Sailing/anchoring : home-making of highly educated female migrants in contemporary Shenzhen

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Home-making of highly educated female migrants in Contemporary Shenzhen

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Sailing/Anchoring: Home-making of highly educated female migrants in Contemporary Shenzhen

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Abstract

As the epitome of China's neoliberal transitions, Shenzhen embodies both rapid development and the profound challenges that it brings. The city, drawing criticism for exploiting low-skilled female migrants in its embrace of neoliberalism, has been maintaining a high-speed economic development based on highly skilled migrants. Can highly educated women in China challenge gender norms by relocating to and making home in Shenzhen? To answer this question, this thesis explores the everyday home-making of highly educated women at different life stages, seeking to understand how they negotiate their aspirations between multiple binaries: conformity/individuality, tradition/modernisation, and locality/globalisation.

The research stems from an 11-month qualitative investigation involving 26 participants' life stories and home video tours. By incorporating the life-course perspective into the concept of uprooting/regrounding (Ahmed et al., 2003), this study conceptualises the process of migrant home-making as an agentic practice, enabling highly educated women to negotiate their aspirations and specific structural gender norms. Central to this framework is to view the home-making of female migrants as simultaneously '*sailing*' away from constraining (socio-cultural) contexts and '*anchoring*' in aspirational life opportunities.

The analysis reveals that highly educated women navigated societal expectations placed upon them by decorating, reshaping, and moving home to pursue expected identities, intimate relationships, and emotional bonds. Home-making practices in Shenzhen enabled women at various life stages to pursue their respective aspirations, whether it be expected single lifestyles, ideals of perfect motherhood, or non-heteronormative family structures. However, while relocating to and making home in Shenzhen empowers them to approach aspirations by *sailing* towards and *anchoring* in Shenzhen, highly educated women are also imposed on potential gendered exploitation in the labour market and enduring gender inequality in Chinese society.

The findings of this thesis reveal the compromises and struggles concealed beneath the middling lifestyles and urbanine identities of highly educated women in Shenzhen. They contribute to the expanding body of literature at the intersection of feminist research on the everyday geographies of home and internal migration, with a particular focus on the Chinese context.

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I extend my gratitude to the individuals whose support and collaboration have played a pivotal role in completing this thesis.

First and foremost, I thank my partner, Ms Tianpei Wang, who has been there all these years. Her enduring presence over the years has provided emotional support and invaluable intellectual guidance. Together, we have navigated the challenges of this academic journey, and our shared aspirations for the future have illuminated the past four years with the best moments.

To my parents, their generous funding of my PhD study and unconditional love have been the bedrock of my life. They have consistently stood by me, offering unwavering support and encouragement. Their words, "no matter what kind of person you want to be, we will support you and cheer for every success you achieve," have fuelled my determination to pursue academic goals.

A heartfelt thank you goes to all the participants in this research. Their willingness to share their time, home videos, and valuable knowledge has opened doors to their life narratives and challenges in pursuing aspirations in Shenzhen. I hope this thesis amplifies their voices and sheds light on the gender inequality concealed within their middle-class lives.

Much credit for developing this thesis goes to my supervisors, Rosie Cox and Melissa Butcher. From the project's inception, they have provided invaluable guidance, support, and constructive feedback. Rosie's influence has shaped my understanding of "home," while Melissa has deepened my insights into migration and the urban context. These insights will undoubtedly accompany me in the years to come. Special thanks also to Jess Farr-Cox, whose assistance greatly contributed to refining my academic English; any well-written paragraphs owe much to her expertise.

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Collectively, the contributions of these individuals have made this academic journey a transformative experience, and for that, I am profoundly thankful.

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Chapter One. Introduction

> *In my encounters with informants, an intriguing pattern emerged, prompting them to question the focus of my research. They often remarked, "Aren't social scientists supposed to be delving into the lives of those struggling for daily needs? Shouldn't your inquiries be directed towards the rural-to-urban women instead of individuals like me?" After asserting that their lives were already 'better' and devoid of any dire need for assistance, they would share narratives detailing the self-sacrifices, compromises, and limitations they had willingly embraced.*
>
> *Consequently, as our interviews drew to a close, I would explain along these lines: "I understand that you considered those 'tough days (苦日子)' as bearable, perhaps even necessary, to secure your present contented lives infused with happiness. As a social scientist, I endeavour to grasp whether contemporary China, particularly in its urban manifestations, is evolving towards a more 'women-friendly' society. Or, beneath the current claims of substantial progress in eradicating gender inequality, might there be overlooked questions and resistance among individual women? These overlooked aspects should also be acknowledged while we celebrate [moments of] progress.*
>
> *(Excerpt from research diaries, March 14, 2022)*

These excerpts from my research diary encapsulate my research journey, which seeks to shed light on the lives of highly educated female migrants in Shenzhen, China. It is a journey that transcends the focus on narratives centred around acute hardships, underscoring that a diverse range of stories warrants exploration within complex migration contexts. As a geographer who has maintained close contact with various highly educated women in Shenzhen for years, I firmly believe that the experiences of female migrants grappling with formidable challenges and adversity are undeniably significant (Dudley, 2010; Kabachnik et al., 2010). It is vital to unfold the experiences of middle-class, highly educated women who have made voluntary interregional moves to Shenzhen to pursue their aspirations.

From my extensive and close observations, I see that these women have taken a unique journey toward their hoped-for lives in Shenzhen. They have acquired knowledge and skills that have not only transformed their own lives but have the potential to catalyse broader societal change. In a sense, their educational attainment has endowed them with a particular privilege, granting them access to opportunities and decision-making authority that many others in their communities might not attain. However, their privileges are also shaped by

specific conditions (Kynsilehto, 2010), and these women are still mitigating complexities rooted in the evolving gender norms of contemporary Shenzhen. Their experiences encapsulate the paradoxes and tensions that emerge when traditional values intersect with the structural forces associated with the rapid economic development of Shenzhen. Consequently, these women's lives can serve as agents of change, challenging societal expectations regarding women's role in Chinese society.

The life stories of highly educated women in Shenzhen offer a poignant window into the negotiations that define their partially privileged lives. These stories illuminate the dualities that characterise their experiences – on the one hand, there may be a superficial degree of privilege, but underneath lie narratives of self-sacrifice, compromise, and an ongoing negotiation of gendered subjectivities. These women have, often with full awareness but sometimes unconsciously, taken a path marked by limitations and societal expectations.

Up to this point, their life journeys show their resilience and adaptability. Yet, their choices, whether willingly or out of necessity, do not exist in isolation: they come with consequences. Their agency, while considerable, is not absolute. Rather, they are attempting to strike a delicate balance as they strive to fulfil their aspirations while simultaneously grappling with the weight of societal expectations. They navigate this terrain as women in a rapidly changing society, where tradition, globalisation, societal norms, and individual aspirations intersect in complex and sometimes conflicting ways.

As a social and cultural geographer, I aspire to extend my research beyond documenting the struggles of the most vulnerable in society and further embrace the opportunities of unveiling the subtler and less conspicuous transformations that transpire within the context of everyday mundane activities. This responsibility is particularly significant within a rapidly developing economic entity like China, marked by distinctive political, social, and cultural dynamics compared to other formidable global economic powers such as the UK, the US and Australia (Harvey, 2005; 2006; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). This thesis will not only provide insights into the complex dynamics of a burgeoning global economic powerhouse but also offer valuable perspectives on how societal change can be navigated and understood within diverse cultural contexts, contributing to a more global discourse on human development and progress.

As a global economic power, China often captures the world's attention with its staggering growth figures and technological innovation (Lee, 2018; Shaffer & Gao, 2020). However, beneath the veneer of these impressive statistics lies a rich mosaic of human

experiences. Many of these experiences, despite their relevance and significance, often remain concealed from the broader international gaze. This dearth of nuanced understanding regarding the lives and aspirations of individuals navigating the multifaceted landscape of contemporary China has compelled me to embark on this research journey.

Focusing on the lives of highly educated female migrants in Shenzhen, I aim to offer a nuanced perspective on the multifaceted changes occurring within China. This encompasses scrutinising the overt disparities and struggles and considering equally profound shifts within the intersections of gender norms and shifting socio-cultural contexts as China continues to evolve. My goal is to shed light on China's development concerning gender norms, which are often either overlooked or misinterpreted.

The rest of this chapter embarks on this academic journey. Section 1.1 elaborates on the dynamic landscape of Shenzhen, a city characterised by the sweeping currents of neoliberal transition and evolving gender norms, which impact the everyday lives of highly educated women who have made their way to Shenzhen from all corners of China, propelled by aspiring to greater independence and autonomy. Section 1.2 sets the stage for articulating research objectives and questions, drawing upon a self-formulated framework termed *sailing/anchoring*. This framework synthesises elements of feminist analysis, a life-course approach, and perspectives of timescape in reevaluating the concept of migrant home-making. Section 1.3 closes this introductory chapter by outlining the structure of the thesis.

1.1 Social Setting

Shenzhen, a city that began as a fishing village, has become emblematic of China's meteoric rise. Its transformation into a bustling metropolis, marked by rapid development and technological prowess, has consistently garnered international attention (Bontje, 2016; Chen & Ogan, 2017). However, beneath the gleaming skyscrapers and impressive statistics lies a social setting that defies easy categorisation. In this section, I delve into the multifaceted nature of Shenzhen's development, exploring its position as a microcosm of China's journey in embracing neoliberal transitions and achieving substantial economic success. Specifically, I examine the landscape of internal migration within Shenzhen, where distinctions of class, *hukou* (户口, which roughly equates to legal status within the housing registration system in China), and privilege intersect to shape the lives of highly educated women.

1.1.1 Shenzhen: Epitome of China's development

Shenzhen is often described as the epitome of China's Reform and Opening initiative (Pun, 2005; Gang, 2017). Starting in 1992, Shenzhen sustained an astonishing annual growth rate of 27% over the next 26 years. What was once a muddy expanse dotted with villages and small market towns underwent a metamorphosis that brought Deng's memorable invocation to life: "To get rich is glorious" (Bach, 2011). Nestled within the Pearl River delta, one of the world's foremost manufacturing and economic hubs, Shenzhen has not only blossomed into mainland China's fourth-largest metropolis but also recently became the nation's third-most potent economic force, measured by GDP in 2021 (China Daily, 2022).

Shenzhen's incredible journey from obscurity to economic prominence parallels China's overall transformation over the past four decades. China's pioneering Special Economic Zone (SEZ) is an experimental frontier where state policies converge with free-market dynamics, fuelling unprecedented growth. Geographically and culturally adjacent to Hong Kong, Shenzhen harnessed its advantages to embark on an unparalleled economic boom. Shenzhen's development is unique because it embodies collaboration between an authoritarian state and neoliberalism, making it a quintessential Chinese city that epitomises the country's journey towards neoliberal reform (Pun & Lu, 2010). Therefore, comprehending the distinctive context of Shenzhen requires an understanding of the landscape of neoliberalism within China.

In contrast to liberal and pluralist societies (e.g., the US, Canada, and many Western European countries), neoliberal ideology in China is unique. Instead of existing as an external or opposing force, neoliberalism is frequently interwoven within China's framework of state developmentalism (Qian & Florentine, 2021; Gao et al., 2018). This distinctive integration is intimately linked to the underpinning autocratic rule of the Chinese state, which excels at moulding a populace already inclined towards governability. The interplay between neoliberalism, state developmentalism, and authoritarian governance forms the crux of understanding the socio-political dynamics in contemporary China. Critically pointing out that contemporary China is an outcome of a "particular kind of neoliberalism interdigitated with authoritarian centralised control" (2006: 34), Harvey (2005: 1) describes China's market-oriented reform as "neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics". These new economic dynamics not only mould economic policies but also profoundly impact the mindset and conduct of its populace, contributing to a complex context of governance and compliance that is distinctly Chinese.

Fuelled by neoliberal values that underscore self-improvement, self-responsibility, and a strong work ethic (Gao, 2020), migrants from other cities, regions and provinces across China voluntarily migrate to Shenzhen to pursue success. For example, rural-to-urban migrants aspire to non-agricultural jobs and life in modernised cities by leaving their lands and villages (Yue et al., 2010). Shenzhen's development is, therefore, intertwined with the contributions of these migrant workers. With a population exceeding 15 million, as revealed by the 2017 national census, Shenzhen is a dynamic and diverse metropolis. A staggering ninety-five per cent of Shenzhen's population was born elsewhere, rendering it an artificially youthful city with an average age of 28 (Bach, 2011). In 2009, only 2.2 million residents held Shenzhen city registration (*hukou*), while 6.4 million residents were legal migrants, plus an additional 5 million or more undocumented migrants (China Daily, 2009). It is important to recognise that many residents with Shenzhen *hukou* migrated there in pursuit of specific life opportunities. Among these 'local migrants', talent (ren cai, 人才), broadly defined as highly educated or highly skilled individuals in the labour market, plays a pivotal role in the success of Shenzhen as a collaboration between centralised state governance and neoliberal principles.

The significance of talent in China's development, particularly in the case of Shenzhen, cannot be overstated. President Xi Jinping has consistently emphasised the pivotal role of talent in advancing China's economic development and technological innovation. He

has referred to talent as "the first resource" (第一资源) in China's quest for "self-reliance in independent innovation" (Zwetsloot, 2020). Due to its relatively short period of development, the People's Republic of China faces certain educational disadvantages, such as education inequality between rural and urban areas, upper and lower classes, or different genders (Liu & Apple, 2016; Zhang et al., 2015). Consequently, China is actively working to attract high-quality human capital from abroad to reform its higher education system. Simultaneously, it prioritises accelerating domestic talent development, especially in STEM fields. China's ambition to become a global technological powerhouse is evident (Wübbeke et al., 2016). Shenzhen, often called the Chinese Silicon Valley, unquestionably plays a pivotal role in realising China's ambitions.

Following the Reform and Opening policy introduced by Deng Xiaoping around 1980, Shenzhen enjoyed the privilege of formulating its talent policy. This policy aims to attract both overseas returnees and domestic talent by promising them a tolerant cultural environment and favourable conditions for starting businesses in STEM. These include tax exemptions and public rental housing to accommodate migrant workers (World Population Review, 2020; Yeung & Howes, 2006; Wang, 2022). According to the World Intellectual Property Organisation, in 2017, China filed almost 50,000 international patents, nearly half of which originated from Shenzhen. The city is home to technological giants like Huawei, the world's largest telecommunications manufacturer, and Tencent, China's most valuable internet company. Among these technology firms, Tencent is the most attractive employer for overseas returnees, and Huawei is fourth (Boss Career Science Lab, 2019).

Shenzhen's development path reflects China's unique market-oriented reform, where state control and governance have been pivotal. This economic landscape illustrates Shenzhen's transformation from a fishing village to one of China's major metropolises. Centralised governance guides and regulates economic development while leveraging market forces to propel growth. Shenzhen's economic progress, driven by market-oriented policies, foreign investments, and private entrepreneurship (Chen et al., 2022), unfolds within the framework of China's centralised and authoritative state, which retains the power to direct its rapid development.

A pivotal moment illustrating the profound impact of authoritarian governance in Shenzhen's development is the introduction of the 'vacating the cage to change the birds' (腾笼换鸟) policy by Wang Yang, then secretary of Guangdong Province in 2009. This policy

aimed to make space for higher-end industries by encouraging the departure of what were considered 'low-quality' rural migrant workers. This initiative sought to raise the quality of the workforce, as measured by GDP per capita, and make way for 'high-quality' talent (Xie & Hu, 2009). This intervention played a crucial role in transforming Shenzhen from an industry-led city heavily reliant on low-wage labour into a high-technology-based hub of creativity and entrepreneurship, with an emphasis on attracting talented individuals. The city was voted China's most dynamic city, and highly favoured by migrant workers in 2014 (World Population Review, 2020). Significantly, Shenzhen has become home to one-sixth of China's doctoral graduates (Wang, 2021).

However, beneath this economic success grounded on renewing the labour force lie dark aspects of neoliberalism. The emphasis on intense competition and authoritarian governance has adversely affected individuals. Rural migrant workers in particular have been subjected to extreme workplace exploitation, sometimes leading to self-harm and suicide (Pun & Chan, 2013; Pun, 2005). While successful, the 'vacating the cage to change the birds' policy excluded these 'second-class' migrant workers from the authoritarian policy-making process, leaving them with limited citizenship rights (Zuo, 2010). Those who have remained in Shenzhen face challenges posed by the *hukou* system and factory discipline, resulting in a highly exploitative migrant labour regime aimed at producing compliant, self-reliant workers while minimising labour costs and welfare consumption. The 2010 Foxconn suicide incident, where 18 young migrant workers attempted suicide, was a turning point. Following this tragedy, the neoliberal migrant labour regime shifted from coercive discipline to active governance, focusing on regulating migrants' psychological well-being (Gao et al., 2021).

As Shenzhen continues to adjust to evolving global and domestic contexts, the challenges it presents to individuals are no longer limited solely to low-skilled workers. Recently, Shenzhen has reshaped its talent policy, leading to a reinterpretation of the concept of talent (Liu & Li, 2023). Notably, individuals with doctoral degrees and experience in STEM industries, particularly those from the US or Western Europe, are highly regarded within this policy framework. Conversely, individuals with bachelor's degrees from universities outside prestigious global rankings are less employable and have received less support in Shenzhen's talent policies (Zwetsloot, 2020). Consequently, the evolving landscape in Shenzhen, characterised by shifting policies and an influx of high-quality talent into the labour market, has presented challenges for highly educated individuals relocating to

Shenzhen, particularly newcomers who do not have advanced degrees or who graduated from lower-ranked universities.

The focus on highly educated individuals who have chosen to relocate to Shenzhen is paramount because this demographic represents a crucial segment of the city's population, contributing significantly to Shenzhen's economic and technological development. Their experiences shed light on the collaboration between central state governance, neoliberalism, and the city's development. In Chapter 2, an extensive review of relevant literature on this collaboration and the shifting gender norms within Chinese society and Shenzhen's unique context provides theoretical perspectives to contextualise and frame this research.

1.1.2 The partially privileged migration experiences of highly educated women

Among highly educated migrants in Shenzhen, I narrowed my focus to highly educated women, motivated by the recognition that women's experiences in this context are distinctly influenced by the evolving dynamics of Shenzhen's neoliberal transition and societal expectations rooted in traditional gender norms. The experiences of women who have migrated to Shenzhen offer a unique lens through which to examine the intersection of neoliberalism and gender norms. As these women navigate the evolving context of the city, they are confronted with a complex interplay of opportunities and challenges. Shenzhen's status as a beacon of neoliberalism in China has brought about shifts in employment, entrepreneurship, and societal expectations.

Highly educated female migrants in Shenzhen possess a certain extent of privilege derived from living and working in Shenzhen. Kynsilehto (2011: 1547) claims that the identity of highly educated female migrants can be termed 'partially privileged' as it is conditioned by various forces. Within the context of internal migration, these women's experiences of 'partial privilege' are associated with their relatively greater agency to migrate than that of their highly educated counterparts who choose not to relocate. Additionally, their standard of living tends to surpass that of low-skilled rural-to-urban migrants. However, their gender introduces complexities into their workplace experiences, potentially leading to disparities. Furthermore, they grapple with expectations rooted in Chinese cultural norms, including the concept of 'filial duty' and maternal responsibility (Wang et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2019), which can compromise their privileged status, rendering it only partial.

Understanding highly educated women's partially privileged migration experiences necessitates examining the relationship between migration and women's agency. Migration

provides a means for women to enhance their agency, enabling them to make choices that deviate from traditional gender roles, including decisions related to mobility and domestic responsibilities (Liu, 2020; Sullivan, 1997). Historically, societal expectations for women in China have been tightly intertwined with the domestic sphere, laden with unpaid labour (Silvey, 2006). However, as women acquire knowledge or skills via education, they enhance their agency in breaking away from specific long-established associations. Education serves as a platform through which they access egalitarian ideals and cultivate independence. Migration often emerges as a common means for this departure, enabling women to establish new homes and empowering them to shape desired identities or enhance their agency (Ralph & Staeheli, 2011; Fleury, 2016). Nevertheless, the impact of migration on women is nuanced; while it can empower them to challenge traditional norms, it can also expose vulnerabilities when structural constraints or gender norms impede their agency (Webber, 2018; Ho, 2006).

In Chinese metropolises like Shenzhen and Shanghai, highly educated women have shown their capacity to challenge certain societal expectations of women. Against certain gender norms in Chinese tradition that require them to conform to lifelong monogamy or take on maternity responsibility (Tang & Quah, 2017), the divorce rate has been steadily rising for over a decade, particularly since the liberalisation of the Marriage Law in 1980, which allowed no-fault divorce, followed by the streamlining of the divorce process in 2003 (Wang, 2001; Wang & Zhou, 2010). Ironically, despite the introduction of the Two-Child Policy, the birth rate has not experienced a surge, but rather a slight and continuous decline.[1]

Moreover, in the face of being stigmatised as "'left-over women'" (Sheng Nv, 剩女), the average age at first marriage has risen over the past two decades (Cheng et al., 2011; Gaetano, 2014: 124). In large cities like Shanghai, more young people stay single into their late twenties and beyond. For example, the average age of first marriage in Shanghai has risen significantly, particularly for more educated women. In these urban areas, a larger proportion of women than men remain unmarried after the age of thirty, and the likelihood of marriage for women decreases significantly with increased education levels (Cheng et al., 2011). Recently, the emergence of digital feminism, characterised by its emphasis on the private sphere, de-politicisation, and indirect confrontation, has provided a potent platform

[1] According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2017-2020), the number of births in China in 2017 was 630,000 fewer than the 17.86 million reported in 2016, marking a decrease of 3.5 percent. Furthermore, in 2019, there was a 2.5% decline from the 657,076 live births recorded in 2018, reaching the lowest figure since 2004, during the era of the one-child policy.

for ‘left-over women’, particularly the post-’90s generation[2] (90后), who reject traditional gender roles, to challenge societal norms (Chang et al., 2018). This digital feminist movement is particularly instrumental in contesting the prevailing expectation that women's roles should primarily revolve around the family and household (Yang & Zhou, 2022).

Beneath these changes lies a profound transformation in gender dynamics, increasingly challenging traditional gender norms. The conventional notion of men as primary breadwinners and women as household caretakers (男主外，女主内) has significantly evolved, especially in metropolitan areas where the economic burden on family units is substantial. It has become common for both partners to engage in full-time employment outside the home, reflecting a departure from the historical domestic division of duties (e.g., Li, 2020). However, even for highly educated women, their roles as primary caregivers for children within families have still been significantly influenced by the societal ideals of femininity. Despite women's increased participation in the workforce, they continue to bear the brunt of family chores, both within the private domain and in the public sphere (Shen, 2013; Liu, 2020). These changes suggest that societal expectations for women have shifted from being limited to homemakers to concurrently encompassing the roles of breadwinners and homemakers.

In sum, while highly educated female migrants in Shenzhen may enjoy a degree of privilege among Chinese women, they still grapple with structural, historical, and cultural forces, including patriarchal and heterosexual social values, which influence their migration experiences, everyday home-making practices, and aspirations. Recognising and interpreting the experiences of this 'partially privileged' group is crucial for understanding their role in shaping Chinese society and cities.

[2] The post-’90 generation is a generation in urban China encompassing people who were born between 1990 and 1999. The post-’90 generation is usually compared with the post-’80 generation, and is characterised as having less of a sense of hierarchy in the workplace and more of a sense of individuality.

1.2 Research objectives and questions

This research aims to:

1. Reveal the perpetuating gender inequality embedded in neoliberal transitions of Shenzhen throughout the past decades.
2. Interpret the home-making of female migrants as agentic practices through a *sailing/anchoring* framework, shedding light on how women respond to possible inequality in their everyday lives.
3. Contribute to the geographies of families and geographies of queers in Chinese societies by unravelling changes in family structures/forms in Shenzhen and examining how female migrants negotiate between conformity/resistance and tradition/modernisation.

This research sets out to explore the everyday home-making practices of highly educated women in Shenzhen, viewing the daily lives of these women as parts of societal activities. Staeheli and Cope (1994: 447) posit that political activity within societies encompasses "the 'private' negotiations of the household, the 'personal' coalitions of the neighbourhood, and the 'informal' networks within the community." As emphasised in the preceding section, Shenzhen emerges as a focal point where two significant forces intersect: the currents of neoliberal transitions shaping the city's rapid development and contemporary China, and the evolving gender norms deeply ingrained in Chinese tradition. At its core, this research is driven by the aspiration to shed light on and analyse the interplay between these dominant forces through the lens of everyday geographies. By examining how highly educated women navigate their life choices and aspirations, I seek to grasp the potential sacrifices, compromises, and resistance inherent in their pursuit of expected lives amidst the impacts of these forces. Grounded in this exploration, I further aim to interpret how these women's everyday lives contribute to the potential societal changes in urban China. Shenzhen's unique attributes, serving as a microcosm of China's rapid development and ongoing economic transformation (Harvey, 2005; 2006), render it an ideal backdrop for this investigation.

My research primarily aims to shed light on the persistent gender inequality ingrained within the societal expectations shaped by transitional gender norms and impacted by neoliberal principles in Shenzhen. Through an exploration of life choices, trajectories, and significant transitions of women from different generations, I seek to understand the ways in which neoliberal principles and practices have impacted gender roles, women’s opportunities,

and power structures within the context of Shenzhen's rapid urbanisation and economic development.

Grounded in a framework of *sailing/anchoring*, this research seeks to interpret the home-making practices of female migrants in Shenzhen as agentic responses to potential inequality in their everyday lives. Building upon the foundational work of uprooting/regrounding (Ahmed et al, 2003), I further consider migrant home-making as agentic practices through which female migrants can respond to possible inequality in their life courses. By incorporating the 'timescape of home' (Liu, 2020: 343). This temporal framework acknowledges that highly educated women in Shenzhen are engaged in an ongoing process of materialising their evolving subjectivity and identity formation (Tolia-Kelly, 2004; 2005; Walsh, 2006). By integrating migrants' experiences of *sailing* away from socio-cultural norms that constrain their aspirations with their present practices of *anchoring* in an imagined place where they can manifest their ideal selves, I created the framework of *sailing/anchoring* to re-conceptualise the dynamics of migrants' everyday home-making. Based on reading highly educated women's everyday home-making practices using this framework, this study aims to shed light on the ways in which women navigate and negotiate societal expectations, constraints, and opportunities within the context of migration, urbanisation, and neoliberalism.

The last key objective of this research is to contribute to the geographies of families and queers in Chinese societies by unravelling possible changes in family structures and forms in Shenzhen. By examining how these highly educated, middling female migrants negotiate between conformity and resistance, traditions, and modernisation during their life journeys of *sailing/anchoring*, this study aims to provide insights into the complex intersections of gender, migration, and urbanisation in shaping family dynamics and queer experiences within the rapidly changing socio-cultural landscape of Shenzhen.

To achieve the research objectives, I have raised four research questions:

1. How do highly educated female migrants from different generations adapt to the neoliberal transitions of Shenzhen?
2. How do these women sail/anchor to/in Shenzhen via home-making practices in the domestic space?
3. How do these women sail/anchor to/in Shenzhen via home-making practices beyond the domestic space?

4. How do these women negotiate life courses via *sailing/anchoring*?

The first research question lays the foundation for addressing the initial research objective, aiming to offer an understanding of how highly educated female migrants navigate Shenzhen's complex landscape, where neoliberal values and traditional gender norms intersect. By examining the experiences of these women across generations, answering this question provides essential insights into how they negotiate the evolving dynamics of contemporary Chinese society. It illuminates their responses to and role in shaping these intersecting forces, contributing to a deeper understanding of the agency, resilience, and transformative potential of the cohort of highly educated female migrants in Shenzhen.
The second and third research questions align with the second research objective, seeking to illustrate the *sailing/anchoring* framework as a dynamic and multifaceted process employed by these women. The second question initiates this exploration within the domestic sphere, examining how these women leverage home-making to construct their ideal selves and navigate gendered migration experiences within this context. It sheds light on the role of agency in identity formation and negotiation, contributing to my comprehension of their strategies for overcoming challenges amidst traditional gender norms and evolving socio-cultural contexts in Shenzhen.

The third question extends this investigation beyond the domestic sphere, aligning with the *sailing/anchoring* framework's departure from the traditional domestic-focused lens. It delves into how highly educated female migrants establish a 'home' in non-domestic spaces and routines within Shenzhen. Answering this question allows us to understand the multifaceted nature of their home-making practices and how they transcend the boundaries of domestic and non-domestic spheres. This understanding significantly contributes to the overarching research goal of illuminating these women's agency, resilience, and transformative potential as they navigate various aspects of their lives in the city.

The fourth and final research question is connected to all three research objectives. It encapsulates the essence of the *sailing/anchoring* framework and its application to the experiences of highly educated female migrants in Shenzhen. We gain valuable insights into their agency by investigating how these women employ *sailing* and/or *anchoring* to navigate their lives. Answering this question provides a view of the dynamic and multifaceted nature of their migration experiences, thereby contributing to our understanding of the intersections

between internal migration, evolving gender norms, and rapid urban development in contemporary China.

Together, these research questions and objectives form an integrated framework that explores the experiences of highly educated female migrants in Shenzhen. Each question, individually and collectively, contributes to a more profound understanding of how these women negotiate gender norms and identity within Shenzhen's complex and evolving urban landscape.

1.3 Thesis structure

My argument develops as follows. **Chapter 2** serves as the foundational theoretical cornerstone. It introduces the *sailing/anchoring* framework, a vital lens through which I analyse the complex lives of these women. Grounded in an extensive literature review that encompasses gendered migration experiences, life-course theories, and the dynamics of everyday home-making, this chapter identifies and addresses research gaps within these domains and elucidates how our exploration, guided by the framework, can contribute to filling these research gaps.

Chapter 3 establishes the epistemological and methodological foundation essential to this study. I adopt interpretivism and feminist research as its primary epistemological approaches. I chose qualitative methodology because of its ability to unearth the depths of meaning within lived experiences, supported by visual methodologies and life stories to enhance authenticity. This chapter also adapts the research design to a remote, digitised approach due to COVID-19 disruption, shedding light on research resilience and the viability of such methodologies in contemporary qualitative research design.

Chapter 4 explores the first research question. It explores the life stories of highly educated women from different generations. Highly educated women in this chapter are categorised as pre- and post-one-child-policy[3] generations. While the study does not directly assess the impact of this policy on individuals' life choices and everyday experiences in migration, it is crucial to acknowledge that individuals, particularly women who grew up without siblings or in families where parents paid penalties to give birth to a younger brother, perceive opportunities, aspirations, and relationships in their life trajectories differently from the older generation (Hu & Shi, 2020). Moreover, these women were raised amidst the transitions in Chinese society, where ideas of individuality and neoliberalism are evolving. I trace these women's journeys in navigating evolving gender norms within Shenzhen's dynamic context, which are crucial in unravelling the complexities of internal migration amid Shenzhen's neoliberal transitions. By examining experiences across generations, this chapter considers the pathways these individuals take within the evolving gender norms in Shenzhen.

[3] One-child policy (独生子女政策): The one-child policy was a population control measure implemented by the Chinese government between 1979 and 2015 to curb population growth. Under this policy, most urban couples were restricted to having only one child, while certain exceptions and exemptions were made for rural couples, ethnic minorities, and other special circumstances.

It establishes a robust foundation for subsequent analysis of the *sailing/anchoring* experiences of highly educated women.

The following three empirical chapters focus on highly educated women at three distinct life stages burdened with varying societal expectations. Chapter 5, 6, and 7 will respectively focus on specific subsections of the sample, including nine single women, nine mothers, and eight women deviating from heteronormative patterns of life. These chapters' analyses are grounded in a small-sample, in-depth exploration of aspirations, relationships, life choices, and opportunities embedded in these women's lives. The selection of these three life stages is informed by considerations of their age range. In 2005, 88.41% of Shenzhen's residential population fell between the ages of 15 and 59, with 3.1% aged 65 or above (China Statistics, 2005). While there is a limited population aged over 65, many of them are grandparents temporarily residing in Shenzhen to care for their grandchildren while their parents are busy working (Qi, 2018). Therefore, these three distinct life stages/transitions are chosen to encompass the major population of Shenzhen.

Within these chapters, I respond to the second, third, and fourth research questions by examining the experiences of these highly educated women expected to align with comparable societal expectations. **Chapter 5** investigates how highly educated women negotiate singlehood within the backdrop of evolving gender norms that often portray their life stage as a form of 'waiting time.' Concurrently, these women who were born after 1990 (90 后) grapple with the dual influence of neoliberal values in Shenzhen, providing economic opportunities while also exposing them to potential exploitation. Through examining these women's home-making practices and routines that extend beyond domestic boundaries, enabling them to embody their desired single lifestyles, this chapter illuminates their journey, *sailing* away from conventional portrayals of singlehood as mere 'waiting time.' However, it also highlights the challenges they encounter in seeking an anchorage for their next life stage in the intense labour markets of Shenzhen. This chapter uncovers the liminal nature of their experiences at the crossroads of evolving gender norms and neoliberal transition, emphasising their challenges, alignment with societal expectations, and the exploitative dynamics embedded in the city's neoliberal landscape.

Chapter 6 underscores the everyday home-making practices of highly educated women in Shenzhen and evolving expectations of motherhood. Through exploring their home-making activities, relocation within the city, and routine engagements in urban spaces, I reveal how these women *anchor* themselves by fostering emotional connections,

particularly in mother-child relationships. Simultaneously, they bolster their economic agency and autonomy to facilitate these emotional bonds within and beyond the domestic sphere. Here, I underscore the concept of 'perfect' motherhood these women's negotiations throughout life journeys in Shenzhen, which encompasses traditional maternal roles related to caregiving and nurturing, as well as class-based approaches that entail scientific parenting and the economic capacity to fulfil these roles.

Chapter 7 focuses on the interplay between the everyday home-making of divorced women, childless women, and lesbians. It explores their negotiations when pursuing families that do not conform to patriarchal or heteronormative norms (e.g., female-headed households). I examine the interrelationships between the societal and policy environment dominated by prevailing norms of heterosexual marriage and nuclear families and individual lives that contest these norms. I focus on how these women *sail away* from the relatively standardised pattern of life events in family formation and anchor themselves in alternative narratives that provide them autonomy in personalising their families in contrast to specific societal expectations. I reveal how highly educated women negotiate their life courses by questioning, disrupting, and reimagining prevailing structures that influence personal identity and professional engagement in Shenzhen.

Chapter 8 revisits and synthesises the findings of the preceding chapters, responding to the research questions. It reflects on the *sailing/anchoring* framework, emphasising the contributions made to various bodies of literature. While acknowledging the study's limitations, it proposes potential avenues for future research. This chapter encapsulates the enduring interplay between women and the home, especially in the context of persisting gender inequality influenced by the evolving gender norms within China's neoliberal transition.

Chapter Two. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Introduction

This chapter sets the stage for exploring the relationship between the everyday lives of highly educated female migrants in Shenzhen and the transformative impacts of neoliberalism within this urban landscape. It addresses a critical research gap regarding contemporary China: the impact of China's neoliberal transitions on gender expectations and disparities. This exploration specifically centres on middle-class, highly educated women who migrate from other regions of China to Shenzhen in pursuit of increased autonomy and independence. By closely examining their home-making practices in everyday life, this research investigates how these women establish their homes within Shenzhen's ever-changing social landscape. Their efforts are aimed at either conforming to specific gender expectations or mitigating prevalent gender disparities, shedding light on the complex dynamics at play.

I begin by reviewing the literature on China's embrace of the neoliberal transition, marked by economic reforms and openness to international markets, and its effects on gender expectations. In Section 2.2, I point out that, in the Chinese context, the impact of neoliberal transitions on gender norms is a subject of intense debate. In Sections 2.3 and 2.4, I discuss the changing 'selves' of female migrants and the diverse ways in which they navigate gender norms at different life stages. I scrutinise the development of individual identities, the construction of subjectivities, and the evolving agency observed throughout the migration journeys within a life-course framework (Elder et al., 2003; Bailey, 2009).

Sections 2.5 to 2.6 develop the framework of *sailing/anchoring* and discuss how this framework serves to capture and explore societal changes through individual everyday home-making practices. Building on critical geographies challenging traditional notions of home-making as private and intimate (Brickell, 2012; Miller, 2001), I embrace a multifaceted view of home through a life-course perspective (Elder et al., 2003).

2.2 China in neoliberal transition: Evolving gender norms

China has undergone a rapid economic transformation in recent decades, with the introduction of the Reform and Opening Up policy in the late 1970s as a pivotal moment. This policy injected new vitality and openness into China's economic landscape, coinciding with its accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001, solidifying its position as a global magnet for foreign investment. However, beneath the facade of economic success, significant cultural and social changes were taking place, resulting in tensions arising from the collision between globalisation-driven discourses and deeply rooted traditions.

This economic transformation is closely linked to the burgeoning neoliberal transition of contemporary China. Neoliberalism, as articulated by Harvey (2007), is primarily a theory of political and economic practices advocating the advancement of human well-being through the liberation of individual entrepreneurial freedoms within a framework marked by robust private property rights, free markets, and free trade. China's rise in the late 1980s, along with parallel economic reforms in the United Kingdom and the United States led by Thatcher and Reagan, heralded the emergence of a globalised "neoliberal" order.

Deng Xiaoping's economic liberalisation played a pivotal role in transforming China from a closed backwater into a dynamic centre of capitalism characterised by sustained and historically unparalleled growth. However, China's interpretation of neoliberalism resulted in a unique form of a market economy, blending neoliberalism with centralised authoritarian control. This fusion of ideas distinguishes China and defines its distinctive economic model, in which the state retains significant control, especially in strategic sectors, while simultaneously embracing market-oriented policies in other areas. For instance, the enduring power of the state in introducing the opening and reform policy highlights the persistence of the communist one-party system, which orchestrated both socialist revolutions and neoliberal transitions, maintaining its solid political dominance in China's economy (Davis & Wang, 2008). Similarly, Luo and Sun (2015) argue that China's transition to a market economy demonstrates the state's ability to retain control amidst changing economic structures.

Over the past few decades, China's neoliberal transition, as it implements "socialism with Chinese characteristics," has extended beyond the economy (Harvey, 2005). In particular, the neoliberal mindset permeating public culture and society reflects a shift from the cultivation of 'consciousness' during the socialist revolutionary years to a contemporary landscape where neoliberal power operates on the site of individual behaviours in a cosmopolitan context (Rofel, 2007). Rofel links such desire with cosmopolitanism by saying

that ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ is a cosmopolitan ideology that ‘normalises new forms of inequality, new ways to value human activity, and new ways of ‘worlding’ China, of placing China in a reimagined world’ (Rofel, 2007: 111-112).

This transformation reflects China’s transition to a market economy and the emergence of a new socio-cultural context that significantly influences individual selfhood (Qian & Guo, 2019). At the level of individual selfhood, neoliberal transitions in China have been analysed as a specific mode of governmentality, a technology of rule that creates subjects who are self-reliant and capable of managing their lives without coercive regulation (Ong, 2007). This process of subjugation consists of two important dimensions. First, neoliberal logic emphasises self-responsibility at the level of individual subjects (Ong, 2007). The responsibilisation of individuals means that people are empowered with certain skills and resources to develop appropriate conduct in a social system, supposedly optimising both collective goods and individual life (Ferguson & Gupta, 2002). In other words, a neoliberal ethos encourages ‘people to see themselves as individualised and active subjects responsible for enhancing their own well-being’ (Larner, 2000: 13). Second, because neoliberal governance relocates risks and responsibilities from the state to individuals, it calls on the active agency and ‘entrepreneurilisation of the self’ (Brenner et al., 2010: 199). Neoliberalism conceives of the individual as an enterprise, a collection of assets to be invested in, nurtured, and improved (Gershon, 2011).

The reconfiguration of the politico-socio-economic complex in post-reform China on the one hand, and the refashioning of individual selfhood on the other, can be expounded from the lens of neoliberalism. As noted above, the state places the market at the centre of policy-making to endure its political power in compelling rapid economic growth. The intertwined relationships between capital, market, and politics make individuals in China develop their selfhood by adopting the palpable (if selective) fluid and self-contradictory, neoliberal-informed practices under various technologies of governance (Zhang, 2012). However, despite offering a degree of freedom for individuals to cultivate their selfhood, market-driven accumulation remains the ‘dominant and leading’ mechanism through which the Chinese state propels widespread modernisation (Wu, 2008: 1096). To some extent, the neoliberal transition in China has led to a tendency to simplify one’s societal role through the prism of economic utility and work.

China’s neoliberal transitions, particularly at the level of individual selfhood, offer a critical lens through which we can comprehend their broader impact on societal expectations

and regulations, particularly regarding women. In China, these transitions intersect with deeply ingrained hetero-patriarchal gender norms, creating a complex interplay that significantly influences women's lives. China's neoliberal transition extends beyond mere economic integration with the global market; it also encompasses a socio-cultural shift, marked by a move toward a more individualistic and self-centred ethos, departing from the collectivist ideals of the Mao era. However, it is essential to recognise that the authoritarian regime, along with specific socio-cultural norms deeply rooted in collective traditions, continue to exert a powerful influence. These forces play a pivotal role in (re)shaping the socio-cultural landscape, particularly in terms of (re)positioning and (re)defining women's roles and perceptions.

Research has unveiled a shift in urban women's confidence in contemporary China, particularly among middle-class women, which can be traced to their emancipation from previously restrictive gender norms (Gaetano, 2007; Weber, 2002; Tan et al., 2021; Li, 2015). It is important to emphasise that this liberation warrants analysis distinct from a simple interpretation through Western feminist theories. A compelling illustration of this transformation is the correlation between the new found appreciation of women's physical appearance in Chinese mass media during the 1980s and the empowerment of Chinese women (Brownell, 1998). The image of robust steelworkers, cotton pickers, and sportswomen, once symbolising women's expected contribution to industrial production and collective honour (集体荣誉), gradually gave way to images of slender, beautiful urban women dressed in the latest fashions (Evans, 1997). From a feminist perspective, this media shift could be perceived as a form of exploitation, subjecting women to the male gaze when interpreted in the Western context (see, for instance, Ponterotto, 2016). However, when considered in the context of China's transition from Mao's authoritarian rule and the Cultural Revolution, where women were compelled to work and leave their children behind, this newfound embrace of personal freedom and choice, though not yet universal, marked a powerful and captivating departure that resonated with the public. This open-minded appreciation of women's bodies and beauty is evidence of China's evolving gender norms.

The evolving gender norms shaped by China's embrace of neoliberalism provide a distinctive backdrop for exploring women's engagement with notions of beauty, consumerism, and their roles within the domestic sphere. This context reveals a nuanced picture where women's pursuits in these areas were not necessarily regressive or discriminatory but in fact, marked a revolutionary and empowering shift. It signifies their

progress in overturning the repressive authoritarian regime that once governed their lives (Wang, 2000; Zhang, 2003). However, there are also challenges beneath the surface of this apparent empowerment. While fostering economic growth, China's neoliberal transition has also brought forth specific "gender consequences" and exacerbated class disparities, particularly in urban settings. Harvey (2007) astutely observed the rapid emergence of consumer culture, particularly in major cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen, which 'formed at an astonishing rate to create exaggerated versions, even to the point of parody, of New York, London, or Paris' (p. 147). While enriching China's cultural landscape, this burgeoning consumer culture has also played a significant role in amassing wealth through the super-exploitation of labour, especially among young female migrants from rural areas (p. 148). For example, rural women who migrate to these bustling cities as labourers often make the painful choice to forgo their education early to earn money, primarily to support their families and, notably, to finance their brothers' education (Chappell & Kusch, 2007).

In urban China, highly educated women often encounter formidable barriers when leveraging their educational achievements to reach their career aspirations, particularly when aspiring to leadership positions, high-level expertise, and roles within academia (as demonstrated by Tsang et al., 2011). In Chinese academia, there were 1,760,786 full time academics in Chinese higher institutions in 2019, of which around half were female. This proportion decreased through the academic ranks: 682,603 middle-level academics with 382,399 (56.02%) women; 531,888 sub-senior level academics with 252,941 (47.56%) women; and 230,301 senior-level academics with 72,593 (31.52%) women (Ministry of Education, 2020). A study examining more than 10,000 firms in the corporate sector from 2000 to 2008 shows that women make up around 4.4% of all CEOs in China's listed companies (Lam et al., 2013). Additionally, 'pay is significantly positively related to gender, with female executives receiving approximately 6.7% less pay' (Chen et al., 2011: 15). These figurative "glass ceilings" encompass not only gender pay gaps but also limited career progression opportunities, and underscore the multifaceted challenges highly educated women face in urban China. They serve as stark indicators of the landscape of gender disparities within contemporary urban China.

Shenzhen, as a microcosm of China's rapid development over the last 40 years, has also borne witness to the dark side of neoliberalism and its impact on the evolving societal roles of women. Notably, collaboration between the authoritarian state and neoliberalism is particularly evident in Shenzhen, a quintessential Chinese city that epitomises the country's

neoliberal reform (Pun & Lu, 2010). Records show that approximately 70% of the city's total population are migrants classified as non-local residents and denied urban citizenship, thus depriving them of welfare and public services under China's *hukou* system of housing registration. This *hukou* system, reminiscent of apartheid and the rigid factory system, has given rise to an exploitative migrant labour regime, particularly those low-skilled, rural-to-urban workers. This regime seeks to produce compliant, self-reliant migrant workers while minimising labour costs and welfare consumption.

This exploitation of rural-to-urban workers is gendered. Within this dynamic landscape, migration and integration into Shenzhen's labour force present a dual reality for female workers, encompassing both prospects and hurdles. The intersectional experiences of female migrants can be conditioned by various factors playing upon the individual in enabling and constraining ways (Valentine, 2007). For women, migration means enhancing their agency in breaking free from specific socio-cultural constraints while imposing new obstacles for them in pursuing aspirations (Sinha et al., 2012). In the context of Shenzhen, for some rural women, becoming a *dagongmei* (打工妹) (female factory worker) offers a chance to enhance their economic opportunities and access education, empowering them to negotiate the interplay of conformity and resistance within their hometown's gender politics (Han, 2021). However, pursuing career opportunities in Shenzhen does not guarantee their liberation from patriarchal constraints. Sometimes, these women are compelled to migrate and send remittances to their male family members (Pun, 2005).

Within these explorations of the interplay between evolving gender norms and the neoliberal transitions in China, I have identified a gap in the current literature concerning women's complex adaptation to evolving gender norms within the context of neoliberal transitions. While existing research has focused on less educated, rural-to-urban female migrant workers (Pun, 2005; Gao et al., 2021), there is a notable scarcity of studies addressing the potential exploitation, challenges, and strategies employed by highly educated female migrants who relocate to urban areas in pursuit of greater autonomy and independence. Understanding the dynamics of highly educated women in this context offers valuable insights into the contested nature of neoliberal transitions in contemporary Shenzhen as they intersect with deeply rooted gender norms in Chinese society. These women's experiences highlight how neoliberal transitions in China reshape individual subjectivities, labour practices, and cultural ideals. By addressing these, I aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of gender expectations in contemporary China, shedding light

on the experiences of an often-overlooked demographic. Furthermore, this research seeks to underscore the broader implications of gender disparities within China's evolving socioeconomic landscape and how they intersect with neoliberal ideologies. Ultimately, this exploration aims to provide an insight into the multifaceted nature of gender dynamics in a rapidly transforming society, offering insights that extend beyond China's borders and contribute to the global discourse on gender and neoliberalism.

This section has contextualised the theme that this thesis explores in contemporary China. The following section then 'zooms in' on the interplay between migration and women's agency and identities, elaborating on why this thesis approaches the gendered impact of neoliberal transitions of Shenzhen through the lens of home.

2.3 Gendered migration experiences and the changing 'self' of female migrants

In migration studies, scholars have underscored the influence of gender on the experiences of individuals, whether they embark on internal or international migration journeys (Kofman, 2004; Fan, 2000). When compared to their male counterparts, women's narratives unveil a dynamic interplay of diverse structural, cultural, and social forces that profoundly shape their trajectory in migration (Valentine & Skelton, 2007). These multifaceted forces, sometimes acting as economic opportunities and at other times as constraints, hold power to mould not only women's agency but also their subjectivities and identities. As women seize the opportunities presented by migration, they find themselves navigating through diverse influences, which can either propel their aspirations or confine them (Fan, 2003).

This section, while delving into the nuanced transformations of the 'self' among female migrants, assumes a pivotal role in the broader context of this literature review. It contributes to an emerging body of work that seeks to unearth the multifaceted nature of gender dynamics within migration. By shedding light on how women navigate their identities within the realm of migration, this discussion adds depth and dimension to understanding how gender intersects with migration experiences. Furthermore, it serves as a bridge, linking my exploration of evolving gender norms within neoliberal transitions to the actual lived experiences of highly educated female migrants.

The evolving 'self' of migrants has long been a focal point for geographers and sociologists seeking to comprehend the process of identity formation as they navigate their migration journeys. Grounded in the paradigms of social constructionism and postmodernism, the contemporary understanding of identity has evolved to encompass dynamic, situational, fragmented, decentred, and constructed facets (Wetherell 2010). Rather than treating identity as a collective, this thesis focuses sharply on self-identity, as articulated by Ezzy (1998: 245), who defines narrative identity as the construction of self-sameness, continuity, and character within the narrative an individual weaves about themselves. Recent scholarship underscores the fluid, reflexive, and complex nature of migrant identities (Butcher, 2010). The act of making a new place one's own mirrors the formation of identities.

For migrants traversing diverse locales, whether cities, provinces, or nations, their experiences give birth to cultural hybridity and complexity, often resulting in identities that appear contradictory (Marschall, 2017). This becomes particularly pronounced when they traverse geographical spaces steeped in distinct cultural contexts (Arnone, 2011). Decaux (2006) affirms that identity is a continually renegotiated process, achieved through everyday

practices and performativity, seeing identity as a fluid construct, unshackled from any specific location. It reinforces the notion that identity constitutes a negotiation between 'being' and 'becoming,' necessitating a nuanced interpretation of its ever-evolving nature (Robins and Aksoy 2001: 709).

Amidst the multiple spaces in which migrants negotiate their identities (e.g., leisure spaces, workplaces), the realm of 'home' emerges as a pivotal arena. When migrants endeavour to (re)establish their homes for emplacing themselves, emotionally, materially and socially, in new destinations, they often find themselves compelled to alter and reshape their previous routines due to shifts in external socio-cultural environments. These experiences, whether they occur within or transcend the physical boundaries of the domestic sphere, contribute significantly to identity negotiations. These negotiations may involve transformations from the past 'self' to the present 'self,' or they might entail aspirations toward an 'ideal' self in the future (Tolia-Kelly 2004a, 2004b). Moreover, the negotiations of migrant identities transpire not only within domestic confines but also within routines and social encounters that extend beyond these boundaries. For instance, Italian migrants in London utilise community organisations to bolster their ethnic intimacy by congregating in spaces adorned with elements reminiscent of Italy (Fortier 2000). These identity negotiations are deeply intertwined with the memories of familiar or nostalgic materialities and affective experiences, as well as the expectations of future changes. These elements function as prisms through which we can gain insight into the multifaceted negotiations of identities, which span national, regional, gender, sexual, class, and other dimensions (Longhurst 2001).

Within the realm of female migrants endeavouring to construct an ideal 'self' through migration, the notion of 'home' and/or the urban landscapes in which they strive to foster a sense of belonging emerge as multifaceted and contested arenas. Yet, the pursuit of an ideal 'self' is often hemmed in and influenced by the context of their gendered migration experiences. Within these spaces, they must deftly navigate not only their aspirations but also the expectations imposed by gendered domestic responsibilities (Liu, 2020; Sullivan, 1997). These identity negotiations, wherein female migrants actively seek to facilitate the formation of their aspired identities, function as agentic practices, enabling them to manoeuvre through potential constraints associated with the confines of home that might otherwise impede their pursuit of an 'ideal' self.

Feminist research has shed light on the historical confinement of women to the domestic sphere, a theme that is deeply entrenched in societal norms (Blunt and Dowling

2006; Silvey 2006). Throughout history, women have persistently been assigned the role of beautifying the home, a notion deeply ingrained in societal constructs. Their primary domain, particularly focused on caretaking and housework, was firmly established due to their responsibilities for unpaid labour (Liu, 2020). These gendered roles were grounded in ideologies, such as motherhood, wherein women were burdened with 'natural' responsibilities, including childcare and the care of older family members within the home. Despite advancements in expanding women's roles within the domestic sphere through improved access to education and employment (Fleury, 2016), these historical notions continue to shape how women perceive and negotiate the concept of home.

Agency also plays a pivotal role in comprehending how migration offers women opportunities to navigate the deeply ingrained societal expectations placed upon them, particularly associations between domestic duties and their identities. Agency, intrinsically tied to power, represents both the ability to choose and the ability to choose differently (Giddens, 1984: 9). Charrad (2010) defines women's agency as the capacity to independently decide on mobility, even when facing structural, cultural, and social constraints. Within this thesis, women's agency is conceptualised as the ability to act on one's desires and demands in establishing an 'in-becoming' home. This encompasses the initial decision to migrate and the ability to negotiate with family members regarding home-making.

Like the fluidity of identity negotiations, women's agency can also undergo changes—either enhancement or decline—as they leverage it to navigate possible constraints in migration. Tracking their experiences of using their agency to overcome constraints rooted in memory or adapting their aspirations for the future enables us to discern the shifting abilities and capabilities of female migrants to establish their evolving 'self.' For example, Longhurst et al.'s (2009) project on migrant women and food illustrates how female migrants leverage their agency to overcome culturally embedded differences by performing identities through cooking and eating with other female migrants from various countries. Moreover, research also probes the relationship between adapted aspirations for a future home and the experiences of utilising women's agency. Fleury (2016) argues that migration can empower women, strengthening their agency, particularly for those who can access improved employment and education opportunities. For female migrants aspiring to reside in a nation or city with greater gender equality and progressive norms, their aspirations may shift from temporary to permanent settlement.

However, migration can also exacerbate vulnerabilities, especially when female migrants lack the professional skills or legal status to access the benefits of improved gender equality and norms. Female refugees or asylum seekers, for instance, may find their agency curtailed by immigration policies, resulting in lower expectations for their new home (Webber, 2018). At the same time, discrimination, particularly of a racial or ethnic nature, poses a significant hurdle for highly educated women engaging in international migration (see, for example, Raghuram, 2000; Gaillard, 2002; Kofman & Raghuram, 2006). Despite their qualifications and expertise, these women may encounter barriers that hinder their integration into the workforce and community. These discriminations can not only impede career advancement but also erode the overall well-being and agency of migrant women (Fleury, 2016). Moreover, the intersectionality of identities, where factors such as race, gender, and legal status intersect, creates complex dynamics that compound the difficulties faced by female migrants.

Migration itself has been identified as a significant avenue for women to enhance their agency in negotiating possible constraints rooted in their domestic responsibilities (Fleury, 2016). Moreover, educational attainment plays a pivotal role in shaping the agency of female migrants, influencing their opportunities for migration and employment, as well as concurrently moulding their identities. Importantly, education provides a platform through which they access egalitarian ideals regarding gender relations and cultivate awareness of women's independence (Monkman, 2011). This duality underscores the transformative power of education in their lives.

In this thesis, the educational backgrounds of highly educated women assume a distinctive role in promoting their agency within the specific context of internal migration. Unlike international migration scenarios, where constraints often emanate from immigration policies and socio-cultural norms, including patriarchal and heterosexual expectations, and discriminations, which may undermine highly educated women's ability to establish their 'self' as they desire, domestic migration within China presents a different landscape (Ho, 2006).

These female migrants move across cities or provinces within China, avoiding certain complexities associated with international migration. First, domestic migration situates them in a context akin to that of the majority of city residents in their host cities, sharing national identity, ethnicity, language, skin colour, and often similar cultural backgrounds. Second, these women typically acquire local *hukou* status in their migration

destinations (except those moving to Shanghai and Beijing), alleviating concerns related to immigration policies and welfare compared to their counterparts engaged in international migration or low-skilled female migrants in the same destinations. Their advantages in the labour market, coupled with a college education fostering egalitarian attitudes about gender equality, amplify their awareness of the significance of wielding power in both public and domestic spheres (Shu, 2004). This unique context illuminates the relationship between education, agency, and internal migration for highly educated women. Nevertheless, despite their advantageous position within the realm of internal migration, these women, when undertaking substantial relocations and investing significant efforts to establish themselves in new homes far from their place of birth, also contend with a spectrum of constraints and motivating factors that deeply influence their process of relocation (Neyts, 2015) Within the relatively limited body of literature that addresses internal migration, particularly in the Southeastern and East Asian contexts, it becomes apparent that certain entrenched cultural norms, including patriarchal and heterosexual norms, still wield significant influence over how women exercise their agency in shaping their current and future notions of home. Research into women's agency and migration decision-making in Vietnam conducted by Hoang (2011) shows that the agency of female Vietnamese individuals engaged in internal migration is, to some extent, constricted as they are compelled to negotiate for their interests while simultaneously endeavouring to preserve familial harmony. Hoang characterises Vietnam as a 'society where the family plays a central role' (ibid.: 1455).

Like Vietnam, Chinese society has also maintained women's responsibility for family harmony and cohesion. For low-skilled female migrants moving from rural areas to cities, sending remittances back to 'left-behind' families, normally their father or husband, is also a way to enhance their ability to negotiate with (male) family members (Chang, 2008). Even talented female migrants moving from less developed cities to metropolitan areas tend to prioritise being a better caregiver for elderly parents as the top motivation for migrating (Wang et al., 2016). Therefore, it is imperative to acknowledge that, for Chinese female migrants, no matter whether they move across or within the national border, all have to manage their relationships with the 'left-behind' family. There are various approaches, given that they have different social identities and are regulated by slightly different social and cultural norms (these norms might vary because of distinct family traditions, cultural and social norms in the host/home societies and such like).

This section has illuminated the interplay between (internal) migration and the evolving self of female migrants. In the next section, I further discuss women's changing selves based on the theories of life course and the empirical context of contemporary China.

2.4 Navigating gender norms across life stages

The life stage is a concept rooted in life-course theories. Life-course theories have been widely adopted across social science, providing longitudinal perspectives in understanding changes in human lives between birth and death (Mayer, 2009). Life-course studies have attempted to merge multiple disciplines, such as sociology, demography, anthropology, developmental psychology, economics and health studies, into an integrated classification and interpretation (e.g., Mayer, 2007; Gauthier & Furstenberg, 2005; Wu & Li, 2005). These studies describe the structures and sequences of events and life stages through individual lives, focusing on patterns of order in the practices of everyday life (Elder et al., 2003). For example, behavioural research on areas such as consumption or health behaviours explores 'patterns of order' (Umberson, 2010; Moschis, 2007), while sociological research on life-course stages, trajectories and transitions of work, family or education illustrates the order of patterns. In pursuit of models of individuals' life courses, researchers aim to understand the historical and biographical context, marking the developments of societies.

Life course theory helps map individuals' changing 'self', illustrating their progression through historical and biographical times. Researchers have categorised migrants' life-course transitions as encompassing a wide array of experiences, including but not limited to entering and completing higher education, entering the labour force, forming partnerships, becoming parents, changing jobs, children leaving home, retirement, or even returning to their home country (Bernard & Charles-Edwards, 2014). Life stages, which encompass multiple life-course events, often entail significant shifts in one's status, agency, or identity, both on a personal and societal level (see, for instance, Troiden, 1989). Finally, life course trajectories, which denote sequences of roles and experiences, consist of various life-course stages or events, signifying moments of timing or changes in one's state or role (Elder et al., 2003). For migrants, the migration process is a significant aspect of their life-course trajectories, involving multiple transitions and various life-course stages.

Geographical research underscores the need to critically re-conceptualise life-course trajectories and stages. This re-conceptualisation emphasises the importance of understanding the nonlinearity of individual life courses and how biographical disruptions are created, experienced, and negotiated. Moreover, it highlights the pivotal role of place in shaping life-course trajectories and the changing self across various life stages (Hörschelmann, 2011: 379). Drawing from antecedents in behavioural geography, regional science, feminist geography, the geography of ageing, and population studies (see, for example, Bailey, 2009;

Coulter et al., 2016), geographical research aims to elucidate the active and dynamic role of places and spatial relationships in shaping societies and individual lives. Thus, geographical perspectives underscore the importance of the dynamic interplay of time and broader socio-cultural contexts at different life stages (see, for example, Hall, 2019; Settersten et al., 2020).

Reframing societal expectations within the context of the Chinese life course reveals a prevailing inclination to 'standardise' the sequences and content of life events, thereby regulating the order of life stages for women in this society. Central to this standardisation is the norm of age. Life-course scholarship operates under the assumption that lives are socially structured and age plays a crucial role in organising, planning, or regulating social practices from the perspectives of societies, groups, and individuals. At the societal level, many laws and policies structure rights, responsibilities, and entitlements based on age, while the modern life course often adheres to age-related structures (Settersten, 2003). For instance, primary and secondary educational institutions rigidly adhere to age-based grade levels, and educational programs at the college level impose time limits for degree completion (Anderson, 2014; Bailey et al., 2010). On an individual and small group level, age subtly infiltrates and shapes everyday social interactions, influencing the expectations and perceptions of oneself and others within these exchanges.

For Chinese women, age is akin to a ticking clock, serving as a potential harbinger of failure in meeting standardised life event patterns at specific life stages. An illustrative example is the pervasive discrimination faced by what are often derogatorily labelled as "leftover women": those who are unmarried at the age of 27, 'left behind' in the marriage market. Unmarried women approaching the age of 27 or married women who have not given birth to their first child, typically ranging between 25 and 40 years old, may encounter discrimination during job recruitment or, in some instances, have a higher risk of being laid off than their male counterparts (see, for example, Lee, 2001). This deep-rooted social construct perpetuates the pressure on Chinese women, symbolising the societal emphasis on adhering to normative life events while highlighting the gender disparities embedded within these norms.

However, Chinese scholars have also observed that this tendency toward standardisation is eroding, particularly among female professionals in metropolitan areas of China. Neoliberal transitions have been recognised as powerful drivers of change for women who can leverage their knowledge and skills to enhance economic agency. This allows them to negotiate and customise life events' patterns and content to suit their circumstances (Lo,

2020; Gaetano, 2014). For instance, qualities such as self-reliance, self-motivation and a strong work ethic pursued by 'post-'90s' Chinese lesbians signifies a trend in which women hoping to diverge from standardised life-course trajectories now associate this ambition with neoliberal values that emphasise self-improvement (Wang, 2021).

From a geographical perspective, this thesis aims to enrich the literature on broader societal transformations by examining individual life-course transitions. Specifically, it explores how highly educated women navigate many challenges across various life stages (singlehood, motherhood), and the lives of women who pursue family structures that diverge from conventional 'standardised' forms, including the nuclear and reproductive patterns of contemporary China. The unique and innovative combination of geographical and life-course perspectives in the context of internal migration in China sets this research apart. The exploration of highly educated women in three distinct life stages offers an intergenerational perspective, shedding light on individuals' spatial practices within an evolving socio-cultural context rooted in the neoliberal transitions of Shenzhen.

Sections 2.2 to 2.4 discussed the close and dynamic interplay between the changing 'self' of highly educated female migrants and evolving gender norms catalysed by the neoliberal transitions of Shenzhen. The subsequent section reviews geographical research revolving around home, underscoring the idea that home-making can be understood as a pathway through which to pursue or enable the desired changes in the 'self' throughout the life course of highly educated female migrants.

2.5 Migrant home-making as a dynamic practice

> *As a space of belonging and alienation, intimacy and violence, desire and fear, the home is invested with meanings, emotions, experiences and relationships that lie at the heart of human life.*
> Blunt and Varley (2004: 3)

As the quotation suggests, binaries such as private/public, familiarity/isolation, and safety/fear coexist within the notion of home, whether as material or imaginary spaces (as seen in work by Blunt & Varley 2004 and Chapman & Hockey 1999). For instance, in research on paid domestic caregivers, home, which is familiar and private for the owners, can also be a site of oppression and alienation for these caregivers (Maidment et al., 2005). However, the coexistence of these binaries in emotions, experiences, and relationships does not imply that the landscape and meaning of home are fixed and irreversible. Kaika (2004: 266) argues that the ideal sense of domestic safety and familiarity can be rebuilt by excluding 'the other' (whether human or non-human factors) from home, thus ending the sense of alienation fostered by it. Shifting the research focus from merely 'mapping' these binaries to understanding the active processes involved in reversing potential exclusiveness (as suggested by Brickell 2012), critical geographies of home have emerged to interpret the complexity of the concept systematically.

Recent research on critical home geographies posits that the complexity of home can be comprehended by uncovering 'the politics of home' (Brickell, 2012: 227). These politicised understandings of home extend beyond the physical boundaries of dwelling spaces and can even be reduced to the body (Blunt & Dowling, 2006). Recognising the connections between individuals' identities, agency, and the meanings assigned to home, Brickell (2012) argues that the domestic space functions as a locus of personality and meaning, with individuals positioned differently within it. This argument highlights distinctly embodied experiences influenced by age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and class.

In this research, I embrace a multifaceted understanding of home through the lens of the life-course perspective (Elder et al., 2003), recognising it as a canvas that reflects women's agency and that materialises their visions of anticipated futures or memories. From a spatial standpoint, the concept of 'stretching' home underscores the capacity of individuals to blur the physical confines of home (Gorman-Murray, 2006: 56), allowing for the creation of a sense of home by redefining the meanings of safety, familiarity, and control within urban or rural spaces (as discussed by Boccagni, 2017; Blunt & Sheringham, 2018). Approaching

this subject from a temporal perspective, I acknowledge that the symbolic significance and material landscape of home continually shift in response to the evolving life experiences of individuals (as explored by Choi, 2019). Consequently, I view home in this thesis as a dynamic process rather than a static outcome, aligning with the ideas presented by scholars such as Massey (1994) and Ahmed (1999).

As highlighted in Chapter 1, home becomes a contested territory for highly educated women in contemporary Shenzhen, serving as a battleground in which tensions between neoliberalism, migration aspirations, women's agency, and Chinese tradition meet. Below, I investigate deeper into this complexity and introduce the concept of migrant home-making as a dynamic practice, shedding light on the evolving and adaptive nature of how these women construct and reinterpret the notion of home in response to their unique circumstances.

It is important to highlight the notion of home-making first. Home-making is often discussed in research on everyday place-making. From the perspective of space-human interaction, home-making can be understood as the process that transforms space to place by linking subjectivities and identity formation to a space called home through everyday practice (Bardwell-Jones, 2017; Wood et al., 2016). Additionally, as Blunt (2005) argued, the political meaning of home is rooted in internal intimacies and expressed through the interfaces with a broader world. These two assertions indicate that migrants' home-making practice is not merely based on making sense of home, but also deeply connected to and interacting with the changing sense of self (Gorman-Murray, 2008; Rose, 2004).

This thesis uses the practice approach to understand how everyday home-making can 'materialise' one's memories or imaginations (Crang & Thrift, 2001; May & Thrift, 2003; Shove, 2009; Pink, 2004, 2012). Here, the concept of 'practice' refers to making, doing, or operating (de Certeau, 1984). The practice approach highlights the role of materiality in understanding people's everyday social life (Schatzki, 2001). According to practice theory, everyday practices consist of bodily movements, objects, practical knowledge, and routines. They are a co-constitutive relation between individual actions and the larger-scale social order (Reckwitz, 2002). Home researchers believe that the practice approach is valuable in understanding everyday home-making because it attends to both the spatial and temporal aspects of the notion of home. The practice approach asks home researchers to interpret how specific 'doings', routines, or actions in the present home act to 'materialise' past experiences or expectations towards the future in one's life course.

Recognising that the practices of making home during migration are more about forging routes than roots (Clifford, 1997), recent research has redefined the idea of migrant home-making as a series of practices that reshape domestic spaces into 'in-becoming' home (Nowicka, 2007: 73). For migrants, the past trajectories of creating a 'home on the move' are often documented through their memories (see, for example, Ahmed, 1999; Tolia-Kelly, 2006). These memories of home-making experiences can simultaneously involve detaching from the past home and re-attaching to new homes. For instance, Dudley (2010) illustrates how forcibly exiled refugees may feel 'rootless' as they attempt to establish a home in an unfamiliar foreign land. This case also highlights that migrant home-making can encompass the process of repositioning the 'self' from the home of the past to the present. Therefore, Tolia-Kelly (2004a) suggests that, for migrants, making sense of home in host societies involves ongoing practices or typical experiences of linking past and present, there and here.

This thesis draws inspiration from the uprooting/regrounding framework to explore the connection between the changing 'self' of migrants and their 'in-becoming' home (Ahmed et al., 2003). Uprooting/regrounding suggests that migrant home-making involves the simultaneous uprooting and re-grounding of the 'self,' encompassing affective, material, and symbolic dimensions. This relational perspective of the framework specifically addresses the role of memories. Like Blunt (2006), who regards home as a 'site of memory,' Hoffman (1989: 278) describes the process of making a home as the recreation of 'soils of significance' for preserving or displaying the affective qualities of home. For immigrants, making sense of home involves materialising the 'staying-put' part of the self in the in-becoming home, such as material objects (e.g., photographs or paintings), social relationships (e.g., established friendships or family ties), rituals (e.g., routine festivals, reunions or birthday parties), and the like. Since the self of migrants is consistently influenced by both migrating and homing experiences, their home-making is regarded as an ongoing process of production and reproduction that is never fully complete (Tolia-Kelly, 2004a). In summary, the uprooting/regrounding framework has revealed how migrants can emplace the changing self, whether reshaped or unchanged, by reflecting their subjectivities in the present home. This framework highlights the material and symbolic nodes in memories for interpreting migrant home-making practices.

Following Ahmed and her colleagues (2003), migration researchers have utilised the concept of uprooting/regrounding to analyse the homing experiences of transnational migrants (see, for example, Burrai et al., 2023; Walsh, 2011; Longhurst et al., 2009). These

studies explore the uprooting/regrounding dynamics of transnational migrants, examining how everyday practices involving home objects—such as food, decorations, religious or leisure items—act as "translators," facilitating shifts between different contexts, sensorial experiences, and historical narratives (Vanni, 2017: 193). Informed by this framework, migration researchers emphasise that these everyday practices surrounding home objects serve as cultural processes through which migrants negotiate their identities, attachments to place, and emotions throughout the migration journey. The exploration of this thesis aims to build on and enrich the application of uprooting/regrounding in the context of internal migration.

From a temporal perspective, the concept of uprooting/regrounding has explicitly addressed how migrant home-making effectively connects the 'here' and 'now' to the 'there' and 'past' (Ahmed et al., 2003). can be perceived as a perpetual journey, emphasising residential mobility and transience rather than stability and permanence. Beyond the idea of regrounding and establishing roots in a migration destination, migrant home-making can also involve connecting the present home with an imagined future home. Therefore, I suggest that migrant home-making not only creates 'a site of memory' but also establishes platforms to pursue aspirations (Blunt, 2005: 14). In other words, beyond connecting the now and past, home can also be made to connect the now and the future.

The potential of imagining and aspiring towards the future is now increasingly considered in interpreting practices of making migrants' in-becoming home (see, for example, Collins, 2017; McCormack & Schwanen, 2011). For instance, Shubin (2015) conceives migrants' lives as open-ended, encompassing a multitude of futures, presents, and pasts. He argues that migration is situated not only in relation to present articulations of subjectivity but also in coexistence with pasts that shape migrants' trajectories and future possibilities that are desired but not yet realised. In this context, making 'home on the move' does not describe fragmented practices isolated in different times and spaces; instead, it signifies ongoing and continuous efforts to make the 'self' feel at home, especially in the context of the 'expected' imagined home. Therefore, Shubin (2015) suggests that studies exploring migrant home-making practices should closely examine past, present, and future connections. However, capturing these connections, particularly the associations between the present and future, in certain practices can be challenging (Adam, 1998; 2008), as it requires portraying the invisible (the future) solely based on a series of present narratives.

In geographies of temporality and home, the timescape perspective offers a nuanced lens through which to reconsider the concept of migrant home-making and to enrich the existing uprooting/regrounding framework (Adam, 2008; Liu, 2020). It argues that the lens of 'everyday' can 'map' the subtle changes of the subjectivity and its following manifestations and reflections of making home space (Duncan & Lambert 2004: 387) at one's current life stage. Migrants' identity and agency can be transformed (or maintained) in everyday social and cultural encounters during the processes of migrating and homing (see, for example, Yeoh, 2015). Therefore, home-making in the present, as a way of materialising and emplacing the changing self, creates the timescape of home.

Recent literature has explored how migrants can 'materialise' the formation of their identities or the processes involved in constructing subjectivities, enabling uprooting oneself from their past homes and establishing roots in their present home. Blunt and Dowling (2006: 212) have claimed that transnational homes, serving as sites of memory, should be perceived as performative spaces. Within these spaces, both personal and inherited connections to other remembered or imagined homes are embodied, enacted, and reworked. Memories, akin to pathways leading to the past (see, for example, Tolia-Kelly, 2004a; 2004b), enable migrants to perform and negotiate their identities, adapting to new migrant roles as they transition between the past and the present through their everyday practices. In this context, materialising one's identity formation or subjectivity construction should be understood not merely as a re-creation of a previous home but as a memory space (Longhurst et al., 2008). Home serves as the nexus connecting current home spaces with the specific life events that have transpired in places and times embedded in one's memories (Lewicka, 2014). For migrants, their life narratives entwined with home objects or home-making rituals act as bridges that link them to their past experiences, actions, performances, and embodied interactions with places, people, and objects.

In contrast to the body of literature focusing on the past-present connections within the home, there is a relatively limited corpus of research that explores how migrants can also 'materialise' their aspirations, enabling the expected changes in their lives (Liu, 2020). Clarke (2001) posits that home is not only a site of memories but also a canvas for 'materialising' one's aspirations and imaginations towards the future. Adam and Groves (2007) offer a dual perspective on the future-scape: 'future present,' where future anticipations adapt current practices and mould the forthcoming, and 'present future,' which recognises that the future is an outcome of past and present trends. In line with these

perspectives, creating the future-scape of home involves either planning, prefiguring, and activating present home-making practices (Dodgshon, 2008) or redirecting the trajectories of past home-making practices in the present (Kitchin, 2019).

As a relatively new perspective in exploring migrant home-making, I use several examples here to elaborate on the dynamics between everyday home-making and one's aspirations for the future. Shove et al. (2007) exemplify this by linking kitchen possessions and food practices through a system they term 'having-doing dynamics,' where 'having' refers to material possessions and 'doing' pertains to performance. They argue that the balance between 'having' and 'doing' is dynamic and precarious, leading to the constant reshaping of home-making routines, both temporally and spatially. Moreover, expected changes, often related to the evolving needs of family members, also influence the practices of shaping the future-scape of home. Schwiter (2013) observes that adults on the brink of parenthood tend to transform their homes by incorporating more childcare devices, redefining home as a haven for children rather than solely a private space for themselves. From the perspective of dismantling or 'unmaking' home, Harker (2009, 2010) suggests that the potential deconstruction of the future home or house can reshape current domestic spaces and practices. This is driven by visions of future precarity within the broader society and aspiring to migrate to a more promising place.

In this research, by embracing the timescape perspective, I understand migrant home-making in everyday settings as a series of practices interwoven with an individual's anticipated life changes. These practices extend from their past life experiences, traverse their current life stage, and project into an envisioned future. Aligning with the argument that migrant home-making represents a process of (re)locating the changing 'self' within the continuously evolving concept of 'home,' this thesis asserts that the practice of migrant home-making reveals the interconnections and linkages between the everyday temporality of home and the migratory timeline embedded within an individual's life course. Within this conceptual framework, the subjectivities of migrants take centre stage as they actively (re)shape, envision, execute, adapt, or occasionally reject the very act of home-making. These aspects serve as vessels that facilitate the transportation of memories and aspirations, allowing for journeys across time — from the past through the present and toward the envisioned future.

In the next section, I construct a research framework for interpreting the home-making of female migrants, emphasising the role of agency in enabling expected changes for women who move across multiple life stages and geographical locations.

2.6 *Sailing/Anchoring:* perpetual journeys of female migrants

Incorporating the timescape perspective in the concept of uprooting/regrounding, I propose a novel framework of *sailing/anchoring* to interpret the home-making of female migrants, highly educated/skilled particularly, as agentic practices throughout perpetuating life journeys. Recognising the intertwined relationships between the changing 'self' of migrants and their home-making, I use the analogy of '*sailing/anchoring*' to explore how female migrants use their bodies and subjectivities as vehicles to travel among different life stages across their life courses and geographical locations (de Hass, 202). Like uprooting/regrounding, *sailing/anchoring* highlights the role of migrants' changing 'self', but further considers the time frame for migrants' changes of subjectivities and identities from their past to present and to imagined future. In contrast to uprooting/regrounding, *sailing/anchoring* deems women's mobility as continual journeys in their life courses, highlighting a sense of movement and impermanence embedded in these women's everyday lives.

In this thesis, the framework of *sailing/anchoring* is more agentic compared to uprooting/regrounding (Ahmed et al., 2003). The concept of *sailing* refers to the daily home-making practices of migrants, wherein they exercise agency to depart from previous homes constrained by societal expectations and limited opportunities, enabling them to pursue aspirations such as career development and identity formation. Compared to the notion of uprooting, the journey of *sailing* entails leveraging or enhancing agency to intentionally detach oneself, both materially and emotionally, from specific geographical locations. On the other hand, *anchoring* pertains to the daily home-making practices of female migrants through which they unpack selected social, material, or emotional connections to past homes and pursue aspirations. In contrast to the concept of regrounding oneself and establishing roots in migration destinations, the processes of anchoring encompass practices that leverage agency to pursue lifestyles or identities that may have been challenging to attain in their past homes, such as ancestral homes (*laojia*[4]), or natal homes located outside of Shenzhen.

[4] Laojia: a place to which most Chinese migrants return at least once a year in the Spring festival

Expanding on the feminist lens applied in this thesis, the conceptualisation of *sailing/anchoring* in the context of women's migration takes on a distinct meaning. *Sailing* encompasses the everyday home-making practices of female migrants through which they leverage their agency to liberate themselves from situations and socio-cultural contexts that impose constraints on their pursuit of desired personal changes throughout their life course, while *Anchoring* pertains to the daily home-making practices of female migrants through which they employ their agency to materialise and actively pursue desired changes in their self-defined destinations at specific life stages.

Moving the lens to internal migration in China, the framework of *sailing/anchoring*, centralising the material dimension of home in carrying out one's *sailing/anchoring*, provides an enlightening perspective from which to understand migrant home-making in the Chinese context. As Kochan (2016) argued, Chinese migrants' conceptualisation of home can be divided into three interrelated perspectives – the ancestral home, the city home, and the material home. His research questions, such as how migrants transform their identity in their ancestral home and the city home; or how interior decorations reflect migrants' changing identity and social inspiration or aspiration since they have limited ability to modify the external facades of their home, can be interpreted by adopting this framework.

Considering home-making as an agentic practice, I also incorporate certain everyday practices beyond the domestic sphere as potential 'alternative' pathways for *sailing* and *anchoring* when domestic settings restrict individuals from pursuing their aspirations. As noted earlier, in contemporary society, the concept of home can (and often does) extend beyond the physical boundaries of the house due to the 'porosity' of material and imaginative boundaries between home and the city (Blunt & Sheringham, 2019). Rather than viewing home-making solely as confined to domestic practices, I aim to offer fresh insights into understanding migrant home-making as a unified system encompassing both domestic and non-domestic realms, rather than viewing them as separate/ binary spheres. In section 2.6.2, I elaborate on how specific non-domestic routines and activities also serve as agentic practices that facilitate migrants' anticipated life changes.

Both the investigation of home-making within and beyond material boundaries underscores the importance of material dimensions in understanding the nuanced shifts in one's sense of self. This emphasis extends not only to the transitions between different life stages of female migrants but also to the fluid movements among multiple places called homes in Shenzhen. Consequently, the examination of everyday home-making practices

through the lens of home materiality greatly enhances the capacity of this research framework to comprehend the complex dynamics of internal migration in China.

The framework of *sailing/anchoring* represents a re-contextualisation of migrant home-making, drawing inspiration from life-course theories, timescape perspectives, and a feminist lens. *sailing/anchoring* enables not only the exploration of this research but also opens avenues for future literature to reconsider migrant home-making within the context of one's life course, particularly as one traverses various life stages. By building upon the foundations of uprooting/regrounding, *sailing/anchoring* incorporates the timescape perspectives. Moreover, it posits that comprehending migrant home-making as an ongoing negotiation throughout women's life courses necessitates the examination of their evolving 'self' by tracing the material dimensions of home and everyday home-making.

The framework of *sailing/anchoring*, as a more agentive approach compared to uprooting/regrounding, necessitates adaptations when applied to female migrants from diverse backgrounds and within different migration contexts. Firstly, when utilising the framework to examine how highly skilled/highly educated female migrants facilitate anticipated life changes through home-making, researchers should acknowledge potential social constraints inherent in transnational migration, such as the devaluation of women's skills or insecure visa statuses (Ho, 2012; Yeoh & Willis, 2005), while also addressing the nuanced interplay between mobility and immigration for these migrants. Secondly, when employing the framework to study low-skilled female workers or women with limited agency to pursue expected changes (e.g., refugees or asylum seekers), researchers should adapt the framework accordingly and consider all factors undermining these women's agency.

The rest of this section further enriches the framework of *sailing/anchoring* by delving into the literature on home-making practices within and beyond the domestic sphere.

2.6.1 *Sailing/Anchoring* and home-making within the domestic

The significance of the material dimensions of home and home-making is central to the framework of *sailing/anchoring*. Previous studies on migrant home-making have underscored the role of materiality, contending that everyday home-making can transform everyday objects into social artefacts and provide platforms for negotiating identities or establishing subjectivities. This transformation can manifest through changes in the interior décor or architectural styles of homes (Klaufus, 2006). Recent research has investigated further into material home-making, shedding light on the complex interactions between objects, memories, and imaginations, through which migrants can shape the social and cultural meanings associated with each material element. Ultimately, this process makes home a nexus of identity, power, and emotions (Longhurst et al., 2009; Blunt & Dowling, 2006).

In the context of China, these complex intertwined elements are conditioned by certain factors. In China, migrants' ability to modify the external facades of their homes is limited. Institutional urban marginalisation places many migrants, rural-to-urban particularly, in the position of powerless renters, with all legal and practical rights, such as land use, building rights, or compensation in the event of demolition, resting with urban landlords. This lack of agency diminishes migrants' capacity to use the exterior materiality of their urban home to represent their social or economic status or their connection to their urban environments (Kochan, 2016). Consequently, domestic migrants in China tend to find ways to materialise their emotional connections to their *laojia* by making changes to the interior design or layout of their living spaces, or by upholding specific family traditions. This context is essential for comprehending the concept of material home-making within the Chinese context. Drawing from practice theories noted in the previous section (Reckwitz, 2002), this thesis focuses on the various practices related to using, collecting, producing, and (re)defining material objects and spaces, all of which significantly contribute to migrants' processes of *sailing* and *anchoring* within the framework.

Recent studies have explicitly revealed the relationships between the changing 'self' of migrants and material home-making as it contributes to creating an intimate, protected, and positive realm of emotion, relationships, and experiences (Boccagni, 2017). Tolia-Kelly (2004a, 2006) argues that material cultures function as a prism for memory and, therefore, emplace the identities of migrants. By reshaping the material landscape of the domestic, memories, emotional bonds, and social relationships established in the past can be transferred or reconstructed in the present lifetime (Tolia-Kelly, 2004a). However, the material

dimensions of home and home-making do not simply mirror associations with the past (Levin & Fincher, 2010) but also reveal their incorporation into the dominant representations of belonging (to the societies of destinations) and aspirations to or imagining of future lives (see, e.g., Kochan, 2016; Ralph and Staeheli, 2011).

As China undergoes continued neoliberal change and embraces globalising trends, internal migrants driven by economic opportunities or the well-being of family members often envision and prefigure their future homes while physically in the present home (see, for example, Kochan, 2016). This practice extends beyond merely depicting the interior design of home into actively pursuing housing ownership and choosing a location to meet the specific demands of distinct life stages. These may include aspiring to a larger house to accommodate newborn children, living in a particular school district to facilitate their children's education, or owning additional properties to support the residential independence of adult children (Cui et al., 2016; Forrest & Izuhara, 2012; Wu et al., 2018). In essence, home-making, particularly the practices associated with crafting a home for an imagined future, transcends the boundaries of merely reshaping the physical material environment. It also involves strategic considerations regarding the material dimensions of home, emphasising the significance of housing ownership and location. By identifying and examining the materialities and practices that constitute and shape the material dimension of home (or the next home), this research seeks to shed light on what has, or has not, been 'unpacked and transited' by *sailing* processes. This approach studies the complexities of migrant home-making and its role in negotiating evolving life courses.

The embodied practices of material home-making are also viewed as processes that enable the formation of specific aspired-to intimate relationships or emotional bonds (Buciek & Juul, 2006). This is particularly evident in the context of food in this thesis. Scholars have highlighted that food practices, including the preparation and consumption of food, serve as a crucial way for migrants to establish a sense of emplacement. On the one hand, these practices help migrants maintain socio-cultural ties with their countries of origin and recreate the meaning of home (Gasparetti, 2009). On the other, they alleviate the feelings of fragmentation and discontinuity that often accompany displacement (Rabikowska, 2010). For migrants, engaging in food practices allows them to anchor their changing selves by developing social connections with specific groups of people, such as their left-behind family members or local neighbours in their present location (Meah & Watson, 2011). For instance, Johnston and Longhurst (2012) argue that sharing food and cooking together helps establish

affective bonds between female migrants from different ethnic backgrounds within the same community. For these women, these embodied experiences, facilitated by food routines, become processes through which they assert agency to construct their desired identities. These identities are often centred around notions of belonging to their homelands and enhancing their social ties with local neighbours. Apart from associating the past-present home, food practices, as noted by geographical research in the Chinese context, also contribute to building the future-scape of home. In her research on food practices in Chinese families, Liu (2016) indicates that, in Guangzhou, some families with child-centred structures occasionally reshape the family-based food practices in contemporary three-generational families, as grandparents and parents feel that this may allow the child to grow healthier in the future (Jing, 2000). She argues that food practices in domestic spaces (eating or requesting) enable not only cultural transmission and transition but also emotional communication and reciprocal support.

While these studies have offered insights into how material home-making practices can strengthen emotional connections and nurture a sense of belonging and rootedness, empowering migrants to shape their desired identities and fulfil specific aspirations, I identify a research gap. Existing literature has not thoroughly explored the limitations of material home-making in facilitating desired changes in one's life course, particularly when considering migrants from diverse life stages but with similar backgrounds, such as comparable educational qualifications. It is crucial to recognise that material home-making practices should not be seen as a universal solution to the complex challenges faced by female migrants. For instance, within Chinese families, particularly in places like Guangzhou, food-related tasks, including meal preparation and cooking, often adhere to patriarchal norms. These domestic food responsibilities are predominantly considered and carried out as women's duties, typically assigned to mothers, grandmothers, or female domestic workers (Liu, 2017). Furthermore, structural issues such as legal status, discrimination, economic disparities, and class inequalities significantly impact female migrants' access to the resources and opportunities required to engage in practices related to housing, relocation, food preparation, or the reshaping of material home-making.

Rather than treating highly educated women as a homogenised group in this thesis, I recognise the structural differences that exist among women at various life stages. These distinctions encompass economic capabilities, family structures, and social expectations of them, all of which play crucial roles in home-making experiences. These structural variations

highlight the need for a nuanced understanding of the diverse challenges and opportunities faced by female migrants in their pursuit of an ideal home across different life stages.

2.6.2 *Sailing/Anchoring* and home-making beyond the domestic

Sailing/Anchoring also encompasses everyday experiences that expand the sphere of intimacy, emotional bonds, and agency beyond the domestic. Recent literature suggests that migrants also establish a sense of home beyond their domestic spaces through specific social or cultural encounters (Gorman-Murray, 2006; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2015; Butcher & Dickens, 2016). Kumar and Mukarova (2008: 325) argue that certain urban activities or routines, instead of taking on public qualities, 'remain intensely private, even intimate, activities'. Fortier (2000) discovered that Italian migrants in London believed that by immersing themselves in an environment filled with familiar accents, decorations, and faces, such as Italian restaurants, bars, or communities, they could better socially and emotionally establish themselves in the lives of Londoners.

These studies suggest that activities or routines that enable specific social or cultural encounters can fulfil migrants' desires and aspirations to "fit into" their new societies (Butcher, 2010: 23). These activities or routines typically provide spaces (e.g., markets, restaurants, bars), interpersonal interactions (with people who share common identities, nationalities, ethnicities, genders, classes), as well as specific objects with cultural meanings (e.g., food, decorations, artefacts). However, despite the valuable insights provided by existing literature on how certain urban activities or routines facilitate migrants' establishing a sense of belonging and expressing their identities beyond domestic spaces, these studies often focus on the micro-time frame of everyday settings. Furthermore, these discussions are typically centred around the context of international migration.

This thesis aims to bridge this research gap. As noted earlier, the *sailing/anchoring* framework reads migrant home-making as a unified system that transcends the boundaries of domestic and non-domestic spheres, recognising that both contribute to enabling desired changes in the 'self' throughout one's life course. It necessitates a re-evaluation of home-making beyond the domestic by emphasising the interplay between specific non-domestic routines and domestic practices. For instance, Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong, who often lack privacy and personal spaces in their employer's homes, tend to seek a sense of belonging and familiarity by congregating in the downtown Central District on their usual day off (Tillu, 2011). In this scenario, the challenges of establishing an intimate sphere within

their domestic environment motivate them to incorporate weekend gatherings as non-domestic home-making routines. While these non-domestic spaces are geographically separate from the domestic spaces where these migrant workers reside, the everyday practices in both spheres collectively create a sense of belonging and security for these migrants.

In the context of this thesis, home-making beyond the domestic is similarly conceptualised as a process in which migrants exercise their agency to pursue desired changes throughout their life course. For instance, Yu (2021) suggests that Malaysian-Chinese queer graduates migrate to Taiwan to escape the constraints of Islamic Malaysia, where their racial backgrounds and sexual orientations are stigmatised. Such 'escapes' are common in studies on queer migration within Asian societies (e.g., Lai, 2018; Kojima, 2014). As indicated in these studies, migration allows them to 'escape' their past lives and 'fit' into their imagined futures. For Malaysian Chinese individuals in Yu's (ibid.) research, these visions include a Chinese world where queer identities are no longer stigmatised. The processes of 'fitting in' for them encompass a series of everyday activities in urban spaces, such as strolling through urban areas adorned with Chinese shop signs or engaging with local or Malaysian queer communities. In this case, the processes of 'escaping' and 'fitting in' represent instances of *sailing/anchoring*.

In sum, the *sailing/anchoring* framework addresses several key research gaps in interpreting home-making in the context of internal migration. At its core, this framework argues that home-making can serve as the route for individuals to facilitate the anticipated changes in their life trajectories. However, this assertion necessitates a careful examination of the shifts in migrants' agency and the potential constraints they face, which may include legal status, economic disparities, and gender inequality within the broader socio-cultural context (see, for example, Ho, 2006).

2.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I began by elucidating the empirical settings of this research, wherein societal expectations deeply rooted in traditional gender norms in Chinese societies, alongside the pressure of women's biological clock, collaboratively shape standardised life courses for women. By examining how highly educated women in Shenzhen pursue their expected lifestyles or deviate from the standardised life courses within the context of neoliberal transitions in Shenzhen, my research aligns with its utopian feminist aim. The life stories of these women, centred around their moving to and making homes in Shenzhen, hold transformative potential, offering insights into individual efforts to negotiate gender norms and reshape societal expectations regarding women. Drawing upon the literature review, I argue that these life stories, documenting the dynamics between individual life changes and the rapid urbanisation and transitions of Shenzhen, act as catalysts for societal shifts in contemporary Shenzhen.

Then, I developed a novel framework of *sailing/anchoring* based on the concept of uprooting/regrounding to explore the relationships between these women's everyday negotiation of their life courses and the micro-geographies of home-making. The framework is developed to interpret the home-making of female migrants as agentic practices enabling the expected life changes in their life courses. The temporal focus of the *sailing/anchoring* framework offers a unique and tailored application to highly educated female migrants within feminist studies. It associates home-making practices with women's ability to break away from the constraints imposed upon them and to pursue the changes they envision over their life course. The feminist perspective inherent in the *sailing/anchoring* framework sheds light on the nuanced dynamics of power that female migrants negotiate in their everyday lives. It highlights women's agency to navigate gender norms and gender expectations throughout their life course, making it a pertinent framework for understanding the complexities of their migration journeys and the profound impact of their home-making practices.

With this framework as a guide, I embark on a qualitative exploration, delving into the lived experiences of highly educated female migrants in Shenzhen. The next methodology chapter will elucidate the research design, data collection, and analysis methods, providing a roadmap for my empirical investigation into the lives and home-making practices of participants in this research.

Chapter Three. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the epistemology, methodology, and fieldwork that underpin this research. The epistemological foundation is rooted in the interpretivism and feminist approaches (Tuli, 2010; Wills, 2007; Anderson, 1995, 2000). The interpretive approach highlights the significance of personal experiences and expectations as avenues for comprehending the world and understanding reality. In addition, the feminist approach perceives the generated knowledge as situated knowledge that reflects the specific perspective of women, exploring how gender 'does and ought to influence our conceptions of knowledge, knowers, and practices of inquiry and justification' (Anderson, 2000: 1). Building upon these epistemological foundations and considering the study's context, it recognises the everyday home-making practices of highly educated women as key to unravelling their resistance, negotiations, and aspirations within real-world situations, especially within the context of how the neoliberal transitions of Shenzhen might influence their life trajectories. As noted in the preceding chapter, this research frames highly educated women's home-making practices as a mechanism through which to position themselves within Shenzhen's broader social, economic, political, and cultural fabric. To uncover the processes by which these women position and reposition themselves in their societies, I employ qualitative exploration of the complex interconnectedness between mundane everyday home-making and the broader socio-cultural context of Shenzhen.

The rationale for adopting a qualitative approach is grounded in its suitability for exploring the nuanced and complex experiences of highly educated women in Shenzhen. While quantitative methods are valuable for gathering numerical data and identifying trends across large populations (see, for example, Miner et al., 2012), this research seeks to understand the participants' narratives and subjective experiences. In this context, qualitative research emerges as the most suitable avenue for unravelling these subjective experiences, providing a platform for participants to express their perspectives, beliefs, and emotions

within the context of the prevailing neoliberal transitions and gender norms. I employ a combination of visual methodologies and life stories. This fusion of approaches is a potent tool to mitigate the potential limitations of a single-method qualitative research design. The visual methods, including the video/photo-elicitation interview and video home tours, provide a tangible platform for participants to express their experiences and perceptions through visual cues, bridging the gap between the researcher's interpretation and the participants' perspectives (Henry & Fetters, 2012).

The rest of this chapter illustrates how I adapted my original research design to a remote, digitised research design and fieldwork because COVID-19 interrupted the original research fieldwork. I commence by setting out the research epistemology that underscores the intertwining of everyday home-making, temporal nuances, and the broader socio-cultural context of Shenzhen. Before introducing the digitised research design and remote fieldwork, an overview of the original in-person methodology is provided, featuring participatory visual methods and go-along techniques. Then, I elucidate how I digitised the original research design and conducted remote fieldwork.

Beginning in March 2020 and extending over 10 months, my fieldwork involved several phases: recruitment, filming, storyboard development, interviews, and follow-up interviews to document evolving life-course transitions, including experiences like divorce or motherhood. Drawing from successful ethnographic studies conducted during the pandemic, I highlight the implications and limitations of this adjusted approach. Ethical considerations are also addressed, focusing on measures to mitigate any sense of intrusion during remote home-based ethnography. The chapter culminates with the analysis of data and its alignment of finding chapters with research questions.

3.2 Research epistemology

The philosophical foundations that underpin this research are deeply rooted in interpretivism and feminism. In this section, I explore these epistemological approaches, shedding light on why they are uniquely well-suited to the goals of this study. Based on this discussion, I elucidate my rationale for selecting qualitative research to understand the multifaceted experiences of highly educated women in Shenzhen.

3.2.1 Interpretivism

Interpretivism is an epistemological approach within the realm of social research. It is grounded in the recognition that methods for understanding knowledge related to human and social sciences must differ from those applied in physical sciences. This distinction arises from a fundamental premise: human beings possess the unique capacity to interpret their world and subsequently act based on these interpretations, whereas the physical world itself lacks this interpretative dimension (Hammersley, 2013).

There are two key principles in applying an interpretive approach in social science. First, it recognises the subjective nature of reality, acknowledging that reality is not an objective, universally defined concept. Instead, it is shaped by individual experiences, perceptions, and interpretations. Second, it underscores multiple realities. Within the interpretive framework, a single social phenomenon can be understood in various ways, each interpretation deeply intertwined with the unique context in which it is observed (Creswell, 2007). This framework stands in contrast to the pursuit of overarching generalisations across populations. In the context of this study, characterised by the interplay of highly educated women's experiences, neoliberal transitions, and deeply ingrained societal norms, the interpretive approach seamlessly aligns with the research objective. The core aim of this study is to uncover the multifaceted experiences of highly educated women in Shenzhen as they navigate complex societal norms and transitions. Interpretivism's emphasis on the subjective, context-dependent nature of human experiences harmonises with the dynamic fabric of the lives of the study participants.

3.2.2 Feminist research

Feminist epistemology, a fundamental approach in social research, strongly emphasises the situated nature of knowledge. It contends that knowledge is not a universal, objective entity but reflects the unique perspectives and experiences shaped by individuals' social, cultural, and gender identities. This epistemological approach studies how gender influences and should influence our understanding of knowledge, the identity of those who possess it (knowers), and the methods of inquiry and justification (Anderson, 2000).

A feminist lens is indispensable for this research for several reasons. Firstly, it ensures that women's perspectives and experiences, which have often been marginalised or overlooked in traditional research paradigms, are placed at the core of the inquiry. This promise is particularly vital in the context of highly educated women in Shenzhen, whose experiences and voices may be sidelined due to deeply ingrained societal norms (e.g., hetero-patriarchal norms) and the political environment (e.g., centralised and top-down governance) in China (see, for example, Lo, 2020; Wang, 2021).

Secondly, this research focuses on individuals who do not conform to traditional gender and family norms (e.g., lesbians). The feminist approach is well placed to explore how these women’s non-conformity to societal expectations and their unique struggles should be understood and validated. Moreover, this research recognises the need to challenge existing knowledge attribution, acquisition, and justification conceptions. The feminist lens is pivotal in addressing the disadvantages faced by subordinated groups, including highly educated women, and aims to reform these conceptions to better serve the interests of these marginalised groups (Harding, 1998).

By embracing this feminist epistemology, this research ensures that women's voices and experiences are central to the inquiry. It explores how gender profoundly influences the conception of knowledge, the identity of the knower, and the practices of inquiry. In essence, it serves as a means to rectify existing gender imbalances in research, positioning women's experiences at the forefront in the quest to unravel the intricacies of highly educated women's lives in Shenzhen.

Based on these two central epistemological frameworks, my choice of qualitative methods arises from its suitability for exploring the nuanced and complex experiences of highly educated women in Shenzhen. Qualitative research captures the depth and subtleties of these experiences, providing a platform for participants to express their perspectives, beliefs, and emotions (Wills, 2012), aligning with the two epistemologies underscoring individual

experiences and women's voices. This research platform, facilitated by qualitative methods, is particularly valuable in a context profoundly shaped by neoliberalism and deeply ingrained gender norms. It allows for the exploration of participants' day-to-day lives and practices. Moreover, the adaptability and flexibility of qualitative methods are also valuable when exploring these multifaceted experiences, enabling researchers to adapt their approach based on emerging themes and insights (see, for example, Marzi, 2021; Rahman et al., 2021).

However, qualitative methodologies come with limitations. As briefly noted in the introduction of this chapter, critics have raised concerns, pointing to potential issues such as subjectivity, limited generalisability, and the possibility of researcher bias (Carminati, 2018). These concerns are particularly salient in geographical studies, with distinctive challenges. Subjectivity, for instance, can lead to interpretations influenced by the researcher's perspectives, introducing the risk of bias that might skew the findings. Moreover, the issue of limited generalisability arises from the difficulty of extending findings from a specific context to broader populations or other settings, thus constraining the more general applicability of the research (Holloway & Biley, 2011; Delmar, 2010).

At its core, it is crucial to grasp that this thesis does not aim to merely reflect reality like a mirror providing an unaltered image. Instead, it operates as a pragmatic process of description and relation that recontextualises aspects in novel ways (Crang, 2003). As such, the thesis does not seek to present an account of universal trends. Rather, it focuses on identifying and pinpointing the often-overlooked interrelations between the routine fabric of everyday life and the dynamic transformations shaping the landscape of Shenzhen. In subsequent sections elucidating this thesis's methodology, I outline the strategies employed to mitigate this.

The contextual sensitivity, adaptability, and commitment to capturing holistic understandings of lived experiences inherent in qualitative research render it the most appropriate approach to gathering data and generating knowledge that aligns with the dynamic nature of internal migration and the complexities interwoven in everyday lives. Meanwhile, the qualitative methodology seamlessly aligns with the two chosen epistemologies of this thesis, collectively ensuring that the research remains rooted in personal experiences and the perspectives of highly educated women as they navigate the complex societal norms of Shenzhen. With an understanding of our epistemological foundations, we now turn to the specific methodologies and techniques employed in this study to capture the experiences of highly educated women in Shenzhen.

3.3 Methodologies and research methods

This section showcases the methodologies and research methods that I chose which align with the epistemology of this research. My research design was primarily founded on the concept of household-based ethnography for collecting life stories, supplemented by visual methods, to co-produce knowledge (Lunch & Lunch, 2006; Grasseni & Walter, 2014). The dual focus on life stories and visual methods offered a holistic perspective on the multifaceted nature of home-making experiences.

I underscore the significance of life narrative interviews in comprehending life courses and lived experiences, particularly in the context of domestic settings. A narrative serves as a symbolic representation of a time span, unfolding over a specific period. Individual narratives provide researchers with a means to comprehend the temporal transformations within a confined space of time (Horsdal, 2011). In the literature on narrative methodologies (see, for example, Errol, 1997; Smith, 2000), life stories are interpreted and applied differently in multiple disciplines. For instance, in linguistic studies, life stories are regarded as social constructs, where each narrative serves as a linguistic unit intertwined with broader social interactions, ultimately reflecting cultural norms and values (Linde, 1993). In the clinical literature, life stories and illness narratives are employed to gain insights into patients' self-identity in hospitals and are extensively employed in narrative therapy as described by Riessman (1993). As an interpretive approach, life stories become a subject of examination, focusing on how individuals or groups make sense of the events and actions that shape their lives (Mitchell & Egudo, 2003).

Within home studies literature, life stories encompass textual forms (diaries, memoirs, letters, autobiographies) and in-person interactions (oral history interviews, focus group discussions, ethnographic research). These narratives provide insights into individuals' memories and perceptions of specific life events or stages, anchoring their personal experiences within broader social, political, and cultural contexts that shape their notions of home (Blunt, 2003; Blunt & Dowling, 2006). When using biographical narrative interviews in the domestic context, as noted by Boccagni (2018), "even the most ordinary ways of mentioning the word home, within an interview guide that had a much broader purpose, could generate original conceptual associations—besides facilitating respondents' reflexivity around their past biographies." The discussions about home can elicit unique insights, such as the affective ties or reflections of intimacy, among interview participants regarding their life stories and experiences.

I opted for biographical narrative interviews to collect life stories which were related to the home-making practices in the present because of the interpretive nature of this research method. These interviews provide a flexible and open-ended platform for participants to share their experiences in their own words, allowing for a rich, contextual understanding of their lives. In particular, these accounts offer valuable insights into the progression of life-course transitions, enabling the capture of contextual factors that influence these transitions across various life stages, ultimately revealing discernible trends and trajectories (Gabb, 2008). Incorporating personal life stories, often supplemented with visual materials and participant observations, is common in understanding everyday lives, home lives included, within life courses (Cole & Knowles, 2001). For instance, studies on identity and belonging post-migration gather life stories through biographical narrative interviews, elucidating how individuals construct their identities and attachments to migration destinations through the concept of home (Christou & King, 2010; Kinefuchi, 2010; Barrett, 2011). Life narrative interviews are employed to explore the relationship between specific home-making practices and participants' past biographies, as well as their aspirations towards their envisioned future selves, encompassing ideal lifestyles and expected identities.

However, while the life story approach has strengths in depicting the construction of subjectivities and emotional dynamics throughout one's migration journey, a research design that solely relies on biographical narratives of life stories presents limitations. Thus, adopting a multifaceted approach that complements life stories with other methodologies becomes essential in understanding the complexities inherent in migration trajectories and home-making experiences.

I incorporated an immersive approach that extended beyond traditional biographic narrative interviews in the original research design. Aiming to understand the interplay between female migrants' everyday lives and their life stories encompassing migration trajectories and homing experiences, I selected ethnographic video tours and video/photo-elicitation interviews to elicit these women's life stories. By extending the material for life stories beyond 'words' and incorporating 'videos', I planned to capture participants' daily routines and experiences in Shenzhen and the narratives that revolved around their home-making practices.

The household-based ethnography and interviews, hence, formed a foundation of my original research design, offering an essential counterbalance to solely relying on life stories. Household-based ethnography involves participants sharing narratives of their interior objects

and practices, allowing ethnographers to engage in firsthand observations of their everyday habits and routines. In this intimate setting, participants often employed their own bodies as tools, offering a richer insight into their experiences (Woodyer, 2008). Household-based interviews within the domestic are also deemed to play a crucial role in collecting life stories and uncovering participants' subjective feelings and decision-making processes across their life courses (Shen, 2013). These methodologies provided an immersive context that facilitated the exploration of individual choices and aspirations throughout participants' past, present, and future, all within the broader structural forces shaping their migration destinations.

At the heart of these ethnographic home tours lies the integration of visual methods, offering a visual lens to capture the participants' multifaceted experiences of everyday home-making. Visual methods, including photography and video/film-making, serve as valuable tools for unveiling phenomena that are often overlooked or challenging to articulate (Power, 2003). Visual methodologies align with the epistemology of interpretivism. As Rose (2001: 2) posits in her book, 'interpreting images is precisely that—interpretation, not the discovery of their 'truth'—thus, it is essential to justify your interpretation.' In geography, there exists a longstanding tradition of employing visual methods to study everyday life, place, and identity in housing areas (Crang, 1997; Latham, 2003; Crang & Cook, 2008). These geographical studies interpret visual materials as representations and cultural products (Urry, 2002) and, in doing so, view various types of visual materials as snapshots of the intersection between everyday life and visual culture, as exemplified by Moore (2008).

While visual methods can illuminate hidden aspects of participants' practices (Wills et al., 2016), concerns have been raised regarding potential researcher bias and the manipulation of visual data to conform to preconceived notions (Spencer, 2010). Crang (2010) argues that although the representations and symbolic dimensions of society are essential considerations, scholars must also acknowledge the role of practice in producing images.

In this research, I suggest that visual methods offer a more immediate and immersive glimpse into the everyday world of participants, bringing geographers closer to their daily home life experiences. Within the realm of home studies, participatory visual methods have been widely integrated into home-based ethnography (Pink & Leder-Mackley, 2012). This visual method involves participants taking an active role in directing video projects, capturing and reviewing footage to create films that reflect their experiences and perspectives, as

demonstrated by Marzi (2021). This approach boasts several advantages, including access to elusive data, the ability to capture subconscious and tacit knowledge, the expansion of data collection beyond verbal communication, and the facilitation of digital-visual engagement in our rapidly visualised and digitised world (see also Grasseni & Walter, 2014; Will et al., 2015). Importantly, such visual methods highlight the co-production of visual materials by both researchers and participants, providing insight into the process of how these visual materials are generated.

The home video tour method that I chose to collect visual materials is rooted in the concept of 'walking with video' (Pink, 2007: 240), which entails accompanying research participants with video recording as they navigate their material, immaterial, and social environments in ways that are personally, socially, and culturally specific. This innovative approach, known as video tours, facilitates a collaborative process between researchers and audiences who engage with the resulting video footage, allowing for the co-creation of empathetic and sensorial embodied understandings of everyday experiences.

The ethnographic home tours research method played a crucial role in my proposed research design, enabling me to investigate the interplay between participants' life stories and the nuanced dynamics of everyday home-making practices. While life stories offer insights into migration trajectories and homing experiences in Shenzhen, home tours establish a tangible foundation for capturing the palpable expressions of participants' day-to-day lives. These visual materials serve as a crucial bridge connecting the micro-level practices of everyday home-making to the broader socio-cultural landscape of Shenzhen. This methodology facilitates the exploration of the multifaceted dimensions of home-making by prompting participants to understand their emotions, relationships, and meanings entwined with specific home routines and objects. This lens also allows for an in-depth examination of how home-making is interwoven with structural factors and socio-cultural contexts in Shenzhen, offering a holistic grasp of participants' experiences.

Furthermore, recognising the evolving nature of home-making in contemporary society (see Chapter 2), the ethnographic tours in this study, rooted in Pink's notion of 'walking with videos' (2007: 270), transcend the boundaries of domestic spaces. The 'go-along' method, which allows researchers to participate in patterns of movement while conducting research, is particularly relevant in 'Urban Tours' (Büscher & Urry, 2009). This approach combines the strengths of ethnographic observation with the depth of interviewing, expanding the array of data-gathering techniques to encompass multiple perspectives and

angles. By accompanying individuals in familiar urban contexts, researchers can immerse themselves in participants' worldviews (Cass et al., 2003) and uncover emotional attachments, activity patterns, lifestyles, and networks of intimacy (Buscher, 2006).

Similar to home tours, the process of filming during interviews enables researchers to experience movement patterns firsthand, providing insights into how diverse mobilities shape participants' everyday lives (O'Neill, & Roberts, 2019). However, as Kusenbach (2003: 462) critiques, 'go-along' may not be universally applicable to all sociological and phenomenological inquiries. While it excels in capturing physical movements and in-place experiences, it encounters challenges in revealing the subjective feelings, life stories, and emotional dynamics that underlie these movements and experiences. These challenges stem from various factors, including the constraints of time, the potential for more superficial engagement, external distractions present in urban settings, and variances in participants' comfort levels during the tours. The initial research design addresses this challenge by integrating urban tours into the ethnographic video tours, encompassing these dimensions in the final video/photo-elicitation interviews.

This section has proposed the methodologies and research methods. In the following sections, I will elucidate how I conducted remote fieldwork in response to the COVID-19 context, where physical access to the field was restricted due to travel limitations.

3.4 Digitised methods and remote fieldwork

Due to COVID-19, The imposition of travel restrictions and lockdown policies in China interrupted the intended fieldwork, prompting the need to adapt the research approach rapidly. In response to these unique and challenging circumstances, I used a digitalised research design to facilitate remote fieldwork. This section begins by introducing recent research projects that successfully utilised digitalised methods in their fieldwork. It then gives the details of how I conducted the research methods remotely, encompassing the life story approach, home video tours, and urban tours.

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 ushered in a series of strict stay-at-home orders and movement restrictions worldwide aimed at curbing the virus's spread. These extended and intermittent restrictions disrupted traditional in-person fieldwork methods, challenging qualitative researchers to swiftly adapt to remote alternatives, mainly through digital technologies. This predicament prompted a critical re-evaluation of research designs to ensure data collection while complying with health regulations. As highlighted by

Lupton (2021), qualitative researchers faced the task of embracing alternative methods that could preserve data quality while respecting social distancing and travel limitations. The profound implications for understanding individuals' daily lives and their connection to their surroundings, especially within personal spaces like homes, were of particular concern. In this section, I elaborate on how I transformed the initial research design, originally reliant on intensive in-person interactions, into a remote approach.

The discourse around qualitative methodology had previously contemplated similar challenges, albeit not in the context of a global pandemic. Remote methods have long been harnessed to access marginalised communities, particularly those in hard-to-reach areas. Disability studies, for instance, underscored the importance of diverse and inclusive approaches, including remote methods, to gain deeper insights into the lives of individuals with disabilities (Kasnitz & Shuttleworth, 2001). Additionally, ethnographers have recognised remote methods' potential to overcome barriers related to physical, sensory, cognitive, or knowledge limitations, allowing broader participant inclusion (Apler, 2018; Pavez & Correa, 2020). While diverse fields have explored the complexities of remote methodologies, adapting in-person projects to remote methods remains vital, especially in crises like the COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent disruptions.

To adapt my research design to align with the necessity for remote fieldwork, I initially consulted literature addressing the challenges and implications of adapting in-person research designs to the COVID-19 context (Marzi, 2021; Watson & Lupton, 2022). Scholars highlighted key concerns, including ethical considerations, the feasibility of conducting research virtually, and the pandemic's impact on research relationships. For example, ethical issues arose concerning the need to reestablish informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality as research moved from in-person to online (Mwambari et al., 2022). Additionally, the virtual shift presented challenges to building trust and solidarity between researchers and participants (Valdez & Gubrium, 2020). Scholars have emphasised the importance of upholding methodological rigour, ethical integrity, and equitable research practices to address these challenges (Roberts et al., 2021). Rahman and colleagues (2021) advocated for digitising in-person research methods, highlighting the need for researchers to incorporate adaptability and flexibility into research protocols to enhance resilience during crises.

Recently, numerous qualitative studies have underscored the process of "digitalising" original research designs to enhance research resilience (Marzi, 2021; Watson & Lupton, 2022). Post-COVID-19, researchers have explored strategies such as video

conferencing platforms like Zoom (Howlett, 2021), mobile instant messaging apps (Kaufmann et al., 2021), and remote participatory methods (Hall et al., 2021) to engage hard-to-reach participants under social distancing guidelines. These digital tools have paved the way for creative research approaches, like merging video conferencing with the Photovoice method, to bolster participant engagement and mitigate ethical concerns. Moreover, these innovative methods incorporate a blend of non-digital and digital techniques, such as hand-drawn maps paired with video diaries or calls (Watson & Lupton, 2022). Nevertheless, challenges arise from the absence of face-to-face interactions, potentially impacting sustained participant engagement during prolonged ethnographic fieldwork (Hall et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2021).

Rather than solely resorting to online video tours and photo/video elicitation interviews, my adaptation process entailed a review of the initial research design. This involved a meticulous evaluation of the advantages and constraints of employing digital tools for remote fieldwork, all while upholding methodological rigour and preserving a balanced power dynamic between participants and researchers.

3.4.1 Digitalised research design

The adaptation process commenced with exploring established methodologies that utilise mobile video-recording devices, particularly smartphones, to understand the power dynamics and introduce flexibility into qualitative data collection. Smartphones have emerged as a potent tool for direct and real-time engagement between researchers and participants, circumventing the need for physical co-presence. Their potential has been mainly acknowledged in research involving hard-to-reach individuals such as migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers (Kaufmann, 2019). Moreover, this approach has been embraced in ethnographic investigations that seek to minimise the researchers' impact throughout the fieldwork (Nash & Moore, 2018). For instance, scholars have underscored how smartphones enable participants to create video diaries, offering a way to assess the influence of programs on individuals, even in remote settings such as the Antarctic (ibid.).

The limitations of smartphones are also evident. Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, qualitative studies involving smartphones primarily adhered to designs that required at least some degree of physical co-presence between researchers and participants. This dependency on direct interaction during preparatory stages, including introductory and training sessions, posed challenges when conducting transnational research within the context

of a health emergency (MacEntee et al., 2016). As exemplified by the participatory video research initiative involving South African educators, the guidance and skill-building necessary before, during, and after filming highlighted the limitations of such an approach (MacEntee et al., 2016). Therefore, despite smartphones' accessibility and technological advancements that have propelled the visual method as a potent research method, a considerable investment of time and effort is needed to train participants in collaborative filmmaking. Without prolonged and direct physical engagement, the challenge lies in upskilling participants to navigate the filming process proficiently, emphasising the collaborative essence of filmmaking. This consideration, which was underscored by the pre-COVID-19 landscape, particularly within transnational contexts, echoes the need to balance the enhanced accessibility of digital tools and the investment required for effective utilisation.

The decision to harness smartphones as instrumental tools in reshaping the initial research design in response to COVID-19 was rooted in an evaluation of their benefits and limitations. To collect the ethnographic videos of home remotely, it is important to empower participants to craft videos employing their smartphones. The digitalisation of the in-person visual method was underpinned by a confluence of compelling factors, foremost among them being the evolving landscape of fieldwork precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Within this transformed milieu, smartphones' widespread ownership and pervasive integration into individuals' daily work and personal routines generated a paradigm shift. To effectively employ visual methods from a remote standpoint, it became imperative to conduct a thorough re-evaluation of the traditional methodologies usually employed in on-site research. Furthermore, remote fieldwork demanded a reconfiguration of the roles, expertise, and power dynamics involved in the collaborative process of creating and applying video content (MacEntee et al., 2016).

There are two rationales for using smartphones to conduct ethnographic video tours, both within and beyond the domestic. First, the digitised visual approach capitalises on remarkable strides in smartphone technology, now equipped with the capacity to capture high-definition videos and connect to the internet seamlessly. This transformative technological landscape engenders novel prospects for active participant engagement in the collaborative production of PV, obliterating geographical constraints even in remote contexts. Moreover, smartphone-based ethnography has the potential to cultivate equilibrium within power dynamics, foster trust, and facilitate remote controls while participants take videos or photos (Faulkner & Zafiroglu, 2010). Furthermore, I strategically leveraged my physical

absence to access a privileged vantage point for observing the nuanced and intimate moments of the participants' lives, which may remain concealed when researchers are physically present (ibid.).

To summarise, I connected with participants individually via the WeChat platform, opting for this instead of visiting their homes. After establishing contact on WeChat, I guided participants through one-on-one video calls on the same platform, which introduced them to creating and employing video data. The process unfolded in three stages: firstly, I provided them with an information package, including the overview of the project's objectives, the research methodology, and the pivotal role participants played in it (see Fig 3.1). At the same time, I gained their informed consent (See Appendix 3). After receiving the home videos that my participants filmed according to my guidance, I facilitated a review of the video material they had generated, subsequently formulating interview questions stemming from their submitted content. Then, via video calls, I conducted video interviews, delving into their life stories and eliciting the emotions tied to specific home objects or domestic rituals. Lastly, I asked specifically about experiences or routines that extended beyond their domestic spaces and fostered a sense of belonging or rootedness in Shenzhen. Due to the travel restrictions, I cannot travel back to China while conducting the fieldwork. Therefore, I hired a research assistant to ensure specific visual data collection processes. The research assistant was asked to take photos of specific urban spaces and locations that were noted by participants. These photos became importance evidence for future visual analysis.

3.4.2 Remote fieldwork

The rest of this section introduces three main parts: 1) participant selection, 2) participant recruitment, and 3) data collection. I engaged with a cohort of 26 women residing in Shenzhen, each meeting specific criteria (Appendix 1). To be included, participants had to be internal migrants with a minimum residence duration of one year in Shenzhen; and they were required to possess a higher education level, equivalent to at least a Bachelor's Degree.

Beyond these foundational criteria, I purposefully sought out women navigating distinct pivotal life stages, as defined by Furstenberg (2005). These stages encompassed singlehood, motherhood, and engagement with families that do not conform to heteronormative norms (e.g., female-headed lesbian or divorced households). The selection of these three distinct life stages/transitions, as discussed in Chapter 1, was based on considerations of Shenzhen's population age structure, along with the diverse societal

expectations imposed on women confronting different life challenges. This approach aimed to transcend the potential limitation of generalisability often associated with qualitative research. By avoiding the homogenisation of highly educated women, this classification facilitated the exploration of diverse negotiation processes that women undertake across various life phases.

Guided by this selection framework, my research cohort spanned a wide spectrum of age groups, ranging from 25 to 58. Initially, I contacted 34 qualified candidates, of which 26 agreed to participate. However, four candidates declined participation, citing concerns such as discomfort with revealing their homes or apprehensions regarding privacy and confidentiality. Additionally, I opted not to include data from four candidates due to indications of embellishment in their past experiences or inconsistencies in their life stories. As outlined in Chapter 1, participant selection was structured to mirror the demographic composition of Shenzhen's population. Notably, around 49% of Shenzhen's residents were between the ages of 20 to 34 by 2019 (Xing et al., 2020), aligning with the focus of my research. Consequently, half of the participants in my thesis were younger than 35 years old, with a majority belonging to the post-1990s generation (90后). Among the final 26 participants, nine were single heterosexual women, eight were married women who were either mothers or pregnant, and the remaining nine challenged heteronormative norms prevalent in Chinese society.

The focus on a small sub-section of the sample, with each subgroup comprising less than 10 participants, reflects the depth-oriented nature of the research. This study prioritises a comprehensive exploration of each participants' lived experiences. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the nuanced complexities surrounding home-making and migration within the context of Shenzhen. By dedicating substantial time and attention to each participant, the research aims to uncover rich and detailed insights into their personal narratives and socio-cultural contexts. Through various data collection methods, including videos, photos, life story narrations, and interviews, this research explores the multifaceted dimensions of home-making practices. While the sample size may be small, the depth of analysis ensures that the research captures the complexities of participants' experiences. Moreover, I made the decision to halt recruitment only after reaching sampling saturation. However, the participant collection does have its limitations. Firstly, it excludes the aged population, particularly women over 65, and the unique life transitions they may be experiencing. This exclusionary aspect could potentially limit the breadth of understanding

regarding the diverse experiences of women in different stages of life. Secondly, the sampling saturation was reached within the confines of remote participant recruitment, influenced by travel restrictions at the time of the study. This constraint hindered my ability to reach out to a wider and more diverse pool of participants compared to in-person approach. These limitations are primarily rooted in practical challenges inherent to conducting research remotely, which may have implications for the comprehensiveness and generalizability of the study's findings.

Utilising the WeChat platform for snowball sampling, I successfully recruited a diverse cohort. I initiated the snowballing process with a group of five participants. The 'snowball' process is repetitive: 'informants refer the researcher to other informants, who the researcher contacts and then refer her or him to yet other informants, and so on" (Noy, 2008: 300). As the snowball sampling continued, I accessed information provided by other informants. Being introduced by someone they were familiar with helped me to gain the trust of these female migrants. For example, after I interviewed Zheng Y, she offered to introduce me to two participants; she told me that one of these women was divorced while the other had decided to be child-free. Zheng Y's introduction allowed me to access these participants who might be unwilling to accept the interview request and discuss their personal lives without the introduction of acquaintances.

This process led me to connect with three lesbians, two childless women, three divorced women, and eighteen married women, including those intending to enter heterosexual marriages. To facilitate recruitment, I provided prospective participants with project information and the consent form via WeChat. To enhance communication efficiency, I developed an informative visual aid encompassing project descriptions, textual and pictorial filming guidelines, and the objectives associated with each filming phase (see Fig 3.1). This visual representation elucidated the sequence of the home tours and subsequent video-elicitation interviews.

I started data collection via WeChat after the initial engagement. I facilitated a video call to offer insights into the filming guidelines, addressing any queries or concerns participants might have. This interactive session clarified the filming process and fostered mutual understanding. Then, participants embarked on the filming process, which typically spanned one to two weeks, contingent on their individual schedules. I allowed this flexibility to ensure that participants could comfortably integrate the filming within their routines, allowing them to capture the essence of their domestic lives.

Fig. 3.1 (A part of) the long picture of filming instructions (Source: Made by author)

A pivotal and innovative aspect of the second phase of remote data collection involved the strategic use of storyboards, effectively bridging the gap between the home tours and video elicitation interviews. Storyboards, which integrate photographs or video footage into research interviews (Happer, 2002), offer a distinctive advantage in delving into profound layers of human consciousness beyond verbal expression, particularly in comprehending experiences that may elude direct observation (Henry & Fetters, 2012). However, this approach has been criticised for its potential complexity and time-intensive nature, especially when conducted remotely. Remote video elicitation interviews can introduce complications such as technical glitches caused by unstable internet connections, leading to potential disruptions and misinterpretations (e.g., frozen screens).

To navigate these challenges and ensure the efficacy of the elicitation interview process, I employed the form of storyboards as a facilitating tool to showcase the visual and auditory richness encapsulated in participants' audio-visual creations (Laurier, 2016). A storyboard approach in digital storytelling is a visual planning tool used to outline the sequence of events, content, and visual elements in a digital story. It serves as a roadmap for the creation of a digital narrative, facilitating researchers, filmmakers, or educators, to

organise their ideas and ensure a coherent and engaging story (Flicker & MacEntee, 2020; Greenberg et al., 2012).

My application of storyboarding involved a series of sequential steps to transform the participant-made video tours into a storyboard that depicted the sequences and content of their filming while highlighting the home objects involved. First, I coded all the videos and transcripts associated with them. This initial coding process was essential to identify recurring themes and elements in the footage. Next, based on the codes and thematic analysis, I selected still footage and corresponding transcriptions that could be repurposed as prompts for the subsequent video-elicitation interviews. The key criterion for this selection was whether the participants themselves had mentioned or whether I had observed that specific home objects or home-making practices held significance in relation to their past life stories or their aspirations for the future. Finally, to ensure coherence and alignment with the narrative threads of the participant-made videos, I categorised the chosen still images and transcripts by assigning them numerical references. This process helped maintain a clear connection between the narrative elements and the visuals, ensuring that the storyboard accurately represented the participants' experiences and stories.

In anticipation of the forthcoming elicitation interviews, I took the initiative to share these crafted storyboards with the participants. This step offered participants a glimpse into the content that would form the foundation of our subsequent discussions. During the interviews, I used these storyboards as prompts, interweaving them with pertinent questions designed to unearth their life narratives and the emotions interwoven with specific domestic objects or routines. For instance, by presenting a participant with a storyboard (Fig 3.2), I engaged her in a conversation that probed the motivations behind her decision to reshape her living space. I asked whether she encountered challenges while attempting to make a home that diverged from the conventional "norm" prevalent in China, such as the typical nuclear family arrangement. Moreover, I asked about her perspectives on the relationships that connected these unconventional homes with her past experiences, particularly her deliberate decision to be childless.

Fig. 3.2 An example of the storyboard prompt (Source: Made by Author)

In my fieldwork, I found that storyboards also yielded the benefit of mitigating the inherent uncertainty in data collection. This uncertainty was largely rooted in the participants' varied capacities to utilise smartphones for filming, alongside their distinctive lifestyles and diverse housing arrangements. For instance, during the remote fieldwork, despite participants receiving uniform guidance, how they produced videos of their home tours exhibited substantial variation. This divergence was evident in the number of video submissions, where the participants residing in spacious villas or mansions might contribute over ten pieces of video footage. At the same time, those dwelling in shared housing might provide a more limited collection, often consisting of two or three one-minute clips. This diversity and unpredictability in participant-generated videos posed challenges in identifying suitable prompts, such as home-making practices or significant home objects, essential for subsequent video-elicitation interviews and subsequent analysis.

The incorporation of storyboards played a pivotal role in effectively counterbalancing this variation and establishing standardisation across participant-made videos. By utilising storyboards, I could present a structured framework that allowed me to 'standardise' the assortment of video footage, regardless of its duration or quality. For instance, by sharing a storyboard with a participant (Fig 3.2), I initiated discussions on specific elements within their videos, such as their rationale behind redesigning home spaces, their struggles in deviating from conventional home norms, and the nuanced links between unconventional living arrangements and their personal life choices, such as the decision to remain childless. This approach facilitated the availability of sufficient prompts for each elicitation interview, alleviating the potential drawbacks of a time-intensive interview process. With some participants submitting extensive video clips, these interviews could extend for hours (O'Brien et al., 2008; Lyle, 2003).

Concluding the elicitation interviews, I sought participants' consent to utilise these storyboards for future analysis. Following the interviews, I reviewed our discussions and made graphic memos for each interview (Fig 3.3). This process not only added depth and context to our conversations but also enabled me to integrate these insights into subsequent phases of analysis.

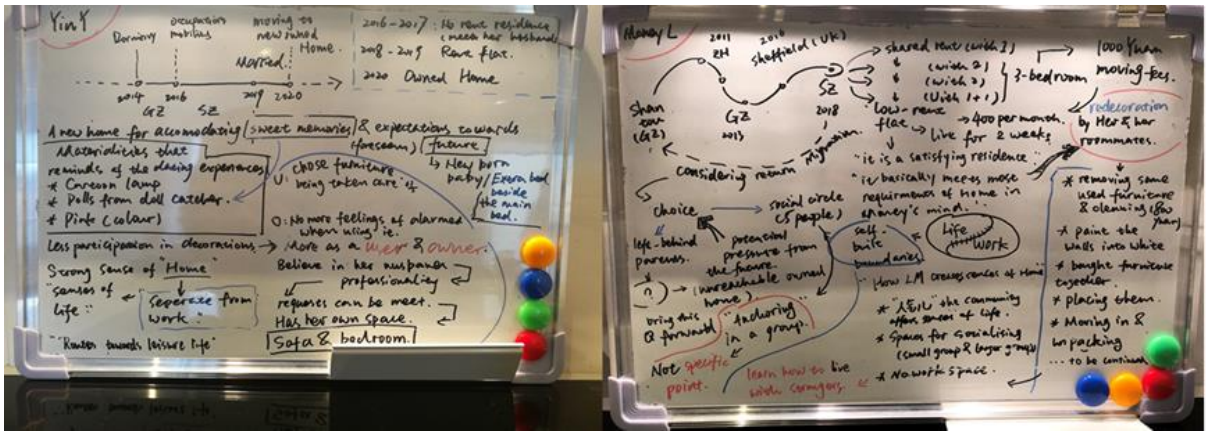

Fig. 3.3 Two examples of graphical memos (Source: Made by Author)

In the final stage of data collection, I extracted insights from interviewees regarding their engagement beyond the domestic sphere. This encompassed leisure pursuits, culinary practices, and other activities that fostered intimacy or a sense of belonging. Utilising the information gathered—taking into account the nature, frequency, and settings of these activities—I enlisted the aid of research assistants to capture photographs of these significant locales. This inventive process served as a remote experiment aimed at substituting the initial ethnographic urban tours featured in the original research design. Yet, in contrast to the original approach of go-along, I acknowledged that this substitute had limitations in affording me firsthand experiences of the participants' movement patterns and a multisensory understanding of the surroundings. While this adapted approach has proven effective in addressing the research inquiry related to activities extending beyond domestic settings, it is essential to acknowledge that this alternative is best suited to situations where in-person contact is not permitted, as exemplified by the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Commencing officially in March 2020 and spanning a span of 10 months, my fieldwork encompassed various phases, including recruitment, filming, storyboard creation, interviewing, and follow-up interviews to capture new life-course transitions such as divorce or motherhood. Throughout this 10-month journey, the engagement cultivated through this

project allowed me to establish rapport with the participants, fostering a sense of camaraderie on the WeChat platform. This ongoing interaction kept me connected to most participants, enabling subsequent research follow-ups on them.

3.5 Reflections on ethics and researcher's positionality

3.5.1 *Ethics*

Based on the ethical guidelines of the BSA (British Sociological Association), there are some critical concerns in family-based studies: 'disclosure of private affairs, divergence among related stories, confidentiality and the degree to which anonymity can be assured' (Gabb, 2008: 26). As subjective feelings and experiences are valued, the main ethical challenge is creating a comfortable environment where participants feel their private world is protected from harm, particularly for those who identify as queer.

During fieldwork, ethical considerations played a pivotal role in data collection, primarily involving private information acquired through online platforms. Although physical access to participants' homes was not required, filming their homes could be viewed as a form of intrusion into their domestic spaces, potentially revealing sensitive information. Adhering to the ethical guidelines established by BSA, the research prioritised avoiding unwarranted intrusion into participants' private lives. Ensuring a transparent and non-coercive approach, I obtained informed consent (see Appendix 3) to access their homes and lives through video/photo-elicitation interviews.

Prior to commencing the fieldwork, several measures were devised to address ethical concerns and establish a sense of comfort and privacy among participants, including encouraging participants to independently film their homes and introduce their private spaces and lives. An information sheet was provided beforehand, clearly explaining the anticipated data collection process, and participants received a consent form, which was available in both written and oral formats, enabling them to provide their consent according to their preference. During the fieldwork, a sensitive approach was adopted when discussing potentially upsetting topics, such as marital conflict. Rather than pressing for personal details, the focus shifted to how these changes impacted daily routines and emotions. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities. All forms of data, including interview records, transcriptions, photos, videos, and written materials, adhered to the pseudonym policy. Data security was ensured through password protection and cloud backup, and only the researcher

transcribed audio materials. These measures safeguarded the confidentiality and integrity of the data throughout the research process.

3.5.2 *Positionality and Reflexivity*

The researcher's positionality played an important role in approaching participants' home lives and attaining their life stories. Feminist scholars have long been proposing reflexive and explicitly positioned writing, within ideas of situated knowledge, privileged location and feminist standpoint. Here the notion of 'situated knowledge,' according to Rose (1997), involves the examination of the research process by looking inward- self-reflexivity - and outward - reflecting on the relationships with others in the research. The latter is given constant attention among feminist geographers who have sought to disentangle processes of 'interpretation, translation, stuttering and the partly understood' (Haraway 1991: 195). Moreover, although focusing on the personal, professional, and political everyday experiences of some individuals, the reflexivity of feminist research allows the reader to fully grasp the contextual nature of knowledge production and thus enables them to understand their 'situated knowledge' (Carette, 2014). As such, personal accounts of both the researcher and participants should be integrated into the discussion increasing the reflexivity of the research.

My positionality as an insider to some aspects of my participants' lives allowed me to foster a sense of mutual trust with the participants. It was facilitated by our existing social connections as friends, acquaintances, or through mutual acquaintances. This familiarity laid the foundation for open communication and cooperation throughout the project. Upon initial introduction and explanation of the project, I sensed their willingness to share their home lives, as evidenced by their proactive efforts to accommodate my requests when filming their homes. For example, participant Shan H said, "*If the quality (of home tours) is poor, let me know. I can re-film them.*" Beyond this foundational trust, my identity as a young (29 years old during interviews), female PhD student from a foreign university also played a role in lowering barriers, prompting participants to share personal stories with fewer reservations. Participant Jiajia said, "*oh, you will write your thesis in English, right? Then it is totally fine to tell you about my story as no one (around myself) would have the opportunity to read it.*[5]"

[5] Jiajia, along with many other participants in this research who may have had concerns about confidentiality, believed that language barriers could prevent those around them from reading my thesis. The other participants in my thesis understood that I would anonymise them.

Throughout the fieldwork, participants like Jiajia conveyed a belief that our discussions were held within a secure environment where their privacy was respected. They viewed me not only as a researcher in social science but also as a woman who empathised with their experiences, struggles, aspirations, and achievements. This perception granted me unique access to their life stories enriched with subjective insights and emotions.

In conducting my interviews with participants from diverse backgrounds, I adapted my positionality accordingly. Some scholars argue that fieldwork has traditionally been shaped by masculinist perspectives (Sundberg, 2003; Vanderbeck, 2005), while others recognise that researchers may not always hold a position of power, particularly when they are perceived as 'the other' by their respondents. As a result, researchers often employ strategies to establish stronger connections with their participants and generate reliable accounts. For instance, Tarrant (2013) exemplifies this approach in her research, where she, as a white female, engaged with British grandfathers by alternating between her roles as a researcher and a granddaughter. This dynamic allowed her to gain varied insights into themes such as ageing, gender, and place, thereby enhancing the validity of her research.

In my own fieldwork, I used different identities depending on the context of the discussion. When conversing with lesbian participants about potential discrimination and challenges in their everyday lives, I positioned myself as both a researcher and a Chinese lesbian, enabling a deeper understanding of their experiences. When engaging with single participants, I alternated between my roles as a researcher and an individual who had previously worked in Shenzhen, allowing me to grasp the possible exploitation in their everyday lives and traditional gender norms which might frame their life choices. Moreover, when exploring the experiences of mothers, I transitioned between the roles of researcher and daughter, aligning myself with the perspective of someone at a similar age as their child(ren). Despite cultural norms discouraging probing into hosts' private lives in Chinese society (Liu, 2016), as a researcher investigating home-making practices and women's negotiation of identity, it was essential to delve into personal narratives and aspirations regarding their future homes. By navigating these shifts in identity, I fostered a relaxed, conversational atmosphere conducive to exploring participants' everyday home lives, and eliciting their aspirations and past experiences in a meaningful manner.

Meanwhile, it is important to recognise that the stories shared by my participants, as individuals navigating the landscape of neoliberalism, may sometimes be partial, especially when they aim to portray narratives of empowerment or liberation associated with their

relocation choices. Embracing neoliberal principles, these women, when narrating their past experiences or depicting their aspirations, perceive themselves as authors of their life scripts, asserting their agency and emphasising the importance of freedom in making life choices. They value autonomy and resist feelings of being controlled or restricted, seeking to avoid such elements in their lives. However, in my analysis, it is crucial to critically consider these narratives within the broader context of neoliberalism, recognising that, while these narratives highlight the agency and autonomy of the participants, they also invite my deeper reflection on the complexities of negotiating identity and aspirations within neoliberal frameworks.

As noted in Chapter 1, the identity of my participants, though can be deemed as socio-economically advantaged due to their middle-class lifestyles in Shenzhen, is still 'partially privileged' as conditioned by a variety of forces (Kynsilehto 2011). The reflexivity and positionality of myself allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding that each 'partially privileged' female migrant can be varied. Rather than only categorising these women as 'highly educated', I need to draw conclusions about these women by assuming that the potential concerns or challenges for different participants are varied.

3.6 Implications and limitations of the methodology

In an earlier section of this chapter, I emphasised that when geographers utilise visual methods for qualitative data collection, they should not only interpret visual materials as cultural products or representations but also consider the production process of specific photos, videos, or sketches (Crang, 2005; 2010). The preceding section demonstrated how I, in remote collaboration with participants through WeChat, co-produced visual materials despite the absence of physical co-presence. In this section, I offer a reflective analysis of the digitalised approach I employed in my research design, along with a discussion of the implications and limitations associated with these digital research methods.

Participant-made videos emerged as a central element of my remote fieldwork strategy. Faulkner and Zafiroglu (2010: 188) highlight the participants' control over recording as a powerful means to shape their representation, enabling the sharing of more intimate and mundane aspects of their lives compared to traditional researcher presence. I capitalised on this potential to gain nuanced insights into participants' routine home-making practices. These participant-made videos served as foundational data for the creation of

storyboards and subsequent visual analysis. Moreover, these storyboards also played a pivotal role as stimulating tools during video elicitation interviews.

The digitalised research methods not only addressed the challenges presented by the pandemic but also yielded valuable lessons for researchers employing visual methodologies, contributing to enhancing research resilience. Recent scholarship has started to highlight the potency of adjusted methodologies, particularly in the post-pandemic context, as stand-alone methods (Börner et al., 2023; Alencar & Camargo, 2022). Marzi (2021) emphasises the potential of remote participatory video methods in revolutionising co-production of research by sidestepping the need for physical presence and reshaping power dynamics in the fieldwork. Following this trajectory, researchers are advocating for research designs that infuse qualitative methodologies with reflexivity, adaptability, and flexibility that extend beyond the pandemic context (Rahman et al., 2021).

My research design extends beyond being merely a coping strategy in response to the COVID-19 situation; it exemplifies the potential for transformation within visual methodologies. While the core research questions remained unchanged, I transitioned all in-person research processes within the proposed design to a digital format, effectively using smartphones for recruitment, engagement, and interaction with participants. This integration of smartphones not only facilitated participant engagement but also introduced a newfound level of flexibility and adaptability into my qualitative research design (Rahman et al., 2021; Marzi, 2021). Several aspects of this digitalised research approach offer valuable insights and implications for the future of qualitative research.

One of the essential implications is the recalibration of power dynamics, facilitated by the digitalisation of my presence. In conventional home video tours (see, for example, Pink & Leder-Mackley, 2012), researchers establish balanced power relationships by positioning themselves as listeners and followers, prioritising the role of participants as primary narrators. This approach diverged from conventional go-along methods, where researchers often assume a more directive role (O'Neill & Roberts, 2019). However, my remote fieldwork introduced new complexities in maintaining this power equilibrium. The absence of real-time guidance when participants filmed home tours required innovative solutions to prevent imbalanced dynamics, subpar videos, communication breakdowns, and project risks. In response, I digitalised my presence by providing participants with visual guides containing project descriptions, instructions, and objectives for each filming process. For example, the objective of capturing footage in their kitchen and dining room is to explore

the relationships between food practices and these women's sense of home. Although time zone differences occasionally posed challenges, the robust interactions facilitated by the WeChat platform allowed for continuous engagement. This entailed addressing participants' inquiries, offering real-time advice, and requesting reshoots for suboptimal videos, ensuring a degree of oversight in the filming process.

Through collaborative film production, I reconfigured power dynamics by granting participants the role of 'directors,' positioning myself as the 'producer.' This paradigm shift redirected the focus of the filming process from 'participant's narration + researcher-made film' to 'digitally-guided process + participant-made film.' In doing so, I maintained a balanced power relationship, ensuring that my guidance, advice, and feedback were readily accessible throughout the filming process. This ongoing interaction reestablished equilibrium, exemplifying the impact of the digitised research design on power dynamics.

More broadly, this digitalisation of participant engagement serves a dual purpose within visual methods and qualitative methodology. The integration of storyboard prompts to connect participant-created videos with subsequent elicitation interviews offers a nuanced way to foster interaction between researchers and participants, particularly within remote fieldwork scenarios. Researchers in remote participatory visual methods often leverage interactive technologies or integrate interaction processes to realise anticipated academic outcomes (Marzi, 2021; Watson & Lupton, 2022). However, this heightened researcher control raises concerns about participants aligning their practices with predetermined academic expectations influenced by funders or institutional cultures (Evans, 2016). By entrusting participants with video production control, I gained direct access to their unfiltered perspectives on intimate moments, allowing for a rich and authentic experience (Faulkner & Zafiroglu, 2010). Additionally, the organisation and editing of their self-created videos struck a balance between prompting life narratives and refraining from excessive guidance, ensuring authenticity.

Additionally, the reconfigured power dynamics between participants and researchers offer nuanced insights into reevaluating the 'tyranny of participation' and researchers' influence during participatory video methods. Researchers have grappled with unintentionally exerting control through physical presence, potentially influencing filming processes to align with funders' expectations (Evans, 2016; Marzi, 2021). Conversely, some have maintained strict hands-off control to amplify participants' voices, leading to inefficient data collection (Evans, 2016; Marzi, 2021). My approach of 'digitised guidance and feedback + participant-

made film' strikes a balance, granting participants agency while curtailing excessive researcher influence.

The methodology of this thesis has several limitations. Firstly, I encountered challenges in experimentally creating and employing the *sailing/anchoring* framework to interpret internal migration experiences. The framework's novelty within migration studies brings with it both opportunities and limitations. While it offers a fresh perspective on understanding internal migration dynamics, its qualitative nature introduces the possibility of oversimplification or misinterpretation of participants' experiences. The framework may not fully capture the complexities of internal migration experiences and may require further refinement and validation. As the framework deals with highly skilled/educated internal migration—which has received comparatively less attention in migration studies—it may have limited power to capture the multifaceted aspects of internal migration experiences.

Additionally, the temporal and spatial scope of the research also has limitations, particularly due to the unforeseen impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic disrupted the planned research process, forcing a shift from in-person data collection to online methods. The digitalised fieldwork demands ethical consideration, particularly concerning the potential blurring of boundaries between participants' private and public domains. Reliance on participant-made videos within remote ethnographic fieldwork also introduces certain limitations. The heavy dependence on visual technologies and smartphones limits the capture of multi-sensory experiences and excludes those who need access to these technologies. Similar to other participatory visual projects involving home tours (Pink & Leder Mackley, 2014; Pink et al., 2016), the value of in-person visits lies in capturing multi-sensory insights, such as the taste of food or the ambient temperature within a household (Longhurst et al., 2009; Pink et al., 2016). Regrettably, attaining fully embodied, multi-sensory experiences requires physically entering the participants' homes, which proves challenging in remote research scenarios. While researchers can inquire about the multi-sensory subjective feelings of participants by having them describe these experiences verbally during post-filming discussions, the ability for researchers to personally partake in embodied multi-sensory experiences is limited. Consequently, this imposes constraints on the use of researchers' bodies as research tools in the fieldwork process.

The subsequent section illustrates how I organised the collected data and answered research questions through thematic analysis.

3.7 Analysis of data

The relationship between analysis and design is often conceptually separated, particularly by those who view design as a prelude to data collection. However, in this research, I regard analysis as an integral part of the design process (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 6), and recognise it as something that must be designed. A fundamental tenet in managing qualitative data is to conduct analysis concurrently with data collection, allowing me to progressively refine my interviews and observations and determine how to test emerging conclusions.

The initial phase of data analysis involved the utilisation of qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA, to input and manage all collected materials, including interview data, audio recordings from home tours, and visual data like storyboards, photos, and videos. Since the remote fieldwork was conducted in Chinese, when I concluded fieldwork, I transcribed the interviews and all participants' oral explanations of their home tours in Chinese. Then, I organised the transcripts thematically against my field notes. Subsequently, these transcripts were thematically organised in alignment with my field notes. Rather than translating all the transcripts into English, I chose to translate only the quotations integrated into the respective findings chapters. All codes, memos, and text utilised within the storyboards during the coding processes were maintained in English for clarity and consistency.

My approach to coding the raw textual data involves employing a questioning strategy that directly pertains to the research questions. This strategy, derived from Corbin and Strauss (2008), is particularly useful in the initial stages of analysis. As Rose (2003) underscores, questions can explore the nature of attainable and desirable knowledge, along with the means to achieve it. Essential questions include whether the data pertains to life stories, subjective sentiments (towards homes or life narratives), or introductions to home-making practices and objects. By categorising the data based on these inquiries, I subsequently formulated overarching themes, concepts, dimensions, and coding categories. In the process of data analysis, these questions were systematically encoded and accompanied by memo entries, following three key steps:

1. Open Coding: This phase revolves around five primary coding themes: 1) home objects; 2) home-(un)making practices; 3) memories or imaginations; 4) life stories; and 5) non-domestic activities. Each main theme is comprised of two levels of sub-themes. For instance, within the coding theme of "home-(un)making practices," the first-level sub-category is 'making a home for the expected life-course transitions,' while the second-level sub-category

is ‘preparing for the upcoming baby at home.’ In contrast to research that only involves transcripts in the data organisation process, I also use these themes to code storyboards, still footage from videos, and photos.

2. Initial Memoing: This step requires the researcher to ‘step back from the field setting to identify, develop, and modify broader analytic themes and arguments’ (Emerson et al., 1995: 57). Reviewing each informant's codes, I wrote initial memos person by person, combining codes under different themes and used the ‘Free memos’ function of MAXQDA to identify the connections among multiple codes. For example, I put together codes under the themes ‘home objects’, ‘home-(un)making practices’, ‘life stories’ or ‘memories or imaginations’ of one participant. Then, I wrote a memo addressing the relationship between practices of displaying this home object and the informant’s hopes that this would boost the family's well-being. The initial memo-ing process, therefore, contributes to analysing the relationships between home objects/home-making practices and specific life events. What is special about this phase is that these memos were also applied to capture the association between particular transcripts and visual data.

3 Writing Integrative Memos: The initial memo-ing phase laid the foundation for comprehending the correlations between home, home-making, and ongoing life-course transitions for each informant. Crafting integrative memos involves amalgamating initial memos from each informant to identify interconnections. The purpose of integrative memos is to synthesise evidence that directly addresses the four research questions. For example, specific home-making practices, like leaving cardboard boxes unpacked, surfaced as a prevailing trend within the cohort of single women. By amalgamating these preliminary observations and composing integrative memos, I discerned a link between these shared home-making practices and the possible constraining circumstances that prevailed among this group in Shenzhen. This deduction served as a launching point for delving deeper into the nature of these constraining circumstances and their interplay with the broader socio-cultural fabric of Shenzhen. This process of exploration then contributes to answering the first research question: “How do highly educated female migrants *Sail/Anchor* to/in Shenzhen via home-making practices in the domestic?”

The data organisation serves as a robust foundation for addressing the four research questions. In Chapter 4, I employed three case studies to answer the initial question: "*How do*

highly educated female migrants from different generations adapt to the neoliberal transitions of Shenzhen?" Simons (2009) has defined a case study as an in-depth exploration, considering multiple perspectives, of the intricacies and distinctiveness of a specific real-life project, policy, institution, program, or system. To conduct case studies, I selected three highly educated women's migration stories in Shenzhen based on my research diaries, graphic memos, and the outcomes of coding and memo-ing processes. These women, representing different generations, each shared their distinct experiences of relocating to and residing in Shenzhen. I then examined the first research question by assessing the distinctions and commonalities in the living experiences of these three generations of women in Shenzhen.

In Chapters 5, 6, and 7, this analytical approach was repeatedly employed to address the research questions aimed at uncovering the experiences of diverse cohorts of highly educated female migrants in Shenzhen. Each chapter has a distinct focus, offering insights into how these women negotiate societal expectations at various life stages, including singlehood, motherhood, and other transitional phases, as they diverge from patriarchal or heteronormative norms that prevail in Chinese tradition. This multi-phase data organisation process enabled exploring how *sailing* and *anchoring* manifested across different life stages and circumstances. In Chapter 8, the findings derived from the various cohorts were revisited and synthesised to draw conclusions that collectively addressed the three central research questions. By amalgamating insights from the distinct phases of analysis, this chapter culminated in a unified understanding of how highly educated female migrants in Shenzhen engage in home-making practices to *sail* and *anchor* within the city's dynamic landscape.

This three-phase data organisation process also allowed me to find some data that I did not initially consider central to my research, but which became an essential part of my findings. A review of all 26 life stories revealed the necessity of initially presenting the differences in political, economic, and socio-cultural contexts that span different generations of women in Shenzhen. Chapter 4 serves as a platform to outline this evolving context, one within which these women embarked on, progressed through, and potentially concluded their life journeys in Shenzhen. This chapter assumes a pivotal role in contextualising the subsequent analyses presented in Chapters 5, 6, and 7, thereby offering readers an initial lens through which to perceive Shenzhen via the experiences of two distinct generations of highly educated women.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter stands at a crucial intersection, linking the theoretical underpinnings of the literature review with upcoming empirical discoveries, while also echoing the flexibility and resilience of the participants themselves. Adapting the methodology goes beyond being a research approach; it serves as a conceptual bridge, connecting the theoretical frameworks discussed in the literature review to the practical investigation of the experiences of highly educated female migrants in Shenzhen.

I started by establishing an epistemological foundation rooted in the 'timescape perspective.' This methodology aligns with the theoretical framework of *sailing/anchoring* in the literature review. The emphasis on home-making practices as temporal and spatial conduits for understanding the interplay between past, present, and future resonates with broader themes of memory, aspiration, and socio-cultural dynamics discussed in the previous chapter. I presented my voyage through this chapter, encompassing the original in-person methodology, the seamless adaptation to remote fieldwork, ethical considerations, and the approach to data analysis. The original research design, built upon participatory visual methods and go-along techniques, laid the foundation for understanding how highly educated female migrants navigate Shenzhen's evolving socio-cultural landscape. The unexpected disruption of the pandemic transformed the research into a remote, digitised endeavour. This shift was navigated with meticulous attention to ethical considerations, ensuring participants' comfort, autonomy, and informed consent throughout the process. The adaptation introduced participant-made videos and storyboards as central tools for engagement, enabling a balanced power dynamic and fostering an enriched understanding of participants' perspectives.

Moreover, the methodological considerations surrounding participant-made videos, storyboards, and remote engagement intersect with agency, power dynamics, and interpretation, as outlined in the literature review. The emphasis on collaboration, empowerment, and the dynamic interplay between researcher and participant reflects evolving methodologies in participatory research, further reinforcing the alignment between theoretical concepts and methodological execution. As I proceed to the empirical chapters, the epistemological stance and research design steer the exploration of journeys undertaken by highly educated female migrants. These chapters remain rooted in the same temporal and spatial comprehension of home-making practices, facilitating a rich and full analysis of how these practices function in *sailing* away from specific circumstances and *anchoring* within spaces aligned with personal aspirations. The next chapter sheds light on the evolving

contexts of Shenzhen wherein highly educated women make their homes and navigate challenges across various life stages.

Chapter Four. Cheers and Tears: The Migration Journey of Three Highly Educated Women in Shenzhen

4.1 Introduction

This chapter revolves around three life stories of internal migration from highly educated women in Shenzhen. It explores the first research question: *How do highly educated female migrants from different generations adapt to the neoliberal transitions of Shenzhen?* I unravel the potential opportunities and struggles for highly educated women in fast-developing Shenzhen, providing context from which to explore the remaining research questions. As noted in Chapters 1 and 2, as the epitome of China's neoliberal experiment, Shenzhen developed from a small border town in 1980 to China's centre of creativity and entrepreneurship (Keane & Zhao 2012). However, alongside its miraculous economic achievements, Shenzhen has also faced criticism for embracing neoliberalism, leading to hyper-exploitation and suicides of rural migrant workers (Pun & Chen 2013; Pun 2005).

Within this dynamic landscape, migration and integration into Shenzhen's labour force present a dual reality for female workers, encompassing both prospects and hurdles. As noted in Chapter 2, migration offers pathways through which women can break free from specific socio-cultural constraints while imposing new obstacles (Sinha et al., 2012). For some rural women, moving to Shenzhen and becoming a factory worker offers a chance to enhance their economic opportunities and access education, empowering them to negotiate the interplay of conformity and resistance within their hometown's gender politics (Han, 2021). However, pursuing career opportunities in Shenzhen does not guarantee liberation from gender norms rooted in the patriarchal tradition. For example, many such women are compelled to migrate and send remittances to their male family members (Pun, 2005).

This chapter examines the 'partially privileged' migration experienced by highly educated women who move to Shenzhen (Kynsilehto, 2010). It encompasses two aspects: first, an investigation into their ability to effectively apply their skills and knowledge, thereby becoming a 'highly skilled' labour force, which enhances their agency to pursue various economic, social, and cultural aspirations. Second, an examination of the enduring gender

disparities entrenched within socio-cultural norms and local policies that may impede the successful transfer of skills and knowledge. By critically analysing the distinctive experiences, opportunities, and challenges faced by women who have migrated to Shenzhen at different stages of its development, this chapter seeks insights into the evolving gender norms and their repercussions for highly educated women in the city.

The rest of this chapter explores the life stories of three highly educated women – Lu J, Chen X, and Wu F. These women's respective relocations to Shenzhen coincide with three pivotal stages of the city's development. Lu J's move in 1980 aligns with Shenzhen's early emergence as a small border town. Chen X's relocation in 2000 corresponds to the city's transformation into a Special Economic Zone, offering ample opportunities for highly educated migrants. Wu F's migration after 2015 reflects Shenzhen's evolution into a major creative hub and one of China's mega-cities. Furthermore, these women represent two distinct generational cohorts, pre- and post-one-child policy, as discussed in Chapter 1. Lu J and Chen X exemplify the shared experiences and challenges of highly educated women born before the one-child policy. Meanwhile, Wu F's narrative, encapsulating her relocation and subsequent departure, offers valuable insights into the collective experiences of her peers born after the policy's implementation. These case studies were selected based on the identification of recurring themes and experiences in their life stories that parallel those of the rest 23 participants in this thesis.

The intergenerational focus is indispensable for comprehending the evolving gender norms experienced by highly educated women in Shenzhen. By exploring their life stories, I underscore the shared challenges, aspirations, and adaptations, offering touchpoints for understanding the experiences of other participants. This approach aligns with my goal of unravelling the interplay between Shenzhen’s rapid neoliberal transitions and gender inequality. By comparing the distinct career opportunities, aspirations, and challenges inherent in the migration journeys of these three women, we gain insight into how they adapted to evolving gender dynamics. The historical progression of gender expectations and disparities in Shenzhen revealed by the analysis allows us to understand the impact of neoliberalism on gender norms.

4.2 A trailblazer and an outsider: Lu J's story

At 17, Lu J (who was 57 at the time of the interview in 2020) embarked on her journey by leaving Nanchang, the capital city of Jiangxi, to pursue higher education at a university in Nanjing. One of only ten female architecture students in a department of sixty-four, Lu J excelled in her studies. Assigned through the state's unified job allocation system, which provided life-long employment and comprehensive welfare, she received enticing job offers from various cities, including Beijing, Hangzhou, and Shenzhen. In 1980, when Shenzhen was just beginning its economic development journey and remained a relatively small border town with a population of less than half a million (Ding & Warner, 2001), Lu J made a bold and forward-looking decision by accepting a position as an architect in Shenzhen. The decision was driven by several factors, including the attractive salary offered to her and the city's untapped potential. Lu J recognised Shenzhen's pivotal role as a testing ground for China's Reform and Opening policy (Pun, 2005; Gang, 2017), which promised high salaries and ample opportunities for highly educated professionals, including substantial career growth. Furthermore, she acknowledged the city's significance in the broader context of economic development and urbanisation, which further fuelled her determination to move.

Lu J's decision to move to Shenzhen set her apart from most of her classmates, who went to more established cities, allowed her to grasp unique career opportunities and find the work environment to which she aspired. Apart from the attractive salary (four times higher than her other offers), Lu J was influenced by her desire to collaborate with highly educated individuals willing to take a chance on a city with limited infrastructure, a relatively small population, but a wealth of advantageous policies and promising prospects (Ng, 2003). Reflecting on her journey to Shenzhen around 1980, Lu J expressed that her experience in the city aligned perfectly with her initial vision. She shared,

> *I want to work in Shenzhen because I thought the hierarchy system in Shenzhen (back then) might not be as well established as some other Chinese cities. I was right. Back then, whether it was aged leaders or my younger colleagues, everyone had just arrived in Shenzhen, and it was easy for us to connect and get along. This was rare because my classmates who went to other cities had to endure a long time adjusting to the strict bureaucratic (官僚) working environment.*

Lu J implies that, beyond the visible economic pull factors, her decision to migrate was also influenced by less apparent yet highly significant factors. These included her aspirations for a

less bureaucratic work environment and more equitable power dynamics. Notably, the less bureaucratic work environment she referred to underscores a privilege experienced by individuals like Lu J. Highly educated migrants were compelled to relocate to specific destinations due to job allocations, except for a few who happened to be assigned to their hometowns. For those sent to cities like Beijing or Hangzhou, with well-established work systems, pre-existing social networks, and certain unwritten rules among local staff, acclimating to the established work culture posed substantial challenges (Naughton, 1997). In contrast, as Lu J subtly indicated, it was notably easier for highly educated individuals arriving in the early days of Shenzhen, where almost all staff in her workplace were newcomers still grappling with their roles and responsibilities, to integrate into the work environment. This unique migration context significantly shaped the degree to which Lu J needed to adapt and the extent to which she could cultivate professional relationships. It demonstrates that migration experiences were influenced not only by overt factors but also by the particularities of the destinations to which they were assigned, which affected their ability to navigate the workplace (Black et al., 2011).

As Lu J described, this less bureaucratic work environment, apart from offering flattened power relations, also indicates her advantages as part of a valuable labour force in her *danwei*[6] (单位, work unit). However, it is crucial to examine the extent to which their imaginations align with the lived realities of all highly educated migrants working in Shenzhen, considering the rapid changes that the city experienced at the beginning of its market-oriented reform (Harvey, 2005). In Lu J's case, the interplay between her aspirations for a less hierarchal working environment, and the realities of Shenzhen's flattened power relationships between her and her superiors indicate the complexity and dynamics of internal migration to Shenzhen. Lu J's subsequent life experiences further exemplify this interplay between the fast-changing Shenzhen and her changing expectations of herself.

After three years in her assigned position, Lu J's career took an unexpected turn. In 1983, she left the state-owned company and ventured into entrepreneurship with her line manager. Her decision to start a company was related to the preferential policy encouraging foreign investment in Shenzhen. For example, corporate tax in Shenzhen was only 15%, compared to 55% elsewhere (Zhu, 1996). Meanwhile, the explosion in industrial activity and

[6] A work unit or *danwei* is the name given to a place of employment in the People's Republic of China. This term is more used during the period when the Chinese economy was not as developed and more heavily reliant on welfare for access to long-term urban workers or when used in the context of state-owned enterprises.

foreign investment demanded architecture – buildings such as factories, businesses and residences provided Lu J numerous opportunities to expand her business. Despite the demanding workload and fierce competition with state-owned companies, Lu J accumulated wealth and had invested in more than ten properties in the city before the age of 30, while most of her former colleagues were still living in government dormitories. Through her company, Lu J played a pivotal role in building residences for the influx of migrants.

> *When we started our company, private businesses weren't really a thing in Shenzhen. Most companies were state-owned, and their employees lived in government-provided dorms. But we did things differently. We built our own houses for our employees to live in. Other companies also rented houses from us to house their own employees. It was a new and exciting concept for Shenzhen at the time!*

Lu J's success in seizing opportunities and competing underscores the interplay between her enhanced agency and the neoliberal ethos of success. By embracing neoliberal ideals such as competition, self-improvement, and individual responsibility, she broke away from the confines of the state-owned company. This decision aligned with the context of neoliberal governance in Shenzhen, where the labour market for migrants played a crucial role (Gao, 2021). As one of the many entrepreneurs encouraged by Shenzhen's famous slogan, "time is money, efficiency is life" ("时间就是金钱，效率就是生命") (see Fig. 4.1), Lu J positioned herself as an agent of her success, leveraging the market-oriented reform of Shenzhen to make a significant impact.

While appearing empowering, Lu J's success in embracing neoliberal principles was also associated with the neoliberal transitions of Shenzhen. For Lu J, the construction of her entrepreneur identity exemplifies her enhanced agency that can be derived from navigating the challenges presented by developing neoliberalism in a rapidly transforming society. However, as it was uncommon for women to assume leadership roles back then, Lu J faced unexpected challenges as a female entrepreneur.

Fig. 4.1 The famous billboard in Shenzhen that reads: ‘Time is money, efficiency is life.’ (Source: Image provided by Lu J)

Lu J’s experiences of discrimination from her male co-founder exemplify the hidden challenges faced by highly educated women as they sought to capitalise on opportunities created by the Opening and Reform Policy and subsequent economic deregulation (Pun, 2005; Gang, 2017). Lu J’s co-founder struggled to acknowledge and respect her opinions:

> *I felt that, even as a co-founder of the company, another male co-founder would often dismiss my opinions without much consideration. He believed that accepting me as a woman and as a business partner was already a generous leadership gesture, and all I needed to do was demonstrate my excellent execution skills in carrying out the tasks he assigned to me.*

Lu J’s experiences of discrimination highlight the complex relationship between neoliberal ideals and gender disparity. Despite occupying a founder position, she confronted dismissive attitudes and a lack of respect from her male co-founder, who believed that merely accepting her as a woman and business partner sufficed as an expression of leadership. This underscores the deeply ingrained gender biases that undermine women’s credibility and leadership potential within the city (Luo & Chan, 2021). While women represent a significant

proportion (about 25 per cent) of entrepreneurs in China, they often are stereotyped as lacking skills, capital, and networks, or are deemed too bold for leadership roles (China Daily, 2015). While women have gained access to the entrepreneurial sphere in contemporary times, they frequently encounter glass ceilings and unequal treatment that curtail their progression into more influential positions.

This disparity underscores the burgeoning systemic gender bias within entrepreneurship and implies gender inequality in a broader urban context (see, for instance, Luo & Chan, 2021). Although Shenzhen, as a nascent city at the time, initially appeared to have less powerful hierarchical and bureaucratic power dynamics in the workplace, aligning with Lu J's initial expectations, deeply ingrained patriarchal gender norms persisted in devaluing her opinions and positioning her in a subordinate role (Orhan & Scott, 2001). For Lu J, the opportunities presented by the Opening and Reform Policy and subsequent economic deregulation in Shenzhen may have seemed to offer career advancement and increased agency on the surface. However, entrenched cultural expectations and patriarchal norms continue to undermine women's credibility, especially in terms of leadership potential. These limitations in Lu J's career development led her to make a significant decision to leave architecture and embrace a new path. Recognising that she was not able to shift her 'outsider' identity and become a leader in her career as expected, she made the choice to quit her job as an architect at thirty-three years old, permanently stepping away from the confines of her previous profession. After giving birth to her daughter, Lu J redirected her focus towards investment in stocks and real estate, charting her own course outside the architectural field. Remarkably, she achieved success as a self-employed individual in Shenzhen, defying expectations and achieving high profits in her new endeavours.

This career transition underscores the profound influence of gender bias in Shenzhen, a city that concurrently embraces neoliberal principles while perpetuating entrenched patriarchal norms. Lu J's accumulation of wealth empowered her to navigate these societal challenges, as evidenced by her ability to carve out her unique path. Nonetheless, the departure or compromise of highly educated women, akin to Lu J, can be identified as a pivotal factor contributing to the limited presence of female leaders in the corporate sector (Luo & Chan, 2021). Lu J's narrative exemplifies the obstacles confronted by professionally accomplished women born in the 1960s as they pursued opportunities in Shenzhen. Amid the city's rapid development spurred by the Reform and Opening policy, Shenzhen emerged as an appealing destination for highly educated talent, accompanied by

preferential policies for their career endeavours. Conversely, the next narrative illustrates how highly educated women born in the 1970s strategically employed internal migration as a potent strategy to liberate themselves from patriarchal norms entrenched in their hometowns, aspiring to achieve success within the dynamic landscape of Shenzhen.

4.3 Following, struggling and thriving: Chen X's story

Born and raised in a small town in Jiangxi, Chen X (48 years old at the time of interviewing) migrated to Shenzhen in 1999, following her husband. Her motivation for leaving her hometown was not only driven by the promising future of Shenzhen but also by her desire to shield her daughter from the pervasive influence of son-preference values (重男轻女) (Murphy et al., 2011), which prioritise male offspring and dowry culture (彩礼文化) there (Li & Li 2021).

> *In 1999, I left [my hometown] because my parents-in-law saw my daughter as a commodity. Despite caring for them as their daughter-in-law, I overheard them planning to deny my daughter's education and make her work early for my son's expenses. Shockingly, they even expressed joy at my daughter's good looks securing a dowry of two houses or something. Faced with this situation, I quit my job in state-owned danwei and followed my husband to Shenzhen.*

Chen X's migration to Shenzhen was influenced by various factors. By 2000, Shenzhen had undergone a notable transition from an industry-focused Special Economic Zone developed with domestic capital to a flourishing city that drew millions of internal migrants. However, the city's aspirations to evolve into a globally renowned metropolis faced uncertainties with the emergence of other cities, particularly Guangzhou and the recently reunited Hong Kong. Chen X's words highlight the devaluation and objectification of women within this cultural context, where girls like her daughter were considered assets for securing dowries and prioritising the welfare of male children. The gender bias against and potential harm to her daughter were compelling reasons for Chen X to move to Shenzhen, despite the sacrifices of leaving her stable job to face the uncertainty and intense competition of a new labour market.

In contrast to Lu J, whose invisible migration motivations centred around her aspirations for a less hierarchical working environment and higher salaries, Chen X's motivations were anchored in resisting deep-rooted gender norms in her hometown and

safeguarding her daughter's future. Chen X's migration can be seen as an expression of agency, a means through which she actively resisted gender biases (Zheng, 2000), such as the restrictive cultural expectations that threatened her daughter's growth and development. By relocating to Shenzhen, Chen X sought to create a different environment where her daughter could have greater opportunities and be shielded from the detrimental effects of son-preference values. While the happiness of her family members, particularly her daughter, was the primary motivation for Chen X's migration, she soon adapted to Shenzhen. Chen X regarded Shenzhen as a better 'fit' for her as the city embraced individuals like her: women who possessed skills, knowledge, and the courage to take risks and start their own businesses. She felt a new sense of belonging and fulfilment.

> *Life in Shenzhen back then gave me a sense of belonging that I had never felt back in my hometown. I used to work the regular nine-to-five grind and felt like there was no hope for career advancement because I didn't have any guanxi connections there. But Shenzhen was different. I was captivated by the idea that my hard work would actually lead to more success and profit. They say, 'the more you labour, the more you gain'. I worked from eight to ten every day when I started my company, and it paid off. I was able to provide my daughter with the best education available in Shenzhen.*

Chen X's story sheds light on her unique experience as a wife who joined her husband in a migration destination. Unlike some Chinese professional women who choose to migrate to developed countries (see, for example, Ho, 2006; Chen, 2021), Chen X's skills and knowledge were not devalued by the labour market in Shenzhen. Rather than becoming a homemaker like some migrant wives, Chen X actively pursued her career aspirations, driven to provide a better life for her daughter and enabling her to have a range of choices. The neoliberal values embraced in Shenzhen created an environment where abilities and merits were prioritised in the labour market, allowing internal migrants like Chen X to thrive based on their skills and hard work.

Chen X's words highlight the transformative nature of migration to Shenzhen, which allowed her to break free from the *guanxi*-oriented system prevalent in her hometown. *Guanxi*, defined as a closed system of social relationships, has often dictated career prospects and access to resources within a hierarchical bureaucracy (Chang, 2011). However, in Shenzhen, Chen X found freedom from *guanxi*, enabling her to leverage her knowledge and skills for tangible success, such as securing a promising future for her daughter. Migration

also allowed her to leave behind a situation where her agency was impeded, relocating to a city where her ambitions aligned with the burgeoning neoliberal transitions in Shenzhen. By embracing neoliberal ideals of self-improvement, competition, and a strong work ethic, she experienced personal growth and developed a sense of belonging in Shenzhen, where her aspirations resonated with the evolving neoliberal landscape.

It is essential to acknowledge that the transformative power of migration to Shenzhen should be critically examined in light of the broader social and economic dynamics. While Chen X's story highlights the positive outcomes that can arise from embracing neoliberal ideals in the city, it is essential to consider the nuanced realities and systemic issues that persist within the context of Shenzhen's evolving landscape. For example, factors such as intense competition in the labour market and demanding work conditions in Shenzhen, which once exploited female factory workers, may present risks and create disparities among migrant workers (Pun, 2005; Pun & Chen, 2013). Chen X's life story showcases the systemic challenges she navigated in Shenzhen. Like Lu J, Chen X faced challenges and gender biases as a young female civil engineer in a predominantly male-dominated industry. During the initial phase of her career, when attending business dinners alongside her husband, she was often referred to as "Mrs Li" (李太太). This title diminished her role and opinions in the negotiations by labelling her as an adjunct to her husband. However, Chen X took charge and actively facilitated collaborations between her company, real estate firms, and the local government. She gradually earned the nickname "Boss Chen" (陈老板)[7] by reinforcing her leadership and assertiveness in her industry. Chen X's transition from 'Mrs Li' to 'Boss Chen' symbolises the possibilities for the empowerment of women within the context of internal migration in China (see, for instance, Seeberg and Luo, 2018; Sun, 2016). Her journey not only created avenues for professional advancement but also challenged the patriarchal norms that commodify and constrain women. Despite initial marginalisation, Chen X's success serves as a testament to women's potential to assume leadership roles and make substantial contributions in traditionally male-dominated industries. Like Lu J, Chen X's accomplishments were accompanied by nuanced and often unseen challenges specific to women, underscoring her resilience and capacity to excel within Shenzhen's business landscape.

[7] Boss Chen: In the business field in China, businessmen often respectfully refer to male leaders in decision-making positions as "X 老板," where "X" represents their name or title.

The resilience that Chen X demonstrated in pursuing her positions within the field of business also underscores the burgeoning gender disparities in Shenzhen back then. Her experiences highlight the need for female entrepreneurs to navigate situations, striving for opportunities and respect often taken for granted by their male counterparts (Sadiqi & Ennaji, 2006). Despite Shenzhen's reputation for emphasising ability and merit within the labour market, persistent underlying gender biases erect invisible barriers for women, including highly educated talent that is valued in both the Talent Policy and the local labour market. These barriers continue to constrain women like Chen X.

In Shenzhen, where the city's ethos is centred on competition and individual responsibility (Gao et al., 2021), female entrepreneurs like Chen X still grapple with the need to prove their worth and assert their capabilities. One significant reason for these challenges is male-dominated business networks, as Chen noted (see also Matther et al., 2014). These closed networks, within which entrepreneurial opportunities circulate, act as significant constraints for women like Chen X looking to establish their businesses. While Chen X, whose husband was willing to support her in extending her social networks, may achieve success, it often requires additional support, which many highly educated women may not have. This dynamic serves as a reminder of the structural inequalities embedded in Shenzhen's economic landscape and the ongoing challenge of gender barriers.

Chen X expanded her company in 2004, coinciding with Shenzhen's introduction of new preferential policies benefiting highly educated migrants (Wang, 2022). As discussed in Chapter 1, Wang Yang, then party secretary of Guangdong Province, introduced the policy known as 'vacating the cage to change the birds' (腾笼换鸟), designed to create space for higher-end industries by encouraging the departure of 'low-quality' (低素质) rural migrant workers. This initiative aimed to elevate the average 'quality' (素质) of the labour force, as measured by gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, and pave the way for an influx of 'high-quality' talent (Xie & Hu, 2009). Aligned with the Shenzhen Talent Policy, Chen leveraged her connections and influence to provide employment opportunities and housing for 20 highly educated women from her hometown between 2006 and 2015. This strategic move played a pivotal role in her company's evolution from a start-up into a medium-sized enterprise, employing 80 individuals.

> *I helped many 'sisters' from my hometown (姐妹老乡) come to Shenzhen through the recruitment process. They later expressed their gratitude because it would have been*

difficult to migrate to Shenzhen alone without the positions and accommodation I provided.

Chen X's facilitation of her female staff relocating to Shenzhen opened up a transformative pathway for these women to empower themselves as part of a neoliberal labour force, utilising their knowledge and skills to navigate beyond traditional gender roles. In contrast to Lu J's decision to leave architecture, Chen X became the *guanxi* upon whom "sisters" from her hometown could rely, providing them with positions and accommodations that reduced the uncertainty and risk of internal migration. She saw facilitating the relocation of highly educated women to Shenzhen as a transformative way for them to challenge themselves in the neoliberal labour market and break free from systemic constraints, including patriarchal norms and hierarchical systems in their hometowns. Her efforts became a collective route to enhance these women's agency (Sharma & Sudarshan, 2010; Moyle et al., 2006).

However, as discussed in Chapter 2, while migration to Shenzhen did offer these women opportunities to leverage their knowledge and skills to pursue aspirations such as improving the well-being of their family members, it did not guarantee liberation from patriarchal constraints (see, for example, Pun, 2005; Han, 2021). In fact, it sometimes exposed them to new constraints rooted in unequal labour relations. Here, Chen X's actions were driven not solely by charitable intentions. Her company also accrued strategic benefits from implementing a targeted recruitment strategy, enhancing its reputation as a reliable employer and gaining a competitive edge in Shenzhen's cutthroat labour market. Simultaneously, by facilitating access to that market for these women, Chen X exposed them to the city's intense 'entrepreneurial spirit,' embodying a climate of intense competition and a drive for innovation, which could give rise to new forms of exploitation inherent in neoliberalism (Anderson, 2012). Under the influence of neoliberal transitions, where market forces and profit maximisation often prevail, individuals are encouraged to pursue self-interest vigorously. This can create an environment in which labour is commodified, and workers are expected to adapt to market demands swiftly. In seeking success, women who moved to Shenzhen via Chen X's recruitment route may be subjected to exploitative labour conditions, wage disparities, and inadequate social protection, due to the intense competition and the prioritisation of economic growth associated with the 'entrepreneurial spirit.' Chen X's role in introducing these women to the 'entrepreneurial spirit' underscores the complexities of empowerment and exploitation intertwined within the neoliberal framework. While she facilitated their access to opportunities, it simultaneously exposed them to the

potential risks and challenges associated with navigating the demanding and fiercely competitive environment of Shenzhen's labour market.

For Chen X herself, being a female entrepreneur who successfully expanded her business through these female-oriented networks had both advantages and disadvantages. On one hand, she derived significant benefits from these labour relations governed by neoliberal principles, which bolstered her company's competitiveness and helped it compete in Shenzhen. On the other hand, her efforts in extending her network also shed light on the struggles, including network barriers and gender bias, that highly educated women encounter within corporate sectors in Shenzhen (see Tsang et al., 2011; Chen et al., 2011).

More broadly, Chen X's journey exemplifies the transformative potential and new challenges brought about by internal migration to Shenzhen compared with the time of Lu's arrival. Leveraging the advantages offered by Shenzhen's Talent Policy, Chen empowered herself to confront and transcend societal narratives that constrain women to subordinate roles and perpetuate patriarchal norms in her hometown (Shen, 2016). However, the expansion of her business also foreshadowed the growing number of highly educated individuals in Shenzhen's labour market, which could potentially perpetuate the exploitation and impede the progress of newcomers like Wu F—a returned overseas graduate born in the 1990s (90 后海归)—as the following story illustrates.

4.4 Coming for fantasy, leaving for reality: Wu F's Story

Wu F (30 years old at the time of my interview), an unmarried woman who has lived in Shenzhen for seven years, recently decided to leave Shenzhen and return to her hometown. Her migration history began with attending a college in Beijing and later pursuing a master's degree in Durham, UK. After graduating in 2015, she moved back to China and opted for Shenzhen over her hometown and Beijing.

Fig. 4.2 An example of metropolitan lifestyle provided by Wu F (Source: Image provided by Wu F)

Shenzhen seemed an optimal destination because Wu F imagined that, as one of the four major cities in mainland China, it would offer her high-salary career opportunities and a metropolitan lifestyle (see Figure 2). In her words:

> *Shenzhen was an ideal place for me at that time. It was modern, energetic, and close to Hong Kong. I thought I could work with creative young people under the supervision of an open-minded superior. At the same time, I could also frequently visit and enjoy art exhibitions, concerts and various cultural experiences in Hong Kong. Most importantly, I thought Shenzhen was less bureaucratic (官僚主义) compared to many other Chinese cities.*

Wu's imagination of Shenzhen as an ideal encapsulates the allure of an urban 'fantasy' (Tseng, 2011) that encompasses a vision of self-improvement (Gao et al., 2021). Her desire to engage with creative individuals within a competence-driven environment, rather than one reliant on *guanxi* prevalent in her hometown, aligns with the neoliberal values espoused by Shenzhen. These values emphasise the notion that individual effort leads to tangible rewards (多劳多得). In her imagination, Wu conceived Shenzhen as a city with flattened power dynamics between superiors and young workers like herself, liberating the latter from the hierarchical norms often prevalent in bureaucratic settings. Indeed, during her initial years in the city, Wu found contentment and fulfilment. She achieved her aspirations and earned considerably more than her counterparts in her hometown. Additionally, she relished the freedom to explore Hong Kong during weekends.

Wu F's imagination of Shenzhen reveals her privileged position compared to rural-to-urban women in Shenzhen. As a highly educated migrant, Wu F was automatically entitled to Shenzhen's *hukou*, the household registration system that distinguishes rural migrants from urban citizens. This distinction grants access to essential services such as public housing, education, and healthcare, which is legally denied to migrant workers without the proper *hukou* status (Chan & Zhang, 1999). Unlike less-educated, rural-to-urban migrants, Wu F had fewer concerns about precarious and exploitative labour conditions aimed at minimising migrant workers' consumption of public resources and reducing labour costs to sustain a competitive regime of cheap labour in the neoliberal transition (Gao et al., 2021). Furthermore, Shenzhen's Talent Policy, which not only ensured access to *hukou* for migrant talents but also provided affordable accommodation for graduates from prestigious universities, played a significant role in shaping Wu F's imagination. As discussed earlier, Shenzhen initiated its top-down market transition from a manufacturing-driven economy to a technology- and innovation-focused one around the time that Chen X expanded her business in the 2010s. In contrast to cities like Beijing and Shanghai, where highly educated migrants encounter formidable obstacles in obtaining *hukou* (Liu & Shi, 2020), Shenzhen emerged as a more attractive destination for migration. The city's preferential policies warmly invited those seeking a less hierarchical and more egalitarian work environment where migrants were not marginalised based on their *hukou* status.

However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 drastically altered Wu F's life. Lockdown measures constrained Wu to a rented space and subjected her to the strenuous '996' work schedule (working from nine in the morning to nine at night, six days a

week). Her work-from-home setup also kept Wu F in a state where she could not refuse work or overtime, as everyone had to remain available online from nine to nine. This routine was primarily a result of her lack of seniority, depriving her of opportunities. Simultaneously, Shenzhen—one of the top destinations for such returnees who studied in the US, the UK or Australia—experienced a surge in its labour force for those with comparable educational backgrounds to Wu's (He 2020), which eroded Wu's competitive advantage within the local labour market as a highly educated individual with overseas exposure.

Wu's long hours, lack of work-life balance, and reduced competitiveness shed light on the reality of exploitation that lay beneath her initial urban fantasy (Gao et al., 2021; Qian & He, 2012). Wu F's high salary, which initially enabled her to pursue cultural experiences and personal fulfilment, became a double-edged sword that constrained her freedom. Shenzhen has long been criticised for building its economic development on the exploitation of rural migrants, who are seen as attractive resources for global investors seeking low-cost labour (Pun, 2005; Chan & Zhu, 2010). Wu F's experiences highlight the emergence of a 'new' form of exploitation targeting highly educated internal migrants in the city. This exploitation involves not only maximising workers' productivity but also manipulating their emotions and bodies to meet the demands of the market (Anderson, 2012). While contemporary Shenzhen has presented itself as a symbol of economic success and opportunity (Cheng et al., 2023), the hidden exploitation and erosion of work-life boundaries experienced by individuals like Wu F expose the dark side of the city's rapid development.

Wu F's struggles continued after China announced a looser lockdown policy in 2022. Returning to in-person work under a high-intensity work pattern, Wu faced multiple challenges. She discovered that her anticipated competency-oriented setting was an illusion and her male superior did not view her as an individual worthy of respect.

> *Living here for seven years made me realise I had romanticised this city. Let me give you an example. Once, I received a call from my boss at 11:30 p.m. asking me to accompany a group of male clients to karaoke. I was furious and refused. Deep down, I felt a sense of despair. In my boss's eyes, I wasn't a respected individual; I was merely a tool he could use to maximise his interests at any time.*

Moreover, on her thirtieth birthday, she was labelled a leftover woman by her mother, who urged her to promptly find a husband. However, Wu knew she would struggle to afford a home or to educate any children she might later have in Shenzhen, which added to her

dilemma. Driven by the (apparent) urgency to form a family and a sense of impotence amid increasing competition with and manipulation from those around her, she decided to leave.

Wu's experiences exemplify the exploitation of highly educated women within the context of Shenzhen's neoliberal globalisation, exacerbated by persistent gender norms rooted in China's patriarchal traditions. She grapples with a complex dilemma as a woman aspiring to a thriving career and metropolitan lifestyle while conforming to rigid societal norms dictating the timing of life events. On one hand, she strives for excellence in her profession within Shenzhen's predominantly male-dominated corporate sphere. On the other, she confronts societal and familial pressures that prioritise marriage and motherhood, necessitating a more settled lifestyle. This inherent conflict creates a precarious balance where her ambitions depend on her professional success. However, this balance often tips in favour of aligning with the expectations imposed by male superiors in her workplace. Fearing adverse consequences, including potential job loss, she may feel compelled to acquiesce to unreasonable demands, eroding her personal autonomy. Consequently, she may find herself in situations where her bodily autonomy and life choices are no longer within her control. This imperative to conform to workplace norms and societal expectations and maintain her desired urban lifestyle establishes a power dynamic that hampers her ability to assert herself.

The intense competition and exploitation Wu faced reveal a dark side of the prevailing neoliberal values in Shenzhen, begging the question as to whether these women might become the next cohort 'vacated' to make room for workers deemed to be of even higher 'quality' (Wang et al., 2009), such as PhD graduates or seasoned researchers (Wang, 2021). Wu grappled with the weight of social expectations and the ticking biological clock (Te Velde & Pearson, 2002; Amir, 2007). These demands included the provision of well-being, encompassing high-quality education and living conditions, for her prospective children. This added pressure exacerbated the challenges she faced. In parallel with the experiences of rural workers in Shenzhen (Pun 2005), highly educated women of Wu's generation face common forms of exploitation, highlighting the entrenchment of gender inequalities and the constriction of women's agency within Shenzhen's neoliberal context.

4.5 Evolving gender norms and perpetuating gender disparities

So far, this chapter has illuminated diverse life journeys through the narratives of two generations of highly educated women in Shenzhen. Lu J and Chen X (representing the generation born before the one-child policy) were initially attracted to Shenzhen by the prospects of substantial salaries, promising career opportunities, and an aspirational working environment facilitated by policies including the Opening and Reform policy and a series of Talent Policies (Pun, 2005; Gang, 2017; Wang, 2022). Their journeys are compelling examples of how educational attainment empowered women of their generations who moved to Shenzhen. It allowed them not only to navigate the gender inequalities that once constrained their aspirations, especially in their hometowns but also to pursue aspirations that might have been more challenging in other Chinese cities.

In contrast, Wu F, belonging to the post'90s generation, faced a less privileged situation compared to Lu J and Chen X. Despite holding a Master's degree from a highly-ranked university, she had to contend with intense competition in Shenzhen's labour market. Her narrative unveils the shadows cast by Shenzhen's neoliberal transitions in response to the whirlwind of China's globalisation and modernisation (Keane & Zhao, 2012). These shifts have led to diminished advantages in the current labour market for her generation and constrained agency when addressing gender inequality. This section revisits these life stories to address the first research question, highlighting the intergenerational differences in how highly educated women adapt to the continually evolving gender norms in the context of Shenzhen's ongoing neoliberal transitions and the enduring gender disparities that constrain these women's aspirations.

In revisiting the life stories of these three women, a common thread emerges—their shared aspiration as educated, urban, and middle-class women seeking recognition. Through internal migration, they sought to liberate themselves from constraining circumstances and establish their presence in a city where they believed their knowledge and skills would be valued. However, the gender disparities faced by these women at different development stages of Shenzhen exhibited variations. Lu J's relocation in the 1980s coincided with the early stages of Shenzhen's development as a burgeoning border town, where being highly educated made individuals valued in the labour market. The gender inequality she faced revolved around a lack of access for women to leadership roles in her industry, a challenge that persists to this day (Tsang et al., 2011). Nevertheless, the high salaries and abundant economic opportunities of the 1980s, in general, enabled her to achieve her aspirations. Chen

X's relocation in the 2000s allowed her to realise her aspirations of providing a greater sense of well-being for her family and herself. However, beneath the surface of her successful career and happy family, profound gender disparities persisted. Many of Shenzhen's sectors maintained male-oriented and exclusive *guanxi* networks (Jacka et al., 2013). Chen X's struggles and efforts in mitigating these gender disparities reflect Shenzhen's evolving gender norms. On one hand, the female-oriented network that she established implied a gradual erosion of male-oriented *guanxi* networks in Shenzhen. This shift was advantageous for her and other female migrants in Shenzhen who resisted specific gender biases and workplace discrimination (Burt, 2019). On the other hand, Chen X's network consisted of female migrants from the same geographical regions. This homeland-based *guanxi* network could unintentionally become a barrier, excluding certain women (Wu, 2018). Wu F's migration to Shenzhen, while promising a metropolitan lifestyle to which she aspired, brought a new set of challenges and pressures stemming from the intense competition and burgeoning population of highly educated individuals in Shenzhen's labour market. Without the privilege of being valued by the Talent Policy solely due to her high level of education, Wu F quickly realised that Shenzhen's evolving hierarchical system pushed her away. Simultaneously, she felt pulled back to her hometown by societal expectations that encouraged her to prioritise family life, seek stability, and avoid the uncertainties associated with urban living, such as buying a house or maintaining a competitive edge in the labour market.

These three women's case studies offer insights into the intergenerational differences among highly educated female migrants in Shenzhen. For those belonging to pre-one-child-policy generations, while their trajectories may differ from Chen X's entrepreneurial success or Lu J's property ownership, a common thread emerges—a shared experience of leading middle-class lives in Shenzhen. These women have established themselves as professionals in specific fields or homeowners. Their migration to Shenzhen, occurring before Shenzhen's labour market saturation, afforded them significant benefits associated with their highly educated backgrounds, fostering a sense of identity. However, like Chen X and Lu J, these women navigate the persistent challenges of mitigating gender inequality in domestic realms and workplaces. Conversely, participants from the post-one-child-policy generation, akin to Wu F, grapple with a shifting landscape. The saturated labour market diminishes the advantages once tied to their highly educated identity, exposing them to heightened competition and the pressures of neoliberal work culture.

The experiences of highly educated women in Shenzhen across different generations highlight a multitude of factors that contribute to the persistence of gender inequality in the contemporary landscape. Shenzhen's rapid economic growth, spurred by its neoliberal transitions (Gao et al., 2021), has transformed the once distinct advantage of higher education into a less exclusive asset. The influx of highly educated individuals has intensified competition in the local job market, eroding the advantages once enjoyed by women in this demographic. Consequently, highly educated women grapple with reduced competitiveness and agency within this evolving economic environment. Furthermore, the deeply entrenched gender norms rooted in China's patriarchal traditions continue to exert significant influence over the lives of highly educated women. These societal expectations prescribe distinct roles for women in maternity and childcare, placing them at a natural disadvantage in the labour market (Cha, 2013). These norms also affect negotiations with male partners regarding the division of domestic labour and caregiving, further impeding women's professional pursuits and work-life balance.

More importantly, while moving away from their left-behind families, the gender norms rooted in patriarchal traditions in some women's hometowns continue to constrain their life choices and aspirations as they cannot prove that they have become independent from the natal families, which is marked by forming a heterosexual partnership in many contexts (Geanato, 2012). Hence, for female migrants from the post-'90s generations and younger, the challenges associated with acquiring housing ownership further undermine their agency in pursuing their aspirations for lives in contemporary Shenzhen, forcing them to navigate gender inequality while simultaneously pursuing successful careers and complying with societal expectations. Their restricted agency exacerbates the challenges in seeking independence economically in the labour market and emotionally from their natal families.

As noted earlier, the 'new' forms of exploitation that disproportionately target highly educated women of the post'90s generation and beyond were reinforced. In an increasingly saturated labour market, these women are often perceived as replaceable, with their skills undervalued or dismissed and their agency compromised. The pressure faced by these women to conform to traditional gender roles while simultaneously aspiring to professional success results in a unique and complex form of exploitation. Beyond the cohort of the post-'90s generation, highly educated women discussed in this chapter were (consciously or unconsciously) navigating the fine balance between fulfilling societal expectations of being dutiful daughters, wives, and mothers and pursuing their career aspirations. This challenging

negotiation is exacerbated by the stringent social expectations and regulations that require them to prioritise productive and caregiving responsibilities within specific life stages.

The complex and dynamic context in which these two generations of women pursued their aspirations in Shenzhen provides a vital backdrop for interpreting life journeys within the *sailing/anchoring* framework. Understanding the intergenerational differences in how highly educated women navigate distinct gender inequalities is foundational for comprehending this framework. The unique experiences of women from different generations illuminate the multifaceted nature of gender norms, disparities, and contemporary challenges in Shenzhen. Importantly, it underscores that gender inequality is an evolving phenomenon shaped by each generation's historical, social, and economic context.

This dynamic perspective on gender inequality allows me to approach the *sailing/anchoring* framework with a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted challenges faced by women at different life stages. The framework, as discussed in Chapter 2, emphasises that migrant home-making involves leveraging agency to facilitate expected changes in life courses. Recognising the dynamic nature of gender norms, which are shaped by evolving societal values, economic structures, and cultural influences, highlights the diverse contexts and expectations faced by women across generations. As they seek to assert agency over their life trajectories, women navigate distinct challenges shaped by the changing social landscape. As I study these women's life journeys of *sailing* and *anchoring*, this understanding equips me to interpret these women's experiences with contextual sensitivity. In the forthcoming three empirical chapters, I study the home-making practices and migration experiences of 26 highly educated women in Shenzhen. I aim to explore how they facilitate the realisation of their desired life changes as they navigate various constraints tied to gender inequalities. These gender disparities disproportionately affect them in the form of social expectations and exploitations within the labour market.

The analysis of the following three chapters centres on the challenges and opportunities these women encounter during significant life transitions, including singlehood, motherhood, and significant personal decisions such as choosing to remain childless, undergoing divorce, or identifying as a lesbian. The contextual exploration in this chapter has provided a foundational understanding of the complex social, cultural, economic, and political landscapes in which these women negotiate their aspirations at various life stages. For example, Wu F's narratives shed light on the experiences of single women, while Chen X's and Lu J's narratives offer insights into the context of motherhood. By focusing on their

home-making practices, including those that extend traditional notions of home beyond the domestic sphere, the upcoming empirical chapters explore the interplay between life transitions, privilege, and structural barriers faced by highly educated women in Shenzhen.

4.6 Conclusion

Each generation of highly educated women in Shenzhen has experienced its share of challenges, enduring 'tears' (exploitation, career bottlenecks, and discrimination), while also celebrating the 'cheers' of achievements (economic independence, metropolitan lifestyles, and contributing to the well-being of their loved ones). In this chapter, I have explored the life journeys of three highly educated women in Shenzhen, representing different generations. While each woman faced unique challenges and opportunities, the overarching theme is the pursuit of agency in the context of evolving gender norms and disparities. Lu J and Chen X, who hail from earlier generations, benefited from the initial phases of Shenzhen's development, where education conferred substantial advantages. However, they still had to contend with gender disparities, particularly in leadership roles. The story shifts with Wu F, representing the post'90s generation, who faced intensified competition and 'new' forms of exploitation in a rapidly evolving Shenzhen. This chapter's key finding of intergenerational differences in gender disparities is a foundation for the upcoming analysis. These differences are pivotal in understanding how women navigate challenges in pursuing aspirations related to singlehood, motherhood, and family forms that do not conform to heteronormativity. We gain insights into their multifaceted challenges by recognising how the interplay of agency, generation, and evolving societal norms shape these women's experiences. This understanding will contribute to a deeper analysis of the specific hurdles and strategies women employ as they navigate the complex landscape of Shenzhen to achieve their aspirations and challenge traditional gender roles in their various life stages.

The next chapter will investigate how highly educated women of the post-'90s generation, akin to Wu, navigate the potential exploitations and societal expectations linked to women's singlehood. It will shed light on their use of agency to liberate themselves (*sail*) from specific constraints within their previous lives or hometowns and subsequently establish new foundations (*anchors*) in desired lifestyles, locations, networks, or relationships.

Chapter Five. Negotiating singleness: the construction of the mobile home

5.1 Introduction

As introduced in Chapter 1, single, highly educated women in some metropolitan areas of China, such as Shenzhen or Shanghai, often face the stigma of being 'left over' and devalued by the marriage market (Gaetano, 2014). This chapter explores the experiences of these women, shedding light on the complex interplay between their negotiation of singleness and the making of home, particularly how they navigate societal expectations, possible exploitation in Shenzhen, and the pursuit of aspirations. This research seeks to uncover how they establish agency, redefine the domestic space, and maintain their single lifestyles.

This chapter contributes to addressing the remaining research questions. Specifically, it provides insights into how single, highly educated women navigate the maintenance of or transition from singlehood within the socio-cultural context of Shenzhen, where evolving neoliberal transitions expose them to potential exploitation and patriarchal tradition that perpetuates the labelling of these women as leftovers. Chapter 4 discussed the life of Wu F, a single, highly educated woman residing in Shenzhen. Her story sheds light on the intense competition engendered by the neoliberal transition of Shenzhen, leading to exploitation and emotional manipulation, which eventually compelled her to leave Shenzhen. While the preceding chapter touched upon the undermining of agency resulting from such exploitative practices, it did not address how these women navigate these challenges rooted in exploitation and stigmatisation. This chapter elaborates on how the agency of these women could also be eroded by enduring power dynamics and the stigmatisation of single women (Lahad, 2016).

Focusing on nine single, highly educated women, including Wu F, this chapter explores how these women construct and redefine their homes, stretching the notion of home beyond the domestic sphere (Gorman-Murray, 2006). These women, aged 24-30, are contemplating whether and how to form heterosexual partnerships. By looking into their home-making, I examine how they navigate the complexities of societal expectations,

exploitation, and personal aspirations while seeking to maintain their single lifestyles, whether they choose to pursue, delay, or reject marriage.

The analysis in this chapter is structured into four parts. I first showcase the formation of the subjectivities among these single, highly educated women who migrate to Shenzhen, seeking liberation from specific gender norms in their previous environment. Then, I highlight the constraints they navigate, primarily shaped by the financial prerequisites and restricted housing options within the Shenzhen landscape. Following this, I reveal how these women, through domestic practices and urban routines, navigate societal expectations, simultaneously *sailing* towards their new life in Shenzhen where the stereotypical portrayal of singlehood as a passive waiting period can be challenged while seeking anchorage for ceasing a sense of ambivalence and uncertainty amid the city's complexities. In the last discussion section, I contextualise their *sailing/anchoring* life trajectories within Shenzhen's neoliberal framework, unravelling the nuanced in-between status experienced by these women.

5.2 “I am not waiting!” Migration and redefining singlehood

Despite the evolving meanings of singleness, it continues to be framed as a "deficit identity" (Reynolds et al., 2005), challenging women to account for their single status positively. As highlighted in Chapter 1, female singlehood is often characterised as an extensive, uncertain, and transitional phase. The prevailing narrative surrounding female singlehood regards this life stage as temporary, expecting that single women will eventually attain the desired permanent status of being married with children. As also discussed in Chapter 2, Chinese women are expected to fulfil specific standardised life event patterns at specific life stages (see, for example, Lee, 2001). In this context, women’s singlehood becomes a life stage of waiting in the Chinese context (see also Lahad, 2016). The experience of waiting for single women is contingent upon various social circumstances and positions (Auyero, 2010; Bissell, 2007). In the Chinese context, as noted in Chapter 2, the stigmatisation of single women over the age of 27, particularly highly educated women in metropolitan areas, exemplifies the societal expectations that frame singlehood as a state in which women are expected to be chosen. If they are not married within a specific timeframe, they are perceived as leftover (Gaetano, 2014). This socially constructed "waiting" phase significantly influences the construction of women's identities and shapes their subjectivity (Bourdieu, 2000; Vitus, 2010).

For the highly educated women discussed in this chapter, singlehood was often problematised and deemed as their own fault for thinking too highly of themselves, being blunt and/or not working hard enough to pursue marriage, which it is assumed will lead to happiness. As discussed in Chapter 4, unmarried individuals such as Wu F may contend with the pressure of societal expectations and the ticking of the biological clock (Te Velde & Pearson, 2002; Amir, 2007). Here, all nine single women in this study had experiences of being urged to get married soon. They were either sent on blind dates by their families or blamed for missing the 'proper' time for reproduction. For instance, Hao S, a 27-year-old woman living in Shenzhen for one year, shared how her mother often urged her to meet men.

> *My mom always tells me that she was already preparing to have my younger brother when she was my age, and here I am, never even having been in a relationship. She keeps urging me to go out and meet someone in Shenzhen before I turn 30 and get married. What's more, she even blames me for saying 'It should not be a rush to find my life partner' because she thought, once I passed 30, it can be difficult to be picked by men.*

Hao S's words underscore the intergenerational gap in perceptions of singlehood between herself and her mother. However, it is important to acknowledge the contextual distinctions that exist between them. At the age of 27, Hao S has recently completed her Master's and has less than a year of work experience, in contrast to her mother, who, at the same age, had already accumulated over five years of professional experience. These substantial disparities in life experiences and career stages are notable. However, Hao S's mother, acting as a constant reminder of the looming age 'deadline' for marriage, appears to overlook these distinctions and places primary emphasis on Hao's biological clock. She urges Hao S to find a male partner and establish a relationship within a predetermined time frame. This advice overlooks the evolving patterns of life events within urban contexts, which have altered significantly. Furthermore, an intergenerational gap also exists in how Hao S and her mother respectively perceive partnership formation. Hao S associates processes of seeking a partner with her agency. She believes that she can decide when and how to find a life partner, whereas her mother sees partnership formation as a passive process where Hao S should meet men, present herself, and be chosen by one.

These intergenerational gaps are recurring themes among women discussed in this chapter. These women all expressed that they had been criticised for not adhering to conventional gender norms, such as not behaving in ways that conform to men's expectations, including not wearing dresses or putting on makeup to please men; or being too assertive, too

tall, too educated; or conducting their relationships in ways that might undermine men's masculinity. They all assert their desire to maintain their authentic selves, including their interests, preferences, and physical appearance, even if it means not finding a male partner before a certain age. Instead of conforming to others' criteria, they are determined to find someone who accepts them as they truly are.

Hao S and the other eight women epitomise the socio-cultural and gender dynamics that influence the experiences of single, highly educated women in Shenzhen. These women face significant pressures, which can be attributed to the deeply ingrained patriarchal norms and societal expectations surrounding marriage and female roles as discussed in Chapter 2 and Chapter 4. As Xie Y claimed, the pressure she felt, though conveyed through her parents' words, was rooted in traditional gender norms. These norms framed the understanding of marriage and women's familial roles among her mother and relatives of her parents' generation. She said, "*women's choices are limited and fixed back to the old time. One should get married to a man in her 20s and then completely devote her family and family-in-law. They wouldn't be like us, this generation, where at my age, women have many options besides forming a family. They can start businesses, pursue further education, travel, or strive for their careers. I understand their limitations, but I won't let their narrow-mindedness restrict my life choices.*" The distinct societal contexts in which single women in this thesis and their elder-generation kin made life choices caused generational gaps which placed relatively outdated (from the perspective of participants in this chapter) gendered expectations on them.

The rapid economic development in China and the burgeoning individualistic culture are profoundly reshaping the perceptions of family ideals and self-concept among two generations of Chinese women. As the country undergoes unprecedented growth and urbanisation, traditional social structures are being redefined, with emphasis shifting from collective welfare to individual aspirations (Steele & Lynch, 2013). This transformation has empowered this younger generation of highly educated women in Shenzhen to challenge conventional gender norms and familial expectations. Compared to the elder generation such as their parents, they view marriage and family life not as obligatory milestones, but as choices to be made autonomously in alignment with personal goals and desires. Consequently, intergenerational tensions arise as differing perceptions of family roles and societal obligations come into conflict and pressures on these women.

Under the pressures rooted in gendered expectations placed upon them, these women demonstrate a strong sense of agency and autonomy in navigating possible stigma,

misunderstandings, or other challenges revolving around their singlehood and resisting societal pressures. They refuse to conform to the socially constructed femininity imposed by patriarchal norms, choosing instead to maintain their sense of self and personal identities. Xie Y, a 29-year-old intern lawyer (during the time of interviewing), shared her understanding of her expected marriage and romantic relationships.

> *I've enjoyed casual relationships because I felt respected and loved. Finding someone to cuddle or offer emotional support was easy. But marriage is different; it's a commitment involving two families, at least six people choosing each other. I worry about losing my independence and being devalued by my mother-in-law as too old to have babies or pressured to have three. It's scary, right?... Yes, you could say I'm afraid of Chinese marriage (恐婚[8]), or maybe just picky about my future family. But, no one can force me to marry until I say yes. Before that (the time of marriage), I am free.*

Xie Y's remarks illuminate how highly educated women approach the prospect of marriage, contemplating the potential loss of control over aspects like their bodies and broader life choices. This perspective extends beyond Xie Y, resonating in interviews with eight other single women who share similar apprehensions. Their concerns revolve around the transition to partnership as a new life stage, involving negotiations and potential compromises on life decisions, including childbearing preferences, housing plans, children's education, and economic independence.

Choosing to remain single becomes a deliberate avenue for these women to assert agency, sidestepping the risks of being chosen, devalued, or coerced into life decisions contrary to their preferences. In doing so, they strategically navigate societal expectations and family pressures, preserving their autonomy in matters integral to their personal fulfilment and life trajectory. While family expectations may exert influence on single women, emphasising the importance of marriage and pressuring them to find a suitable male partner, these women assert their right to remain true to themselves.

Migration to Shenzhen provides these women with a pathway to redefine singlehood according to their own perceptions and values. The case of Peng Y, a 29-year-old female migrant, illustrates how leaving her hometown allowed her to address her agency in constructing her identity and shaping her own path to fulfilment. Peng Y's decision to migrate

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[8] 恐婚 (Kong Hun): A Chinese term refers to an individual's apprehension or anxiety about getting married. This term is normally used to describe women who have concerns about the commitments, responsibilities, and potential changes in their lives associated with marriage.

to Shenzhen after graduating from Guangzhou was driven, in part, by a desire to escape the circumstances in which her singlehood was consistently associated with failure.

> *Whenever I go back home, my aunt would say things like 'Oh, I know you have a good job in Shenzhen, but you are about 30 and not married yet. Let aunt tell you, men tend to look for younger girls. Let aunt introduce a good guy to you…' It's annoying to stay in places where people ignore all the success you have achieved and simplify you as a waiting-to-be-chosen product. Living in Shenzhen on my own, though might not be as comfortable as living in my parents' home, at least allow me to be treated as a professional woman rather than a pathetic, leftover woman.*

Peng Y's words poignantly reveal the social pressures and stigmatisation she faced in her hometown. Despite her professional success and accomplishments, she found herself reduced to a demeaning label of being a leftover woman, as if she were a product waiting to be chosen. This experience of being reduced and devalued solely based on her marital status was deeply frustrating and disheartening for Peng Y.

It was a common thread among all single women in this chapter – their decision to live in Shenzhen provided them with a liberating escape from such devaluation and societal pressure to get married soon, especially as they approached their 30s. For Peng Y and the other women in this chapter, living independently, away from their previous dependent (usually their parents) in Shenzhen brought a sense of relief.

This sense of relief highlighted the relationship between migration and how highly educated women negotiate their agency in narratives of singleness (Reynolds et al., 2006). As noted in Chapters 2 and 4, for highly educated female migrants who move domestically, migration can, at least to a certain degree, enhance their agency and enable them to navigate challenges imposed by societal norms, such as the patriarchal traditions in China (Kynsilehto, 2011). By migrating to Shenzhen, Peng Y was able to reclaim her agency and redefine the meaning of singlehood as more than just a deficit or temporary phase. Within the city's bounds, these women actively sought and maintained control over their singlehood, making decisions on their own terms – from choosing whether to pursue a partner to determining when and how to settle down, avoiding being stigmatised as waiting to be chosen or leftover.

Peng Y's journey, mirrored by those of her peers, showcases their resilience and determination to challenge the prevailing norms and expectations surrounding women in Chinese society. Living in Shenzhen provided a platform for these women to assert their independence and be recognised for their professional achievements. For instance, Chen F, a

graduate who just moved to Shenzhen for two years (by the time of interviewing), passionately articulated how migration to Shenzhen allowed her to re-perceive singlehood.

> *At this (life) stage (of singlehood), it should be the happiest time of my life. I am young, self-sufficient, and have a promising career ahead. I am realising my dream of travelling all over China by working hard. My parents believe that I should spend the time I use for travelling on finding a partner and getting married. I told them, 'Before becoming a wife and mother, I want to become the person I aspire to be first.' I know it's hard for them to understand, but I won't change my plans because of their opinions."*

Chen F's perspective encapsulates the empowering narratives that emerge in her life journeys to Shenzhen as a single woman. It underscores a sense of agency and fulfilment by showcasing her commitment to personal dreams and professional goals. Internal migration, in this context, became routes through which they redefined the possibilities of being single and highly educated, demonstrating that their worth and identity extend far beyond societal expectations. Furthermore, both Peng Y and Chen F's life journeys highlight the complex interplay between social pressure rooted in women's singlehood (Lahad, 2012; 2016; Ramdas, 2012; Butcher, 2022). While social narratives often undermine women's agency by framing them as passive individuals waiting to be chosen, Peng Y's migration to Shenzhen provided her with a space in which she could exercise autonomy and make choices that aligned with her own values and aspirations.

Living in Shenzhen offered Peng Y and other women in this chapter a liberating escape from the possible disappointment of not fulfilling societal expectations, such as the pressure to marry. However, addressing a sense of control over their singlehood introduces them to new challenges. Peng Y's poignant statement that she was "not as comfortable as living in my parents' home" encapsulates the uncertainties and complexities of living alone in rented accommodation in Shenzhen. These challenges include limitations in personal spaces, limited rights to redecorate or keep pets, as well as the risks associated with renting contracts in a fast-paced and ever-changing urban landscape (Li et al., 2019; Huang et al., 2015). The dynamic city demands that these women use their agency and resilience to navigate challenges rooted in the neoliberal work ethos (Gao et al., 2021), as revealed through Wu F's story in Chapter 4.

This section has shed light on how single, highly educated women resist and challenge the societal norms that frame singlehood as a waiting period for women. This voyage of self-discovery allowed them to reclaim their agency and redefine the significance

of singlehood, asserting themselves as individuals recognised for their professional accomplishments and aspirations, transcending the limitations imposed by societal expectations solely based on their marital status. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that while internal migration provided a means for these women to embrace their agency and *sail* away from specific societal pressures tied to their singlehood, it also brought forth a new set of challenges if they pursued *anchoring* themselves in Shenzhen. As the next section further discusses, Shenzhen's housing market, marked by its structure and fierce competition, creates hurdles for female migrants looking to settle. The escalating prices and limited choices strain their sense of agency, adding complexities to the challenges these migrants face in seeking settlement in Shenzhen (Wu et al., 2016). Moreover, the prevailing neoliberal work ethics in the city can impose exploitative practices, acting as 'new' constraints that limit their ability to lead fulfilling lives as single women in metropolitan areas. Under such circumstances, the desire to establish an *anchor* in Shenzhen can become an obligation, pushing these women to consistently strive for professional success and unceasingly pursue career growth. This obligation can sometimes limit their life choices and force them to remain a *sailing* status to maintain control over their singlehood.

5.3 Making a portable home for single living

I noted that relocating to Shenzhen allowed these women a liberating escape from specific societal expectations. However, highly educated women in this chapter still struggled to maintain their single lifestyle within housing designs primarily intended for nuclear families or intergenerational cohabitation (Maslova, 2022). As noted in Chapter 1, the increasing prevalence of single-person households and evolving lifestyles have led to challenges in traditional housing design and construction, prompting the need for more flexible approaches (Schneider & Till, 2005). Despite changing demographics and housing needs, the nine women examined in this chapter resided in shared and rental apartments originally designed for families, ranging from two-bedroom to four-bedroom houses in Shenzhen's central districts. Sharing multiple-bedroom apartments allowed them to save on rent, ensure safety, and stay close to their workplaces. For instance, Liao W, a 28-year-old woman who had been living in Shenzhen for two years, rented a two-bedroom apartment with her cousin in Nanshan, an area with the highest rental prices in the city. She emphasised the importance of these factors in her decision-making process.

> *I need to live really close to my company because I'm basically working overtime every day. The earliest I can get back home is around nine p.m., and sometimes I don't get back until two a.m. Living near my workplace not only saves me commuting time but also ensures my safety. I'm so grateful to my cousin because he agreed to share the rent with me. It lightens the financial burden.*

Liao W's housing arrangement exemplifies the women's ability to adapt and accommodate their specific needs within housing originally intended for nuclear families. The other eight women in this chapter also prioritise proximity to their workplaces when choosing an apartment due to their demanding work schedules that often require overtime. They all successfully found apartments and roommates that, to different levels, matched their needs for proximity, affordability, and safety. Their adaptability reflects their agency in relocating themselves to places that flexibly align with their professional needs (Maslova, 2022). However, it is crucial to note that this adaptability is contingent on their modest socio-economic status in Shenzhen, particularly compared to certain rural-to-urban low-skilled workers (see, for example, Pun 2005). Despite the openness to shared rent, financial constraints, restricted housing options, and potential security concerns significantly influence these women's decisions to opt for shared housing rather than living alone.

Housing choices also bring to light the limited options for these single, highly educated women and the significant impact of Shenzhen's prevailing work culture on their home lives. To afford the two-bedroom apartment in Nanshan District, Liao W had to find a roommate, in this case, her cousin. This mismatch between traditional housing design and the specific requirements of single individuals highlights one of the challenges these women face in finding suitable homes that meet their needs for proximity, safety, and affordability. Moreover, the prevalence of overtime work reflects another challenge imposed by the strong work ethos rooted in neoliberal values in Shenzhen on their home lives (Qian & Guo, 2017; Gao et al., 2021). The demanding work schedule deeply impacts their off-work life choices, as shown by the need to live close to their workplaces to save commuting time. This interconnection between their professional and personal lives underscores how the intense work culture shapes their housing decisions and daily routines.

By looking into their everyday lives behind the enclosed doors of their homes, I explore how they navigate these challenges and make a home while also negotiating their subjectivities and identities. While reviewing home tour videos of the nine single, highly educated women in Shenzhen described in this chapter, a recurring observation was the intentional display of home objects associated with home-moving, such as suitcases and cardboard boxes, prominently positioned in the living rooms shared by participants and their roommates. For instance, Peng Y created what she referred to as a "*portable*" home in Shenzhen (see Fig. 4.1). Within Peng Y's rental home, one can observe various packing-related items, including cardboard boxes, suitcases, plastic storage boxes, and cabinets, placed prominently in the living room. Peng Y explained that these cardboard boxes served as "storage spaces" that extended her living area and facilitated smooth home moving in case of a short-notice job change or relocation. By strategically utilising these cardboard boxes, Peng Y, as she claimed, successfully "*won the space competition*" by extending her personal space beyond her bedroom and taking up a part of the living room within the shared apartment. She became the only one who used the living room most of the time, making it her personal place for physical workouts or remote working during COVID-19. This reshaping of the living room transformed this space, originally designed as a conventional gathering space for families, into an open-plan storage and personalised area, which matched her requirement for flexibility and extension of personal space.

Fig. 5.1 A storyboard of Peng Y's home tour (Source: Made by Author)

These practices of reshaping and competing for space are common among the single women explored in this chapter. For example, Lin M, a 29-year-old single woman living in Shenzhen for two years, added an affordable, second-hand sofa and occupied living room space, which is supposed to be shared by her and her roommates, allowing herself more socialising space. Lin M's negotiation for home spaces extended to discussions with her roommates, including taking up the responsibility of cleaning the living room. Another participant, Liao W incorporated a large, detachable cat cage in the living room to create space for her beloved cat. Much like Lin M, Liao W negotiated for this space by allowing her roommates to interact with the cat. She also mentioned the cage's versatility, emphasising its capability to be dismantled and transported to her new residence if the need to move arose, enabling her to accommodate her cat while maintaining a mobile lifestyle.

The home-making practices of single, highly educated women in Shenzhen, as exemplified by Peng Y, Lin M, and Liao W, highlight their ability to maintain flexibility in housing while asserting their agency in pursuing career opportunities. Through deliberate arrangements of packing objects and adaptable furniture, they reshape their living spaces to match their needs for flexibility and mobility at their current life stage (Nowicka, 2007). These material choices go beyond mere decoration; they play a crucial role in adapting their homes to suit their ever-changing requirements, granting them the power to embrace the

uncertainties of rental housing while maintaining control over their environment. These practices materialise and give meaning to the redefined concept of singlehood embraced by these women, showcasing their agency in constructing homes that align with their evolving needs and aspirations (de Hass, 2021).

These practices not only highlight the agency of these women but also articulate their individual subjectivities. As discussed in Chapter 2, migration is linked to expressions of identities and envisioned future possibilities that are aspired to but not yet realised (Shubin, 2015). Here, by making their mobile homes, these women mitigated the challenges of living in shared apartments designed for nuclear families by allowing for a re-distribution of self-space within the limited confines of their rental living (Longhurst, 1999). They, in their everyday lives, addressed their agency by allowing the personalisation of space, fostering adaptabilities in responding to possible shared living challenges and asserting control over their living environments. In doing so, these highly educated women construct subjectivities as migrants in Shenzhen, leveraging their living spaces and routines to adapt to anticipated changes in their life trajectories, particularly in relation to potential future career opportunities.

The home-making practices of single, highly educated women in Shenzhen, therefore, empower them to maintain flexible and mobile lifestyles, allowing them to navigate the challenges posed by societal norms and rigid gender expectations. However, these practices also introduce a more complex and fluid understanding of 'home,' characterised by deliberate or unintentional disruptions to the sense of place and sentiment at different scales and times (Brickell, 2012). While these women create living spaces that prioritise safety, proximity to workplaces and affordability, the concept of 'home' transforms from a "fixed geographically delineated place" to a "turbulent sea of constant negotiation" (Reinders & Van der Land, 2008: 8; Miller, 2001: 4). In this sense, 'home' becomes less of a stable and secure haven and more of an ever-changing, evolving entity that reflects their dynamic life trajectories. Although their portable home-making practices enable these women to *sail* towards their expected single and independent lifestyles, the transient nature of their home-making practices also pose challenges in finding places where they can genuinely *anchor* themselves. The emphasis on safety, proximity to work, and affordability means that their sense of attachment to a particular living space may remain transient. They are always ready to move to the next place, leading to a continual sense of impermanence (Nowicka, 2007).

The continual sense of impermanence resulting from the portable home-making practices of single, highly educated women in Shenzhen holds significant implications within the context of the city's neoliberal transitions. These women's perpetual state of *sailing* without the ability to *anchor* reflects an overarching ethos of Shenzhen's neoliberal transformations, marked by rapid economic shifts and urban development, as detailed in Chapter 1 (Qian & Guo, 2017; Gao et al., 2021). These women's ongoing negotiations in defining 'home' mirrors the adaptability required in the city's neoliberal landscape. Despite aligning with the transient nature of opportunities in Shenzhen's economy, this persistent sense of impermanence positions them in a metaphorical sea where *anchoring* seems unattainable. As Hao S said, "*it is too far for me to imagine a long-term future. I mean, there is a lot of uncertainty, from the soaring housing prices to the instability of my job, not to mention unexpected emergencies like COVID-19.*" These sentiments echo the concerns of many participants, such as Liao W, who remarked, "*even if Shenzhen cannot provide me with the soil for rooting, that's fine. I will figure that out later*." This awareness of impermanence in internal migration, coupled with the adjustment of expectations regarding settling, highlights a distinctive dynamic akin to the uprooting/regrounding framework proposed by Ahmed and her colleagues (2003). In this dynamic, individuals uproot themselves from their past homes but find themselves ungrounded in the process of migration.

This section reveals the tension between agency and the sense of impermanence embedded in the home lives of these single women. The following section underscores the role of materiality in the domestic in addressing these women's single lifestyles under the turbulence of uncertainty and impermanence in Shenzhen.

5.4 Materialising aspired single lifestyles in the domestic space

Many participants emphasised the importance of preserving a sense of self within their shared living spaces. One of the primary ways they achieved this was by displaying or decorating their homes with objects that expressed their identity and fostered a sense of belonging. Young (2005) explores the relationship between domestic material objects and individual subjectivity in shared living spaces, highlighting the distinction between personal belongings and shared items. Each person often has their own designated spaces for keeping items that are important to them and engaging in activities that reflect their individuality. Liao W's home tours (see Fig. 5.2) provide a glimpse into the interplay between domestic objects and

her construction of subjectivity. Through deliberate home-making practices, she created spaces that fulfilled her expectations, such as keeping cats and upgrading her bed.

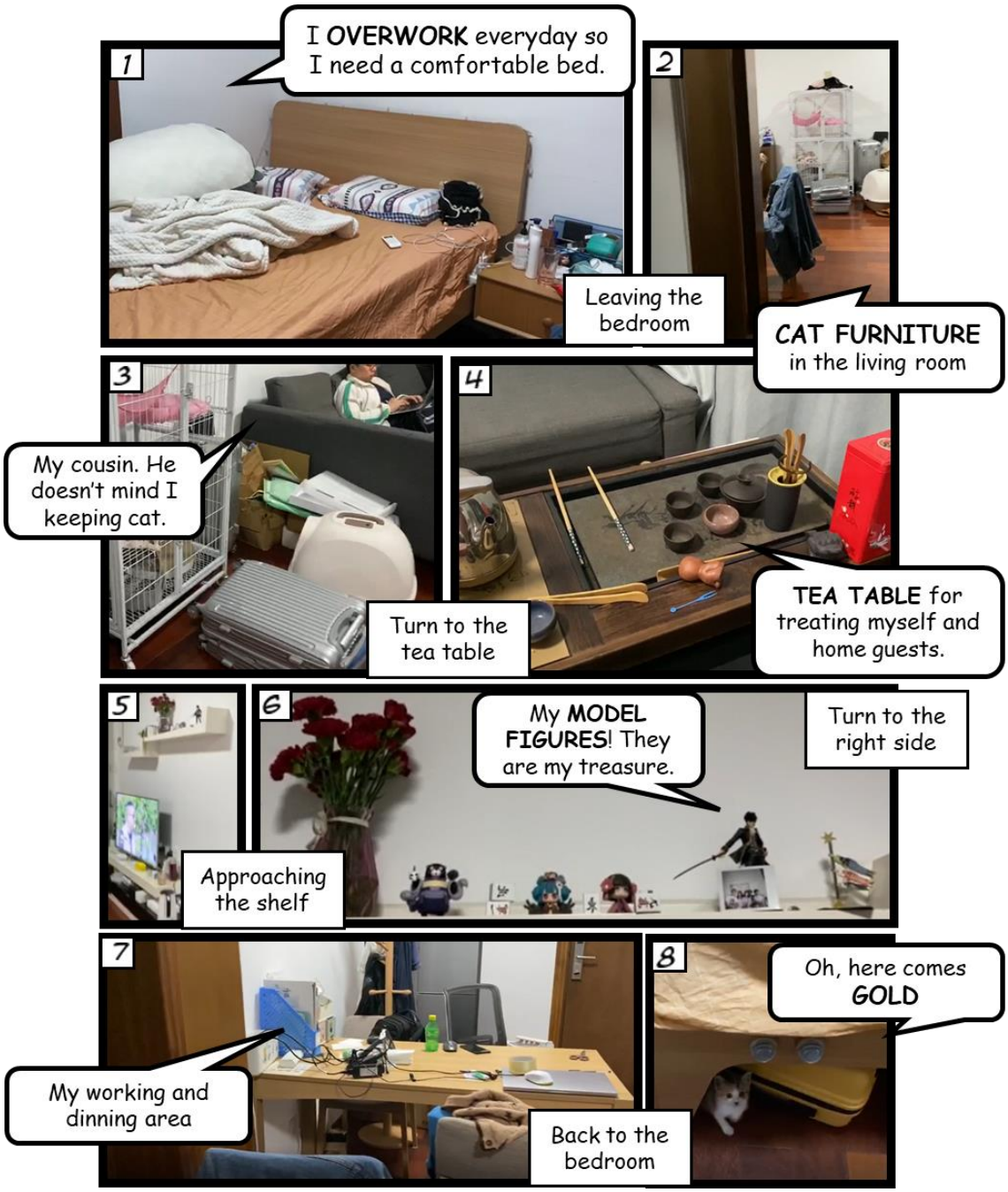


Fig. 5.2 A storyboard of Liao W's home tour (Source: Made by Author)

Through her deliberate home-making practices, Liao W effectively addressed her sense of self in her living spaces, utilising various objects to craft living spaces that align with her past imaginations of the notion of home (Young, 2005). During her home tours, she eloquently narrated how she carefully curated her living space to fulfil expectations that had once

seemed unattainable due to her economic dependence on her parents. One crucial aspect she prioritised was ensuring a comfortable and restful space after her demanding work. Liao W made a significant decision to invest in an expensive mattress and bedding set, replacing the uncomfortable bed in the rental home – a move that her parents opposed because they thought Liao W should save her money for the future family rather than spend on her present, single life. Moreover, despite her parent's opposing voices and blaming Liao for being "*naive and immature*", Liao W proudly showcased furniture that catered to her passion for her cats, as well as displaying manga figures that expressed her identity as an 'Otaku girl' (宅女).

These manga figures and the expensive bed signify Liao W's determination to create an environment that prioritises her present comfort and desires, asserting her sense of self within the constraints of her busy lifestyle and limited living space. Rather than conforming to societal expectations and sacrificing her current happiness for the perceived next life stage of marriage, Liao W firmly believes that marriage should not require hiding her true self or compromising her present well-being to please someone else. She said,

> *My parents often say, "If you act like this, you won't be able to get married." But in my opinion, marriage shouldn't require sacrificing my present happiness or hiding my true self just to please someone else. I really hope to meet someone I'd be willing to marry, but that person should be someone who shares my interests, values, economic status, and cultural pursuits rather than a person forcing me to fit in his frame.*

Her words reflect the essence of agency and subjectivity among single, highly educated women in this study. They actively engage in home-making practices to pursue and achieve their present desires and aspirations, prioritising their individuality and self-fulfilment over conforming to traditional norms of transitioning into marriage (Lahad, 2016). Through making homes, these women materialise their agency through their homes, using them as platforms to assert their individuality and resist the stigmatising framing of singlehood as incomplete. They express their desires, interests, and values through the intentional decoration of their living spaces. Like Liao W, many participants, such as Liu S, manifest their agency by curating their homes to align with their passions and aspirations. Liu S's silent piano in her bedroom and her determination to learn and play it daily reflect her defiance of traditional expectations imposed on her to be an "*elegant Chinese girl*" learning the *guzheng*. She said, "*I realised that my parents' desire for me to learn the guzheng stemmed from the expectation that traditional Chinese girls are obedient and compliant with parental or in-law demands. But I'm not that. I am someone who needs my aspirations to be respected, so I chose to learn piano and composition to express myself through music.*" In

addition to Liao W and Liu S, other participants also demonstrate their agency by transforming their living spaces into weekend party areas, cosy reading corners, or mini-bar spaces. These intentional home-making practices are ways for them to consolidate their subjectivity and make their homes reflect their true selves (Young, 2005).

Here, the women reflect the sense of self through home-making practices, yet concerns persist about marriage potentially limiting their authenticity within the domestic sphere. For example, as introduced by Liao W, her parents, observing her home interior via video calls, view her as unconventional and undermine her ability to be "*qualified wives and mothers*". While these women's homes serve as canvases for leveraging the economic ability to pursue their aspired single lifestyle, societal norms continue to question them, and societal norms continue to scrutinise and sometimes impede the full realisation of their authentic selves. Liao W's parents' disapproval reflects societal pressures on women to adhere to traditional marriage roles, exacerbating these women's association of marriage with unexpected compromises on expressing their authentic selves.

Home-making became an essential means for these women to navigate the ongoing tension between their individual self-perceptions and societal expectations that encourage them to move on to the 'next' life stage (marriage). In response to the social norms framing their singlehood as a waiting period, these women assert their agency within the domestic space by engaging in home-making practices that materialise their self-perception of singlehood as legitimate and fulfilling. These deliberate acts of self-expression through home-making serve as forms of resistance against the societal norms that undermine their singlehood (Lahad, 2016). The women actively shape their homes to reflect their sense of self and challenge the notion that singlehood is merely a transitional phase leading to marriage. As discussed in Chapter 2, the nexus between power and identity in the domestic becomes a critical locus of personality, belonging and meaning, experienced differently based on age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and class (Brickell, 2012).

For these single, highly educated women who have graduated from well-established universities and successfully relocated to Shenzhen for at least a year, their homes become spaces not only particularising their resistance but also politicising it (Blunt & Dowling, 2006). In interviews, participants like Xie Y and Peng Y shared their deliberate choices in decorating their living spaces, featuring items such as mini-skirts and wine bottles, which are sometimes associated with stereotypes of lasciviousness (不检点) or flapper (太妹) culture in Chinese traditions. Their intentional acts of decorating serve as a direct form of resistance

against societal expectations dictating conventional behaviours for women in China. These women assert that such items, often misunderstood as symbols of impropriety, represent their confidence in their body figure and response to excessive work pressure, influenced by some foreign cultural norms (see, for example, Weber, 2002). These home-making practices take on a political dimension, challenging established gender norms and contributing to a broader societal discourse about the clash between the globalisation of Shenzhen and its deeply ingrained Chinese cultural values. The inclusion of these objects becomes a collective statement, symbolising a rebellion against traditional expectations and advocating for a more nuanced understanding of women's choices within the evolving cultural landscape of Shenzhen.

Economic independence, as noted earlier in this section, plays a fundamental and transformative role in shaping these women's sense of self within the domestic realm. Being financially autonomous enables them not only to pursue their interests and aspirations but also to make independent decisions about their lives and relationships. It grants them the freedom to curate their living spaces, as seen with Liao W and Liu S, where they can materialise their self-perception of singlehood without compromising their present happiness or pursuit of aspired lives in the future. Their ability to afford and develop their interests challenges the societal notion that marriage is a standardised goal for women.

The home functions as a conduit through which these women assimilate neoliberal principles in Shenzhen to reshape their subjectivities, engaging in experimentation to delineate the lifestyle they aim to pursue within the phase of singlehood. As discussed in Chapter 2, in the Chinese context, societal norms in the Chinese context often rigidly reinforce benchmarks tied to age, restricting women's life choices (see, for example, Wang, 2021). By materialising their changing selves, these women continually fortify their sense of agency, allowing the transformation of their subjectivities throughout the migration journey to Shenzhen. This deliberate process enables them to navigate away from the standardised life choices imposed by societal norms.

Viewing home-making as a means of seeking an *anchor* and settling in places where their singlehood can be more than a life stage of waiting to be chosen, their financial autonomy provides agency and a degree of control over their home spaces, allowing them to *sail* away from lives of being compelled to compromise, sacrifice, or make life decisions which are against their wills (Brickell, 2008; Ling, 2017). Compared to their past home lives, they feel less obligated to conform to societal pressures or family expectations regarding

marriage by making a home aligning with their single lifestyles in Shenzhen. This agency allows them to challenge prevailing norms that frame singlehood as incomplete. By asserting their ability in independent decision-making and taking the following consequences, these women redefine the concept of singlehood, seeing it as fulfilling and meaningful in its own right: a state in which they can actively explore their individuality, such as delaying their marriage age beyond the socially constructed marriage age in China (27 years old as noted in Chapter 2), and pursue their desires, such as seeking romantic relationships without a premise of forming a partnership (see also Shen, 2016). In the broader societal context, their economic independence challenges deeply ingrained gender roles and expectations. They defy traditional notions of women as dependent on men, paving the way for more equitable relationships, partnerships, or the freedom of being single, should they choose to form them (Gaetano, 2012). This process of these highly educated, single women seeking an *anchor* in Shenzhen not only reshapes their self-perception of themselves as single people but also contributes to a broader cultural shift that challenges patriarchal norms and reinforces the importance of women's agency and fulfilment in contemporary China.

However, I also found that, while embracing neoliberal principles provides a foundation for self-definition, it also introduces potential limitations related to the sense of impermanence noted earlier in this Chapter. The unrelenting pursuit of economic success and individuality may foster competitive and isolating environments, exacerbating societal pressures rather than alleviating them. As discussed in Chapter 4, Wu F, labelled as a "leftover woman" by her mother, was compelled to relinquish her home in Shenzhen—a place where she once believed she could embody her ideal metropolitan life. This decision stemmed from the difficulty of simultaneously handling pressures from traditional gender norms, primarily represented by her mother and the competitive labour market in Shenzhen. As evidenced by Wu F's story, Shenzhen's neoliberal environment, while granting women access to pursue individualised life choices, appears to extend this access primarily to those with a strong spirit, unwavering effort, or a predisposition to prioritise careers over family life (e.g., Liao W noted at the end of last section). The competitive nature of the city's economic landscape demands these women to establish resilience and adaptability in the sense of movement and impermanence, potentially favouring those more committed to professional pursuits over traditional familial roles. This dynamic creates a nuanced scenario where women with specific attributes find greater opportunities to redefine their lives, while others

may face greater challenges in navigating the complexities of Shenzhen's neoliberal transitions.

Despite their adaptability and resourcefulness in constructing flexible living spaces and expressing agency in the domestic space, these highly educated, single women still find themselves grappling with a profound sense of ambivalence about their sense of belonging and attachment to the city. Here, this sense of ambivalence is rooted in recurring cycles of questioning whether their residence in Shenzhen genuinely qualifies as "home" and convincing themselves that, at the very least, their current living space offers a refuge from societal expectations that undermine their agency. On one hand, these women wholeheartedly embrace their ability to define their singlehood in Shenzhen and pursue their aspired single lifestyle. Therefore, they successfully attached a sense of home based on their strong sense of belonging and identity (see also in Goulahsen, 2017). On the other hand, there is an underlying unease about the uncertainty of life in leased accommodation. Lin M shared "*I am content for now. But can I sustain this happiness if I continue to move frequently after my 30s?"* Similarly, Chen F also complained, "*Even though I am currently happily living with my roommates, I still worry about the difficulty of finding another compatible roommate once they depart.*" These women perceive that residing in temporary, fixed-term residences, while convenient for job-related relocations, also hinders them from forming emotional attachments to permanent abodes legally owned by themselves because they feel a deprivation of sense of control over their residential spaces.

The sense of uncertainty experienced by these women was further amplified by their introspection regarding the sustainability of their single lifestyle, which often involves high mobility and demands a strong commitment to their careers to afford life in Shenzhen. The participants in this chapter have moved at least twice since coming to Shenzhen, with the most frequent mover having relocated a staggering five times. For instance, even though individuals like Liao W can construct a sense of self by decorating and reshaping their home spaces with an array of personal objects, the persistent uncertainty associated with renting apartments and the enduring commitment to working overtime erodes their attachment to the domestic realm. This transformation turns their homes into spaces where they passively respond to the challenges deeply ingrained in neoliberal Shenzhen, a city that encourages individuals to embrace competition, self-promotion, and a strong work ethic (Gao et al., 2021).

It is, therefore, worth considering how, in cases where these women dedicate extensive hours to their professional lives, their domestic spaces may cease to hold meaning, regardless of the degree of personalisation, because they simply do not spend enough time there for it to matter. This raises important questions about the sustainability of their current lifestyles and the impact of relentless work commitments on the significance of their domestic spaces. Similar to Liao W and Peng Y, highly educated, single women in this thesis possessed the agency to free themselves from local patriarchal traditions and rigid gender roles that dictate their lives in their hometowns, but the allure of Shenzhen also comes with a price. Shenzhen's fast-paced and competitive environment demands unrelenting dedication to work and the acceptance of certain exploitative practices (as presented in Chapter 4). Despite shaping homes that embody their desired single lifestyles, these women contend with the harsh realities of Shenzhen's housing market, marked by soaring prices and pervasive uncertainty. The dream of owning a stable home seems elusive, illustrated vividly by Hao S's poignant remark: "*My salary is merely 10,000 yuan (around 1115 pounds) per month, and the housing price of the district where I am working is more than 65,000 yuan (around 7249 pounds). How can I dream about buying a house here?*" This stark contrast between their hometowns, where homeownership may have been more attainable, and Shenzhen, is a critical factor in their consideration of the future. They question whether maintaining a *sailing* status in Shenzhen, consistently changing residence, can allow them to settle, or simply imprison them in another constraining situation.

This next section further examines the interplay between everyday practices that stretch the idea of home beyond the confines of private and domestic spaces and the processes of recreating stability and rootedness within housing precarity (see also Brun, 2016; Meek, 2014). I explore how my participants navigated the exploitation imposed on them, shedding light on the paradox they experienced in Shenzhen, which revolves around the dual challenge of seeking a stable *anchor* and a sense of belonging while simultaneously embracing constant change and mobility.

5.5 Stretching the idea of home

The home-making practices of these women, as exemplified by Peng Y, Lin M, and Liao W, demonstrate how they materialise and give meaning to their re-defined singlehood. As noted in Chapter 2, the concepts of home and individual subjectivities are fluid and evolving (Duncan & Lambert, 2004). According to their everyday routines, I found that, for these

women, the notion of home is not confined to a fixed location and encompasses practices and processes where they proactively extend self-space within and beyond the domestic (Gorman-Murray, 2006; Blunt & Dowling, 2006). It is a rich environment through which they explore and materialise various aspects of their subjectivity, including sexual orientation, sexuality, familial connections, cultural heritage, class, and politics (Gorman-Murray, 2008; Morrison, 2013). As highlighted in Chapter 2, Sheringham and Blunt (2020: 10) challenge the narratives that reinforce the notion of home as a safe, private, enclosed place, arguing that these narratives "overlook the ways in which home can be made in multiple ways and encompasses more than the built form". As noted in Chapter 4, exploitative practices drove Wu F, a single woman with a Master's degree, to leave Shenzhen. This section considers how these women perceived different forms of exploitation, which affected their emotions and bodies and negotiated their sense of belonging by integrating them into specific urban practices.

For the single, highly educated women in this chapter, their relationship with the built environment and the more expansive city intertwines with their emotional experiences, shaping a complex contrast between feelings of alienation and belonging in their everyday lives (Ghosh, 2014). As explored in Chapter 2, various place-making practices in migration destinations have enabled migrants to find a sense of diasporic belonging (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2017; Gorman-Murray, 2006). Here, I found that this development of belonging and place attachment is also deeply connected to broader power dynamics and gender inequalities. For instance, in Chapter 4, Wu F finds fulfilment in Shenzhen due to relatively flattened power relationships with her superiors, allowing her to experience a greater sense of agency. Similarly, Peng Y's words illustrate how her interactions with local people in Shenzhen fostered a sense of belonging and attachment to the city, where the boundaries between locals and migrants are less distinct, and newcomers are welcomed into the community.

> *I feel I was lucky to start my career in Shenzhen. My friends in Shanghai told me that they sometimes feel marginalised because of some uncomfortable experiences. They were once called "outsiders" and blamed for "occupying local people's living spaces" by an indigenous Shanghaier who spoke the Shanghai dialect. In Shenzhen, the boundaries between locals and migrants are vague. Shenzhen's city slogan is 'whoever comes to Shenzhen can be a Shenzhener.'... My department has ten people, and we are from eight different cities… Once I came to Shenzhen, I automatically became one of the majorities.*

Peng Y's experience of diversity in Shenzhen plays a pivotal role in shaping her evolving sense of identity. Blunt and colleagues (2012: 2) argue that the city should not be solely viewed as a space of arrival and settlement but also of departure, resettlement, and emotional experiences—a site that encompasses various forms of "*territorial and emotional mobility*". As one of the nine single women who have maintained a *sailing* status by making portable homes in Shenzhen, Peng Y left the societal norms that framed her singlehood as a waiting period. Further, migration also enabled her to arrive, in a specific socio-cultural context where she could establish a 'new' identity as a "*Shenzhener*" (深圳人) and affiliate herself with a specific social group of internal migrants like her. Her encounters with colleagues from various areas and the experience of living in a non-dialect language environment contributed to her sense of rootedness in the turbulence of uncertainty in Shenzhen.

Similarly, all participants in this chapter express that the Mandarin-based language environment and the diversity of Shenzhen's population played a vital role in reducing feelings of alienation and detachment. In Shenzhen, they encounter fewer language barriers, cultural gaps, or visa issues than immigrants or domestic migrants in cities where migrants are regarded as unwelcome minorities by some locals (see, for instance, Cederberg, 2017; Chen & Wang, 2015). Additionally, the shared experiences of other women facing similar societal pressures, such as parental pressure to get married or the tension between societal expectations (e.g., fulfilling filial duty) and individual aspirations (e.g., living single lifestyles), have allowed them to reframe their perception of singlehood. As noted earlier in this Chapter, Hao S shared a poignant experience where intergenerational differences in perceiving singlehood and motherhood resulted in pressures on her and the devaluation of her life choices. During interviews, Hao S expressed how encountering other single, highly educated women in Shenzhen with shared pressures and challenges facilitated processes of reframing singlehood.

> *In my hometown, many friends of my age already have children, but it seems that my colleagues and classmates around me are like me – they neither have a stable partner nor the desire to get married. However, here, no one will ask you to explain why you are still single. I can chat with my friends about topics I like, such as my idols (偶像) or future career plans, instead of constantly needing to prove, like in my hometown, that not getting married doesn't mean no one wants me; it means I choose not to.*

This narrative, echoed by others in the study, illustrates the liberating nature of urban encounters in Shenzhen, where the pressure to conform to traditional marital expectations is

replaced by an acceptance of diverse life choices. As discussed in Chapter 2, migrants establish a sense of home beyond the domestic through specific cultural encounters (see, for example, Gorman-Murray, 2006; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2015). In the city, women like Hao S find solace in the camaraderie of colleagues and classmates who share similar aspirations and lifestyles. The absence of others' judgment and the need to defend life choices in her everyday life in Shenzhen created a platform for women like her to explore and express their individuality. For these women, *sailing* towards expected single lifestyles by making home in Shenzhen brought uncertainty and a sense of impermanence to their life courses. However, it also enabled them to reperceive their pursuits of individuality and independence. Instead of feeling left over or marginalised from the social majority, they see themselves as seeking *anchors* for their expected future and a sense of rootedness in other social groups, which may have been difficult to attain in their past lives.

The re-conceptualisation of singlehood as a period of potential and endeavour reflects a dynamic process of identity negotiation within the urban environment. Shenzhen transcends its physical dimensions, evolving into an expanded notion of home where women redefine the parameters of belonging. Drawing on insights from Chapter 2, the transformation (or preservation) of migrants' identity and agency occurs in their daily social and cultural interactions amid migration and settlement processes (see, for example, Yeoh, 2015). Here, the expansion of the home concept to include external realms and public spaces, facilitated by network relationships in proximity, establishes a sense of rootedness. Notably, this rootedness, distinct from emotional or social ties to past experiences, gains reinforcement through the pursuit of anticipated selves in their envisioned futures.

Amidst their multifaceted daily routines, leisure activities, including boxing, skateboarding, frisbee, and dancing, assume a pivotal role in expanding the conceptualisation of home for single women, concurrently facilitating their deeper integration into local social groups in Shenzhen. Drawing inspiration from the 'material turn' in recent home scholarship (Datta, 2008), Clarke (2001: 42) argues that '*the house objectifies the vision the occupants have of themselves in the eyes of others*.' Building upon this argument, I found that home objects such as skateboards, frisbees, and boxing gloves serve as a way for these women to objectify the aspirations and desires of the self that they wish to present to others. These home objects, much like the portable packing objects that extend their self-space beyond their bedrooms in the domestic setting, also allow them to stretch their self-space into the outer world (Meier & Frank, 2016). For example, Xie Y's skateboarding enabled her to assert

agency in urban spaces (see Figs. 5.3 and 5.4), providing an escape from the stigmatisation of her appearance and clothing choices, as well as from the exploitation of long working hours:

> *Skateboarding allows me to wear tanks, jeans, leggings, or anything I feel comfortable in. In the [skateboarding] park, I won't be judged as indiscreet, or improperly dressed and play[ing] boy's sports by my parents… Meanwhile, skateboarding allows me to take a breath from my job, which I am committed to from nine [am] to nine [pm], Mon[day] to Sat[urday].*

Figs 5.3 & 5.4 Xie Y's skateboard in the domestic space (left); Xie Y skateboarding in Shenzhen (right) (Source: Provided by Xie Y)

Xie Y's skateboarding empowered her with a strong sense of identity in urban spaces (Jing & Whitson, 2014). By identifying two situations from which she aspired to *sail* away – the stigmatisation of her clothing choices and the exploitation of long working hours – skateboarding became her means to navigate through these challenges and create environments that fostered a sense of freedom and empowerment. Similarly, the other single women in this chapter also recognised the significance of engaging in beyond-the-domestic routines. Whether it is through sports, hobbies, or social activities, dedicating several hours per week during weekends or weeknights allowed them to encounter like-minded individuals who did not stigmatise them for being single, dressing unconventionally, or expressing themselves in ways that might challenge traditional gender norms (Jing & Whitson, 2014). These routines served to maintain a *sailing* status and their sense of self.

Through engaging in leisure activities like skateboarding, boxing, and frisbee in urban spaces such as parks, boxing gyms, and frisbee courts, Xie Y and other single women expand their self-space beyond the domestic sphere, creating an intimate and positive realm of experience outside their homes. Participant Xiao Y, for instance, connects her sense of self

with boxing gyms, expressing, "*I spend three nights in the boxing gym per week. Every time I learn new movements or compete with others, I feel I am getting closer to the woman I want to be—strong, confident, and determined*." Additionally, participant Liu S finds a sense of community through her regular frisbee activities, saying, "*The weekly training and occasional competitions make me feel like the frisbee team is my home. I don't consider being single as loneliness because I have such a group of friends."* These activities become transformative sites of belonging and inclusion, where they can express themselves freely, fostering a sense of community and connection with like-minded individuals. By integrating leisure activities into their daily routines, these women stretch the idea of home beyond the confines of their bedrooms, establishing profound connections with various urban spaces and constructing a new and rooted identity in Shenzhen. Their agency in redefining home reflects broader discourses of inclusion and exclusion in the city, highlighting the link between the geographies of urban homes and wider social and political contexts (Blunt & Sheringham, 2020).

The wider urban context in Shenzhen, intertwined with the values of neoliberalism that prioritise competition, self-improvement, and individual responsibility (Gao et al., 2021; Pun & Chen, 2013), significantly influences how these women stretch the idea of home. In response to the exploitation imposed by these neoliberal values, these single women seek to extend their self-space beyond the domestic realm, searching for environments that allow them to navigate the challenges they face in the workplace. While they embrace certain aspects of Shenzhen's culture, such as the preference for Mandarin and the city's diverse population, providing relatively inclusive and diverse social networks that contribute to their sense of belonging, they are simultaneously confronted with new challenges from which they aspire to escape. The pervasive influence of neoliberal values in shaping the city's socio-cultural fabric continually reinforces these challenges, leaving these women in an in-between state as they strive to maintain their agency and sense of self amidst the complexities of urban life in Shenzhen.

As these single, highly educated women maintained their *sailing* status by asserting their sense of self in specific spaces within Shenzhen, they found themselves at a liminal stage in their life course. While breaking away from societal norms and leaving behind constraints on their singlehood, they were simultaneously searching for places in which they could establish a more stable sense of belonging. Shenzhen, with its promise of opportunities and possibilities, provided them with various contexts in which to explore and assert their

agency. However, it also imposed new complexities and uncertainties on their journey towards self-fulfilment and rootedness. The next section revisits both home-making practices and urban activities to provide a deeper understanding of this in-between life stage and how these women navigated singlehood by maintaining a delicate balance between *Sailing* and *Anchoring*.

5.6 Singlehood and women's in-between status: *Sailing* yet *Anchoring*

At their current life stages, home-making practices in Shenzhen allowed these women to value their own preferences, interests, and self-expression, while at the same time, challenging the limitations imposed by traditional gender roles and cultural expectations prevalent in Chinese society (Weber, 2002). By refusing to compromise their identities and asserting their autonomy by prioritising their own aspirations and desires, these women create a sense of self and rootedness by reflecting their desired lifestyles, prioritising their present desires and interests over conforming to traditional marriage norms. This process of empowerment challenges the notion that singlehood is merely a transitional phase leading to marriage, contributing to a broader cultural shift that challenges patriarchal norms and emphasises individual agency and fulfilment. However, as I also discussed in previous sections, these women encounter constraints to pursue their sense of self, predominantly entrenched in the exploitative nature of Shenzhen's neoliberal principle. This section reviews the processes of *sailing/anchoring* at their current life stage and sheds light on the in-between status of these women.

While serving as a space for these women to explore and redefine singlehood, Shenzhen demands a commitment of time, energy, and life dedication to work. The pursuit of freedom and the desired single lifestyle becomes contingent on the dedication required in the demanding work environment. For instance, as noticed earlier in this Chapter, long working hours, overtime commitments, and the pressure to constantly pursue professional success illustrate the extent to which Shenzhen's female migrants are entangled in a dynamic, where the quest for autonomy coexists with the demanding nature of their professional lives (see also Pun, 2005; Pun & Chan, 2013). The tension between embracing their chosen single lifestyles and yearning for stability is a constant reminder of the societal expectations they must navigate. Lin M's statement illustrates the internal conflict faced by many of these women.

> *In Shenzhen, you have to either work your butt off or play like crazy. Everyone around me seems to be like this. If I don't fill up the little time you have outside of work, I feel I am still working. But going all out with partying is exhausting too. I'm not even 30 yet, and during my health checkup this year, I found out I have irregular heartbeats. I'm considering whether I should just go back to my hometown. Even*

though I'll be urged to get married and forced to be with annoying relatives, at least in my hometown, I can 'lie flat' (躺平) and not be 'rat racing' (内卷)[9].

Lin M's hesitation between leaving or staying in Shenzhen resonates with the struggles faced by many women in this Chapter. She highlights the tension in pursuing career growth while maintaining a metropolitan lifestyle, which can be seen as embracing neoliberal values and empowering women, but also entails potential exploitation and manipulation, particularly concerning their health. This study reveals that factors rooted in neoliberal transitions in Shenzhen (Gao, 2020) might have driven these women to leave, including underlying health conditions as noted by Lin M, as well as the increasing difficulties of accessing homeownership (Wu et al., 2016), reduced value in the labour market with age (Neumark, 2018), and fears of marrying late and missing the chance to have children (Te Velde & Pearson, 2002). For these women, leaving or staying became a choice between embracing the concept of "lying flat," framing their singlehood as an incomplete, pathetic waiting period, or freeing themselves from this framework but endlessly navigating the pressures of "rat racing."

The in-between status of these women in their life course reflects both empowerment and the presence of an invisible bottleneck specifically for single, highly educated women in Shenzhen. Internal migration and the establishment of homes in Shenzhen have provided some relief from societal pressures that frame them as incomplete women (Ramdas, 2012), but they have also introduced new challenges. While they have found some rootedness in certain urban spaces, they have yet to discover a definitive place to *anchor* themselves. Maintaining the *sailing* status by making 'mobile' homes offer fulfilment as they navigate the precarity of migrant life as single individuals and challenge conventional norms of femininity (Bennett and Dixon, 2005; Lahad, 2016). They have, to some extent, liberated themselves from the pressures of conforming to societal expectations, expressing their individuality and pursuing aspirations more freely compared to their past lives in hometowns.

This empowerment raises questions about the perpetuating sense of impermanence stemming from the challenges of planning for their futures. Metaphorically, navigating the sea of Shenzhen feels similar to a daunting journey, where the depths are too uncertain to *anchor*, yet the turbulent waves grow stronger, making continued *sailing* in Shenzhen increasingly arduous. These existential inquiries weigh heavily on these women as they

[9] Rat racing (内卷): Recent studies also translate this word into "involution."

navigate their current life stage. With the prospect of owning a house in Shenzhen seeming almost unattainable, the question arises: are they destined to sail forever? Moreover, is the price of maintaining a metropolitan life, which involves sacrificing personal time, health, and family relationships, worth it to maintain this *sailing* status? The decision of where to arrive, if not in Shenzhen, becomes a complex issue. While returning to their hometowns offers a potential escape from the relentless pace of urban life, it also entails confronting societal pressures to conform to traditional family roles and expectations, particularly concerning marriage. As highlighted earlier in this chapter, single women of their generation possess unprecedented choices and economic agency, empowering them to make decisions beyond the constraints of traditional gender norms. Yet, paradoxically, these newfound freedoms also present them with a different set of challenges—namely, the overwhelming array of choices generated by the opportunities and aspirations afforded by migration. Just as they viewed conventional gender norms as constraints limiting their mothers' understanding of familial and romantic relationships, they now find themselves grappling with the complexities of navigating an abundance of choices, each laden with its own set of implications for their futures and identities.

The complexities of their in-between status reflect their struggles, negotiations, and a sense of powerlessness in reversing such dilemmas in their life course. Despite progress, women are not entirely free from societal expectations and constraints. The lives of highly educated, single women in metropolitan areas like Shenzhen reveal new challenges and pressures. The stories of these women underscore the importance of examining the intersections of gender, education, migration, and urban life to gain an understanding of the diverse experiences and aspirations of contemporary Chinese women.

5.7 Conclusion

Through the lens of *sailing/anchoring*, I have revealed the interplay between societal expectations, personal aspirations, and economic empowerment, providing an understanding of how single, highly educated women negotiate their singleness in the dynamic urban landscape of Shenzhen. The findings of this chapter address the second, third, and fourth research questions, offering valuable insights into the experiences of single, highly educated women in Shenzhen and their pursuit of personal fulfilment amidst societal norms and life-course challenges rooted in their singlehood.

Through their home-making practices, both within the domestic sphere and beyond, these women assert their agency and negotiate societal norms. In the domestic realm, they reshape their living spaces, prioritising their desires over societal expectations placed upon them, associating their next life stages with marital obligations, thus creating anchors for their single lifestyles. Beyond their homes, they engage in urban activities, finding liberation from the demanding work culture influenced by neoliberal values. These leisure activities expand their sense of home to encompass the entire city, contributing to their sense of belonging in Shenzhen and subsequently, their sense of self as a Shenzhener.

The process of *sailing/anchoring* in these women's life courses encapsulates their in-between status, where societal expectation, personal aspiration, and economic independence intersect. These women may have opportunities to *sail* away from societal norms that frame singlehood as merely waiting for marriage (Lahad, 2016), by seeking to *anchor* themselves in the familiarity and stability of their current lives (Stachowski & Bock, 2021). Yet, while these women challenge traditional norms and embrace singlehood, they are not entirely free from societal constraints. The tension between their chosen lifestyles and the desire for stability presents a nuanced picture of their lives and aspirations in Shenzhen. This research underscores the struggles, negotiations, and quest for self-fulfilment that characterise their journeys, shedding light on the complexities of women's empowerment in contemporary China. The difficulties they face life journeys of single, highly educated women in this research resonate with Wu F's experiences of being 'pushed' away by Shenzhen, discussed in Chapter 4.

In the following chapter, we will explore the experiences of participants who are mothers, exploring how they negotiate their motherhood while maintaining their *sailing* or *anchoring* status in Shenzhen. The intersection of motherhood and internal migration presents unique challenges for these women as they balance their motherhood responsibilities with their aspirations for personal fulfilment and self-expression. Through their life journeys in Shenzhen, we will gain a deeper understanding of how the dynamics of *sailing* and *anchoring* play out for women with the dimension of motherhood.

Chapter Six. Mothers in the Making: Negotiating motherhood through home-(re)making and home-moving

6.1 Introduction

The role of mothers in contemporary society has undergone significant transformation, moving away from a time when women were primarily confined to supporting their husbands, nurturing children, and engaging in domestic chores such as the beautification of the home, and experiencing limited status and opportunities compared to men. Women's improved status in China today, increased access to education, and a growing sense of independence have granted mothers greater autonomy within the family (Li, 2022). Nevertheless, the construct of "motherhood" continues to influence various aspects of family life, occupation, and societal norms. In contemporary China, the ideal of motherhood is socially constructed and shaped by scientific parenting advice, consumerism, and traditional patriarchal values (Tao, 2013; Popkewitz, 2003). Rapid urban and economic development in cities like Shenzhen presents new challenges for mothers, intensifying their responsibilities. These challenges encompass difficulties in accessing quality education, rising childcare costs, and societal expectations regarding supporting adult children, among others. Middle-class women in major Chinese cities may face stigmatisation, labelled as "widowed parents" if they prioritise their careers or as practitioners of "intensive motherhood" if they solely focus on a single child (Chen, 2018). These societal labels illustrate the expectations placed on mothers, highlighting the evolving complexities of motherhood in contemporary China.

This chapter examines the evolving challenges faced by nine highly educated mothers in contemporary Shenzhen and their strategies for negotiating motherhood through creating and shifting homes within the city. Chapter 4 focused on the narrative of Chen, a mother from the post-1970s generation, highlighting how her education empowered her to sail away from past constraints while aiming to offer her daughter a brighter future. However, this account did not extensively address how Chen, as a successful professional woman, managed potential conflicts between family responsibilities and career aspirations. This chapter will examine the impact of factors like the rising sophistication of parenting in Shenzhen,

characterised by an emphasis on scientific parenting, and the prevalent ideal of the "perfect mother" within the Chinese context on women's choices when becoming mothers. Additionally, it will explore to what extent their identity as highly educated individuals benefiting from the Talent Policy in Shenzhen contributed to the outcomes of their negotiation of motherhood.

Shifting the focus to nine highly educated female migrants who are mothers or pregnant married women, this chapter addresses this thesis's second, third, and fourth research questions by examining how they create, adapt, and redefine their homes in Shenzhen to negotiate their roles as mothers. Despite their involvement in heterosexual marriage and property ownership in Shenzhen, these women show significant diversity in their occupations, income, savings, ages, and places of origin. Through an exploration of their home-making experiences, this chapter investigates how these women construct a sense of home, blurring or reinforcing "*binary oppositions such as inside/outside, male/female, work/home, and public/private*" (Brickell, 2012: 226). This analysis reveals how these practices enable mothers to embrace neoliberal values in pursuit of career success and manage intense competition in the labour market. Concurrently, it also addresses the societal ideal of traditional motherhood, which demands that women strive to be "perfect mothers," offering love and support, navigating between the roles of "extensive motherhood" and "widowed parenting" while supporting their children into adulthood. Like the single women discussed in Chapter 5, the mothers in this chapter must find a balance between social expectations and contemporary life in Shenzhen. This chapter will provide nuanced insights into the embodied experiences of 'new' motherhood, depicting how these women navigate modernising norms while fulfilling certain traditional expectations concerning the role of mothers in Chinese society.

The analysis in this chapter is structured into three parts. The first section investigates the complexities surrounding the role of mothers within contemporary Shenzhen, unveiling the profound impact of societal expectations and entrenched gender roles on the life choices and experiences of these women. Sections 6.3 to 6.5 provide detailed insights into how highly educated women navigate the terrain of motherhood under the influence of neoliberal transitions and evolving gender norms in Shenzhen. In Section 6.3, a compelling exploration unfolds, spotlighting home-making as practised by these women, in which they ingeniously intertwine nurturing, caregiving, and professional ambitions. Continuing this journey of exploration, Section 6.4 examines how home-moving decisions mirror the class-based nature

of their mothering practices. Section 6.5 explores how these women's individual pursuits of 'perfect' motherhood are interwoven within the broader context of Shenzhen's neoliberal context.

6.2 'Perfect' motherhood in contemporary Shenzhen

This section first explores how highly educated women in contemporary Shenzhen pursue a 'perfect' mother ideal. It explores domestic responsibilities, shedding light on the challenges, aspirations, and societal pressures that shape experiences. These women's stories provide a window into the concept of home as both a geographical anchor and an emotional centre in Shenzhen while also highlighting the constraints imposed by traditional expectations of motherhood in Chinese society.

> Tracy, a 55-year-old interviewee, shared her experiences, stating,
>
> *I found out I was pregnant just when my boss offered me a promotion and a chance to go abroad. However, with my husband already overseas, I made the tough decision to resign, thinking of my unborn daughter and my 13-year-old son. It was surprising for me to become a housewife, something I never imagined I'd be. But honestly, I don't need to do any chores since we have two housekeepers (阿姨, aunts) taking care of everything. So, after leaving my job, all I could do was stay home, rest, feed myself and wait for the baby. Being liberated from domestic chores didn't bring me a sense of ease, as I found myself grappling with the transition from a full-time professional to essentially a stay-at-home wife with nothing to do. Thankfully, things started to change for the better when my daughter began kindergarten. I rediscovered my passions and interests, diving into books, and art exhibitions and travelling the world to collect art pieces. Even though I'm not formally employed, I actively contribute to our family business, utilising my management skills and expertise in contracts. It makes me feel lucky that I haven't missed out on my children's childhood while also not losing myself during the time I've been a housewife.*

Tracy's narrative provides insight into how some highly educated women in contemporary Shenzhen have first enhanced their agency by becoming economically independent or building their career trajectories based on the reciprocal relationships within families (such as Chen X). Similar to Chen X's journey in Shenzhen, as showcased in Chapter 4, Tracy's decision to move to Shenzhen was driven by the city's promising career prospects and opportunities. As a highly educated individual from the post-1960s generation, Tracy's determination and hard work enabled her to seize various professional opportunities, eventually becoming a director in a listed company. Through years of dedication, she

achieved significant milestones in her career. Her journey exemplifies the transformative power of education and career success in shaping the lives of highly educated women in the city. Like Tracy, four participants in this chapter have achieved entrepreneurial success by themselves, such as co-establishing family businesses to earn annual incomes exceeding two million yuan (approximately £220,000) or leading project teams of over 50 people. The remaining four participants are employed by specific danwei. Their salaries align with the average for their respective positions, ranging from a minimum of 15,000 yuan per month (approximately £1678) for a high school teacher to a maximum of 25,000 yuan per month (approximately £2802) for a state-owned enterprise manager. Despite their diverse career paths, these women own or jointly own at least one property in Shenzhen. Their professional trajectories have elevated them to middle-class or upper-middle-class status in Shenzhen, providing them with extensive knowledge and expertise in their respective fields. These women's career trajectories, coupled with the support from their natal or current families, have positioned them in the middle-class or upper-middle-class strata in Shenzhen. This success has not only granted them financial stability but also fostered extensive knowledge and expertise in their respective fields. Additionally, they have secured permanent residences in Shenzhen, a notable accomplishment considering that a typical single white-collar worker in Shenzhen would need to save their entire salary for approximately forty years to purchase a single property after 2019 (Tong, 2021).

The middle-class or upper-middle-class status of these highly educated women plays an important role in negotiating the social expectations and personal perceptions of motherhood in evolving and modernising Shenzhen, where they can allocate some domestic work to paid workers (Sun, 2009). For instance, transitioning from being a professional to a housewife to embrace the responsibilities of motherhood, Tracy took a series of steps to reconcile herself to her 'new' identity (Syrda, 2023). Rather than accepting certain conventional duties of motherhood within the domestic space, which revolves around caregiving, cleaning, cooking, or beautifying the home (Zuo & Bian, 2001), Tracy defies the conventional expectations of a housewife. She redefines her identity as a stay-at-home mother by strategically allocating many gendered domestic duties, such as household chores and childcare, to paid domestic workers, thereby freeing herself from the constraints of traditional gender roles and the burden of mundane household tasks. These workers were normally referred to as "aunty" (ayi, 阿姨) by their employers and tended to be low-skilled, rural-to-urban women seeking a higher income in Shenzhen (Sun, 2009). All participants in

this chapter, regardless of their employment status, have either experienced or continue to engage in hiring "aunties" to assist them with household chores and the care of children or elderly parents.

These women claimed that their relationships with the aunties were either intimate or professional, whether employed as live-in staff or only for a few hours a day. During significant occasions like Chinese New Year, some "aunties" express their affection by giving red envelopes to their employers' children, while the employers reciprocate by assisting them in finding new job opportunities. These highly educated mothers believe that, beyond the formal contractual nature of their employment, it is the invaluable support provided by these "aunties" that frees them from certain domestic duties traditionally allocated to mothers. Zheng Y's expressed her genuine gratitude to her live-in "auntie". She said,

> *This auntie has been working in our home for over eight years, and she is the heart and soul of our family. She not only takes care of my son but also helps with all household chores, allowing me to focus on work and gather with my besties (闺蜜) every week. With her assistance, my family is well-organised. I told her that if her daughter came to Shenzhen and needed a place to stay, they could live in our home. If she ever needs any help in the future, I will do my best to help.*

To some extent, the relationship between these women and the "aunties" transcends the conventional boundaries of employer-employee dynamics, extending into a realm of mutual care (although, of course, I do not have the "aunties"' view of this). This nuanced dynamic underscores the diverse nature of interpersonal relationships within household in contemporary Chinese societies, where formal employment arrangements can encompass appreciation and even affection (particularly between women[10]). The narratives about the flatten power relations between the hostess and the "aunties" serve as illustrations of how this interpersonal connection has become integral in the construction of motherhood within the context of modern Shenzhen. This connection underscores the adaptation of maternal responsibilities in alignment with the unique features of Shenzhen, achieved through the engagement of specialised and professionally compensated domestic workers, effectively replacing previously uncompensated domestic labour. For mothers who have outsourced (a part of) their domestic duties, this transformation not only liberates them from the potential

[10] As per Liu's (2016) study on intergenerational households in Guangzhou, China, this profound sense of appreciation and affection embedded in interpersonal relationships typically forms among mothers, grandmothers, and female domestic workers, especially in scenarios involving the care of an only child within a household.

exploitation associated with traditional domestic labour but also ensures the efficient execution of household tasks that may have been less effectively managed in the past.

It is important to underline that this research lacks voices from “aunties” and other female relatives responsible for these women's home care. However, details provided by participants suggest that the liberation of highly educated women from domestic duties may be rooted in potential exploitation, driven not by these women's attitudes but by the neoliberal principles of Shenzhen. In major cities like Shanghai or Shenzhen, domestic workers’ monthly income ranges from 4,000 yuan (approximately £448) to 10,000 yuan (approximately £1121) according to their seniority[11]. Trained female workers, like the "aunties" mentioned, are also expected to deliver high-quality care. For instance, Chen X said, “*We switched nine domestic workers to get the best Aunty Wang… yes, we switched aunties as my daughter was not satisfied with them.”* Meanwhile, Tracy said, “*I hired two aunties as sometimes I feel, it would be great to let them see each other working hard so that they would not be lazy.”* Compared to the possibility of grave exploitation and violent abuse, particularly among rural-to-urban migrants (Chan, 2016), the actions of these women as employers may perpetuate mundane inequality and further reinforce the potential exploitation of domestic workers or their female relatives. This is because dual-income or high-income families often view hiring domestic workers as a convenient solution to avoid unwanted domestic duties, seeing it as a paid service.

The integration of “aunties” of other female relatives in fulfilling the mother’s role in domestic labour sheds light on the evident lack of male participation in household responsibilities within contemporary Shenzhen. The prevalent association of unpaid domestic work with mother’s responsibilities, coupled with the extensive historical association of outsourced domestic labour with a gendered social image of "aunties," highlights the persistent influence of China's patriarchal tradition and deeply entrenched cultural values (Yan, 2006). As noted by a pregnant participant Yin Y, “*With both our mothers helping after the baby arrives, my husband sees himself as the fourth in line for childcare. As a mom, no matter how much assistance I’ll get, I'll always see myself as the primary caregiver. The contrast is clear*.” Yin Y’s words illustrate that, while the option to hire paid domestic workers or ask for female relatives’ support may seem like a practical solution to ease the burden of household chores and childcare for highly educated women, it also raises important

[11] For experienced yuesao (confinement nanny), salaries can reach 14,000 RMB (https://www.expatden.com/china/helper-ayi-china/).

questions about gender, entitlement, and power. On the surface, hiring domestic workers can provide highly educated women with more time to focus on their careers and their children's education, seemingly liberating them from traditional household responsibilities. However, this decision also further perpetuates the protection of male figures, particularly fathers, from domestic labour, reinforcing the inherent associations between the domestic sphere and femininity, as well as between caregiver roles and traditionally feminine duties (Grove & Lui, 2012), a division of household labour that remains entrenched in traditional gender roles.

The intersection of motherhood and the domestic sphere has significant implications for gender dynamics and inequality in contemporary Shenzhen. One broadly cited (though often discredited) hypothesis regarding the unequal distribution of housework and childcare is that men, with their high-prestige jobs, higher earnings, and social connections outside the home, bring more "gendered resources" to a marriage (Zuo & Bian, 2001: 1122). However, the highly educated mothers in this chapter claim that they contribute nearly as much as their husbands in providing financial support for their families. Despite this financial parity, they continue to view their homes as a critical arena, akin to their workplaces, where they are expected to excel in various aspects, including maintaining cleanliness, preparing nutritious meals, preserving family traditions, and offering high-quality extracurricular education to their children. Participant Zheng Y's statement exemplifies this commitment, stating, "*I'll brief the auntie on specific cleaning areas and remind her to limit pork for my slightly overweight child. I also arrange tutors for English and piano for him, and on weekends, I'll take him math and programming classes. It's manageable, but some tiger moms (虎妈)*[12] *I know go all in after work for their kids*." This voluntary engagement between women themselves and the responsibilities of caring for their families and children particularly aligns with Zuo and Bian's (2001) finding that, although housework division remains unequal among dual-earner couples in China, the majority of wives and husbands perceive it as fair. Consequently, even though husbands are no longer the sole breadwinners at home, wives' roles as housekeepers, even with the assistance of 'aunties,' retain their primary place in the family. This societal expectation reinforces inequality in family roles, as husbands who fulfil the provider role are not expected to do any of the duties noted above, while wives may face

[12] Tiger moms: Tiger moms, in the Chinese culture, refers to mothers who give their kids pressure because they feel fears and see the world as jungle and they use this way to protect their children to survive from several competition in schools and their future lives.

blame if they do not fulfil domestic responsibilities, despite also being financial providers of the family.

Even with the assistance of hired "aunties" for household chores and cooking, highly educated women are not completely freed from caring duties in their families. To fulfil these responsibilities, they still participated in domestic labour, playing roles such as nutritionists, music instructors, or computer programming tutors. To facilitate these roles, women frequently rely on convenient and cost-effective logistical services available in Shenzhen, such as online grocery stores, flower shops, medicine delivery, and food services. Rhoda, a partner of a private company, shared, "*I have local farms and flower farmers from the suburbs deliver high-quality ingredients and flowers to my door. The auntie cooks delicious meals and arranges flowers. The food and flower delivering service is not cheap, but worth it*" As exemplified by Rhoda's words, these women associate their modern approach to fulfilling mothers' responsibilities with the fear of falling short of the "perfect" mother ideal and their inability to provide the high standard of care and housekeeping they believe their families, particularly their children, deserve (Li, 2022). Consequently, this pursuit of 'perfect' motherhood introduces new challenges for these mothers, notwithstanding their ability to fulfil certain traditional maternal responsibilities through new means in aligning with the social context of Shenzhen.

The new means adopted in fulfilling a mother's duties, in conjunction with the idealised concept of "perfect" motherhood, assumes a pivotal role in the configuration and perpetuation of gendered notions of motherhood. Tracy's decisions, despite her enhanced economic ability and autonomy, were still influenced by the societal construct of the "perfect" mother (Li, 2022), which acted as a binding force shaping her choices, behaviours, and self-perception. For example, rather than pursuing her personal interests after leaving her job, Tracy prioritised childbearing and positioned herself as a devoted caregiver eagerly awaiting the arrival of her baby.

The intricacies of motherhood as a transformative journey unveil a dynamic process shaped by embodied practices, underpinning the perpetuation and reinforcement of gendered ideals. According to Huopalainen and Satama (2019), the experiences of maternity, delivery, confinement (坐月子), and postpartum recovery, which may span years, exemplify how motherhood is a process that involves accepting vulnerability and powerlessness despite the presence of scientific expertise. For instance, Jingjing shared that "*after giving birth, I had a pretty severe condition called diastasis recti, where the muscles in my belly separated. Long*

story short, it took a whole year of treatment to get back to my pre-pregnancy state. But this unhealthy condition really affected both my work and mindset." Zheng Y also noted that, "*I started having morning sickness from the first month of pregnancy, and it lasted until delivery. Not all pregnant women experience it as severely as I did. So, at that time, I often felt like it was nature punishing me.*" Jingjing and Zheng Y's words indicate that, even with the ability to hire a nutritionist to design a postpartum diet and access the best private hospitals, still need to endure the physical pain of childbirth and the challenges of postpartum recovery. These experiences become significant obstacles for them when attempting to transition smoothly between being a professional woman and a mother, where they are expected to demonstrate mental strength, self-improvement and competitiveness. At the same time, these experiences reinforce these women's desire to achieve "perfect" motherhood by providing the best they can for their children. The long-term symbiotic relationship between mother and child impacts how mothers perceive themselves and their children, giving rise to complex emotions encompassing pain, joy, and a profound sense of fulfilment (Smith, 1999).

The choices and experiences of highly educated mothers in contemporary Shenzhen exemplify the interplay between societal expectations, gender roles, and the pursuit of motherhood ideals. For instance, Tracy's journey of reconciling personal aspirations with familial responsibilities took a year, highlighting the weight of the "perfect" motherhood ideal and gendered domestic labour in her life choices. This insight into the concept of the "perfect" mother for Tracy and the eight other highly educated women in this chapter, provides a valuable understanding of how mothers' duties have evolved in modern Shenzhen. Despite their economic empowerment and access to diverse professional paid domestic services, these women's negotiation of motherhood is still significantly impacted by prevailing gender norms. Consequently, the modernisation of the mother's duties in Shenzhen does not liberate women from domestic labour but rather reinforces the traditional association between women and the domestic sphere, despite both parents contributing equally to the family's financial well-being (Brickell, 2011; Kan & He, 2018).

This section has revealed how highly educated women in contemporary Shenzhen pursue the notion of an ideal mother by fulfilling domestic responsibilities in new ways. Despite Shenzhen offering various means for outsourcing domestic tasks, the desire to be a "perfect" mother and the fear of falling short in fulfilling parental responsibilities persisted among these women (see also Macdonald, 2011). The subsequent section of the analysis further explores how these highly educated mothers navigate motherhood by exercising their

agency in moving and making their homes. By examining their actions and choices, I will reveal how these women negotiate and reconcile the demands of motherhood by *anchoring* in the rapidly changing and modernising society like Shenzhen.

6.3 Doing motherhood: mothering as home-making practices

While home is often romanticised as a place of control, familiarity, and safety (see Chapter 2, Boccagni, 2017), it is essential to move beyond such normative conceptions and recognise the coexistence of multiple meanings, resulting in complexity and variability (Allen, 2008; Brickell, 2012; Alison & Dowling, 2006). For instance, postcolonial research sheds light on the struggle for a sense of belonging among diasporic communities after forced relocation during colonial times, challenging stable notions of home and the homeland, which must be renegotiated amidst changing political and economic circumstances (Kläger and Stierstorfer, 2015; Kowino, 2011). As mothers in this chapter (re)produce and perform their motherhood through embodied practices and intentional activities presented in the last section (see also Huopalainen & Satama, 2009), the meanings of home are also continually formed and negotiated in an in-between "space," where material and imaginative realms intersect (Blunt & Dowling, 2006: 254). Therefore, this section explores the relational practices in making the home and everyday performance of motherhood within this dynamic context (Butler, 1990).

Home-making and motherhood performance are interlinked within the domestic context. The women in this study, as discussed in the previous section, demonstrate a strong desire to provide the best for their children, such as offering nutritious meals, preserving family traditions, and ensuring access to high-quality extracurricular education. These aspects represent their commitment to nurturing their children's physical and intellectual growth. Mothers adopt different approaches to achieving these goals, but they all establish particular domestic routines to make these aspirations a reality. In the subsequent analysis, I elucidate that, through the enactment of these routines, they deftly fulfil their dual roles as both devoted mothers and ambitious professional women, endeavouring to meet the expectations of motherhood.

As mothers, they exude love, care, and gentleness towards their children, emphasising the importance of emotional connection and support. As professionals or self-employed individuals like Tracy, they navigate the challenges posed by the intense working environment in Shenzhen's neoliberal labour market, displaying competitiveness and a resilient mindset. Home-making serves as a crucial means for these women to perform

motherhood and accommodate their expectations for mother-child relationships within the domestic space. Participant Jingjing shared that "*I have a strong commitment to both my work and family. However, the driving force that keeps me moving forward at work is the desire to ensure my family, especially my parents and children, have a good life."* Her quotation indicates that creating and nurturing a home environment reflects their dedication to both their careers and their roles as mothers. These women skilfully integrate the demands of their professional lives with the needs of their families. Rhoda's words reinforce this assertion, stating, "*I don't believe being a good mother means staying at home with the husband and kids. I think being a successful career woman sets an important example for my daughter."* Rhoda's view aligns with many participants' belief in creating a harmonious space for their children to thrive physically, emotionally, and intellectually.

One of the fundamental ways these women perform motherhood is through the repetition of everyday food routines. As highlighted in Chapter 2, food practices hold significant importance for migrants, allowing them to maintain socio-cultural ties with their regions of origin and recreate a sense of home (Gasparetti, 2009). Nurturing children through feeding them is a complex aspect of motherhood, shaped by societal expectations that place mothers as primary providers of sustenance (Frost et al., 2015). This role is not only linked to the physical act of nourishment but also holds significance in fostering family connections (Molander, 2014). As this nurturing often takes place in the domestic environment, it reinforces traditional concepts of home and the sense of comfort and belonging it represents. For migrant mothers in the Chinese context, food practices within domestic spaces play a crucial role in cultural transmission, emotional communication, and intergenerational support (Jing, 2000). As with other migrants from various provinces, cities, or towns within Guangdong, highly educated mothers have brought their food habits and preferences with them. By recreating familiar flavours using specific ingredients and cooking methods, they aim to cultivate a sense of belonging within their homes (Johnston & Longhurst, 2012; Longhurst et al., 2009).

These food practices not only provide a means for these women to reconnect with the tastes of home but also play a crucial role in their children's understanding and connection with their mothers' identity. They hope that by sharing these familiar flavours, their children will carry a sense of belonging with them, even when they are away from home in the future. Simultaneously, these mothers expose their children to diverse culinary cultures by dining out at upscale or speciality restaurants, exemplifying their desire to be open-minded and embrace

potential experiences beyond their immediate surroundings as Rhoda demonstrates in her photographs (see Figs 6.1 and 6.2).

Figs. 6.1 & 6.2 Rhoda's weekday dinner (left); Rhoda's weekend dining at an Aussie brunch (right) (Source: Images provided by Rhoda)

Zheng Y's approach exemplifies how this process of nurturing mother-child relationships is integrated into their family routines.

> *Food is a top priority for Chinese people (民以食为天, Min Yi Shi Wei Tian). At least for our family, whether it's a casual family dinner or a weekend gathering, food holds significant emotional meanings regardless of its nutritional value. At home, we bought organic vegetables and meat delivered from local farms and asked "aunty" to cook them in traditional hometown dishes. However, on weekends, we dine at some upscale or speciality restaurants, trying local food from different areas in China, Western dishes, or Japanese food. In this way, my son gets to experience both the flavours of our hometown dishes and the diverse culinary cultures from dining out.*

Like Zheng Y, mothers in this chapter regularly arrange dining-out experiences for their families. Beyond introducing their children to new cultures through diverse cuisines, these outings also allow them to teach their children appropriate behaviours and etiquette when interacting with different groups, including their close friends, business partners, and relatives. These routines extend the practices of nurturing mother-child relationships beyond the domestic realm, fostering intimate environments for communication and emotional interactions in urban spaces (Kumar & Mukarova, 2008). By integrating food routines into their daily interactions with their children, these mothers reveal to their children both their own life journeys from their hometowns to Shenzhen and the potential destinations that lie ahead for their children. These food practices become a powerful means of conveying

personal histories and aspirations, fostering a sense of belonging and familiarity, and imbuing the concept of home with rich emotional meaning for their children (Moore, 2000). Another participant, Chen X, elaborated on how their food routines allowed her children to feel a strong sense of belonging to both her hometown and Shenzhen.

> *When my kid was little, I used to often make a dish called "Three-Cup Chicken," a Jiangxi specialty. My mom taught me how to cook it, and every Chinese New Year, he must have Grandma's Three-Cup Chicken to feel the sense of home in our hometown. In Shenzhen, we also love dining out. He enjoys finding restaurants online and takes me to all sorts of places. He always says, "In Shenzhen, you've got the convenience of enjoying world cuisine." That's one of the things he loves about Shenzhen.*

These food practices among migrant mothers can be seen as a form of *anchoring*. The mention of cooking a traditional dish, "Three-Cup Chicken," passed down from Chen X's mother, represents a process of *anchoring*. It involves unpacking selected emotional and material connections to the past home (hometown) and maintaining a sense of continuity with familial traditions (see also, Longhurst et al, 2009). For Chen X, food practice anchors her sense of identity in her cultural heritage. At the same time, the reference to dining out and exploring various restaurants in Shenzhen also represents *anchoring*. It involves leveraging agency to immerse oneself in a place where the pursuit of multicultural experiences is readily accessible. Through the establishment of these food routines, Chen X exercises her autonomy to emotionally connect herself to Shenzhen, simultaneously reinforcing ties to her past while constructing a sense of belonging within the globalised urban fabric of the city. This showcases her ability to transcend specific geographical confines and embrace the diversity and opportunities inherent in her new home. Chen X's *anchoring* processes extend beyond mere emotional detachment from past homes; they involve the materialization of memories and the forging of connections between her present abode and anticipated future prospect, echoing the arguments presented in Chapter 2.

Further, the act of reshaping domestic spaces to enable routine companionship with their children also plays a crucial role in the mothering practices of these highly educated women, particularly in the context of Shenzhen's fiercely competitive labour market, which demands their unwavering commitment to their professions. These domestic routines encompass various activities such as chatting, tutoring homework, supervising instrument practice, drawing, and reading together. For instance, Jingjing exemplifies how she optimises her limited time away from work to spend time with her son (see Fig. 6.3). By rearranging her living room, she added a protective fence to create a safe play area for her child. She

utilises her processing table, which was originally meant for dining, as a makeshift study area. These adaptations to her interior space allow her to establish a routine of accompanying her son after work. This precious time together usually occurs between 9 pm and 9.30 pm, as Jingjing typically arrives home at 8.30 pm, and her son's bedtime follows shortly after. Due to their demanding weekday schedules, these highly educated mothers often have limited time with their children.

Fig. 6.3 A storyboard of Jingjing's home tours (Source: Made by Author)

All mothers discussed in this chapter emphasised designing or reshaping the material landscape of their homes to facilitate particular routines with their children. These adaptations can range from transforming a bedroom into a dedicated study or instrument room for the children, to dividing a large bedroom into two separate study spaces for studying and working. some mothers even added exercise equipment, like a running machine, to help their children prepare for high school entrance examinations in physical education.[13] Participant Jiajia, a manager of a state-owned company, shared her practices of reshaping home, saying "*Originally, we had one study, but when my daughter entered junior high, she wanted her own. We used a curtain to divide it into two. We let her decorate and arrange her own study space, and she chose the desk, chair, and bookshelf to put all her books in. I can feel that, giving her a separate study made her feel respected and strengthened our bond*." Jiajia's quote illuminates the underlying motivation for reshaping the home, highlighting the meanings embedded in these home-making practices, including the fulfilment of individual needs and the nurturing of family bonds.

[13] That is, the high school entrance examination in PE (体育中考).

These home-making practices highlight the challenges and tensions faced when simultaneously playing the role of mother and co-breadwinner in contemporary Shenzhen. The highly competitive nature of Shenzhen's labour market demands resilience and dedication in their careers to afford their middle-class lifestyles (Elfick, 2011), such as outsourcing domestic labour to paid domestic workers and paying for multiple extracurricular education courses for their children. At the same time, they are equally committed to providing emotional support and actively engaging with their children's lives. Reshaping the domestic space represents an endeavour to bridge the gap between the demands of their work life and their desire for intimate and meaningful connection with their children. In navigating these challenges, these highly educated mothers demonstrate their agency in crafting environments that facilitate their mothering practices. They understand the significance of creating nurturing spaces that foster emotional bonds and perform motherhood and materialise these bonds in the domestic space. These home-making practices not only mirror their commitment to their families but also exemplify their willingness to invest time and effort in nurturing their mother-child relationships.

These women's practices of redesigning their living spaces to accommodate routine companionship with their children represents the dynamics of *anchoring*. On one hand, these home-making practices allowed them to reshape home as a sanctuary where they can pursue career goals, adapting to challenges presented by the demanding Shenzhen labour market in Shenzhen. On the other hand, by optimising their homes to create dedicated study spaces or safe play areas, these mothers ground their expected intimate relationships with their children in their domestic environments. This process allows them to approach their envisioned form of motherhood by maintaining stability and connection amid the competitive and fast-paced nature of Shenzhen's professional landscape.

While these highly educated mothers can leverage their agency to challenge traditional gender norms and take on breadwinning roles traditionally assigned to fathers and men (Osteria, 2011), the family's caregiving arrangement remains stable, with mothers still shouldering the majority of caregiving responsibilities. Despite their accomplishments in the professional sphere and their capacity to ensure a financially comfortable life for their children, domestic food work persists in adhering to a patriarchal pattern. In line with the research highlighted in Chapter 2, this food work is predominantly seen and enacted as women's labour, typically delegated to mothers, grandmothers, or female domestic workers (Liu, 2017).

The boundaries of home between the domestic and public spheres are continually shaped and negotiated through food practices that extend beyond the household. These practices showcase the power of performance in transforming not only the domestic space but also the public realm (Nagar, 2000). As highly educated mothers engage in routines of regularly dining out and introducing their children to diverse cultural experiences, they demonstrate how issues typically considered "private," such as nurturing mother-child relationships, become visible and influential in shaping interactions within the public sphere. In doing so, they challenge prevailing notions that strictly demarcate the domestic interior as a space exclusively for "domestic" activities and the public realm solely associated with non-domestic affairs (Blunt & Sheringham, 2020). Their food practices, through nostalgia, memory, and imagination, serve as conduits for complex emotions and relationships (Ralph & Staeheli, 2011). As internal migrants to Shenzhen, these women's food practices are rooted in specific localities, evoking familiar smells, tastes, and appearances of traditional dishes (Longhurst et al., 2009). However, these practices are also influenced and shaped by multiple factors that extend beyond their immediate locality, such as the introduction of exotic foods that symbolise the globalisation and rapid development of Shenzhen. Therefore, these food practices reflect the fluid and dynamic nature of contemporary urban life, intertwining the personal and the public, the local and the global. These women's involvement in food rituals and culinary experiences reshapes the concept of home-making, transforming it into a process of cultural exchange and emotional resonance. Through these practices, they not only preserve traditions from their places of origin but also cultivate a sense of belonging, establishing multiple identities, including middle-class Shenzhener, urbane identities, and cosmopolitan identities, within the dynamic and ever-evolving landscape of Shenzhen.

This section illuminates how highly educated mothers in Shenzhen carry out motherhood through relational home-making practices. These practices reveal their ability to handle challenges posed by the competitive labour market in contemporary Shenzhen and the traditional gender norms assigning them caregiving roles. To balance their roles as breadwinners and caregivers, these women reshape their homes to accommodate both roles. Within their homes and specific public spaces, a dynamic narrative of motherhood unfolds through deliberate actions and emotional connection with their children (Huopalaninen & Satama, 2019). These practices not only reflect their agency but also underscore their ability to *anchor* themselves in Shenzhen's evolving landscape. These *anchoring* practices integrate memories of the past with aspirations for their children's future into their present daily

routines (Liu, 2020), holding vital implications for understanding the experiences of highly educated mothers in urban contexts like Shenzhen, where the interplay between neoliberal values and traditional gender norms creates a complex terrain in which women perform motherhood. The next section will focus on how these women utilise home-moving to navigate the competitive landscape for accessing high-quality education in contemporary Shenzhen. Additionally, it will explore how they negotiate a sense of home during intra-city movements and address the socio-cultural norm in Chinese tradition, which highlights the connections between one's roots and home (Li, 2000).

6.4 "Of course! I'd love to move!": *sailing/anchoring* for mothering

In the previous sections, I demonstrated how home-making practices enabled these women to *anchor* themselves in Shenzhen, seeking stability and rootedness, while simultaneously *sailing* toward their envisioned lives, such as fostering the desired mother-child relationships. These home-making practices, encompassing the transformation of home interiors, hiring mentors for children, and occasional dining out, necessitated the financial agency of these highly educated mothers. This financial agency plays a crucial role in facilitating the dual processes of *sailing* and *anchoring* while fulfilling their mothering duties. In this section, grounded in the experiences and attitudes of home-moving among these mothers, I explore the class-based nature of mothering practices in Shenzhen and examine the interplay between these practices and the *sailing/anchoring* dynamics within these women's life courses.

Earlier in this chapter, these mothers have been classified as 'middle-class' or 'upper-middle-class' in Shenzhen based on discernible consumption patterns. This classification underlines their agency and aspirations in the pursuing the expected home lives. However, such choices are far from uniform, particularly when considering their endeavours to secure the 'best' possible education for their children while simultaneously grappling with their own limitations. The following analysis further explores how these highly educated mothers personalise paths for their children's growth and navigate constraints through home-moving, This home-moving practice involves *sailing* away from their current living spaces where sense of belonging might have already been established.

These women's home-moving decisions are often inextricably linked to the well-being and prospects of their children. Thus, these women's choices and actions regarding home-moving become profoundly enmeshed with several life-course transitions they encounter in Shenzhen, from marriage to pregnancy and their children's educational

milestones. For instance, Yin's decision to relocate to a larger apartment following her pregnancy underscores her desire to provide ample space for her baby. She said, "*I understand that dealing with the monthly mortgage is both financially and emotionally challenging for us (Yin Y and her husband). But when I think about my child not having to settle for our small current house, I believe it's all worthwhile."* Similarly, Zheng Y's choice to move to an apartment within a school district just prior to her son entering primary school exemplifies how she leverages home-moving as a strategic tool to secure a high-quality education for him. She complaint, "*It's quite pricey here, even though our (Zheng Y and her husband) incomes were well above the Shenzhen average. Repaying the loan every month was still a burden, but in hindsight, it was the right decision. My son's elementary and middle schools are within a 10-minute walk, and he didn't have to take an entrance exam*." These quotations indicate how relocation in Shenzhen can cause economic burden for these women and their families. Therefore, it is crucial to recognise that these relocation decisions are not made in a vacuum, but shaped and constrained by the socio-cultural context within which they operate.

The landscape of education inequality that prevails in contemporary Shenzhen interlaces with the complex dynamics of homeownership and access to high-quality education, profoundly shaping the contours of home-moving decisions for families. The concept of "*jiaoyu*-fication," or education-led gentrification, aptly captures this phenomenon. This convergence of education policy reforms, commodification of housing, and fierce competition for desirable school enrolment zones have catalysed a reconfiguration of residential spaces (Trémon, 2023). Central to this trend is the influential "nearby enrolment" policy in Shenzhen, which grants school-age children entry to nearby schools without the hurdle of entrance examinations. However, this policy has triggered a ripple effect, considerably inflating real estate values within the best school districts and giving rise to *jiaoyu*-fication. As middle-class parents flock to these districts, they reconfigure the social fabric by displacing existing communities and forming new enclaves (Wu et al., 2018). As an illustration, in 2019 the average house price in the Baihua zone (百花片区), renowned for hosting some of the most esteemed school districts, surpassed 100,000 Yuan per square metre. This represented a remarkable 45.4% increase compared to housing costs in other zones within Futian District, where the Baihua Junior High School, acclaimed as one of the top secondary schools in Shenzhen, is located.

Highly educated mothers find themselves entangled in a paradoxical scenario in contemporary Shenzhen. On the one hand, their pursuit of high-quality education for their children propels them into heightened competition for school district housing. The high housing prices then place these women in a demanding situation, necessitating them to excel in their professional careers to afford both the relocation process and the high-quality education. Jingjing's words exemplify this claim, stating, "*After having a child, I want to provide a better life for them. I'll work hard to earn enough money before they start elementary school to move to a good school district or afford to send them to an international school*[14]."

On the other hand, failing to secure the best educational resources positions them as 'inadequate' mothers, amplifying the pressures and expectations they navigate within their roles. Yin Y noted how she might blame herself for not providing quality education to her unborn son.

> *I just don't want to be in a situation where my son's bright and capable, yet I can't get him into a school that could really nurture his potential and let him thrive.*

The struggle to avoid feeling like an 'inadequate' mother exemplifies the interplay between these women's agency and the structural constraints they grapple with in their pursuit of 'perfect' motherhood. It reveals a nuanced relationship between their aspirations, strategic decision-making, and the broader socio-cultural forces that shape their lives. As discussed in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, pursuing opportunities in Shenzhen does not guarantee some rural-to-urban female migrants' liberation from patriarchal constraints, as they might still be required to send remittance back to support female family members (Pun, 2005). Here, the 'perfect' motherhood underscores the conditional liberation of these highly educated women in Shenzhen from the patriarchal norms and China's collective traditions. While these women have achieved notable agency in shaping their lives, the pursuit of optimal educational opportunities for their children imposes a specific condition on their liberation.
The pressure to secure the best educational resources not only serves as a benchmark for measuring their adequacy as mothers but also unveils the delicate balance these women navigate between personal aspirations and societal expectations. This association of children's

[14] Taking Shenzhen College of International Education (深圳国际交流学院), an international high school in Shenzhen, as example. The tuition fee for 2023 term is 258000 yuan (approximately 28944 pounds) and student is expected to attend the school for three or four years before applying for universities in the UK.

well-being with the mother's role obscures the father's role in childbearing, emphasising the gendered expectations placed on mothers in the pursuit of idealised parenthood.

In their pursuit of 'perfect' motherhood, these women find themselves engaged in a constant process of *sailing* away from their established sense of belonging within their current living spaces. The pressure to secure the best educational resources for their children becomes a powerful force propelling them towards new horizons, both physically and metaphorically. The quest for idealised motherhood necessitates a willingness to navigate beyond the comfort of familiar territories, pushing against the boundaries of their established lives. This dynamic represents a form of *sailing*, as these women strive to create an optimal environment for their children, exploring uncharted waters in the educational landscape of Shenzhen.

In this context, leveraging financial power, homeownership or home-moving as strategies to access high-quality education unveils the class-based, or the social resource-based, nature of mothering in contemporary Shenzhen (Duncan, 2005). The scarcity of such resources has introduced new dimensions of competition into their lives, pushing these mothers, in the already competitive landscape of their professional careers, to optimise available resources based on their economic means, social status, networks, and knowledge of Shenzhen's education system. As Chen X introduced, "*When my daughter was young, we were relatively poor and couldn't afford a house in the school district. So, we used guanxi connection to approach someone in the education bureau, paid a 100,000-yuan school placement fee, and managed to get her into a better primary school. This kind of thing was not uncommon back in 2005.*"

Additionally, the decision to move into a particular school district changes that district over time, into an enclave predominantly inhabited by middle-class parents sharing similar educational aspirations for their children. Within these newly gentrified enclaves, they cultivate a sense of rootedness and integration by engaging with peers who share common backgrounds and concerns, cementing a social embeddedness that spans various aspects of their lives. As Zheng Y recalled, "*after moving here, I became known as "XX's (her son's name) mom," and I address others the same way. We have a moms' WeChat group where we share everything related to our children's studies and extracurricular activities. Because this information is very regional, I find it very useful.*" The interesting self-reference as their children's mothers rather than their own names indicates the transformation of individual identities into collective roles defined by their maternal responsibilities. While Zheng Y's

experience aligns with the prevalent societal expectation of defining mothers primarily by their maternal roles, Jingjing's perspective challenges and expands this notion. She said, "*I convinced all the moms to change the Group name of "Mom's Group" to the "Parents' Group" and encouraged everyone, including dads, to use their own names instead of titles like "XX's mom." Of course, I had a personal motive behind this. Some parents are potential business partners for me, and since we live close to each other, I sometimes expand my business collaborations by helping each other with childcare.*" Jingjing's initiative implies a recognition of the multifaceted identities of parents beyond their familial roles, while highlighting her identities as a business woman. The two differing voices within the group reveal the complex negotiation of identity and societal expectations among these highly educated mothers. Jingjing's stance demonstrates a conscious effort to reshape collective identity and challenge traditional gender norms.

Social embeddedness enables these mothers to *anchor* in their neighbourhood. It takes on temporal dimensions, extending through relationships that bridge different domains of their lives. Activities like organising family trips together, mutual childcare responsibilities, and companionship between children reinforce their interconnectedness. Moving into school district housing, a manifestation of their pursuit of 'perfect' motherhood, underscores the iterative and evolving nature of settlement as migrants striving to find stability in contemporary Shenzhen. This process is deeply interwoven with their life stages, ranging from their children's early school years to their eventual departure from home, reflecting their effort to establish lasting footholds in the city.

Despite the first type of home-moving driven by the pursuit of quality education within school districts, a distinct pattern that extends beyond the realm of schooling constraints emerges. Some highly educated mothers opt to relocate to rental homes after their children transition to high school after nine years of compulsory education. The "nearby enrolment" policy is no longer a structural constraint in this phase. In contrast to the earlier relocation within primary/secondary school catchment areas, this shift entails moving beyond the central Shenzhen, considering that some high schools are located outside this central area. For instance, Jiajia's experience underscores this scenario.

> *I moved homes twice for the sake of my child. The first was when she transitioned from elementary to junior high school, and the second was when she transferred from a local high school to an international high school. Our home wasn't too far from either of these schools; if she took the subway, it would only take 30 to 40 minutes to commute. However, in my view, if she could get an extra 25 minutes of sleep, it*

wouldn't matter if my workplace was a bit further away. Both times I moved, it was to a place just a five-minute walk away from her school.

As explored in Chapter 2, the concept of 'home' becomes a crucial space for migrants to (re)establish themselves emotionally or socially in their destination of migration (Boccagni, 2017; Blunt & Varley, 2006). This type of home-moving, coinciding with the departure from living spaces previously adapted to foster emotional and social connections, reflects a readiness to disengage from the emotional ties associated with their former residences, where feelings of familiarity, belonging, and stability were often intertwined. For instance, Rhoda shared, "*I still have strong feelings for the neighbourhood where I used to live. Occasionally, we drive back to that area, visit the restaurants we used to frequent, and sometimes my daughter and I go for a run in the park near our old home. It holds shared memories for us."* However, in navigating the complex terrain of migration, these women not only grapple with the emotional and social aspects of their homes but also strategically position themselves in the evolving landscape of their children's educational journeys. In Jiajia's case, she opted for temporary residences in relatively unfamiliar locations, strategically closer to their children's high schools. Like Jiajia, many mothers in this chapter whose houses are not near their children's high school would move to a rental house and spend three years living in rental apartments. The purposefully home-moving underscores the modernisation of mothers' duties in contemporary Shenzhen, where parenting has evolved into a sophisticated practice often termed "science parenting", which involves planning and calculated decision-making to optimise children's educational opportunities (Gilles, 2008; Chiong & Dimmock, 2020).

This pattern of home-moving sheds light on these migrant mothers' fluid, transient, and mobile lives in contemporary Shenzhen (see also Stachowski & Bock, 2021). By purposefully choosing to move into school districts, these highly educated mothers have not only rooted themselves but have also cultivated a sense of place attachment to specific neighbourhoods (Bonnerjee, 2012). Despite the initial *anchoring* themselves in Shenzhen, these women continue to perceive mobility as an inherent component of their strategies to ensure their children receive high-quality education, reminiscent of their initial draw to Shenzhen. Their choice of moving to a rental apartment, involving the relinquishment of their established sense of attachment, underscores their life choices of *sailing* away from established sense of belonging and keen awareness of the broader context in which they operate.

This intertwining process of *sailing* and *anchoring* is evident throughout their life journeys in Shenzhen, illustrating their adaptive navigation of the neoliberal environment in Shenzhen, perpetually shaping their understanding of home and belonging. Throughout their home-moving process, these women showed adeptness in reshaping these rental spaces into temporary homes. For example, as Chen X who had also moved twice for her daughter, said, "*I will try my best to ensure that each time we move, my daughter can find a sense of home in our new place. Some essential elements include the soup I cook for her, the plants we care for together, and the fragrances we both enjoy*." As discussed in Chapter 2, everyday home-making can transform objects into social artefacts and provide platforms for negotiating identities or establishing subjectivities (Klaufus, 2006). These home-making practices showcase these women's agency in imbuing the sense of home with mother-child relationships and emotional connection, surpassing material aspects like house ownership and domestic landscapes (Blunt et al., 2007; Varley, 2008; Manzo, 2003). Rather than opposing forces, mobility and settlement intertwine as integral aspects of the process of *sailing* and *anchoring*. Their choice to ground their lives in Shenzhen does not mark the end of mobility; rather, it reveals the adaptive nature of their mobility practices, constantly attuned to the overarching dynamics that perpetually shape their lives. This dynamic intertwining of mobility and settlement underscores their agency and adaptability as they navigate Shenzhen's multifaceted urban landscape. Here, neoliberal principles of the city exert influence not only on these women's careers but also on their children's education.

The agency and resilience of these women evoke concerns about potential limitations on their capacity to offer the absolute best education for their children. This raises a broader contemplation regarding the alignment of their pursuit of an idealised notion of 'perfect' motherhood, or their preferred approach to motherhood, with a nuanced understanding of what is truly the 'right' strategy within this specific context. This deliberation also prompts a deeper exploration of the relationship between the modernisation of motherhood and the evolving socio-cultural landscape in Shenzhen, particularly within the framework of the neoliberal transition (Gao et al., 2021). As a nucleus of innovation and entrepreneurialism, Shenzhen has attracted a multitude of highly educated individuals like those featured in this study. Benefiting from their education, as illustrated via Chen's story in Chapter 4, these mothers are ardently invested in helping their children to become highly educated individuals. However, being highly educated in contemporary Shenzhen may not secure the advantages it once did. This paradox compels these professional women to deliberate not

only on providing quality education but also on securing their children's broader future, preparing them for destinations that they can sail to.

Rhoda illustrates this. By acquiring an apartment within the gated community where her daughter has just entered high school, Rhoda has acquired a 100-square-metre haven—a symbolic gift that affords her daughter the flexibility to either inhabit the space or potentially sell it, especially when contemplating the possibility of relocating abroad. This gesture, emblematic of providing financial or material support until their adult children marry or embark on their initial career endeavours, threads through the experiences of the mothers examined in this research, accentuating how the modernisation of mothers' duties is an amalgamation of traditional Chinese parenting norms and neoliberal principles (Li, 2020). This fusion harmonises both preference and rationality (Duncan, 2005), as their commitment to their children's education transcends mere preference, evolving into an imperative that mandates deliberate, strategic choices, even to the extent of investing in property to ensure their children's future stability. These individual actions collectively reflect the interplay between personal aspirations, the influence of socio-cultural currents, and the ever-evolving urban landscape of contemporary Shenzhen.

This chapter unveils the interplay between the modernisation of mothers' duties in contemporary Shenzhen and the decisions/actions of home-moving and house ownership. The following section revisits and further examines the interplay between these *sailing/anchoring* processes and the negotiation of motherhood within contemporary Shenzhen, as it relates to how women manage these tensions between traditional mothering and contemporary Shenzhen.

6.5 *Sailing/Anchoring*: negotiating motherhood in neoliberal Shenzhen

In the preceding sections, I showcased how these highly educated mothers in Shenzhen navigate the realms of *sailing* and *anchoring* within the context of their everyday lives. Driven by the pursuit of 'perfect' motherhood, these women adopt practices that serve as both *sails* and *anchors*. The *sails* propel them through the currents of familial expectations and career demands ingrained in Shenzhen's competitive labour market; while the *anchors* grounds them in the preservation of familial traditions and metropolitan lives centred on providing high-quality education and intercultural communication for their children. The everyday nuances of home-making, food rituals, and purposeful home-moving experiences became the canvas upon which these women painted their narratives of motherhood. In this

section, I examine how these individual pursuits are woven into the evolving neoliberal context of Shenzhen, shaping the negotiation of motherhood for these women.

Neoliberal principles in Shenzhen first exert influence on how women in this chapter perceive ‘perfect’ motherhood. The expectations of motherhood in contemporary Shenzhen mirror the city's neoliberal evolution. The delegation of domestic tasks to paid workers and the pragmatic approach to parenting reflect a pragmatic response to the demands of Shenzhen's robust work culture. While these women ongoingly reshape their identities and subjectivities as ‘perfect’ mothers, the invisible father in parenting responsibilities also reflect on a certain form of gender inequality for women from co-breadwinner families in Shenzhen. For example, as Chen X said, “*In our family, we have a typical widow-style parenting*[15] *(丧偶式育儿) situation. My husband only changed our daughter's diaper once, and he used a newspaper at that time. Even though I have a busy job, I never asked him to help take care of the child again.*” Jingjing also states “*Isn't society expecting too much from us moms? When I bring my child to work, my mom blames me for neglecting them, and if my husband holds the baby at his workplace, my colleagues praise him as a responsible dad.*” As indicated by these women’s experiences, in pursuit of 'perfect' motherhood, these women must balance their roles as caregivers and breadwinners, navigating Shenzhen's intense competition with resilience and dedication. This negotiation is integral to navigating the influence of neoliberal principles in their lives. Embracing these principles in Shenzhen, these women strive for balance by continually enhancing their agency, especially in financial matters. However, there is a limited exploration of involving fathers in childcare duties unless they willingly volunteer.

Maintaining ongoingly *sailing* or *anchoring* in Shenzhen allow these women to navigate the fiercely competitive labour market and secure limited educational resources for their children. However, these practices also impose an additional gendered burden on highly educated women within their families. As noted in previous sections, through the integration of food practices and the reshaping of interior spaces, they skilfully foster emotional bonds with their children while renegotiating traditional caregiving responsibilities in a city undergoing neoliberal transitions. Meanwhile, the purposeful act of relocating homes into school districts stands as a powerful assertion of agency, ensuring class-based access to high-

[15] Widow-style parenting refers to a significant absence in family upbringing. For example, one parent is frequently absent, or both parents are present physically, but one lacks emotional support for the children.

quality education—an essential element of modern motherhood constrained by neoliberal influences.

However, deliberate as these practices appeared to be, they also lay bare the inherent constraints woven into the pursuit of 'perfect' motherhood. While economic capability significantly contributes to these women's life journeys of *sailing* towards the envisioned lives, it might inadvertently solidify their positioning within idealised motherhood constructs (see also Huopalainen & Satama, 2018). Their adeptness in departure from *anchors* in Shenzhen harbours the potential to perpetuate this constructed ideal, yet it also reveals their keen awareness of the broader societal context in which they operate. The relationship between the *sailing* and *anchoring* practices of these women and the gender inequality they face in familial roles is notable. Their willingness to employ various methods to approach 'perfect' motherhood unintentionally reinforces gender inequality by perpetuating the liberation of fathers from domestic duties (see also Macdonald, 2011). Further, this dynamic might reinforce the gender inequality embedded in Shenzhen's neoliberal transitions.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter unravels the intricate evolution of motherhood in contemporary Shenzhen, encompassing economic empowerment, the renegotiation of gender norms, home-making practices, and deliberate home-moving decisions. These multifaceted negotiations redefine the conventional social expectations placed on women, offering a more inclusive perspective on empowerment within China's evolving society. The strategies employed in everyday home-making that affirm their agency challenge rigid gender roles and provide insights in empowerment within the shifting landscape of Chinese society. These women's life journeys highlight that motherhood, a societal norm for women in specific life stages, is now a contested concept reshaped by the interplay of women's agency, evolving gender norms, and the ever-changing urban context of Shenzhen.

A pivotal finding in this chapter revolves around the economic empowerment of these women, their delegation of domestic labour, often to female workers, and the array of strategies employed in fulfilling their parental responsibilities within their journeys of *sailing/anchoring*. On one hand, these women willingly empowered themselves to enact the desired transformations in their life trajectories, allowing them to forge profound emotional connections with their children and nurture familial intimacy. On the other hand, these practices shed light on the class-based nature of motherhood in Shenzhen, notably through deliberate decisions concerning home relocations to secure high-quality education for their

children. This class-based disparity in fulfilling the role of motherhood, stemming from the outcomes of neoliberal transitions in Shenzhen, underscores the emergence and consolidation of social classes. It also raises concerns about potential adverse consequences, such as unequal access to educational resources, particularly affecting the children of disadvantaged rural-to-urban women (Jin et al., 2017). This finding highlights the profound implications of socioeconomic inequalities on motherhood experiences within Shenzhen's neoliberal context.

In the upcoming chapter, I explore the lives of highly educated women whose narratives deviate from the confines of conventional gender norms surrounding women and families. This unique group includes women who have experienced divorce, embraced a childless journey, or identified as lesbians. I shed light on how these women negotiate the heteronormative framework encompassing sexuality and gender within the dynamic landscape of contemporary Shenzhen.

Chapter Seven. Negotiating Heteronormativity: Making Home for ‘new-normative’ Families

7.1 Introduction

The preceding two chapters have approached the second, third, and fourth research questions from the lens of highly educated women, exposing the challenges they face in either conforming to or resisting the pressures surrounding heterosexual marriage and the creation of nuclear families in contemporary Shenzhen. This chapter focuses on women who have diverged from established norms by seeking 'non-normative' family structures, including same-sex partnerships, non-reproductive marriages, or divorced families. I probe the interplay between the concept of home-making and how these women navigate the prevailing social landscape marked by heteronormativity. Here, the lives of divorced, lesbian, and childless women unfold in ways that challenge the established heteronormative and patriarchal norms in Chinese society. By focusing on the daily experiences of these three distinct groups of women, this chapter illuminates how these women pursue their ‘non-normative’ families through everyday home-making (Davis, 2014; Fincher, 2016).

It is important to underscore the notion of ‘non-normative’ families in this context first. This term is closely intertwined with but contests the notion of heteronormativity, which goes beyond merely prescribing a predetermined "correctness" rooted in conventional norms (Berlant & Warner, 1998). It portrays heterosexuality as "correct" and "proper" and consistently adheres to traditional gender roles and the concept of lifelong monogamy (Jackson, 2006: 105). In its complex nature, heteronormativity distinctly marks the boundaries segregating the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy, actively governing and moulding the lives constrained within this binary.

Within contemporary China, a critical discourse has emerged, dismantling the array of family-oriented policies designed to preserve the traditional family and unveiling the predominant representations and the underlying regulatory mechanisms founded upon normative reproductive sexuality (Wang, 2021; Xie, 2023; Lo, 2020). This critique effectively unravels the notion of society's elevation of heterosexuality over homosexuality,

challenging oversimplified perspectives that not only reinforce this binary but also link heterosexuality predominantly with reproductive marriages and lifelong monogamy. Against this backdrop, contemporary feminist and queer studies vigorously champion a more nuanced interpretation of heteronormativity (Wilkinson, 2014).

This chapter sheds light on the formidable negotiation processes undertaken by these women—a deliberate challenge to the presumptuous "rightness" attributed to heteronormativity. It illuminates the negotiation journey undertaken by these highly educated women. This journey stands as an active challenge to the preconceived "rightness" of heteronormativity while purposefully (re)constructing 'non-normative' gender subjectivities within the socio-political landscape of Shenzhen—an intersectional city uniquely characterised by both neoliberal transition and traditional gender norms (Gao et al., 2021).

The following sections present through an analysis of their agentic practices in establishing their homes, —ranging from arranging domestic artefacts to fostering intimate relationships within or beyond the domestic space and even personalising familial lifestyles. Section 7.2 sheds light on these women's opportunities and challenges as they redefine their non-normative families as new-normative families within a societal and policy context underscoring heterosexual partnership and reproductive marriage. This distinction serves as a crucial perspective through which their experiences come into focus, unveiling how these women redefined "non-normative" family structures as personal life choices for which they would bear the consequences.

Subsequently, I explore their encounters with, and occasional defiance of, the pervasive influences of this norm as they forge non-normative households that challenge established norms, particularly those entrenched in "traditional gender arrangements" (Jackson, 2006: 105). Through the process of constructing 'new' family dynamics and sexual politics, I aim to unearth potential pathways for dismantling the deeply rooted gender inequalities that persist within both domestic spheres and Shenzhen's labour market. Within a city shaped by neoliberal values prioritising individual economic contributions, these women's experiences resonate not solely on an individual level but also within the broader sociopolitical dialogue. Their narratives of navigating heteronormativity are intertwined with the broader discourse on gender inequality embedded in Shenzhen’s neoliberal transitions. Ultimately, this chapter embarks on an intellectual journey that seeks to question, disrupt, and reimagine prevailing structures that influence the realms of both personal identity and professional engagement within contemporary Shenzhen.

7.2 Non-normative? New-normative! Everyday opportunities and challenges

In their journeys navigating 'non-normative' identities in Shenzhen, the experiences of pursuing higher education played a transformative role. This educational journey empowered them to grapple with the intricate complexities of heteronormativity, offering a lens to reevaluate past perceptions that confined family existence to the state-approved norm of a heterosexual, legally married, dual-parent family. Wang Q's account illustrates this transformative process. Now cohabitating with her girlfriend, who holds a permanent residency in the US, and planning to get married in the US next year, Wang Q eloquently underscores how her college experiences before migrating to Shenzhen brought about a seismic shift in her perspective.

> *I didn't know lesbians like me could have a choice until I went to college. I knew I liked girls when I was young, and I told myself this [her sexual orientation] was only a pre-marriage thing. I [thought I] will marry a man like all girls around me did anyway. However, I changed my mind when I attended an optional course about 'queer culture in China' at university. That was the first time I knew there were ways to approach my dream life in Chinese society. After talking to some queer people after the class, I realised that I could pursue my dream by leaving my homeland and migrating to a major city like Shenzhen.*

The transformative impact of education is underscored by Wang Q's revelation of how it expanded her horizons, enabling her to perceive and embrace homosexual lifestyle, identity, and desire once deemed temporary in her life trajectory and infeasible in the context of her homeland. The knowledge of queer culture[16] (酷儿文化) that she learnt at university introduced her to new ideas and perspectives, and thus allowed Wang Q to reconstruct her gendered subjectivity, questioning the necessity to conform to the heteronormative gender norms, which frequently entailed heterosexual partnership and traditional familial roles. Her queer awakening marked the beginning of Wang Q's quest to establish a non-heteronormative family structure that could embrace her queer identity (Xie, 2023).

Cote and Schwartz (2000) claim that contemporary societies often streamline decision-making by narrowing options to normative life choices, aligning with prevailing trends. In this chapter, highly educated women's life choices are framed by entrenched gender norms—heterosexual legal marriage, lifelong monogamy (Jackson, 2006),

[16] Queer culture can be narrowly understood as sexuality- and gender identity-based culture. It is the subculture or communities composed of people who have shared experiences, backgrounds, or interests due to common sexual or gender identities.

childbearing, and childrearing (Bernald, 2010). Wang Q's account of her previous plans to forsake her homosexual identity and conform to heteronormative norms reflects the experiences of many participants who feel constrained by heteronormativity and societal pressures. Lu J expressed regret for not initiating divorce sooner, allowing her ex-husband to do so first. She stated, "*I contemplated divorce for a long time but lacked the courage to initiate it. I'm not sure what I feared, but I felt a force holding me back, warning me that initiating divorce might lead to blame, particularly as a wife and mother*." The concerns and compromises revealed in these women's experiences shed light on the societal pressures faced by those who seek alternative life paths. As Lu J pointed out, these pressures may go unnoticed by the majority in Chinese society who adhere to traditional norms but significantly affect women striving to break free from the constraints of heteronormativity. However, Wang Q's narrative also hints at the potential for a paradigm shift, indicating that her awakening extends beyond individual incidents and paves the way for transformative change.

Notably, the influence of education on heterosexual women extends beyond labour market advantages, as expounded in Chapter 4, by imparting valuable knowledge and skills (Ho, 2006; Chen, 2021). It also enables these women to challenge societal expectations that take reproductive duties and marital obligations for women as unquestioned responsibilities (Lahad, 2013). For example, as a married woman who chose to be childless, Chan Y's re-evaluation and validation of her once-dismissed "*unrealistic dreams*" of living a childless life were catalysed in college when she learnt that "*it is women's right to decide how to use their bodies.*" Similarly, Lucy's evolution from envisioning herself as an "*obedient wife who supports her husband unconditionally*" to admiring her supervisor who "*dares to reveal her cheating husband regardless of his high reputation and authority in academics*" reflects the profound impact of education on redefining perceptions of intimate relationships, including her own heterosexual marriage, encouraging her to end a loveless marriage after her son attended university.

The complex interplays between these women's realisation that 'non-normative' family forms are possible are entangled with their experiences in higher education and their choice to migrate to Shenzhen (Farrer, 2014; Xie, 2023). Their migration is not mere relocation; it represents a profound process where they harnessed their agency to navigate not only their personal trajectories but also Shenzhen's expansive socio-economic and political canvas. Their university experiences of feminist awakening laid the groundwork for their

understanding of non-normative identities and lifestyles and exposed them to alternative avenues for constructing new kinds of families. Within the narratives of the participants in this chapter, these experiences encompass a spectrum of encounters. These encounters range from overseas learning opportunities to engagement with literary or cinematic works that depict families and lifestyles deviating from the prevalent patterns of nuclear families and reproductive marriages in China. Additionally, they include cultural exchange with other highly educated women who have diverged from conventional notions of heterosexual reproductive marriages. Wang Q explained how she reinforced her re-perception of the life choice to form homosexual partnerships and childless lifestyles as "*normative*" in Shenzhen. She said, "*My life in Shenzhen and the university allowed me to ignore the voices in my hometown that stigmatise my current choice as "irresponsible for my family, against Chinese traditional ethics*[17]*." By meeting with lesbians who also tend to form homosexual partnerships in Shenzhen, I no longer regard my expected lesbian lifestyle as abnormal (不正常) but more as a new trend in Shenzhen, or in other words, a new-normal*[18] *(新常态) in Shenzhen."*

These women's increasing aspiration for 'personalised' family forms aligns with their evolving needs, reshaping their perception of migration opportunities to Shenzhen within the broader context of their life trajectories. As exemplified by Wang Q's quotation, migration was seen as a form of upward mobility—a way to bolster their economic capabilities, which in turn would provide the resources to pursue their visions of new-normative lifestyles. The concept of the "*new normal*" first encompasses her personal decisions to establish a non-heteronormative family structure. Moreover, it also indicates the nuanced socio-cultural context of Shenzhen compared to her hometown, wherein her choices are perceived less as deviations from conventional life trajectories and more as autonomous decisions that neither infringe upon the well-being of others nor being against societal expectations. Wang Q and other women's realisation of the potential to craft new-normative identities (as perceived and

[17] Being a lesbian does not inherently make a woman go against Chinese traditional ethics. However, traditional Chinese culture, like many other cultures, often places importance on heterosexual marriage and the continuation of family lines through offspring.

[18] "新常态" (xīn chángtài), or "new normal," was introduced by president Xi Jingping in 2014, referring to the shift in China's economic development model from one driven primarily by high-speed expansion fuelled by investment and exports to a new phase characterized by slower, more sustainable growth. In the post-covid context, this term was used by the Chinese government and in propaganda to describe the post-pandemic situation and the changes it brought to various aspects of life and society.

identified by themselves) and unconventional family structures resonates deeply within the city's fervent embrace of neoliberal values—values that underscore individual empowerment and self-determination. As Chan J stated, "*College life allowed me to realise that I can live with a same-sex partner rather than faking a (lesbian) identity for the rest of my life. Then, working hard in Shenzhen will provide me with the financial means to pursue my expected life, that is, co-living with my girlfriend with two cats.*" Chan J's quotation illustrates a synergy between educational enlightenment and the ethos of neoliberalism. It serves as a dynamic driving force, propelling these women to envision lives that transcend the confines of traditional gender norms.

This alignment of understanding and aspiration, driven by an evolving perception of migration's role in life journeys of these women, has integrated their pursuit of family patterns — perceived as new-normative by themselves — with the evolving landscape of the city (Lo, 2020; Wang, 2021). The choice to migrate to Shenzhen, therefore, extends beyond mere geographic transition; it is about seeking a soil, a specific socio-political and economic environment, that aligns with their aspirations—a space where their values and agency can flourish and where they can simultaneously embrace and challenge prevailing norms to establish the 'new-normative'. As these women carve their paths in a city marked by its relentless pursuit of progress, economic attainment, and individual agency, their migration embodies more than just movement; it signifies a strategic leap towards constructing lives that resonate with their inner ideals while harmonising with the dynamic essence of contemporary Shenzhen.

The significance of these women's pursuit of alternative life paths is amplified within Shenzhen's embrace of pervasive neoliberal values. This alignment is multifaceted and stems from several interwoven factors. Economic independence emerges as a pivotal driver, particularly crucial in the pursuit of non-normative lifestyles. The city of Shenzhen, renowned for its array of career opportunities and Talent Policy benefiting highly educated individuals (as shown in Chapter 4) offers positions that come with considerably higher remuneration (Wang, 2022). This financial autonomy enables women with appropriate education and skills capital to deviate from the traditional family paradigm and forge paths that prioritise personal fulfilment and aspirations because they can earn enough to live independently. Secondly, Shenzhen's labour market mirrors neoliberal principles, often positioning highly educated individuals as a labour force with fewer family commitments, thereby allowing them to channel more energy and focus into their work (Wang, 2021). In

this context, the women's pursuit of new-normative pathways resonates with the city's ethos of self-improvement, individual agency, and self-consequence, resulting in a harmonious alignment of values and choices that reshape both their lives and the fabric of contemporary Shenzhen. This paradigm is exemplified by He L's experiences, revealing her sexual orientation during her job interview in response to an intrusive question.

> *During a job interview, I was asked about my future family plans, and I just gave a straightforward answer. I told them I'm a lesbian and have a stable female partner, so we're not planning on having kids. Surprisingly, the HR didn't seem shocked, just nodded. I got the job in the end. Now, at the company, I've even come across some lesbians in middle management. The funny thing is, among the few women in leadership positions, none of them are married with kids – it's all divorced, single, or lesbian.*

He L's narrative serves as a testament to how embracing non-normative family patterns can yield opportunities within the realm of careers. Despite being visibly marginalised in terms of policy and mainstream media representation (Chang & Ren, 2017), lesbians, because employers assume them to have reduced maternity-related commitments but unwavering dedication to their work, would wholeheartedly embrace their careers. He L's observations also shed light on the absence of married women with children within the management layer of her company. This absence suggests a potential devaluation of mothers in such roles due to a complex interplay of factors, including the challenges of managing maternity leave, the ongoing dilemma between prioritising careers or family obligations, as discussed in Chapter 6, and other contextual elements (He et al., 2023). This phenomenon underscores how the convergence of neoliberal values and non-normative family choices can have both empowering and limiting implications for women's careers.

The preference for women with fewer commitments to traditional heterosexual and reproductive marriages, while introducing discrimination against a cohort of women, paradoxically benefits other groups of women who have pursued non-normative family arrangements in Shenzhen's labour market. This preference is, in many ways, a manifestation of the labour market's alignment with neoliberal principles that prioritise unwavering dedication to work over family (Qian, 2019), supporting the career aspirations of women who may not adhere to the traditional gender norms of motherhood and domesticity. However, this preference also introduces a complex set of challenges. The elevated expectations placed upon divorced, childless, or lesbian women to prioritise their professional roles over their personal lives can narrow their options. This phenomenon results in the emergence of a 'new'

normative—a model that assumes that women unburdened by commitments to their husbands or husband's families can devote their time solely to their careers (Wang et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2019). This situation has, indirectly, contributed to the formation of a new stereotype, where women who diverge from traditional heterosexual and reproductive marriages are presumed to be exceptionally successful professionals.

Yet, beneath the surface of these seemingly advantageous circumstances, these women face a set of challenges. Much like the women highlighted in Chapter 4, they encounter a series of gender inequalities within their workplaces. These inequalities may manifest in various forms, such as the assignment of manual labour tasks to young lesbians like He L due to her appearance being considered boyish or the disrespect faced by married, childless, and divorced women occupying high-ranking positions. For example, Shan H, a married assistant professor without children who regularly attended academic conferences in China, often found herself facing gender-biased questions about the willingness of female attendees to tolerate male professors smoking indoors. Some established male professors seemed accustomed to an academic environment devoid of women. In their earlier years, there were few women in higher education environments while those female faculty members were often regarded as more dedicated to their family roles rather than academic careers (see also in, Rhoads & Gu, 2012). As a result, these men had become accustomed to disregarding the needs of female researchers, such as creating a smoke-free environment for female researchers who normally do not smoke[19]. This experience speaks to a broader issue of gender disparity within academic and professional spaces, where traditional norms of masculinity dominate. Shan H often felt compelled to tolerate such behaviours, even though they conflicted with her own values, as she recognised the necessity of establishing academic connections.

In essence, while Shenzhen's labour market liberates these women from conventional reproductive and family responsibilities and enables them to pursue new family patterns to some extent, they also find themselves confronted with the complexities of heightened competition and inherent inequalities within the same labour market. This paradoxical situation gives rise to a multifaceted interplay between individual agency and systemic pressures, resulting in these women delicately balancing their personal aspirations with the demands of their professional lives. As they navigate this landscape, these women emerge as

[19] Smoking and drinking culture in China are widely considered important means through which men establish and strengthen relationships.

emblematic figures in an ongoing struggle to reshape gender norms and labour market dynamics in contemporary Shenzhen.

The increasing visibility of women who have opted for new-normative family patterns, free from conventional reproductive roles, often signifies a positive shift towards greater inclusivity and acceptance of diverse life choices. However, as noted earlier, embedded within this trend is the assumption and expectation that women who choose not to take on traditional reproductive duties have done so to channel that time and energy into their work. This unspoken expectation, either inadvertently or sometimes deliberately, can limit the freedom these women aim to achieve through their new-normative life paths. It imposes a subtle yet powerful pressure on them to conform to the emerging 'new norm' of women who, unburdened by familial responsibilities, are anticipated to focus solely on their professional roles.

This subtle shift in expectations introduces complexity to these women's journeys. While they sought to liberate themselves from the traditional confines of gender norms, they now navigate a landscape redefined by their choices. As they endeavour to carve out spaces for their aspirations and identities, they must also contend with this growing 'new chain' influence embedded in the neoliberal principles of Shenzhen's labour market—one that may undermine the agency they sought to gain. This dynamic encapsulates the interplay between personal empowerment and systemic pressures, ultimately shaping gender dynamics and labour market norms in contemporary Shenzhen. Through the prism of everyday home-making, the following section showcased how these highly educated women navigated the socio-cultural contexts that frame their life choices within the confines of marital obligations and reproductive duties through processes of *sailing/anchoring.*

7.3 Disrupting heteronormative ideals: making 'alternative' homes

This section explores how divorced and married childless women make or remake their homes, aligning with their life choices that deviate from the heteronormative ideals of families in contemporary China. In a cultural and policy framework that strongly promotes heteronormativity, China's policies regarding families and women have traditionally emphasised women's reproductive responsibilities and marital obligations as the only recognised and favoured structure (Lo, 2020; Xie, 2023). As noted in Chapter 2, the domestic sphere has historically served as the epicentre of patriarchal and heterosexual dynamics (Liu, 2020). In contemporary societies, housing designs often prioritise the reproductive

imperatives of their occupants, as noted in Chapter 4 (Schneider & Till, 2005). By examining how objects, women's bodies, and homes are imbued with meanings linked with family configurations (Baydar, 2012; Hubbard, 2008), this section explores how divorced women and married childless women reshape their domestic spaces, which are typically designed for nuclear families, to accommodate their 'alternative' perceptions of families and desired intimate relationships.

For these highly educated women, a prominent strategy employed to navigate and challenge prevailing gender norms within the confines of the home revolves around the reorganisation of household objects to accommodate non-normative lifestyles. Shan H, a retired 53-year-old university professor, is an example of how the physical space of the home becomes a canvas for these negotiations. Her actions signal a deliberate effort to reshape her environment to align with her childless marriage, characterised by the social and emotional connections she expects to foster in Shenzhen.

At the beginning of her video home tour (Fig. 7.1), Shan H presents a purposeful shift in her living situation – transitioning from a modest apartment in central Shenzhen to an expansive 400-square-metre suburban villa. This transformation transcends mere spatial change; it embodies her desire for a life rich with meaningful social interactions (Al-Ali & Koser, 2002; Blunt & Dowling, 2006). As she takes viewers through her home, Shan H articulates how she designed spaces that seamlessly accommodate gatherings with friends and family. These home-making practices serve as Shan H’s principal method of reshaping power dynamics within her household, moving away from traditional patriarchal family structures (Tang & Quah, 2017). For instance, traditional home layouts typically segregate the living room, which is designed as a reception area, from the kitchen, where refreshments like tea are prepared (Amarante & Rossel, 2018). Shan H, however, challenges this norm by integrating the guest reception area and the kitchen space. This innovative approach serves to mitigate any perception of servitude that might arise when preparing tea for guests. A tea space is fashioned using the dining table as a central element, facilitating lively conversations and offering scenic views of her courtyard while remaining within easy reach of the kitchen. This arrangement invites both guests and her husband to partake in the process of tea-making naturally, converting the act into an engaging interaction. This design choice effectively levels the power dynamics between Shan H, her husband, and their guests, disrupting the conventional framework of patrilineal family structure and host-guest relationship dynamics

(Zhang et al., 2019). In the process, it challenges the gender norms in Chinese tradition, such as “women rule the domestic and men rule the world” (男主外，女主内).

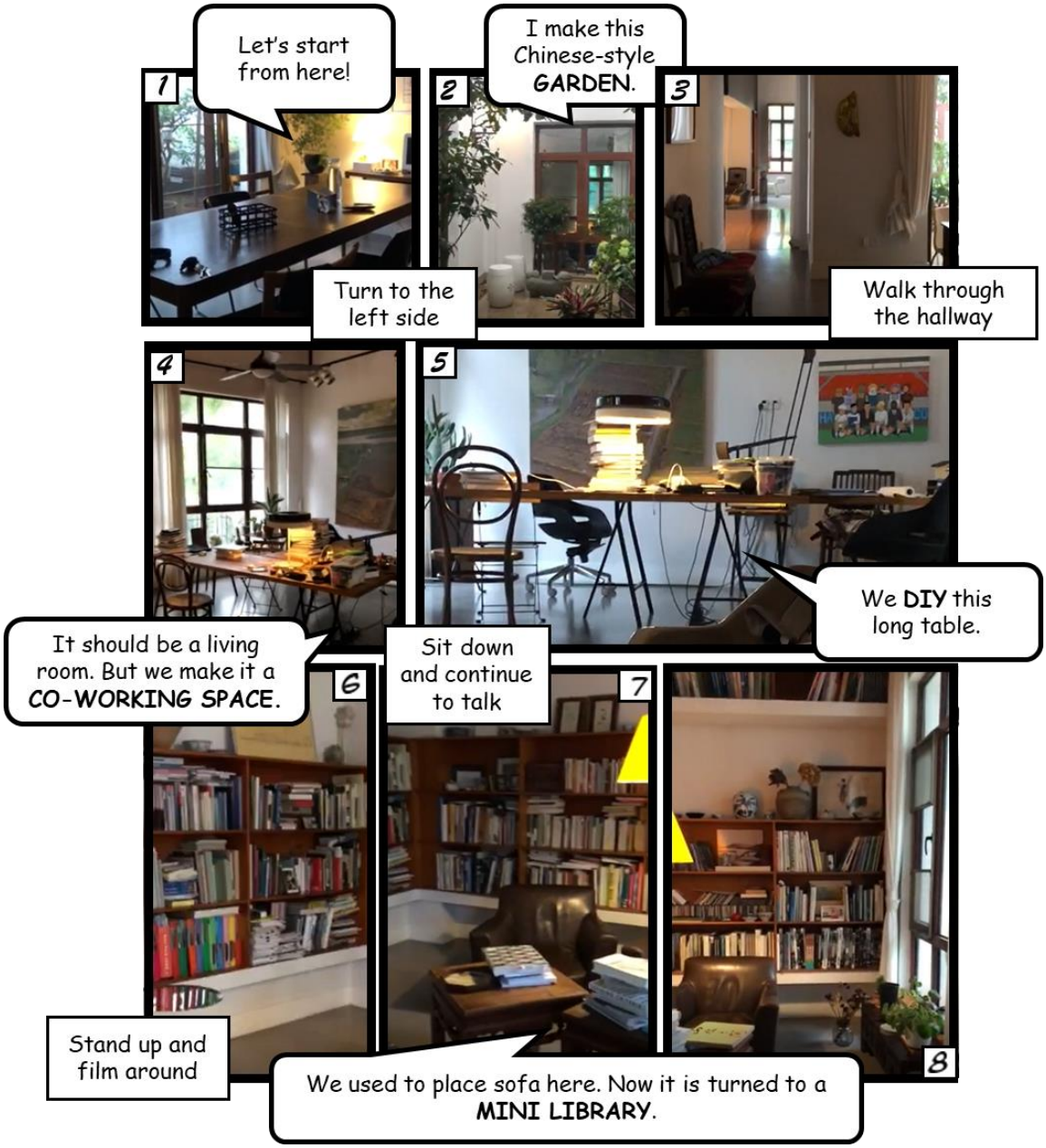


Fig. 7.1 A storyboard of Shan H’s home tour (Source: Made by Author)

Shan H's deliberate efforts to reshape her home allowed her to liberate herself from situations in which childless women might be portrayed as unhappy or incomplete (Kam, 2014). Her financial agency, seen in home transformations through relocation and curated furnishings, underscores her empowerment. This process not only reshapes physical spaces but reflects her identity, independence, and agency. Her home becomes a space of emotional resonance, symbolising her journey and relationships. Beyond physical changes, her home-

making becomes a means to accommodate emotions, relationships, and the home's symbolic value. Shan H's approach to home-making constructs a narrative of agency and choice. It served as a dynamic platform where 'alternative' family forms, personalised to fit Shan H's needs, were crafted, negotiated, and maintained, enabling her to transcend societal gender norms within her household.

For five divorced and married childless women discussed in this chapter, these home-making practices of reshaping interiors designed for nuclear families is a process of matching their gendered self beyond women's role within the heterosexual reproductive marriage. As exemplified in Shan H's home tours, she actively shaped her living spaces to reflect her evolving interests and a strong desire to construct subjectivity in the domestic. For instance, she eschewed the conventional sofa and television setup in favour of a personally crafted DIY table in her living room. To one side, she installed three homemade on-wall bookshelves, creating a mini-library ambience. Additionally, her atrium boasted carefully arranged bonsai plants, evoking the essence of a botanical garden. Through these deliberate changes, Shan H effectively crafted distinct zones—a "*studio for two*," a "*mini library*," and a "*botanic garden.*"

Lu J transformed her living space after a divorce, reshaping it into a realm for herself and her daughter. Removing her ex-husband's belongings, she reconstructed the domestic environment to mirror her current circumstances and aspirations (Fig. 7.2).

Fig. 7.2 A storyboard of Lu J's home tour (Source: Made by Author)

These home-making practices extend far beyond mere decoration. They are strategic choices that serve as filters, deliberately sieving through deeply ingrained social norms that shape and constrain domestic decision-making. These practices take on a powerful role in disrupting the heteronormative ideals which 'standardised' families as reproductive and male-headed (see, for example, Ho, 2006), thereby defying the societal pressure on women to fulfil domestic duties that primarily cater to the needs of male household members. By consciously choosing to deviate from these norms, these women challenge the rigid conformity to standardised, heteronormative gender roles that often flatten the richness of individual life trajectories into a singular mould (Furstenberg, 2005; Mollborn, 2009).

These intentional filtering practices possess transformative potential, enabling the personalisation of intimate relationships that extend beyond the narrow, policy-defined boundaries of the nuclear family or reproductive marriage (Oswin, 2008). In doing so, they contribute to a profound sense of rootedness and belonging for these women—both as migrants seeking their place within a new environment and as 'new-normative' women diverging from the predominant narrative of dual-parent, reproductive marriage (Tang & Quah, 2017). For example, Shan H regarded the processes of reshaping home as a life journey through which she justified her choice of being childless, stating "*At one point, my choices (of remaining childless) were often questioned by many. Living in a home seemingly designed for a family of three made me feel even more stifled. Through reshaping the interior according to my preferences, such as removing the sofa or DIY-ing the working table, I made peace with the decision not to have children."* Similar to Lu J, Lucy, another divorced woman, associated the home-making with reconstructing a sense of belonging and a sense of self, saying, "*After the divorce, living in the home my ex-husband and I built together didn't feel like home at all…This process (remaking home with her son and parents) made me feel their support and gave me a sense of home in this space again. It's different from before; I don't have to compromise with my ex-husband for so-called family harmony. In this home, I can be myself."* These two quotations illustrate how these women pursued their new-normative patterns of families through making or remaking their homes. Similar to women in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 who were respectively transitioning towards singlehood and motherhood, these women also leverage home-making to enable the aspired transitions in their life course. The act of reshaping their living spaces becomes a powerful tool for asserting agency and crafting identities outside the conventional gender norms.

Home-making for these women becomes a powerful tool for allowing themselves to *anchor* in ongoingly reshaping home and *sail* towards their envisioned, new-normative patterns of families. Through their engagement in home-making, these women express profound agency in enabling aspired changes in their lives. As discussed in Chapter 2, the standardisation of women's life trajectories, particularly evident in cities like Shenzhen and among highly educated women as discussed in this thesis (see, for example, Lo, 2020; Gaetano, 2014), is being challenged. For these women, home-making becomes a vessel to *sail* towards a new-normative family patterns, liberated from entrenched hetero-patriarchal ideals rooted in China's heteronormative culture and policies. At the same time, by making home, they also craft spaces for embarking on life journeys that *anchor* them to places where they could experience self-chosen relationships and emotions that defined the new-normative home. By shaping the material landscape of homes, these women construct tangible manifestations of their agency, reshaping their lived experiences to align with their evolving sense of self. In this interplay between spatial transformation and identity negotiation, they reclaim and assert their agency in pursuing their desired forms of families.

While these five highly educated women wield their economic agency to craft homes tailored to their ideal family lifestyles, challenges persist due to entrenched structural gender inequalities present within both the conventional patriarchal household and the societal expectations. Chen Y's words illustrate these obstacles.

> *Sometimes I also question myself: even though I am very certain about not having children now, will I regret it in the future? This doubt doesn't come from others, like my mother or mother-in-law, who might say that a woman without children is incomplete. Honestly, I don't know what 'incomplete' refer[s] to, but I believe I am a complete woman. I am pondering whether the emotional connection between my husband and me will gradually fade with time. Will I then yearn for a strong emotional bond? Will I regret not having that kind of connection in the world when I am unable to have children at that point?*

Chen Y highlights the landscape these women navigate as they challenge gender norms and reshape their lives within a society moulded by prevailing expectations. Her musings reveal a profound desire for intimate relations that transcend the confines of conventional heterosexual and reproductive marital norms. This desire underscores initiatives for making homes to accommodate intimacy and emotional bonds no longer confined solely to patterns of nuclear families or even lifelong monogamy (Jackson, 2006; Morrison, 2010). Despite their economic agency, these women grapple with societal expectations, highlighting the

need for continued efforts to overcome systemic gender imbalances and construct a more inclusive and diverse landscape in which to pursue personal and emotional fulfilment.

This sentiment resonates with numerous divorced mothers who, despite reshaping their homes and redefining forms of intimacy within their transformed households, continue to grapple with concerns about the repercussions of their choices on their maternal roles and their children's well-being. Lu J serves as an illustration: she left her career to care for her daughter and became a self-employed stock trader. Despite receiving substantial assets in her divorce, including five properties and jointly held stocks, a sense of unease lingers. Her efforts to manage the stocks intensify as she strives to ensure her daughter's stable education abroad. Divorce deepened her emotional connection with her daughter and necessitated financial endeavours. Previously, conforming to traditional gender roles led her to sacrifice her job, a decision rooted in the expectations of heterosexual and reproductive marriages. Now, Shenzhen's labour market limits her career options, resulting in ongoing uncertainty despite her considerable assets. As she said, "*I once wanted to return to work, but for the position I aspired to, I found myself competing with either men whose families were taken care by their wives or women around my age who were unmarried or didn't have children. It's challenging for a woman like me, who took a few years off the job market due to family reasons, to re-enter without lowering my expectations."* Lu J's experiences and words exemplify a common challenge faced by these women, which might lead to postponing divorce until their children reach adulthood to alleviate economic strains on their children's growth. This, as noted by some researchers, might lead to sacrificing their own desires and, in some cases, enduring domestic violence (Showalter, 2016). Similarly, childless married women might face pressure to have children, aligning with conventional norms despite their yearning for a different path.

To navigate these challenges in negotiating gender norms, these women actively sought opportunities beyond the domestic confines of Shenzhen. In doing so, they expanded their efforts to foster alternative forms of intimacy that deviate from conventional patterns tied to nuclear families. By engaging in non-domestic activities, they created a support network that nurtured intimate, protected, and positive home experiences. For instance, Lu J's journey began with attending an alumni reunion where she candidly shared her recent divorce. This gathering introduced her to a community of women, each with their own struggles—ranging from divorce and family business bankruptcy to teenage pregnancies. Through these interactions, Lu J's initial isolation due to her divorce transformed into a

newfound sense of responsibility toward her struggling friends and a feeling of belonging rooted in women's friendship (Bowlby, 2011). Subsequently, Lu J established a weekly hiking routine to strengthen her emotional connections with her female friends. Beyond the confines of her home, this allowed her to assert agency by shedding her pre-divorce identity as a caretaker of a retired husband. Instead, she embraced her autonomy to pursue her and her daughter's aspirations, engaging in discussions about investments and health preservation during the hikes. Her daughter acknowledged her transformation as a "*rejuvenated*" individual who had escaped a lifeless marriage.

Likewise, other divorced and married childless women in this chapter cultivated routines beyond the home to foster intimate relationships, which acted as substitutes for the emotional bonds traditionally expected with children or husbands. Shan H, for example, found solace in gatherings with friends at local venues like coffee shops and flower markets. She shared, "*My best friend is gay. My husband and I often go out with him and his (unmarried) partner. I enjoy grabbing coffee and exploring flower markets with them. Through our interactions and conversations, I've gained a deeper understanding of myself and reflected on my decision not to have children.*" These urban settings offered Shan H a space where she could openly embrace her identity without the need to conceal her true self. Similarly, various activities such as basketball, dog owner picnics, and alumni reunions provided platforms for these women to forge new social connections and reinforce their sense of belonging.

These urban activities play a pivotal role in facilitating the expected changes in these women's life courses, allowing them to navigate away from certain standardised intimate relationships like husband-wife or mother-child bonds. Engaging in non-domestic routines allows these women to redefine the concept of intimacy, broadening their social circles and fostering connections that deviate from traditional family norms. Chapter 2 highlights the idea that making the 'self' feel at home in communal or public spaces involves social encounters within the sphere of intimacy. Shan H and Lu J's urban routines exemplify how these engagements empower women to establish and reinforce themselves in self-chosen, non-standardised intimate relationships. These urban activities become a catalyst, allowing these women to *anchor* themselves in their envisioned lives, emphasising the significance of women's friendship as a fundamental element in meaningful and fulfilling relationships, transcending the constraints of traditional intimate bonds. In tandem with their domestic

home-making practices, these women collectively embark on a journey, *sailing* towards the new-normative patterns of family lives they aspire to achieve.

This collective effort extends beyond individual narratives, contributing to a broader societal transformation that diversifies the forms of families within contemporary Shenzhen (Liu, 2014). In a broader socio-cultural context, this redefined self-perception and the daily practices of establishing, reshaping, and negotiating 'alternative' forms of families mirror the evolution of Shenzhen beyond mere economic growth. These 'alternative' families, flourishing beyond the home, have profound influence on Shenzhen's gender norms. How highly educated women in this section pursue these forms of families and transcend heteronormativity occurs at the intersection of neoliberal discourses emphasising independence and autonomy and the traditional heteronormative culture and policies (Liu, 2014).

However, it is also important to realise that these women's pursuit of new-normative patterns of life is also class-based, echoing the dynamics observed in Chapter 6 where mothers pursued the idealised concept of 'perfect' motherhood. The class-based nature of their pursuit becomes evident in the resources and opportunities available to them. Women in this section, possessing their home and ability to reshape their homes, often belonging to the middle class or above, possess the financial stability, educational background, and social networks that empower them to challenge traditional gender norms and forge alternative family structures. These qualities allow them to navigate the intersections of neoliberal values and cultural expectations. This class-based aspect highlights a potential limitation. Those who do not fall into the middle class or higher may face barriers to pursuing new-normative patterns of family lives, such as rural-to-urban female workers (see, for example, Pun, 2005). Economic constraints, limited access to education, and fewer social connections might hinder individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds from redefining their lives beyond traditional norms. This class disparity could reinforce existing inequalities, emphasising the need for a more inclusive societal framework that enables individuals across all economic strata to pursue diverse forms of families, challenging and transcending established norms.

The following section considers lesbian home-making, exploring how highly educated lesbians in contemporary Shenzhen reimagine family dynamics and reshape their homes to align with these imaginations.

7.4 Making home and reimagining family dynamics

The lesbians discussed in this chapter highlight their aspirations to form a homosexual partnership and the significance of coming out (revealing their sexual orientation), at least with their parents. In contrast to the celebrated image of a liberal and openly proud queer individual prevalent in specific Western settings (Decena, 2008; Horton, 2018), Chinese lesbians encounter significant challenges when revealing their sexual orientations and relationships, particularly to their families of origin (Huang and Brouwer, 2018; Yu et al., 2018). Additionally, societal expectations dictate that they refrain from drawing attention to their identities (Ho et al., 2018). The lesbians in this chapter are all post'90s (90后). As Wu's journey in Shenzhen showed in Chapter 4, these women are also struggling with exploitation in Shenzhen's labour market while seeking ways to fulfil their aspirations. For instance, Bao's residential arrangement of maintaining a dual-city mobile lifestyle (Fig. 7.3), illustrates the strategic navigation of homosexual lifestyles within her future home plans.

* The dashed box is Bao's rented home in Shenzhen. The thick continuous line indicates her girlfriend's rented home in Guangzhou

Fig. 7.3 Comparisons between Bao's home in Shenzhen and Guangzhou (Source: Made by Author)

In her Shenzhen home, Bao intentionally refrained from adding furniture, maintained an untidy living space, and exhibited home objects with significant memories, thus purposefully simplifying the function as a temporary residence and avoiding making it a site of intimacy

and rootedness. Bao's Shenzhen residence is one in which she is present primarily from 10pm to 9am on weekdays. On Fridays, she embarks on regular trips to Guangzhou, returning to work directly on Mondays. Her visits to Guangzhou are motivated by her girlfriend, friends, and pets, and she has taken special care to decorate that space. In contrast to her untidy Shenzhen home, when observing the tours of her girlfriend's home, Bao spent time and energy to make this temporary dwelling the nexus of intimacy, social relationships, and memories. These practices encompassed maintaining a well-organised home environment, caring for pets, and thoughtfully arranging and utilising home objects.

Instead of fully embracing her preferred lifestyle by relocating to her girlfriend's residence in Guangzhou, Bao maintained this dual-city lifestyle because of the higher salary in Shenzhen, and she valued the economic agency it gave her in navigating potential challenges when coming out with her parents. She said, "*I'd prefer to live in the same city as my girlfriend. The job in Shenzhen demands more overtime but offers a higher salary. Both of us need to earn more money to achieve our goals*." Here, the goals refer to the life event of coming out to their parents. Bao's quotation justified her involuntarily mobile lifestyle. In contrast, Chan J shared a similar mobile lifestyle in Shenzhen but navigate it with a different outlook. While Bao had a clear life plan and sees coming out as a significant life transition, another participant Chan J was still in the process of exploring potential life paths. Chan J articulated this uncertainty, stating, "*The only thing I'm sure about right now is that I like women, and I won't marry a man. However, without a stable partner, I'm considering whether I should come out, while also exploring other life possibilities. Regardless, economic strength is essential for my aspirations, so I need to ensure I can earn as much money as possible."* Chan J's quotation underscores that, beyond the shared characteristics of mobile living, each woman's experience reflects her unique position in negotiating societal expectations and personal aspirations within the context of their sexual identity.

These women's mobile lifestyle unveils a nuanced form of *sailing*, reminiscent of the life journeys undertaken by single women in Shenzhen, as explored in Chapter 4. It takes on the characteristics of *sailing* as she consciously crafts a 'mobile' home, marked by limited personal belongings and emotional attachment. This intentional strategy suggests an awareness of the transient nature of their current living situations as they prepare for expected shifts in their life courses. Bao's *sailing* stands out as purposeful and directed, with a clear destination — a life encompassing a homosexual partnership. In drawing parallels with Chan J's *sailing* journey in Shenzhen, a similarity emerges with the experiences of certain single

women in Chapter 4. Both groups, at their current life stage, are navigating towards their next phase, exploring potential life paths. However, the distinction lies in their exploration. Single women in Chapter 4 were contemplating whether and when to form heterosexual partnerships, while for Chan J, the exploration involves planning and constructing her life paths from scratch. Both Chan J and Bao's life journeys represent the personalisation of their life trajectories, highlighting the diverse paths through which highly educated women can pursue their aspirations and broader goals, challenging heteronormative culture and resisting collective norms.

Bao and Chan J both highlight the role of financial independence in allowing them to pursue their personalised life paths that deviate from the trajectories shaped by heteronormativity. As discussed in Chapter 2, this culture often perceives such relationships as oppositional monolithic entities, while filial norms in Chinese tradition may pressure women to conform to lifelong monogamy or embrace maternity responsibilities (Tang & Quah, 2017; Xie, 2023). For Bao, instead of choosing a *xinghun* (形婚， contract marriage) arrangement like some of her lesbian friends, which involves a marriage of convenience with a gay man to maintain a facade of heterosexuality (Engebresten, 2014), she makes a different choice. She linked her coming-out plan to the imperative of showcasing to her parents that even without entering a heterosexual and reproductive marriage, she can still have financial and social stability, as well as happiness, which women are assumed to attain only through heterosexual and reproductive marriage.

> *I find the weekly transportation exhausting. It feels like we are approaching a sort of deadline. Perhaps next year, we'll be in a position to make a down payment on a two-bedroom apartment in Guangzhou. My mother once offered to contribute 40%. However, after much contemplation, I declined her offer, concerned that she might use it to undermine my 'abnormal' relationship when I eventually came out. She might argue, 'Bao, you couldn't rely on a woman; now you even need my support to buy a house! Certain things would have been different if you had married a man.' I plan to disclose my relationship to her after my girlfriend and I purchase a house in Guangzhou. At that point, I'll tell her, 'Hi, Mom. I have a home and a family in Guangzhou.'*

Bao's strategic approach to reshaping family dynamics is evident in her deliberate choices, such as maintaining a highly mobile dual-city lifestyle and rejecting her parents' financial support. Unlike the idea of creating a home environment that reflects her lesbian identity by altering domestic arrangements in a queer manner (see, for example, Pilkey, 2014; Gorman-

Murray, 2006), Bao's goal is to establish a sense of rootedness in a self-acquired property, free from the concerns of relocation or frequent commuting. Her positionality as a lesbian in a committed relationship gives her dual-city living arrangement a specific context, highlighting the distinct experiences of coupled individuals in contrast to the greater precarity faced by many single highly educated women in Shenzhen, as discussed in Chapter 5 and in Chan J's case. Here, coupledom can mitigate precarity in two key ways. Firstly, it offers a clear vision of the next life stage. This clarity contrasts with the uncertainty faced by many single women who are exploring potential life paths. Secondly, coupledom enables individuals like Bao to share the economic burden of pursuing expected life goals with a stable partner in the competitive market of Shenzhen. Coupledom, therefore, becomes a collaborative approach provides a support system that helps navigate challenges and reinforces the stability of their shared journey.

Despite the heightened competition and potential exploitation prevalent in contemporary Shenzhen, Bao also needs to navigate the challenges of coming out to her parents—an obstacle that looms in her future. Her approach to home-making serves as an agentive practice to address this challenge. Both her highly mobile lifestyle aimed at saving money for her eventual "coming out" and her efforts to foster a sense of intimacy, belonging, and protection within her girlfriend's home (drawing from Stachowski & Bock, 2021) imply Bao's active engagement in navigating challenges rooted in the heteronormative culture in contemporary China (Lo, 2020). Bao's journey underscores the overlooked interconnection between family dynamics and the concept of home ownership—a focal point with significant implications. Bao's trajectory follows the traditional life path prescribed for nuclear families, transitioning from renting to owning a home. However, her perspective diverges from that of some heterosexual and highly educated couples, who typically view homeownership as a means of preparing for their children's education or as an investment, as discussed in Chapter 6 (see also Liu & Li, 2018). The current home life of lesbian couple He L and Wang Q, who moved to Shenzhen four years ago (at the time of the interview), aligns with the desired life pursued by Bao. Living together in their own house and raising two dogs, which was not possible in their rental home, Wang Q views their homes as a safe haven and wonderland. She expresses, "*Coming home after work is my happiest time. I can relax, have dinner with my loved one, and take the dogs for a walk. In this kind of home, I feel loved without the responsibilities my friends have with children or cooking for a husband.*" For Wang Q, homeownership not only showcases her financial capability but also symbolises the freedom

to shape her residence as an *anchor*, providing a sense of self and belonging. This approach allows her to *sail* towards her envisioned life, breaking free from traditional women's familial roles in Chinese tradition.

In these women's cases, the significance of owning a house extends beyond the establishment of a family space. For them, it serves as a pivotal foundation for forming same-sex partnerships and navigating possible disadvantages of women in Shenzhen's labour market. This approach arises from the potential adverse consequences of coming out, which could lead to ruptured relationships with their families of origin—potentially rendering them emotionally and physically homeless. Thus, owning a home constitutes a sense of security. This nuanced approach to forming homosexual families has profound implications for understanding the complexity of the concept of "home" within contemporary Shenzhen (Liu & Li, 2018; Yang & Guo, 2018).

For these lesbians, the concept of home transcends mere physical space—it becomes a dynamic interplay between materiality and abstract notions of agency and power. As discussed in Chapter 2, home embodies both a tangible place for materialising a sense of belonging and stability, as well as an imaginative and metaphorical realm (Stachowski & Bock, 2021; Alison & Dowling, 2012; Brickell, 2012). In this rapidly evolving city, the clash of neoliberal values that underscore independence and individualism intersects with deeply ingrained Chinese traditions around filial obligations and family commitment (Wang, 2021). These women's life stories revolving around home and families illuminate the negotiation between these opposing forces within homeownership. Their experiences show how home ownership weaves into the broader social fabric and their perception of non-normative forms of intimacy and family.

Within this larger socio-cultural context, these lesbians' aspirations to associate a sense of belonging with homeownership resonate with the structures of heterosexual families. Paradoxically, this aspiration prompts them to adopt and adapt to neoliberal values that characterise contemporary Shenzhen, including a strong work ethic and self-reliance (Gao, 2020). They reshape their understanding of families to align with the contours of neoliberal culture, opting for childless, dual-worker households. From their perspective, this strategic alignment enables them to integrate their families into the heteronormative framework of contemporary Shenzhen, aligning with broader trends in the city's evolution. In essence, these women's aspirations to homeownership and strong financial capacity are firmly associated with individual desires, indicating the 'ideal' of the home where they aspired to *anchor*. They

embody a dynamic fusion of conflicting ideologies and societal shifts, encapsulating the complex interplay between personal agency, social norms, and the changing landscape of a city in flux.

However, while Shenzhen provides fertile ground for reworking family dynamics by embracing neoliberal values and seizing career opportunities, it also presents challenges. The invisibility of lesbians and the necessity of maintaining a low profile in society for a harmonious family life creates a complex situation (Ho et al., 2018). The absence of policies and support mechanisms recognising same-sex partnerships fosters a sense of insecurity. Consequently, these women perceive success in Shenzhen's competitive job market as their primary avenue to attain a good life. Cai S associated her future family life with the necessity of living and working in Shenzhen.

> *I must stay in a city like Shenzhen and cannot return to my hometown. Although my partner and I don't plan to have children, this progressive lifestyle would be deemed unfortunate and unacceptable in my hometown, where a woman who cannot bear children for her husband is viewed miserably. Therefore, even though buying a house in a big city is quite challenging, with both of us having stable jobs and without concern about buying a school-district house, we are still able to settle down in Shenzhen.*

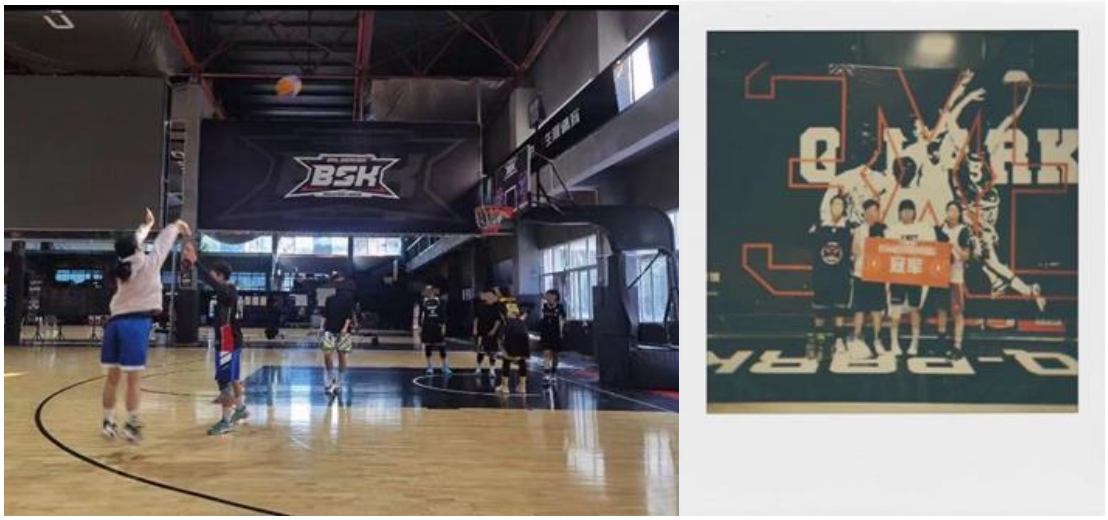
Cai S's perspective sheds light on a deeper rationale behind the desire of highly educated lesbians in Shenzhen to embrace the tenets of neoliberalism, particularly a robust work ethic. The constricted range of settlement options available to them plays a pivotal role in narrowing down the viable avenues for forming families and establishing intimate relationships. As discussed in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, the evolving and diversifying family dynamics underscore individual agency in shaping their desired intimate and familial relationships (Lo, 2020). Here, adopting neoliberal principles in Shenzhen's labour market enables Cai S to *sail* away from her past, where the life she envisioned as a lesbian was not accepted. However, the idea of "choice" as a defining aspect of lesbian family concepts may not be universally applicable, even for highly educated individuals with economic autonomy and migration agency, such as Cai S (see also Engerbresten, 2009; 2014). These lesbians frequently contend with potential stigmatisation rooted in heteronormative cultural norms. Additionally, they grapple with the apprehension that their sexual orientation might impede advancement opportunities or instigate biases, particularly in less developed regions of China. Despite their efforts to reshape their homes to 'match' the particular form of family that they can choose in contemporary Shenzhen, the tension between societal norms and

personal aspirations endures, unveiling the interplay between individual agency and structural constraints. This trajectory is characterised by a fixed sequence of life events, including aspects like home ownership, choosing not to have children, or settling in major cities like Shenzhen. While this predetermined sequence of life events allows highly educated women to break free from heteronormativity, it simultaneously constrains and structures their life choices, urging them to adhere to a different set of social norms.

To navigate the possible challenges embedded in societal expectations and Shenzhen's neoliberal transitions, engaging in regular activities beyond the confines of their homes played a pivotal role. This engagement helped these women navigate the challenges arising from limited options in migration destinations and home ownership. Much like the divorced and married childless women discussed earlier, these lesbians also found solace in the companionship of friends, which contributed to their sense of identity and rootedness within a community of shared experiences and identities (Bowlby, 2011). These activities provided them with opportunities to cultivate relationships beyond biological ties, especially friendships that took on familial and interdependent qualities (see also Wilkinson, 2014). For instance, He L utilised her passion for playing basketball to foster connections with lesbian friends and those who accepted her sexual orientation and appearance (Fig7.4). She shared, "*people often speculate about my appearance*[20]*, wondering if I'm a lesbian because of my neutral dressing. However, on the basketball court, where many girls like me play, I feel comfortable because there's no surprise when they hear my voice and realise I'm a girl."* The basketball court became a space where she felt at home, allowing her to establish emotional bonds with people who understand her life choices. Furthermore, by forming a basketball team, training with her teammates, and competing in Shenzhen's basketball competitions, He L further cultivated a sense of belonging and stability within the team. She said, "*the bond between me and my teammates goes beyond friendship; it's like family*." Similarly, other lesbian women embraced activities like city hiking, clubbing, tennis, and climbing to extend their sense of home beyond their households. As Bao shared, "*Clubbing allows me to better plan my life. From the lives of other lesbians who are older than me, I learn how different people plan their lives as lesbians in China. Compared to my family, these people can contribute more to my life.*" Bao's quotation indicates that, through these routines, these lesbians also formed interdependent relationships centred around information exchange about

[20] He L identifies herself as a T (tomboy). A tomboy girl normally dresses in a more boyish style and avoiding overly feminine attire in her daily life.

navigating homosexual partnerships in China. This could include signing property co-ownership agreements, exploring options for overseas surrogacy, or establishing agreements that permit same-sex partners to sign surgical consent forms.



Figs. 7.4 & 7.5 He L playing the basketball in Shenzhen (left) He L won a basketball competition with her teammates in Shenzhen (Source: Images provided by He L)

By blurring the boundaries between domestic and external realms, and challenging the bloodline-based family relationship, lesbian women in Shenzhen forged a sense of community and novel forms of rootedness. As discussed in Chapter 2, social minorities can explore alternative avenues, such as establishing homosexual partnership or redefining the concept of family, by stretching the ideal of home beyond the domestic (Gorman-Murray, 2006). The urban activities enabled these women to navigate their alternative life paths by incorporating extended social networks that encompass people with shared experiences. In synergy with their domestic home-making practices, these non-domestic routines propel them toward their envisioned lives, navigating through societal constraints that might stigmatised their life choices or make it challenging to find referenceable life paths. This approach resonates with Weston's (1991) notion of 'families of choice,' wherein homosexual relationships are built upon flexible networks encompassing friends, partners, and individuals not bound by biological ties. Through their practices, these women *anchor* themselves in Shenzhen, crafting personalised models of familial relationships that align with their aspirations. These actions offered a means for them to navigate heteronormative expectations in contemporary Shenzhen. In doing so, they simultaneously contested and reshaped limited societal understanding of partnership, intimacy, home, and family (Lo, 2020). This interplay

of personal aspirations and structural boundaries highlights the multifaceted nature of their agency as they navigate a complex web of desires and societal constraints.

Both this section and previous section has highlighted the role of friendship for these highly educated women challenging heteronormativity. The next section then examines the interplay between these women's friendship, individualised life paths, and the neoliberal context of Shenzhen as they navigate their life journeys of *sailing* and *anchoring.*

7.5 Women's friendship and negotiation of heteronormativity

In the preceding sections, I illustrated how these highly educated women pursued their personalised form of family dynamic through *sailing* and *anchoring* in Shenzhen. Migrating to and making home in Shenzhen enabled these women to challenge the heteronormativity that made them invisible or even stigmatise certain life choices, such as divorce, childlessness, and living lesbian lives. These women engaged in practices that served dual purposes: *sailing*, as they explored and refined individualised life paths deviating from heteronormative frames, and *anchoring*, as they approached and achieved envisioned home lives accommodating their unique family dynamics. Throughout their journeys, similar to the experiences detailed in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6, financial capacity and educational backgrounds play pivotal roles. These factors empowered these women, providing them with the agency to navigate the precarity inherent in Shenzhen's competitive labour market, while also affording them the means to pursue their envisioned lifestyles. Moreover, these women also underscored their friendship by allowing themselves to *sail* and *anchor* in Shenzhen. In this section, I examine the distinctive role of women's friendship in these women's negotiations of heteronormativity and Shenzhen's neoliberal context.

Amidst their voyages of *sailing/anchoring*, the pivotal role of women's friendships becomes abundantly clear. These relationships are indispensable cornerstones that aid them in navigating a plethora of challenges. These women adroitly venture beyond the confines of the domestic sphere, intentionally creating sanctuaries of intimacy and protection within the dynamic cityscape of Shenzhen. In the previous section, the experiences of He L and Bao underscored the significance of friendships, portraying them as intimate relationships akin to familial connections. Shan H, much like Bao, articulated the uniqueness of her friendship, stating, "*My friend and I often share our experiences of being childless in Chinese society. For example, People we meet often assume we should have kids at our age. In casual conversations, it's not uncommon for someone to naturally ask, "Is your child starting college this year?" Both he and I have felt uncomfortable due to these societal assumptions. Discussing situations like this with my friend helps alleviate that discomfort, making him a special presence in my life."* These women's experiences indicate that, as these women reshape their domestic spaces to harmonise with 'new' family forms, the evolving landscape of smaller households and diverse living arrangements drives them to increasingly rely on friendship networks that extend beyond the traditional nuclear household boundaries. This

reliance on friendship is not solely about nurturing nuanced emotional bonds, which might have been cultivated with husbands or children in heteronormative contexts.

These women's experiences shed light on the significance of networks of intimacy and friendship that exist outside of, and beyond heteronormative idealised notions of home throughout their life journeys of *sailing* and *anchoring.* Here, friendship serves as a vital *anchor* that not only provides emotional support but also normalises their unconventional life trajectories. In a society where deviations from normative expectations can lead to marginalisation (see also Tang & Quah, 2017), these networks make these women's individualised life paths 'ordinary'. As Lu J said, "*When my family expressed regret about my divorce, my friends and I were celebrating, rejoicing in my newfound freedom. I am grateful to my friends; they made me feel that the decision to divorce, much like choosing a job you love, is something ordinary and joyous, bringing happiness.*" For these women, friendship serves as a counterbalance to societal prejudices, affirming that the pursuit of unconventional life paths is not an anomaly but a valid and normal choice (see also Wilkinson, 2014). The ordinariness of their everyday lives, despite challenging monogamous norms, adds a layer of normalcy to their diverse family structures, fostering a feeling of rootedness and inclusivity in Shenzhen.

Friendship became essential in empowering these women to redefine their lifestyles which are framed as non-normative under heteronormative ideals of home as new-normative ones in Shenzhen. It offers emotional sustenance and serves as a means of cultural negotiation, providing a counter-narrative to societal expectations, asserting that these women's personalised life paths are not only acceptable but can also be a source of happiness and fulfilment. As these women navigate through the complex web of societal norms and expectations, their friendships become not just personal connections but can become powerful tools for reshaping collective perceptions. In this way, the ordinariness derived from friendship networks acts as a strategic negotiation tactic, allowing these women to *anchor* themselves firmly in Shenzhen while challenging and transforming prevailing heteronormative ideals.

7.6 Conclusion

This chapter offers insights into the experiences of highly educated women in Shenzhen as they navigate the deeply ingrained heteronormativity within the realms of family and intimacy. The analysis highlights the agency displayed by these women as they reshape

domestic spaces to reflect their autonomy in pursuing 'non-normative' family structures, defying prevailing norms and structural constraints. These transformative journeys challenge established gender norms and exemplify the potential for profound social change, reflecting personal aspirations toward individualism and feminism that contest the concealed heteronormativity present in the development policies of contemporary China (Yin, 2022; Ning & Poon, 2021).

These women's daily engagement in home-making serves as agentic practices, enabling them to carve out spaces for the imagination and realisation of families or lifestyles that do not conform to prevailing norms (Pilkey, 2014; Wilkinson, 2014). These spaces extend beyond the confines of bloodlines and traditional marital intimacy, encompassing non-patriarchal power dynamics and aspire to personalised family structures that challenge heteronormativity in contemporary China (such as same-sex partnerships with children) (Lo, 2020; Xie, 2021; Xie, 2023). Home-making is a means of *sailing/anchoring*, allowing them to leverage their agency to enable aspired change in their life courses (Nowicka, 2007). This transformative process navigates the complexities of Shenzhen's landscape, redefining family narratives while delicately balancing tradition and modernity. Educational attainment grants them a competitive edge within Shenzhen's labour market, yet this advantage is counterbalanced by constraints imposed by societal norms and structural realities. Women's friendships emerge as pivotal, extending beyond domestic boundaries to provide essential support, knowledge exchange, and pathways to establish non-normative families. These networks transcend conventional companionship, nurturing family structures that boldly challenge prevailing norms.

These findings contribute to our comprehension of the gender norms influencing women's life trajectories in Shenzhen. The agency exhibited by these highly educated women serves as a testament to their ability to confront, renegotiate, and reshape societal expectations, ultimately reshaping their own lives and contributing to the broader discourse on gender and family dynamics in contemporary China. As the last empirical chapter, this chapter addresses the second, third, and fourth research questions by analysing the negotiation of highly educated women who pursued ‘alternative’ forms of families to transcend heteronormativity in contemporary Shenzhen. Through diverse lenses, the interplay of personal agency, societal norms, and the ever-evolving dynamics of this vibrant city are laid bare. As the stories of these women intertwine with the broader societal canvas, a picture

emerges of both the unique resilience of individual journeys and the broader transformation taking place within the complex fabric of Shenzhen.

Chapter Eight. Conclusion

This thesis examines the multifaceted aspects of Shenzhen's rapid development, shedding light on the nuanced underbelly of the city's four-decade transformation from a small border town into a hub of creativity and entrepreneurship, driven by its embrace of neoliberalism (Keane & Zhao, 2012). Recent literature suggests that major Chinese cities are undergoing a gradual shift away from traditional patriarchal family dynamics towards more individualised family structures and economic responsibilities (Yan, 2003; Shen, 2011; Liu, 2020). Nevertheless, women in these urban contexts continue to grapple with societal expectations, including those related to heterosexual marriage, unpaid domestic labour, and reproductive responsibilities. Within the households of Shenzhen, this interplay, deeply entwined with the pressures of intense professional competition and enduring conventional gender norms, simultaneously presents women with opportunities for personal growth and formidable obstacles to navigate.

Against this backdrop, the primary focus of this thesis has been to analyse the gender inequalities woven into Shenzhen's neoliberal transition. Moreover, it seeks to highlight the strategies of how highly educated women navigate the challenges arising from gender inequality, specifically through their efforts in domestic migration to Shenzhen and subsequent home-making. Chapter 4 examines the enduring gender inequality in Shenzhen and the generational variations in challenges faced by highly educated female migrants. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 investigate how highly educated women negotiate societal expectations placed upon them throughout various life stages and life-course transitions. By contextualising their journeys within Shenzhen—marked by economic, political, and socio-cultural shifts—these chapters collectively unravel the nature of 'home' in contemporary Shenzhen, serving as the nexus of women's agency, evolving gender norms, and neoliberal values.

The analysis of this thesis reveals that highly educated women, through internal migration to Shenzhen, exhibit a nuanced interplay of agency by simultaneously navigating dynamic shifts and seeking stability and rootedness in their life courses. Their migration to

Shenzhen and subsequent home-making embodies agentic practices, liberating them from deeply ingrained hetero-patriarchal traditions that historically restricted women's choices. This liberation is particularly pronounced across various life stages, as they confront societal stigmas associated with singlehood, conform to expectations of 'perfect' motherhood, or explore non-heteronormative family structures. However, amidst this assertion of agency, these women are also impacted by the exploitative neoliberal forces in Shenzhen, such as a saturated labour market and intense competition, shaping their trajectories and posing challenges to their aspirations. Their life journeys reflect the dual nature of these women's migration-*anchoring* in places where liberation and opportunities are approachable, yet maintaining *sailing,* navigating the currents of gender disparities and neoliberal constraints.

The exploration of this thesis offers a nuanced lens through which to comprehend the interplay between women's empowerment and individualisation of contemporary China, as observed through the narratives of highly educated women. While many studies of internal migration in China focus on the struggles of low-skilled female workers (打工妹) in negotiating their gender roles within a patriarchal culture prevalent both in their places of origin and destination (Fang, 2012; Kochan, 2016; Pun, 2005), my exploration of the interplay between life courses of middle-class, highly educated women and Shenzhen's evolving socio-cultural context sheds light on a contrasting perspective. The distinctive negotiations that unfold across various life stages among highly educated women reveal potential pathways for constructing alternative life trajectories that serve as acts of resistance against prevailing norms of heteronormativity and gender inequality. These negotiations transpire within a socio-cultural landscape shaped by the rapid expansion of neoliberal transition, which interweaves deeply ingrained patriarchal traditions intrinsic to China's societal fabric.

This concluding chapter begins by reflecting on the *sailing/anchoring* framework, providing an overview of the key arguments and findings. It subsequently underscores how the research questions have been addressed, emphasising the contributions made to diverse bodies of literature and critical discourse. Furthermore, I discuss the empirical significance of this thesis in interpreting the development of contemporary China. Lastly, I suggest potential avenues for further research.

8.1 Reflection on this research through the lens of *sailing/anchoring*

In Chapter 2, I established a conceptual framework of *sailing/anchoring* that underpins the formulation of the four central research questions. Built on and further extending Ahmed's concept of uprooting/regrounding (2003), I developed a dynamic theoretical construct termed *sailing/anchoring*. In line with Ahmed's conceptualisation of home-making involving both uprooting from the past and regrounding in the present, my research has highlighted the need for a deeper exploration of migrant home-making in today's context of heightened mobility and migration. This awareness necessitates a closer examination of the dynamics between migrants' agency and their daily negotiation between uprooting and regrounding. Throughout my analysis, the exploration of *sailing/anchoring* perceives home as a realm of temporal complexity where women's life courses are reshaped through everyday negotiations between conformity/individuality, globalisation/locality, and tradition and modernisation.

The *sailing/anchoring* framework provides a nuanced perspective from which to examine the negotiation processes that unfold as individuals navigate their shifting imaginations and memories of home throughout the trajectory of their life courses and within broader socio-cultural contexts (Liu, 2020; Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Kaika, 2004). This conceptual lens illuminates the dynamic interplay that characterises this negotiation, occurring against the evolving backdrop of contemporary societies. In essence, it asserts that home-making during migration can become a robust and assertive endeavour that seeks to carve out a space that resonates with personal aspirations and desires (Datta, 2011). This assertion aligns with a growing awareness of the nature of home, as "a turbulent sea of constant negotiation" within the context of migration, which emphasises the potential for tension between individual agency and household-oriented societal norms (Miller, 2001: 4). The *sailing/anchoring* framework, contextualised by the everyday lives of highly educated female migrants in Shenzhen, transcends these confines. In this thesis, I perceive home-making during migration as a series of agentic practices, facilitating a transformative journey in women's life courses. This agency-driven transformation is not simply a physical alteration of their living spaces but a more profound journey of *sailing* away from these constraints as they forge a path toward self-fulfilment and aspiration. This journey empowers them to *anchor*, or seek an *anchor*, within new socio-cultural contexts, where their once intangible aspirations materialise into attainable realities.

Throughout my analysis in Chapters 5, 6, and 7, a critical examination of the *Sailing/Anchoring* framework emerges, contextualising the everyday practices employed by

these women to pursue individual freedom, empowerment, and well-being within the evolving landscape of Shenzhen. These pursuits align with the ideology of neoliberalism as they emphasise individual choices, adapt to market forces, and navigate the dynamics of gender and class within the neoliberal context. By positioning these practices within the broader context, the framework's capacity to empower individuals gains depth and nuance. Through their *sailing/anchoring* strategies, the women amplify their agency to navigate many challenges ranging from deeply ingrained gender norms rooted in hetero-patriarchal traditions to the complex interplay of class dynamics accentuated by intergenerational disparities.

However, the *sailing/anchoring* framework is woven into the multifaceted fabric of societal dynamics that envelop individual life journeys. These journeys are deeply intertwined with and significantly shaped by complex power dynamics. Particularly notable among these dynamics are gender inequality within the family unit, the intense competitions of the local labour market, and the broader societal environment of contemporary Shenzhen (see also Pun & Chen, 2013; Pun, 2005; Yan, 2020). For example, this interplay of factors comes to life in Chapter 5, where the narratives of highly educated single women reveal a journey of *sailing* towards their expected single lifestyles which they can defy traditional gender norms depicting them as incomplete. However, this pursuit of autonomy represents an ongoing attempt at *anchoring*, as these women persistently grapple with evolving challenges arising from the fierce competition and diminishing advantages prevalent within Shenzhen's dynamic labour market.

The establishment and application of the *sailing/anchoring* framework in this thesis contribute to the literature on everyday geographies of home (Shove et al., 2007; Miller 2001; Nowicka, 2007; Walsh, 2006; Longhurst et al., 2009). Highlighting migrant home-making as agentic practices which allow individuals to pursue or enable expected changes in their life courses provides nuanced perspectives in interpreting the temporality of home. By utilising the sailing/anchoring framework, I extend existing concepts of uprooting/regrounding by incorporating the life-course perspectives. This novel framework enriches a small but growing body of literature thinking about life-course transitions, which is the mesoscale of time, in the construction of everyday home lives, including the everyday rhythms or the domestication of large-scale social time (Liu, 2020). The temporal focus of the *sailing/anchoring* framework contributes to understanding the relationships between women's agency and their negotiations with social expectations associated with specific life stages. This temporal lens allows for an in-depth examination of the intricacies of everyday

lives and sheds light on the broader intersecting forces that mould the contours of these women's lives. Consequently, it embeds their narratives within the nuanced landscape of social and cultural dynamics.

This thesis, grounded in the interpretation of materiality and routines within the everyday geographies of home, leverages the *sailing/anchoring* framework to consider how seemingly mundane practices weave together one's past, present, and future across different life stages (Liu, 2020). Through the process of *sailing/anchoring* experienced by these women, this thesis illuminates the diverse forms of 'home-making' in contemporary Shenzhen, unveiling the evolving conceptions of home from a mere physical structure to an imaginative and metaphorical space enriched with emotion, women's agency, and migrants' sense of belonging (Al-Ali and Koser, 2002; Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Rapport and Dawson, 1998).

From a feminist perspective, *sailing/anchoring* resists oversimplifying these women's subjectivities and identities by recognising that they are not solely defined as highly educated individuals or women. Instead, it considers and addresses a multitude of individual differences, such as generational distinctions, economic abilities, life stages, and deviations from traditional life trajectories within heteronormative households. While categorising factors can be as multifaceted as those encountered in international migration, such as nationality, skin colour, religion, ethnicity, and language, this study demonstrates their pertinence in highlighting nuanced individual differences among highly educated women in contemporary Shenzhen. By revealing how these women at diverse life stages negotiate a dynamic balance amid various societal forces, this framework understands home-making in internal migration as an expansive realm beyond mere physical boundaries and an integrated domain of women's bodies, emotions, identity, and agency. Employing a feminist lens that considers individual differences enriches the understanding of the interplay between personal agency, the spatial dimension of home, and the broader landscape of societal transformation.

This reflection underscores the multifaceted role of the *sailing/anchoring* framework. It offers a theoretical foundation to understand the key arguments and findings of this thesis. The next section draws on the conclusions of this thesis and elaborates on its contributions.

8.2 Research findings and contributions

This thesis has explored the following questions:

1. How do highly educated female migrants from different generations adapt to the neoliberal transitions of Shenzhen?
2. How do these women *sail/anchor* to/in Shenzhen via home-making practices in the domestic space?
3. How do these women *sail/anchor* to/in Shenzhen via home-making practices beyond the domestic space?
4. How do these women negotiate life courses via *sailing/anchoring*?

I responded to the first question in Chapter 4, unravelling the layers of Shenzhen's rapid development and the gender inequalities woven into its fabric through the life stories of three highly educated women from distinct generational cohorts. The analysis of intergenerational differences reveals several factors that perpetuate gender inequality in contemporary Shenzhen. I found the erosion of advantages once enjoyed by highly educated women in Shenzhen's labour market. This erosion can be attributed to changes in the Talent Policy and the intense competition within Shenzhen's labour market, reinforcing gender disparities. While education attainment was once viewed as a pathway to empowerment, career advancement, and individual well-being for women in the 1960s and 1970s, this is now limited by the influx of highly educated labourers in Shenzhen. This influx is compounded by more stringent criteria for identifying eligible talent, such as migrants with doctoral degrees or those graduating from universities ranked in the top 100 globally.

Concurrently, deeply rooted gender norms stemming from hetero-patriarchal traditions continue to impose societal expectations on highly educated women, particularly concerning motherhood, childcare, and other responsibilities. Moreover, challenges in acquiring housing ownership in Shenzhen serve as a barrier to internal migration, hindering women's pursuit of their aspirations within the city. The interplay between traditional patriarchal norms and the emerging values of neoliberalism gives rise to 'new' forms of exploitation, specifically targeting highly educated women.

The first research question explores the relationship between internal migration and the rapid development of a city, with a particular focus on the life course approach. This perspective is especially relevant in urban areas undergoing swift neoliberal transitions, which are characteristic of developing nations and marked by condensed timelines (see, for instance, Homm & Bohle, 2012; Lewinson, 2003; Bailey, 2009; Heath et al., 2018). Over the

course of four decades, Shenzhen has transformed from a humble fishing village into one of China's most prominent metropolises. Within this evolutionary context, the life journeys of women in this study reveal a unique interplay of challenges and achievements. These experiences encompass 'tears,' which expose instances of exploitation, career impediments, and discrimination and 'cheers,' celebrating accomplishments such as achieving economic self-sufficiency, embracing cosmopolitan lifestyles, and contributing to the well-being of their loved ones.

This life course approach enriches our grasp of the societal context accompanying swift development, particularly in cities undergoing rapid urbanisation and modernisation within a condensed timeframe, as often seen in developing countries. It argues that by tracing individual life trajectories through different life stages and correlating them with broader societal changes, the life course approach has offered a nuanced perspective. It provides insights into how rapid urban transformation and policy shifts intersect with personal experiences, shaping opportunities and challenges for women in an evolving landscape. This argument adds a critical dimension to our understanding of migration through the lens of a life course perspective (see, for instance, Bailey, 2009; Coulter et al., 2016; Hall, 2019; Settersten et al., 2020). It challenges the conventional notion of migration as a singular, isolated event and instead emphasises the significance of viewing it as an ongoing and multifaceted process with evolving life trajectories. In doing so, it reframes internal migration as a complex network of ‘routes’ that allow individuals to break free from historical constraints, such as the pervasive stigma faced by single, highly educated women (Yu, 2021; Woensdregt, 2022), while also enabling the pursuit of aspirations, including the formation of unconventional families (Wang, 2021).

The second question underscores home-making in the domestic as an agentive practice for these women to challenge entrenched gender inequalities in contemporary Shenzhen, particularly pertinent in domains like the city’s labour market, domestic landscape, and socio-cultural norms, which disproportionately affect highly educated women (Zuo & Bian, 2001; Liu, 2017; Fang, 2012). Within the domestic sphere, the home-making practices of these women involve reshaping both material and imaginative dimensions (Kochan, 2016; Tolia-Kelly, 2004; 2006; Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Brickell, 2012; Varley, 2006). Through material home-making, which includes deliberate choices in objects, their arrangement, and removal, these women ‘materialise’ their aspirations associated with the concept of *jia* (家), a Chinese expression encompassing the notions of home, house, and family. This process

entails the cultivation of aspirations, the formation of relationships, the management of emotions, and the construction of identities within the domestic realm.

This home-making includes agency-driven practices, allowing women to challenge and resist prescribed norms dictating women's roles and reshape their domestic space as zones of aspired intimacy, stability, and protection at different life stages (Lam & Yeoh, 2018; Kynsilehto, 2010; Stachowski & Bock, 2021) For instance, as illuminated in Chapter 4, single women navigate home-making to break free from conventional norms that categorise their singlehood as 'waiting' and 'incomplete.' Meanwhile, this process of *sailing* also enables them to break away from the dynamics marked by fierce competition and decreasing opportunities in the labour market, paving the way for a more desirable lifestyle. On the other hand, home-making practices also serve as a mechanism for *anchoring*, offering a counterbalance to the volatility of Shenzhen's labour market by providing a haven that fosters gendered subjectivities and power dynamics distinct from traditional patriarchal norms (Boccagni, 2017). For example, the highly educated mothers featured in Chapter 6 outsource household tasks and reconstruct power dynamics within the home to accommodate their professional ambitions and maternal responsibilities. This process of '*anchoring*' becomes a contemporary strategy for fulfilling traditional roles while embracing 'new' identities that defy conventional norms. This includes women who embrace non-heteronormative family structures; mothers who navigate the dual roles of traditional caregivers and modern, highly educated professions; and single women who pursue independence and enjoy single lifestyles. The process of *anchoring*, sometimes with the help of other less skilled women, enables these women to withstand the pressures of Shenzhen's neoliberal transition and assert their autonomy in shaping their lives.

However, despite enhancing economic autonomy and agency, home-making does not entirely liberate these women from the gender disparities within contemporary Shenzhen. My analysis indicates that the gender disparities noted in the first finding are impacted by gendered exploitative practices in the labour market, the weight of gender-specific family responsibilities such as maternity and childbearing, the gendered nature of domestic labour—especially scientific parenting (Popkewitz, 2003)—and the pervasive influence of heteronormative gender norms that shape women's life choices within the urban contexts. This interplay underscores that, while home-making empowers women to *sail* away from past constraints, *anchoring* in a fairer societal context necessitates broader transformations in the social fabric.

Drawing on this finding, I contest the oversimplification of home-making during the migration process, often categorised solely as either settlement-oriented or highly mobile (Stachowski & Bock, 2021; Nowicka, 2007). The agentic nature of these women's home-making practices indicates that, within internal migration, individuals wield significant agency, allowing them to navigate between states of settlement and mobility. Thus, it becomes imperative to move beyond the binary framework of settled versus unsettled states and inquire further about the transient status between uprooting and regrounding (Ahmed et al., 2003). The concept of agency within the framework of *sailing/anchoring* underscores the importance of considering the autonomy and agency of migrants in regrounding their roots in their migration destination. For instance, as demonstrated in Chapter 7, highly educated women who have formed non-heteronormative families in Shenzhen transcend the mere materialisation of intimate and stable domestic imaginaries. Their home-making practices achieve 'personalised' forms of families by pursuing specific 'standardised' economic capacities or career achievements. The pursuit of homeownership by lesbians, a crucial facet of their home-making, underscores how they enable new forms of family structures while also conforming to specific heteronormative standards. The complexity inherent in the life trajectories of women in this thesis urges researchers to explore how migrants, especially female migrants, negotiate the dynamics between conformity/individuality and tradition/modernisation, throughout their migration journeys.

Moreover, my findings reveal that the home-making of highly educated women, while indicating their autonomy and a sense of agency, was also accompanied by concealed promises, sacrifices, or struggles. This has heightened importance within the framework of postmodern explorations of the everyday lives of marginalised social groups, encompassing women, people of colour, and LGBTQ+ minorities (Wilkinson, 2014; Lo, 2020; Pilkey, 2014). By illuminating the multifaceted aspects of home-making in contemporary Shenzhen, I offer a nuanced perspective that enables a deeper comprehension of the dynamics surrounding "home-making on the move" within internal migration. Finally, this finding has also contributed to interpreting links between everyday home-making practices and changes when individuals move across life courses or socio-cultural contexts. The finding of practices of *sailing/anchoring* through home-making enriches scholarly interpretations of migrant home-making. The investigation of *sailing/anchoring* uncovers a critical aspect of agency—how these women effectively wield their agency to concretise their evolving aspirations, underscoring the fluid essence of home, particularly within the context of migration

(Nowicka, 2007). It challenges a simplistic portrayal of migration as predominantly motivated by a desire to escape poverty, oppression, or violence (Dudley, 2010; de Hass, 2021). Rather, migrants ingeniously use their homes as tools for 'fitting in' or *anchoring* themselves within the evolving contexts of their envisioned lives. These insights from the *sailing/anchoring* approach further strengthen and underscore the central argument in Chapter 2, which posits that home-making practices function as self-crafted 'routes' or tools for female migrants. These practices empower them to navigate constraints and realise their expectations as they navigate various life stages and socio-cultural landscapes.

The third finding, in response to the third research question, highlights the pivotal role of everyday activities beyond the domestic sphere in supporting the concept of "home-making on the move" for these women, who undertake specific routine practices in the process of nurturing various forms of intimacy, ranging from friendships to mother-child relationships, and expressing emotions and identities, including food practices and leisure activities. For instance, the highly educated mothers featured in Chapter 6 undertook practices such as dining out in urban spaces and engaging in weekday family dinners, as a way to convey personal histories and aspirations, establishing a strong sense of belonging and familiarity. This emotional connection to their routines imbued the concept of home with a profound and multi-layered significance for their children (Moore, 2000). These integrated practices enable a seamless interplay between the material, imaginative, and emotional aspects of home lives and the broader urban context, encompassing both their current homes and the places from which they migrated (Blunt & Sheringham, 2020).

Through their persistent engagement in these integrated routines, the women in this study often liberated themselves from the limitations of a socio-cultural landscape characterised by a dearth of diverse lifestyle options, limited career prospects, and homogeneous neighbourhoods (Vertovec, 2007; Kumar & Mukarova, 2008: 35). This process not only propels them to *sail* away from above constraints but also enables them to *anchor* themselves in novel spaces where their aspirations are attainable. In Shenzhen, amidst the convergence of traditional Chinese values and globalising trends, they nurture their aspired emotional relationships, identities, and subjectivities. However, my analysis also indicates that integrating diverse urban activities into processes of *sailing/anchoring*, while serving as pathways to their envisioned lives, can, at times, morph into metaphorical "chains." These chains can tether them to heightened competition and the potential for exploitation within Shenzhen's labour market. For example, in Chapter 7, I found that in these women's pursuit

of aspirational lifestyles—such as the formation of new, non-heteronormative families heavily reliant on women's friendships—there may arise a compulsion to *anchor* themselves in Shenzhen, which might put them at risk of exploitation. Operating in conjunction with their domestic home-making practices, these coveted "lifestyle possibilities" and career prospects might evolve into pivotal factors that either propel their departure from Shenzhen (involuntary *Sailing*) or entrap them within its dynamic fabric (forced *anchoring*).

In the distinct context of internal migration, where such differences are comparatively less overt, the evolution of the home concept assumes a nuanced dimension. Here, these women's practices of 'stretching' the idea of home transform into mundane activities that extend the intimate, protected, and familiar realm of home. These activities include fostering women's friendships and nurturing emotional bonds between mothers and children that transcend conventional family-in-law responsibilities (see Chapter 6 and 7). These practices allow these women to cultivate a profound sense of rootedness and belonging within the contemporary landscape of Shenzhen. This empowerment is brought to fruition through the dynamic materialisation of their resistance, effectively merging their identities within Shenzhen's contrasting socio-cultural environment, distinct from their places of origin (Pilkey, 2014). This adaptive approach equips them to adeptly navigate the dynamics of internal migration, enabling the crafting of their notions of place and identity within the urban milieu. Resonating with the call for closer interplay between home studies and urban studies (Blunt et al., 2020), this thesis not only contributes to the burgeoning field of 'home-city geographies' (Sheringham & Blunt, 2019) but also offers fresh insights into how these migrants forge a sense of home by seamlessly integrating home-making within and beyond the domestic sphere.

These two findings together offer a nuanced perspective on the geographies of families in present-day China (Yan, 2003; Shen, 2011; Chen, 2017). The everyday home-making practices showcased in this thesis indicate the expanding array of ways in which individuals redefine ideals of home, families, and their domestic roles. For example, the increasingly non-domestic participation of middle-class, highly educated women in contemporary Shenzhen, including their active presence in labour markets and urban spaces, act as a reflection of the shifting dynamics of power within and beyond households, heralding a departure from patriarchal norms (Radhakrishnan, 2009). Additionally, as illustrated in Chapter 7, by relocating to and making home in Shenzhen, highly educated women were continuously constructing new forms of families which deviated the heteronormativity. This

departure is manifested in reduced adherence to conventional values and a heightened commitment to alternative forms of intimate relationships within families. This landscape signifies the individualisation of family practices. However, it is crucial to critically acknowledge that despite the emergence of alternative routes in shaping family dynamics, the grip of heteronormative culture and patriarchal values continues to endure in China (Lo, 2020; Xie, 2021; Wang, 2021). Additionally, the impact of class on the ability to pursue alternative lifestyles is noteworthy. The socio-economic privilege and educational background of these women place them in a better position compared to less-skilled rural-to-urban workers (see, for example, Pun, 2005). This advantage empowers them to challenge gender norms that could otherwise pose obstacles to their pursuits. Alternative family ideals, while gaining momentum, are often impeded by these societal barriers.

The fourth finding, shaped by the insights from the preceding two, illuminates the negotiations that occur across various life stages and transitions. These include singlehood, motherhood, and other transitional phases as integral parts of the *sailing/anchoring* process adopted by highly educated female migrants in contemporary Shenzhen. Building upon the first finding that delves into the challenges and opportunities stemming from Shenzhen's neoliberal transition and evolving gender norms, the second and third findings demonstrate how highly educated women navigate challenges and capitalise on prospects. Within these distinct challenges and opportunities, the *sailing/anchoring* process emerges, during which these women question and challenge deeply ingrained gender norms inherent in conventional patriarchal and heteronormative cultures. Therefore, these women's life journeys of *sailing/anchoring* enable them to realise changes because of several factors. First, they re-assessed societal expectations placed upon them, such as challenging the notion that 'singlehood' entailed a passive 'waiting' period for women and questioning the association between motherhood and uncompensated domestic labour. Then, through deliberate home-making practices, these women exercised their agency to fulfil redefined social expectations at specific life stages. For instance, some highly educated women remained single rather than rushing into partnerships, while others outsourced domestic responsibilities to paid workers upon becoming mothers. Their pursuit of economic independence and the ability to make life decisions in alignment with their aspirations resonates with the prevailing neoliberal values in Shenzhen, emphasising the principle of efforts equal gains (多劳多得) (Wang, 2021).

These women's transformative life journeys to Shenzhen extend to the crafting of their gendered subjectivities, enabling them to make life choices that possibly deviate from

the confines of rigid gender norms that historically relegated women to subordinate and supporting roles (Fang, 2012; Liu, 2017; Shen, 2011). Ultimately, the *sailing/anchoring* process evolves into an agency mechanism through which these women navigate the terrain and, in doing so, reshape their identities. In a broader context, this process contributes to the ongoing evolution of Shenzhen's socio-cultural landscape. For these highly educated women, *sailing/anchoring*, encompassing everyday home-making within internal migration, becomes a viable mechanism for shaping their gender subjectivities and forging "new" forms of families that deviate from traditional hetero-patriarchal values. This process exemplifies the emancipatory potential of neoliberal transition within contemporary Shenzhen, offering distinctive avenues towards the individualisation of Chinese societies. This notion aligns with Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2010) assertion that the reform era in China has fostered a state-sanctioned form of individualisation, wherein individuals are compelled to take the initiative due to the disappearance of the social safety nets of state socialism. These negotiations underscore the growing "individual assignment of responsibility" trend within China, contributing to the emergence of Chinese-character feminism and individualism.

The next section discusses the empirical significance of this thesis, revisiting these findings through the dual lenses of China's ongoing neoliberal transitions and its evolving landscape of feminism.

8.3 Ongoing negotiations of gender norms and China's neoliberal transitions

The findings from this study, apart from enriching existing feminist interpretations of China's neoliberal transitions, can also make meaningful contributions to contemporary feminist activism and campaigns in China. This thesis has offered a feminist lens through which to scrutinise the intersection of home, gender norms, and migration experiences among highly educated women in Shenzhen. Within an urban locale that accommodates both the forces of neoliberal transitions and entrenched patriarchal-heterosexual gender norms, this research traverses the negotiations and quiet endeavours of these women's life courses.

Recent Chinese feminist scholarship has begun to illuminate the efforts of young feminist activists who adopt methods akin to those found in Western feminist movements (Wang, 2018; Yin & Sun, 2021). Through protests, online community-building, and other means, Chinese women assert their rights and voice their demands. However, amidst this seemingly visible progress, other ways of challenging gender norms rooted in China's hetero-patriarchal traditions may be overlooked. The endeavours of certain women, marked by their mundane nature, as they navigate a society dominated by such norms through methods that might appear less radical, have often remained unnoticed.

This thesis provides a nuanced understanding of how Chinese women navigate and contest deeply ingrained gender norms. Many of these women are not necessarily associated with organised feminist movements, yet they exemplify resilience and adaptability within their everyday lives. In doing so, they also shed light on the predicaments faced by highly educated female migrants, often considered a privileged cohort, as discussed in Chapter 1 (see, for example, Kynsilehto, 2011). This research reveals the multifaceted challenges that women in China's unique sociopolitical landscape confront. It underscores that feminist activism does not always require large-scale protests or radical action; it can manifest through subtle negotiations within women's everyday lives. These women contribute to understanding the complex realities of women's lives in China, recognising how women contest and transform gender norms, even if they are not formally affiliated with organised activism. It highlights the significance of subtle negotiations and the importance of embracing diverse voices and approaches within the feminist movement.

In contrast to those who actively engage in confronting gender inequality, domestic violence, or career challenges through public demonstrations or online advocacy, the women examined in this thesis opt for a subtler approach. They embark on a "quiet" exploration,

seeking to balance the prevailing heteronormative culture, patriarchal values, and their personal notions of home and family. These women reshape their familial and domestic ideals, locating a 'crack' that they can leverage to create a lifestyle that rejects and undermines prevailing heteronormative and patriarchal gender norms. For example, as highlighted in Chapter 7, highly educated women have adeptly identified a 'crack' in Shenzhen, creating spaces where they can embrace lesbian lifestyles and form partnerships that deviate from traditional heterosexual marriages. Despite these acts of resistance and perseverance not being overtly prominent within the broader literature on feminism and women's empowerment in China—especially compared to studies centred on the experiences of younger generations or post-'90s women—they nonetheless form integral components of the overarching narrative (Chen, 2009).

Their life trajectories reveal a nuanced interplay of challenges and opportunities, offering individuals a potential pathway to navigate the complex interplay between the light and shade of neoliberalism and individualism (Gao et al., 2020; Harvey, 2005; Yan, 2020; Shen, 2011). Through the findings of this research, a spotlight is cast upon the exploitation that lies beneath the veneer of freedom within the pursuit of 'lifestyle possibilities' engendered by neoliberal Shenzhen. By strategically identifying the 'crack' within the contemporary context of Shenzhen, these women have found a delicate equilibrium that allows them to embrace personalised lifestyles while also appearing to adhere to deeply entrenched Chinese societal norms—norms that often shape the trajectories of individuals. Thus, their life journeys illuminate a dynamic equilibrium situated between traditional Chinese cultural values such as filial piety and robust parent-child relationships, juxtaposed against the backdrop of the ethos of self-consequences and individualism propagated by contemporary neoliberalism. Their ability to navigate between family life and the urban landscape, coupled with their remarkable ability to foster a sense of belonging, rootedness, and agency within the fabric of their migratory experiences, significantly enrich our understanding of the prevailing literature on individualism and neoliberalism. This underscores the multifaceted nature of these concepts, rendering a more holistic and contextual grasp of their implications.

As we assess these women's seemingly unremarkable lives within the broader socio-cultural contexts of contemporary Shenzhen, it becomes evident that their significance transcends the ordinary. Their day-to-day existence bears critical weight when delving into the evolution of feminism and individualism in China—particularly when juxtaposed against

the rapid currents of economic development and within the diverse socio-cultural contexts of the nation. While China exerts considerable global influence, juxtaposed with countries like the US and the UK, its distinct political and economic landscape demands a nuanced understanding of the micro-geographical realities that shape its broader socio-cultural fabric.

8.4 Considerations for further research

In expanding the *sailing/anchoring* framework, I propose several promising directions for further research to further enrich the existing understanding of internal migration and home-making practices. One avenue for enhancing the *sailing/anchoring* framework involves conducting longitudinal studies that follow participants' journeys over extended periods. By observing how individuals' experiences and home-making strategies evolve over time, researchers can gain a deeper appreciation of the dynamics of internal migration and social change. This approach would capture shifts in strategies, potential successes, challenges, and adaptations as participants navigate different life stages. Such studies would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the long-term effects of home-making practices on individuals' well-being, aspirations, and relationships within the context of internal migration.

Second, future research can explore the interplay between policies and home-making practices throughout the *sailing/anchoring* process. Investigating the influence of migration policies, gender policies, and housing policies on the decisions and experiences of migrants enhances our understanding of how structural factors interact with personal agency. By examining how these policies shape home-making practices, researchers can grasp the broader forces at play in migrants' lives and reveal how policies may either reinforce or challenge traditional norms and practices.

Finally, a cross-cultural approach, such as a comparative cultural perspective, will offer a valuable lens for further enriching the *sailing/anchoring* framework. Comparing internal migration and home-making practices across different cultural contexts and even between diverse groups of migrants allows researchers to identify universal themes and unique variations. This perspective fosters a broader understanding of how cultural, social, and economic factors influence the strategies and experiences of migrants. By studying internal migrants in other Chinese metropolises or comparing them with migrants from different cultural backgrounds, researchers can provide insights into the cultural specificity of the *Sailing/Anchoring* framework.

8.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis transcends a mere exploration of the lives of highly educated women in Shenzhen; it establishes a platform for unravelling the broader implications inherent in their everyday experiences. Theoretically, it established its framework, *sailing/anchoring*, incorporating the lens of life course theories to understand home-making during internal migration. The conceptualisation and contextualisation of this framework contribute to the interdisciplinary exploration of contemporary Chinese migration and the timescape of home. Moreover, the feminist lens employed in this thesis facilitates a nuanced understanding of the interplay between women's agency, emerging individualism, and China's ongoing neoliberal transitions. Ultimately, this study contributes insights not only to the comprehension of China's rapid development but also to understanding the challenges and limitations concealed beneath the surface of the Chinese speed and miracles.

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Appendix 1. Demographic summary

Participants	Status	Job	Residential situation*	Age (at time of interview)	Years in Shenzhen
Chan F	single	urban planner	renting	21-30	2
Hao S	single	high school teacher	renting	21-30	1
Liao W	single	IT programmer	renting	21-30	2
Liu S	single	banking analyst	renting	21-30	3
Lin M	single	urban planner	renting	21-30	3
Peng Y	single	urban planner	renting	21-30	3
Xiao Y	single	architect	renting	21-30	2
Xie Y	single	assistant lawyer	renting	21-30	1
Wu F	single	banking analyst	renting	21-30	6
Deng L	pregnant married women	high school teacher	home owner	21-30	2
Yin Y	pregnant married women	international high school teacher	home owner	31-40	5
Jinjing	mother	CEO/Owner of an architecture studio	home owner (two houses)	31-40	10+
Jiajia	mother	manager in a state-owned company	home owner (two houses)	41-50	20+

Zheng Y	mother	CEO/Owner of an architecture studio	home owner	41-50	20+
Rhoda	mother	partner in a listed company	home owner (two houses)	41-50	20+
Tracy	mother	Owner of a listed company and a housewife	home owner (multiple houses)	51-60	20+
Chen X	mother	CEO/Owner of a civic engineering company	home owner	51-60	20+
He L	lesbian	IT programmer	home owner	21-30	2
Chan J	lesbian	senior officer in a phone manufacture company	renting	21-30	2
Cai S	lesbian	sales	renting	21-30	1
Bao	lesbian	banking analyst	renting	21-30	1
Wang Q	lesbian	university administrator	home owner	21-30	4
Lu J	divorced	housewife/stock trader	home owner (five houses)	51-60	40+
Lucy	divorced	CFO of family business	home owner	41-50	20+
Chen Y	childless	senior architect	renting	31-40	10+
Shan H	childless	associate professor (retired)	home owner	51-60	30+

Notes: * Without particular highlights, ‘owner’ refers to the owner of one house in the column of ‘Current Residential Status’.

Appendix 2. Outlines of video-elicitation interview questions (English translation)

No.	Outlines of questions	Templates
1	Migrating trajectories	"Can you introduce how many cities (or areas) you have lived in?"
2	Home-moving experiences in Shenzhen	"Can you introduce all your home-moving experiences after you migrated to Shenzhen?"
3	Following the timelines of filming videos, asking questions about life stories and subjective feelings room by room and objects by objects	"Why do you say this painting is important? Can you tell me (more) about this painting?"
4	Asking questions about the objects that are special but not introduced in the self-made videos of informants	"You didn't mention these baby toys in the video; I still want to ask how they make you feel?"
5	Asking questions about how they cooperate with other family members to make their homes	"Who is in charge of home decorating?"
6	If the informant is cohabiting, ask questions about how they feel about (or what they have done to promote) current living arrangements.	
7	Asking questions about the places whether, where and why they have unique feelings beyond home	"You just mentioned a park. Do you have any special memory of this park?"
8	Asking questions about the expected changes of home?	"Do you have plans of re-decorating or moving home?"

Appendix 3 Consent form

Consent form (English Version)

Title of Study:

***Anchoring/sailing:* Highly educated female migrants' home-making in contemporary Shenzhen**

Name of researcher: **Meiyun Meng**

I have been informed about the nature of this study and willingly consent to take part in it.

I understand that I will not be made identifiable in any conversation, documents, publications or talk related to the research.

I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time.

I am over 16 years of age.

Name

_____

Signed

_____

Date

_____

There should be two signed copies, one for the participant, one for the researcher.

附录 3

研究参与者同意书（中文版）

研究题目：**停泊或远航：深圳高知女性移民的‘家’空间建构**

课题负责人：蒙美昀

1. 本人已阅读“致被访者的信”(2020年　　月　　日)
所阐述的研究项目并保有询问该项目相关问题的权利。 ☐

2. 本人参与项目完全是自愿的，并且可以无条件在任何时间段退出该研究，而不带来任何负面影响。本人有权拒绝回答任何不愿意回答的问题。 ☐

3. 本人知晓自己的回答是被严格保密的。本人同意研究者使用我的匿名答复，并且明悉该研究是完全匿名的，任何人将无法在研究报告中确认我的真实身份。 ☐

4. 我授权本人填答的相关信息可以用于该课题的研究。 ☐

5. 本人同意参与该研究项目。 ☐

研究者（法定代表人）　　日期　　签字

受访者　　日期　　签字

*该同意书一式两份，一份由负责人保存，一份交给受访者。