations of this phenomenon on social media platforms. To fill this gap, this study employs keyword analysis with legitimization as the theoretical framework, using corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis to investigate the reasons behind and the identity loss underlying discourses of married Chinese women on Zhihu, one of the most popular online forums in China. The findings suggest those women's identity is influenced by reasons behind their natal, in-law and nuclear families; thus, they are identified as having different roles. This indicates the ideological implication that a Chinese married woman has no sense of home. Various discursive strategies are employed in the discourse, most notably authorisation, moral evaluation, and rationalisation. Findings underscore the current status and predicament of femininity in contemporary Chinese society and highlight the ideological implications rooted in patriarchy.

Keywords: *Chinese Married Women; Identity Loss; Corpus-assisted Critical Discourse Analysis; Keyword Analysis; Legitimation*

Introduction

Many married women in China experience an absence of familial belonging and the consequent loss of a sense of identity. Against this backdrop, Chinese women remain single or avoid marriage altogether (Liu, 2020). This development poses a problem for Chinese officialdom. According to the Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China published in 2023, the department processed 6.835 million legal marriage registrations in 2022, a decrease of 10.6% from the previous year. The marriage rate was 4.8%, a reduction of 0.6 percentage points from the previous year.

Over the past thousand years, the status of married Chinese women has undergone a profound transformation. In ancient China, traditional Confucian ideology advocated the adherence of Chinese women to the principles of the “three obedience and four virtues”, which was strategically devised to accommodate the imperatives of familial stability and the preservation of patriarchal interests. This moral code has functioned as a normative framework for women in ancient and modern China. Although contemporary Chinese society is structured to optimize the development of women and promote gender equality (China Women’s News, 2021), the traditional ideology still has a substantial impact on women. Nevertheless, the identity loss experienced by many married women in China today is a social phenomenon that should not be underestimated, and its far-reaching impact demands to be studied.

This study uses keyword analysis, supplemented with collocation and concordance, from the perspective of CDA to examine the dominant thematic concepts that have merged on Zhihu, an online forum in China, concerning reasons and issues of identity loss faced by married Chinese women.

With this goal in mind, this paper endeavors to answer the following two research questions:

1. What are the main keywords that contribute to the dominant concepts related to married Chinese women on Zhihu?
2. Why and how do women experience identity loss?

Literature

While married Chinese women have been the subject of extensive scholarly attention from various perspectives, the primary focus has been on kinship and spatial dynamics. Studies of kinship have predominantly concentrated on the dynamics between married women, their natal family, and their family-in-law, exploring issues such as familial ownership. For instance, Yang (2011) examined the intricate relationships between married women and their natal families, marital dynamics, and connections with their husbands’ family and village of origin, elucidating the complexities of a married woman’s role. Scholars have also explored the taboos surrounding a married woman’s return to her natal family and the change in her status in her family of origin (Diao, 2010; Zhang, 2014). In terms of spatial dynamics, the research studies can be categorized into urban and rural contexts, with a more substantial focus on married women in rural areas. For example, Weng and Li (2019) investigated how young rural women navigate power dynamics within their families after marriage. Ban (2016) and Wang and Di (2011) examined what has been described as the “two-headed” phenomenon in rural areas, where couples live with their two sets of parents alternatively, thus reevaluating the power dynamics within married rural women’s households. Regarding married women in urban areas, Hai (2021) conducted in-depth interviews with 20 young married women in C City, Shaanxi Province in China, to examine how they reconstructed kinship.

The predominant methodology of these studies has been field surveys and qualitative inquiry. Chinese scholars in particular, have shown a clear preference for field surveys. For example, Li (2010) and Mi (2019) conducted their studies of married Chinese women utilizing field surveys. In one qualitative investigation, Hai (2021) conducted in-depth interviews with 20 young married women, revealing a shift in their post-marital identity from affinal to consanguineous kinship.

Western scholars have conducted comparatively less research on married women in China, and they investigate married Chinese women from a much more comprehensive point of view. Taking a sociological perspective, Judd (1989) found that even after marriage, women’s relationships with their natal families continue to constitute a significant dimension of kinship in rural China. Further topics of academic focus in Western scholarship have been gender norms and marital satisfaction (Chen & Hu,

2021), bride price in rural China (Chen & Pan, 2023), and the relationship between husbands' wages and married women's labor supply in urban China (Zhu et al., 2023). These studies have contributed significantly to the literature on the roles and identities of married women in China while also furnishing crucial socio-cultural insights. In what can be seen as a reflection of women's subordinated role within the family, neither Western nor Chinese scholarship has hitherto paid sufficient attention to married Chinese women's identity-related issues and experiences, let alone studied these from a linguistic standpoint.

While the studies as mentioned above are significant, little academic attention has been paid to the discursive construction on social media of the identity loss and confusion experienced by married Chinese women from a linguistic perspective and in a context where communication and public opinion intersect. Such a study is essential because it would shed light on how gender-role ideology operates in China and its potential impact on the country's marriage rate. This study, therefore aims to investigate the discursive construction on Zhihu of the identity loss experienced by married Chinese women, examine the existing status and dilemma of femininity in contemporary Chinese society, and test the usefulness of corpus techniques to examine representations of women on public platforms in China.

Methodology

Data Collection

Zhihu, one of China's most influential online forums, is primarily used for sharing professional knowledge and is edited by its users. According to authoritative statistics, the number of Zhihu users has exceeded 400 million as of January 2022, with the average number of monthly active users continuing to increase in 2023, reaching 111 million. Because of this extensive active user base in China and thus its relatively reliable representation of public opinion, Zhihu has been selected as the corpus source for this article. Although social media, including Zhihu, is censored in China (Yu & Lam, 2023), the topic studied here is not sensitive, and most data are reliable. As an anonymous public forum, all discourses on Zhihu can be viewed publicly, and this data can thus be used as research without informed consent. We chose the search term "a married woman has no family" and established September 26, 2024, as the cut-off date for data collection. This date was selected as the day we started collecting the data. This search yielded 66 questions and 587 answers. Of the answers, 328 responses were deemed irrelevant because they were devoid of meaning. In this way, a specialized corpus was compiled.

Analytical Framework and Procedure

Analytical framework: Keyword analysis is a widely used method in discourse analysis that helps identify the most distinctive lexical features in a specialized corpus by comparing it to a reference corpus (Baker, 2004; Bondi & Scott, 2010). This method, crucial for language-related and ideological research, has been used to examine overarching themes in gender representations (Yu & Lam, 2023). Collocation and concordance complement a keyword analysis to uncover overarching thematic concepts. A collocation analysis helps to reveal collocates that frequently co-occur with each keyword, and a concordance analysis provides the co-texts surrounding the keyword and collocation.

CDA focuses on how discourses construct, maintain, and perpetuate domination, inequality, and power concerning the wider social structure (Fairclough, 2010). Ideology is manifested in discourse, and discourse serves as a vehicle for ideology (Yu et al., 2024). Thus, CDA, from a research perspective, paves the way for uncovering the underlying ideology under the discourses. Theo Van Leeuwen (2008: 3) has defined discourse as the "recontextualisation of social practice", and then introduced the legitimization framework addressing the question "Why should we do this?". Legitimation involves efforts to make a specific action, process, or ideology accepted and recognized by the public (Wang, 2020). The discursive

construction of legitimation is a part of CDA, and it consists of four key categories: authorisation, moral evaluation, rationalisation, and mythopoesis (See Table 1). Authorisation legitimizes social practices through tradition, custom, law, and personal sources. Moral evaluation relies on values rather than any specific type of authority. Rationalisation encompasses instrumental rationality (justifying practices based on their goals, utility, and effects) and theoretical rationality (legitimizing practices by reference to a natural order). Mythopoesis employs moral narratives, either with positive outcomes to legitimize a practice or adverse outcomes to delegitimize deviant behaviors. The legitimation framework helps analyze the discursive strategies used to legitimize the representation of identity loss among Chinese women. Thus, it is suitable for this study and its research questions.

When computational linguistics methods are integrated into the construction and analysis of corpora within CDA frameworks, the methodology is termed “corpus-assisted CDA” (Baker et al., 2008; Partington, 2004). Therefore, this paper adopts keyword analysis within the legitimation as the theoretical framework in CACDA, as it allows researchers to examine large empirical datasets quantitatively and qualitatively summarize representative discourse features.

Table 1. Van Leeuwen proposed four main legitimation strategies and examples (Van Leeuwen 2008: 105-119).

Legitimation strategies	Examples
Authorisation	Traditional authority: It was the <i>practice</i> for children in infant schools to be given free milk daily. Personal authority: Magnus sat down. Because the <i>teacher</i> said they had to. Impersonal authority: It is the <i>policy</i> in her area to admit children termly after their fifth birthday.
Moral evaluation	Evaluation: It is perfectly <i>normal</i> to be anxious about starting school. Comparison: Like an <i>adult</i> starting in a new job...the <i>child</i> will be worried.
Rationalisation	Instrumental rationalisation: His mother joins the queue to <i>pay his dinner money</i> to the teacher. Theoretical rationalisation: School signals that her children are growing up.
Mythopoesis	No wonder there had been so many voices cheering her on. The whole family had come with Daddy to see Mary Kate win her first race.

Analytical Procedure: The specific operations of the study involve several steps. First, the collected Chinese text was translated into English. After the machine translation, the authors conducted three rounds of proofreading to ensure readability. Native English speakers, then, proofread the final version for further validation. Next, the translated corpus was lemmatized using TagAnt software to avoid repetition of word forms when extracting keywords. For the keyword analysis, a much larger reference corpus was needed. The collected corpus contains 89,630 tokens, so we selected the London-Lund Corpus, which consists of approximately 440,000 tokens. This decision was based on the principle that reference corpora are typically of a similar size to the target corpus (Culpeper & Demmen, 2015, 97). Thirdly, the analysis was carried out using AntConc (4.2.4), a corpus tool that generated a keyword list along with its index lines. A keyword table was created by comparing the target corpus with the selected reference corpus, ranking keywords by keyness, from high to low, based on the frequency of each word's occurrence. Specific redundant keywords were removed based on the following criteria: (a) non-lexical words were excluded, as lexical words are the main carriers of information and contribute more to semantic construction and communication (Lam, 2018); (b) synonyms or repeated words, such as “mom” and “mother”, were consolidated to avoid redundancy. Finally, a collocation and concordance analysis of the main keywords was conducted, and these keywords were categorized according to their semantic meanings and functions within the texts for further study.

Results and discussion

After examining 84 keywords conducted by AntConc and their collocations and concordance lines, 38 main keywords were identified according to the above criteria (See Table 2). By scrutinizing the top two keywords, “home” and “family”, this study finds that the concordance lines primarily focus on the natal family, the family-in-law, and the nuclear family. Additionally, the remaining 36 keywords also revolve around these three overarching themes. Therefore, this study will examine the issue of identity loss among married Chinese women through these three dimensions. In the following sections, the researchers will discuss the discursive construction of legitimation related to these themes, with keywords highlighted in bold within the examples.

Table 2. Keywords list for the discourse about “A Chinese woman has no ‘home’”.

Rank	Keywords	Keyness	Rank	Keywords	Keyness
1	home	5839.251	20	visit	207.523
2	family	3076.863	21	relationship	180.706
3	parent	2756.737	22	independent	161.306
4	marriage	1667.626	23	natal	143.165
5	law	1611.135	24	happy	142.565
6	husband	1386.876	25	sibling	129.068
7	woman	789.854	26	household	119.507
8	live	745.727	27	relative	116.017
9	daughter	723.108	28	childbirth	112.435
10	child	697.808	29	divorce	110.526
11	mother	656.344	30	focus	109.528
12	brother	598.299	31	wife	107.702
13	outsider	440.525	32	dad	106.473
14	place	324.610	33	strong	102.831
15	sister	321.335	34	understand	99.948
16	care	319.864	35	conflict	98.108
17	son	286.853	36	custom	97.808
18	guest	222.968	37	work	95.873
19	partner	217.847	38	pregnancy	94.420

Reasons for Identity Loss in the Natal Family

Women’s identity loss in natal family usually happens in multi-child families with brothers. That means not all Chinese married women face this dilemma, particularly the woman who is the only child in the natal family (Ding et al., 2021). The results of this study indicate that the dominant discourse concerning married Chinese women, which constitutes 31.58% of the corpus, highlights their identity loss within their natal families. In this discourse, this theme was found to include three secondary themes: son preference, customary rules, and sister-in-law relationship (See Table 3). The concordance line of the typical keywords further articulates the discursive construction of these themes.

Table 3. Subclassification of natal families.

Sub-categories	Main keywords (12 keywords)
Son preference	parent (3076.863), brother (598.299), son (286.853), sibling (129.068)
Customary rules	mother (656.344), guest (222.968), visit (207.523), natal (143.165), dad (106.473), custom (97.808)
Sister-in-law relationship	sister (321.335), household (119.507)

Son preference: A closer analysis of individual keywords and their collocates reveals a dominant theme of son preference. This discourse involves various social actors, as indicated by keywords like “parent,” “brother,” “son,” and “sibling.” For instance, the collocates of the primary keyword “son,” within the context of son preference, include “daughter”(35), “preference”(12), “favor”(5), “value”(5), and “mentality”(3). Preference, at least for one son, is well documented in Chinese society (Wang, 2005). Despite the dramatic economic development since the 1978 Economic Reform, many Chinese still hold this traditional value. Some netizens on Zhihu explained why they found identity loss in their natal families from the viewpoint of son preference.

- (1) This is related to our feudal **customs** that have persisted for thousands of years, where there is a **son** preference by **parents**. Properties such as houses, cars, and assets in the natal family are assigned for **brothers**, and even the sister’s dowry may be taken to facilitate her **brother’s** marriage!

Traditional authority strategy legitimizes social practices through long-standing customs and practices (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 108). For instance, in Example 1, the netizen uses the authority of tradition to emphasize the gender bias rooted in the intra-generational financial exploitation between brothers and married daughters with keywords such as “brothers”, “son” and “custom”, indicating the historical reason for identity loss in natal families. Family lineage can only be continued through a male sibling, who controls the household’s financial resources and allocation. Daughters, instead, are expected to leave the natal household upon marriage (Greenhalgh, 1992). In addition, keywords “brother” with collocates of this example such as “houses”, “cars”, and “dowry”, the netizen illustrates the social practice of parents allocating their daughter’s dowry to subsidize her brother’s wedding expenses by employing an instrumental rationalisation legitimization based on specific purposes. The purpose here is to facilitate the brother’s marriage, thereby treating the married daughter as a financial provider for her male sibling.

Customary rules: Customary rules are a significant element in the discourse on “identity loss in natal families”, illustrated by keywords such as “mother”, “visit”, “natal”, “dad”, and “custom”. The main keyword “custom” collocates with “traditional”(8) and “feudal”(6), while the keyword “visit” with “parent”(26), “often”(11) and “occasionally”(5), reflecting traditional family practices. In Chinese society, women, after marriage, may encounter various folks related to their natal families, influenced by Confucian ideology (Diao, 2010). Visiting a natal family, a traditional social practice, is embedded with multiple restrictions. Example 2 highlights the folk constraints married Chinese women experience regarding visiting natal family.

- (2) In this year, my brother picked me up for the gathering but my **mother** was so angry and shouted him to send me back on Spring Festival’s Eve, insisting the **custom** that a married daughter visiting the **natal** home on the first day of the Lunar New Year would be unlucky.

Gender essentialism imposes norms on women regarding expectations and social practices (Yu & Lam, 2023). Chinese married daughters are generally expected to visit their natal families with their husbands and children on the second day of the Lunar New Year, as visiting on the first day is believed to bring misfortune and poverty to the natal family. In addition, they are forbidden to visit natal families frequently. For instance, in Example 2, two discursive strategies were legitimized. The evident fact is that the authority of tradition first legitimizes this customary rule through the keyword “custom”. Evaluative adjectives are key in moral evaluation legitimization (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 110). In this discourse, the mother utilizes moral evaluation legitimization to evaluate visiting on the first day of the Lunar New Year. She uses the negative connotation of “unlucky” to legitimize her accusatory practice, suggesting the constraint for visiting family during the Spring Festival. Following the Chinese old saying “a married daughter is like spilled water”, matrilocal marriage and patrilocal residence designate married daughters as guests to their natal families (Zhang, 2014). Although social norms treat them as guests, the custom of

visiting natal families helps them maintain connections. However, unlike the pre-marriage, these visits are now subject to numerous restrictions, causing married women to experience identity loss and be treated as guests within their natal families.

Sister-in-law relationship: The sister-in-law relationship is another significant dimension in representing the identity loss experienced by Chinese married women within the discourse of natal families. This theme is highlighted by keywords such as “sister” and “household”. The keyword “sister” here refers to “sister-in-law”, and collocates with “brother” (32), “law” (46), and “face” (11), describing the unique role of the sister-in-law for the married daughter in her natal family. When sisters-in-law assume the role of mistresses in the natal families, it means the natal family is occupied by a blood-unrelated newcomer for the married daughter (Weng & Li, 2019). Thus, the sister-in-law’s relationship contributes to the identity loss in the natal family.

(3) There will still be many opinions about the married daughter if the **sister-in-law** is not sensible enough. Take my married friend as an example, when she went back to her parents’ **household** to stay for a few days, her **sister-in-law** who is good-tempered frowned.

The keywords “sister-in-law” collocates with “kind” (15), “sensible” (12) and “good-temper” (8). However, these positive collocations are undermined by negative qualifiers such as “not” and “frown.” In the context of moral evaluation, comparisons in discourse serve a legitimizing or delegitimizing function (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 106). For instance, Example 3 illustrates the act of visiting one’s natal family as being dependent on the sister-in-law, who holds a relatively significant position within the family. This is achieved by comparing the “good-tempered” sister-in-law with other “not sensible” sisters-in-law, employing a moral evaluation strategy. The inclusion of the brother’s wife as a critical figure in the natal family, alongside the exclusion of the daughter’s role, effectively diminishes the power that married women traditionally enjoy in their natal homes (Yang, 2011). The netizen also uses her married friend as an example, drawing on personal authority to legitimize the influential role of the sister-in-law in discouraging the sister-in-law from returning to her natal family. Therefore, the married daughter has become an intruder in her natal family.

Reasons for Identity Loss in the In-Law Family

The prevailing theme of the discourse surrounding “identity loss in the in-law family” includes ten keywords, constituting 26.32% of the corpus, as shown in Table 4. Concordance lines and collocates of these keywords reveal that this theme consists of three sub-themes: mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationships, fertility pressure from parents-in-law, and the husband’s avoidance of conflicts between the parents-in-law and the daughter-in-law.

Table 4. Subclassification of in-law families.

Sub-categories	Main keywords (10 keywords)
Mother- and daughter-in-law relationships	law (1611.135), live (745.727), daughter (723.108), relationship (180.706), relative (116.017)
Fertility pressure	child (697.808), outsider (440.525), place (324.610)
Husband’s avoidance	husband (1386.876), conflict (98.108)

Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationships: The keywords “law” (here it refers to “mother-in-law”), “live”, “daughter”, “relationship”, and “relative” indicate the complex dynamics of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationships. The keyword “relationship” frequently co-occurs with verbs like “manage” (8) and “maintain”(5), underscoring the difficulties in the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship. Their vulnerability and tenuous nature often define relationships between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law (Lim & Lim, 2012). In China, where traditional Confucian ideology has a strong influence, mother and daughter-in-law conflicts are particularly prominent and stand as a primary factor contributing to the identity loss experienced by married women within their in-law families.

- (4) My **mother-in-law** questioned why I weaned my son so early and blamed me for not caring about him at all, and even told **relatives** the same. When my husband and I got COVID, she was much more concerned for her son, giving him advice on medication and rest, but completely ignored me. The contrast was obvious, and it’s impossible not to feel upset, but I don’t mind.

This discourse illustrates how identity loss can be connected to the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship. The netizen employs a comparison as a moral evaluation legitimization strategy to highlight how the mother-in-law treats the daughter-in-law as an outsider. In detail, the mother-in-law showed more significant concern for her son’s well-being while ignoring and criticizing the daughter-in-law for weaning their child too early. According to Van Leeuwen (2008: 111), comparison, a commonly used method in discourse, almost has a legitimating function. For instance, in Example 4, the netizen contrasts the mother-in-law’s attitudes by using the collocation word “blame” towards the daughter-in-law, which directly expresses dissatisfaction with the daughter-in-law and shows deep affection for the grandson. In contrast, the mother-in-law shows “concerned” for her son when he is sick, highlighting the daughter-in-law’s feeling of identity loss within the family. The word “upset” followed by “I don’t mind” reflects the underlying disappointment towards the mother-in-law. A daughter-in-law who has been married undergoes a transition from being an “outsider” to becoming an “insider”, and her acceptance largely depends on gaining the favor of her mother-in-law (Wolf, 1972). Therefore, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflicts are inevitable, which is a crucial factor contributing to the identity loss experienced by married women within their in-law family.

Fertility pressure: Alongside women’s increasing social status and pursuit of personal fulfilment, fertility pressures associated with in-law families are also discussed. This discourse centres around keywords “child”, “outsider” and “place”. The keyword “child” often co-occurs with the verb “bear” (5), while “outsider” highlights identity loss related to women’s fertility, frequently co-occurring with “baby” (7) and “care” (5). Following the Confucian virtue, having no descendants for a married son is deemed the most unfilial act. Naturally, married women in China, as the ones who hold fertility autonomy, often bear the pressure of childbirth in their in-law family. Some netizens shared their experiences of identity loss due to the fertility pressure they face from their parents-in-law.

- (5) My **parents-in-law** push us for having babies without any boundaries. My **mother-in-law** asks about my periods, contraception, and says things like having a **child** earlier helps recovery. It’s so frustrating because having **children** is something between my **husband** and me. They don’t care about me, and I’m just seen as an **outsider**.

For instance, in Example 5, the discourse first employs an evaluation strategy by using the evaluative adjective “frustrating” to convey her feelings about the intrusive pressure from her parents-in-law regarding childbirth. It then uses a personal authority strategy by framing the netizen’s experiences and emotions of autonomy within the context of societal and familial pressures. Keywords such as “parents-in-law”, “mother-in-law”, “husband”, and “outsider” are used to legitimize her identity loss, highlighting the violation of her personal space and decision-making. Chinese families, long shaped by Confucian cultures, place great importance on continuing the family line (Slote & DeVos, 1998, 136).

While women's reproductive rights in China have experienced some gradual reduction in government policies, they remain significantly influenced by these traditional cultures. Therefore, daughters-in-law may perceive that their parents-in-law value them primarily for their reproductive roles, leading to fertility pressure and subsequent identity loss within the family.

Husband's avoidance: The representation of the husband's avoidance in handling conflicts between the parents-in-law and the daughter-in-law is centred around keywords "husband" and "conflict". These keywords illustrate the husband's attitude and approach in addressing such conflicts. Marital satisfaction is generally influenced by how spouses handle conflict resolution. Avoidance of conflicts can negatively impact relational satisfaction (Afifi et al., 2009). Example 6 reveals how the husband's avoiding style leads to interpersonal challenges for the married woman in dealing with conflicts between parents and daughter-in-law within the in-law family.

- (6) My in-law family will never feel like a home. When **conflict** arises, my **husband** acts clueless but speaks up when I push back. He's always on my parents-in-law's side, forgetting their faults and blaming me. In the end, the real issue is his inaction.

Despite the burgeoning of individualism during modernisation, the traditional Confucian value of filial piety, which emphasizes married sons' subordination, respect, and support for their parents, continues to prevail (Zhang et al., 2005). The husband's avoidance, a distinct interpersonal conflict management style shaped by this value, can harm family harmony. In this context, the above example shows that the husband typically adopts this style when conflicts arise between the daughter-in-law and her parents-in-law. For instance, in Example 6, the netizen, using the keyword "conflict", "husband" and their collocations "clueless" and "speak up", employs comparison legitimization to contrast the husband's avoidance of his parents-in-law's mistreatment with his support for them when the daughter-in-law pushes back. A clear ingroup-outgroup distinction highly marks Chinese culture, and marriage is a process through which a man integrates his wife, formerly an outgroup member, into his family (Song & Zhang, 2012). The netizen also highlights that the deeper reason for the loss of identity within the in-law family is the husband's inaction, employing a theoretical legitimization strategy based on the definition of "inaction" to support this argument. This definition of "inaction" automatically legitimizes the husband's unwavering support for his parents-in-law without discerning right from wrong, further underscoring the identity loss experienced by the married woman due to her husband's avoidance of conflict.

Reasons for Identity Loss in the Nuclear Family

This study also finds the last notable theme is that married Chinese women suffer identity loss in terms of their own nuclear family (36.84%). This theme includes three secondary themes: the three-child policy, work-family conflicts and the husband's male chauvinism (See Table 5). The concordance line of the typical keywords further illustrates the discursive construction of these themes.

Table 5. Subclassification of nuclear families.

Sub-categories	Main keywords (14 keywords)
Three-child policy	childbirth(112.435), care(319.864), pregnancy(94.420)
Work-family conflicts	woman(789.854), independent(161.306), happy(142.565) focus(109.528), strong(102.831), work(95.873)
Husbands' male chauvinism	marriage(1667.626), partner(217.847), divorce(110.526), wife(107.702), understand(99.948)

Three-child policy: The three-child policy of the discourse of identity loss in the nuclear family is manifested by the keywords “childbirth”, “care”, “pregnancy”. On May 31, 2021, the Chinese government implemented the three-child policy, aiming to mitigate the impact of declining fertility rates and ageing populations (Wang & Wang, 2022). This change in government policy has added significantly to the burden of married Chinese women.

- (7) Encouraging women to have a third child is the greatest malice towards them. **Husbands** contribute only genes and gain a lineage, while **wives** endure **pregnancy** exhaustion, **childbirth** pain, breastfeeding discomfort, and sleepless nights. **Childbirth** is a huge deception; husbands remain mentally free, while wives become shackled.

As part of the authority legitimization strategy, impersonal authority is enacted through laws, rules, and regulations (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 108). For instance, the netizen in Example 7 uses an impersonal authority to legitimize the idea that women face increased pressure under the three-child policy, as evidenced by the phrase “encouraging women to have a three-child.” Then a comparison strategy was employed by keywords “husband” with “only” and “gain” and “wife” with “exhaustion” “pain” “discomfort” and “sleepless”, the netizen contrasts the fact that husbands provide genetic contributions and benefit lineage. In contrast, wives need to bear the physical and emotional burdens of childbirth and childcare, resulting in their loss of freedom and increased hardship. In 2016, the Chinese government replaced the one-child policy with a two-child policy, and by 2021, it officially implemented a three-child policy, allowing couples to have up to three children (Tatum, 2021; Wang and Song, 2019). This change in government policy aims to improve China’s population, but it has significantly increased the burden on married Chinese women. Thus, the netizen employs theoretical rationalisation to legitimize the sacrifices married women endure, using phrases like “pregnancy exhaustion”, “childbirth pain”, “breastfeeding discomfort”, and “sleepless nights”. This suggests their dissatisfaction with specific current policies.

Work-family conflicts: The discourse of work-family conflicts is also based on the keywords about quality. They are “independent”, “happy” and “strong”. These keywords collectively present a high standard for married women in the Chinese society. Ordinary Chinese women face a more significant burden of managing career progression and family duties (Yang et al., 2022), despite the traditional Chinese belief that the husband should be the breadwinner and the wife the homemaker. Thus, many Chinese women struggle to balance their professional responsibilities with societal expectations to fulfil caregiving roles in their nuclear families (Yu et al., 2024).

- (8) Every **working** married **woman** struggles to juggle both be **independent** and **strong**. It’s a constant loop: **work** by day, care for the kids by night. Even when my children are asleep, I am still working. The only personal time is the lunch break, with no end in sight.

Today, women around the world encounter various forms of subordination. This phenomenon is evident in both the workplace and the family sphere. Attempting to balance paid work and family commitments has become the “life politics” of many women in urban China today (Fang & Walker, 2015). Instrumental legitimization, promotes the idea that purpose, utility, and effectiveness, are the criteria for truth and foundational principles (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 114). Utilizing the keywords “working women”, “independent”, and “strong”, the netizen in Example 8 adopts the instrumental legitimization strategy to describe her identity loss as an unavoidable consequence of fulfilling both societal and professional roles. The emphasis of “loop” and “no end” in discussing work and caregiving normalizes the heavy demands on working mothers, suggesting that sacrificing personal time and identity is a rational response to balancing work and family pressures. Work-family conflicts appear to be expected in China, as raising children reduces women’s paid working hours while men’s paid working hours do not change significantly when they become fathers, according to the China Fertility Cost Report of 2024. Working women in China experience more pressure than men in the family because, as mothers, they also

undertake the primary responsibilities of child-rearing (Yang, 2023). Thus, in their nuclear families, married Chinese women are not only wives but providers, too, burdening them with more significant economic, parenting, and social pressures.

Male chauvinism: Husbands' male chauvinism may manifest within nuclear families, as highlighted by keywords such as "marriage", "partner", "divorce", "wife" and "understand". The keyword "understand" is used as a nominalized action, co-occurring with the adverb "fully", with "husbands" as the agent of this action, emphasizing the wife's yearning for her husband's understanding. Traditional Confucianism emphasizes order in the family and society, granting men greater authority and responsibility through defined gender roles and behavioral norms, which fosters male chauvinism in an indirect way (Yun, 2012). However, the husband's male chauvinism harms the wife's mental health, creating emotional distress that undermines family harmony and weakens her self-identity.

- (9) My **husband** thinks I am not considerate enough and tells me to stay out of his business. No matter how much I handle, he still acts superior, talks nonsense for free, and treats his wife like a fool. He doesn't **understand** that I am just too tired from work to argue. If my **partner** backed up even one thing he said, **marriage** wouldn't be this tough.

This discourse highlights how Chinese married women experience identity loss within their nuclear families, rooted in the husband's male chauvinism. It conveys frustration with the husband's dismissive, superior attitude and lack of empathy for his wife's exhaustion and efforts. For instance, by positioning "my husband" as the authoritative figure who asserts dominance, the netizen in Example 9 uses a personal authority strategy to highlight her husband's indecent behaviors by utilizing the keywords "husband" collocated with phrases such as "acts superior" "talks nonsense for free" and "treats me like a fool". It indicates that the husband's superiority and dismissal of his wife's efforts reflect self-imposed authority, reinforcing his dominance based on traditional gender roles, thereby legitimizing his male chauvinism. Many other married women may similarly experience destruction of self-esteem and self-worth by their husbands, leading to identity loss as their role as wives becomes secondary and subordinated within the nuclear family structure.

The Lost Identity by Chinese Married Women

The demands on married women in traditional Chinese culture are primarily reflected in feudal ethics and conventional moral concepts, which often carry elements of inequality and restrict women's freedoms. While global individualism and neoliberalism have increased Chinese women's self-awareness within the current kaleidoscopic Chinese society (Yang, 2023), married women in China are gradually becoming aware of their identity loss. Therefore, this study explores how married women in China experience identity loss across three critical dimensions within the familial context.

In the natal family dimension, the son preference mentality prevalent in multi-child families often leads to male siblings claiming family resources and positioning married daughters as financial providers. Traditionally, visits to the natal family are constrained by frequency and timing, rendering the married daughter more of a guest than a permanent household member, as encapsulated in the saying, "a married daughter is like water poured out". Moreover, the presence of a sister-in-law helps to fill the power vacuum, granting her influence, while the married daughter is perceived as an intruder in her natal home. It is worth noting that identity loss is more prevalent in multi-child families and less so in families with only one daughter.

The identity as an "enemy" and "outsider" for Chinese married women is the central theme in their in-law families. Traditional Confucian values shape the mother-in-law-daughter-in-law dynamic despite modern shifts in family structures. Upon entering the in-law family, the daughter-in-law is expected to follow prescribed roles, facing supervision and criticism from her mother-in-law. Additionally, as the

primary child-bearer, she faces pressure to conceive, which can make her feel valued only for reproduction rather than as a respected family member. Influenced by the traditional values of filial piety and family harmony, the husband often prioritizes his parents' needs over his wife's emotions. As a result, the wife, being the newest member of the family, experiences a heightened sense of alienation and identity loss.

As for the dimension of the nuclear family, the findings suggest that Chinese married women are identified as caretakers and providers rather than as lovers and wives. The three-child policy in China, compared to the previous one-child policy, offers married women greater reproductive freedom. However, women continue to face the dual pressures of childbearing, career, and family responsibilities. Moreover, societal challenges related to work-family balance, combined with the husband's male chauvinism and lack of understanding, force married women in nuclear families to abandon their traditional roles as wives and lovers. Instead, they become the primary "caretakers" and "providers", taking on both caregiving and financial responsibilities.

Conclusion

Drawing on Van Leeuwen's (2008) approach to CDA, this study employed keyword analysis, collocation, and concordance analysis to investigate whether a married Chinese woman has a sense of home and belonging. This study examines why and how married Chinese women lack a sense of family from three perspectives: their natal family, in-law family, and nuclear family, highlighting that they possess no inherent sense of home in a patriarchal society. At the natal family level, son preference, customary rules, and sister-in-law relationships contribute to identity loss for married Chinese women, presenting them as providers, guests, and intruders. Married daughters not only become detached from their natal families but also contend with significant economic and psychological pressures from family members. The discourse on in-law families addresses three reasons: mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationships, fertility pressure from parents-in-law, and the husband's avoidance of conflicts between his parents and his wife. Often, daughters-in-law are viewed not only as outsiders struggling to fit in but also as enemies. In the discourse on nuclear families, married women experience identity loss due to the three-child policy, work-family conflicts, and their husbands' male chauvinism. The wife's status in her husband's eyes shifts from that of a beloved partner to a caretaker and provider. Despite contributing equally to the family's economic needs, married women face more significant parenting pressures than their spouses. Multiple discursive strategies were employed in constructing these discourses, notably authorisation, morality, and rationalisation.

The study highlights married women's self-identity in contemporary Chinese society, shedding light on the ideological implications of patriarchy. Studying kinship relations and kinship systems has always been a fundamental research area in anthropology. As China transitioned from a predominantly rural, agricultural, and feudalistic society to one that is primarily urban, industrial, and socialist, numerous and far-reaching changes brought about a certain degree of ideological liberation. However, married women's social identity and self-identity in China require greater academic scrutiny and, ultimately, improvement. This study's limitations are due to the small volume of analyzed material, which precludes a more nuanced diachronic analysis. Future research could consider cross-cultural comparisons of the shifts in identity experienced by married women and performing diachronic analyses with an expanded corpus set.

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