

***Silver-Haired Blind Date:
An Exploration of the Remarriage Needs of the Elderly in Harbin***

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Abstract

This paper explores the marriage needs of single elderly individuals in China's growing aging population. It analyzes their tendency to remarry, including the ways and reasons behind it. Additionally, it examines the attitudes of their children towards their remarriage and the challenges that come with it. This study utilized social support theory and social exchange theory as its starting point. Non-participant observation and in-depth interviews were conducted in the Blind Date Corner of Arab Square in Harbin, resulting in 13 in-depth interview files. Qualitative data analysis was performed using Nvivo 14 Plus software, which employed a three-stage coding analysis of grounded theory. This study found that the majority of single elderly individuals who visit the Blind Date Corner tend to cohabit rather than remarry. Additionally, the elderly primarily visit the Blind Date Corner to fulfill emotional, economic, daily life, and illness care needs. The main obstacles to elderly remarriage include intergenerational relationships, fear of betrayal, practical factors, and social pressure. Finally, this study found that some children understand their parents' need to find a partner, while others have reservations about their parents' remarriage in their later years due to concerns about the authenticity of the information in the Blind Date Corner.

Keywords: Elderly Blind Date, Single Elderly, Blind Date Corner, Marriage Needs

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Introduction

China's aging problem is getting worse by the day. Based on data from the seventh population census, there are approximately 420,000 unmarried older adults, 340,000 divorced older adults, and 5.57 million widowed older adults in China. The combined number of older adults in these three marital statuses accounts for 24.8% of the population aged 60 and over. The absence of spousal companionship and care in the daily lives of older adults, combined with the fact that they typically suffer from one or more chronic illnesses, poses a significant threat to their health. As a result, it is evident that single elderly face greater challenges in their lives.

The elderly may fulfill their emotional needs through spontaneous social activities. In Chinese parks, it is common to see paper strips or signs hung on ropes and bushes with personal data and requirements for choosing a spouse. These signs typically include gender, age, height, education, household registration, real estate, and spouse preferences (Cao, 2018). This practice is known as Blind Date Corner. Blind Date Corners have a history of over ten years in various cities in China. They are typically located in a corner of a park and hold activities once or more a week. Some are organized by marriage introduction services, while others are organized privately. Participants exchange contact information if they are interested in each other during the conversation. Visiting the Blind Date Corner has become a regular weekly activity for some elderly individuals. They're there not only to look for a compatible partner, but also to socialize with old friends and alleviate loneliness.

Dating and relationships for older people are often overlooked, as many people generally view this topic as an exclusive activity for the young. Chinese society still expects older adults to provide financial support to their children and to help take care of their grandchildren, which can lead to the emotional needs of older adults as independent individuals being neglected. This study aims to analyze the challenges and problems of remarriage for older adults in China from multiple perspectives. The research focuses on the marital needs of single elderly individuals, their preferred options for remarriage, and the reasons behind their choices. Additionally, the study includes the perceptions of older adults' children to promote social and intergenerational understanding of their marriages and relationships.

Literature Review

Elderly Blind Date

Dating is not an exclusive activity for young people. In order to find a suitable life partner, many elderly Chinese people choose to meet at 'Blind Date Corner,' which are free dating venues that have appeared in certain public places in large and medium-sized cities across the country (P.D. Sun, 2012). Blind Date Corner in parks are popular among the elderly as they provide an opportunity to make new friends and receive emotional support within the group (Qiao, 2023). Parks, being open public spaces where people can freely interact with each other, have a high level of credibility and social support system, which makes them an ideal location for these gatherings (Liu & Jin, 2013). Scholars have outlined and depicted the process of individual choice in elderly dating in Beijing's C Park. The study is based on a field study of the elderly Blind Date Corner. The emphasis is on the subjectivity in the process of elderly dating practice from the perspective of the elderly's subjective experience (X. J. Zhang, 2021).

Some Chinese older adults who feel lonely and lack companionship, especially those who are widowed or divorced, may seek late-life companions for social interaction through dating relationships (Brown & Shinohara, 2013). They may also seek companionship for hospital visits and care in case of illness (A.Q. Li, 2007) or emotional support (S. Sun, 2021). In elderly blind date, it is more common for men to exchange their financial resources for care in old age with women's resources for life care (Guo & Li, 2007). For instance, elderly individuals in poor health seek companions to take care of them, while those lacking sufficient living expenses seek partners with financial means (N.H. Li, 2007). According to DeMichele (2009), some older individuals seek to fulfill their sexual needs with a partner in their later years. In a survey conducted in Japan, it was found that 92% of older men and 52% of older women over the age of 60 had sexual needs (Yu, 2000).

Modes of Old-Age Remarriage

In China, the elderly tend to remarry through three modes: registered remarriage, agreed remarriage, and cohabitation (Wu, 2018). The first two modes are legal marriages, while the third is a quasi-marriage. To differentiate them from informal marriages of partnering in old age, the researcher combined registered remarriage and agreed remarriage into 'registered marriages'. Since remarriage involves practical problems, some elderly people sign an agreement before marriage to avoid the trouble of remarriage and protect their rights. This is known as agreed remarriage, where the parties agree on the division of property, inheritance, and child support before marriage. They also inform their children about the agreement to minimize disputes after remarriage (H.P. Li, 2012; Zhi, 2016). According to Wang (2001), the remarriage agreement mode is characterized by its ease of marriage and divorce, while maintaining the original property ownership, property inheritance, and intergenerational relationship of both parties.

Cohabitation is a common living arrangement among older adults. According to a survey conducted by Senior Daily, about 90% of older adults choose this mode (Liu & Li, 2018). This mode is distinct from illegal cohabitation and legal marriage. It is a quasi-marriage mode and a way for older people to live together as they age (Ren, 2009). The reason why the personal and property relationship of husband and wife in the legal sense is absent is due to the fact that the marriage registration formalities have not been fulfilled (Tian, 2008). The program of love and marriage for the singleton elderly is inverted, resulting in a structure of marriage that prioritizes mutual care in life and gradually cultivates feelings. This has led to the reality of 'marriage but not marriage' to some extent (H.P. Liu, 2014).

Obstacles to Old-Age Remarriage

Studies have shown that traditional Chinese cultural values, influenced by mainstream societal thinking, have weakened older people's desire for sexuality and intimate relationships (Ji & Yan, 2022). Social opinions often reflect stereotypical concepts and lack a social consensus in support of older people's remarriage (Jin, 2019). Additionally, older people who do choose to remarry may face criticism, discrimination, and ridicule, leading to serious psychological pressure (Yu, 2000). Therefore, older adults may refrain from dating due to social pressures, such as fear of judgment and negative perceptions from others (Asgari et al., 2021; Zhi, 2016).

The study on intergenerational pressures on remarriage in old age reveals differences between Chinese and Western families, which are largely attributed to their distinct cultural

backgrounds. In the West, individual happiness tends to be prioritized, while Chinese family culture emphasizes group interests (H.M. Liu, 2019). The traditional Chinese family culture places greater emphasis on the collective interests and overall well-being of the family. Family members are more closely connected to each other, which may result in Chinese older adults feeling more pressure to remarry across generations. Although sociological and gerontological studies have shown that the support or lack of support from children has a significant impact on the quality of life of older people and their marriages (Guo, 2017), the offspring, being the closest direct blood relatives of older people, may have sensitive and resistant attitudes towards the issue of older marriages (Y.J. Zhang, 2017). The reason for this may be that in the culture of elderly marriage, many children of the elderly believe that remarriage of the elderly is a betrayal of traditional etiquette and is immoral behavior (Y.J. Zhang, 2017). According to Luo and Yin (2019), the remarriage of elderly individuals may increase the obligation of one of their children to support the other. Additionally, some older people may choose not to remarry in consideration of their children's interests and to avoid adding to their children's burden of living. The pressure and constraints from intergenerational relationships may have led Chinese older adults to compromise on their intimate relationships, as discussed in the stage of marriage by Jin (2019).

Research Question

- RQ1:** What is the preferred mode of remarriage for seniors attending the Harbin Blind Date Corner and why?
- RQ2:** What are the remarriage needs of older individuals?
- RQ3:** What are the attitudes of the children of the elderly towards elderly blind dates and remarriage?

Method

Participants

This paper focuses on single elderly individuals residing in Harbin and their children. The elderly individuals are the primary participants, while their children are the secondary participants. For the purpose of this study, elderly individuals are defined as those who are over 60 years of age, unmarried, divorced, or widowed, and fully capable of taking care of themselves without assistance from others. Children are defined as the offspring of the elderly individuals surveyed in this study. Additionally, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the elderly population in Blind Date Corners, the researcher conducted interviews with Mr. G, who is in charge of these areas.

Sampling

The researcher utilized purposive and snowball sampling methods to conduct the survey at the Blind Date Corner. Initially, during the survey period of the Blind Date Corner, the researcher first contacted the three elderly people who visited there most frequently, and confessed to them the identity of the researcher, who would then introduce more elderly people and their children who fit the different age, child status and marital status, so as to enlarge the scope of the research target group and to obtain first-hand information.

Procedure

The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with each participant using semi-structured interviews. The outline of the interviews is shown in Table 1. To ensure participant comfort, interviews were conducted in a relaxed manner, either face-to-face in the park or via telephone. The researcher proposed the general direction of the interview based on the interview outline. Participants then answered questions about their personal experiences and feelings. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. The researcher obtained consent from the participants before recording the interviews. The recordings were then converted into transcripts using the software 'Lark' and manually verified for accuracy. A total of 13 interviews were conducted, resulting in 23,802 words of manuscript after refining the contents related to this study.

Outline of the interview
<p>Content of interviews with older people</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Daily living arrangement 2. Living condition 3. Pre-retirement employment, pension, and daily expenses 4. Marriage history 5. Experience in Blind Date Corner, how else have you found a match, and how do you feel about it? 6. Whether there is someone you like now 7. Whether you want to remarry, what kind of remarriage you prefer, and why 8. Children's situation 9. Children's attitude towards blind date and remarriage 10. Whether there are any obstacles
<p>Content of interviews with children of older people</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Attitudes towards parents' blind date and remarriage, and the reasons for it 2. Relationship with parents 3. Any concerns about parents' blind date
<p>Content of interviews with head of the Blind Date Corner</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Overall situation of Blind Date Corner 2. The mechanism and protection of the information review of the Blind Date Corner 3. Whether there have been any fraudulent cases 4. Forms of Marriage Recruitment for the Elderly 5. Conditions for the elderly to choose a partner 6. How will the platform develop in the future?

Table 1: Outline of the Interview

Results

Thirteen interview files were formed due to the limitations of the interviews. The files included responses from nine elderly individuals, three children of the elderly, and one person in charge of the Blind Date Corner. The age range of the interviewees classified as elderly is between 62 and 85 years old. There were three male respondents (one with Harbin City household registration and two without) and six female respondents (five with Harbin

City household registration and one without). In terms of marital status, one respondent was unmarried, three were divorced (including one who had been divorced 2 or more times), and four were widowed. Table 2 provides details of the living arrangements of the elderly interviewees, with most living alone and only one living with family. Three children of the elderly were also interviewed, including one male (son of F6), a non-Harbin household member, and two females (daughters of F2 and F5), both Harbin household members. Table 3 provides details of the children of the elderly interviewees.

No*	Age	Household Registration	Marriage Status	Living Situation	Duration of Blind Date (year)	Average income monthly (CNY)
M1	85	Not local	Widowed	Living alone	1	/
M2	70	Not local	Widowed	Living alone	2	4000
M3	62	Local	Divorced	Living alone	2.5	4500
F1	66	Local	Divorced	Living with father	0.5	3100
F2	81	Local	Widowed	Living alone	5	3500
F3	69	Local	Widowed	Living alone	1	600
F4	62	Local	Single	Living alone	2	6000
F5	73	Local	Divorced	Living alone	2.5	2000
F6	75	Not local	Separated	Living alone	0.5	2500

Note: M stands for male, F stands for female

Table 2: Elderly Individuals

No	Gender	Age	Household Registration	Marriage Status	Children	Occupation	Attitude
1	Female	57	Local	Married	One son	Retired	Negative
2	Female	40	Local	Married	One daughter	External Trade	Positive but concerned
3	Male	45	Not local	Married	/	Architect	Neutral

Table 3: Children of the Elderly People

Data Analyse

This study utilized the three-stage coded data analysis process of grounded theory: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. During open coding, meaningful words and sentences in the source material were identified and marked. After coding was completed, the original words and sentences were revised to be more concise and explicit. Finally, the material was abstracted into concepts using a continuous comparison method. During the open coding process, 44 nodes and 544 reference points were generated in Nvivo14 software. In the axial coding stage, new categories were created by comparing and grouping relevant concepts. The resulting categories were based on the characteristics of different concepts at the same level. In this axial coding process, a total of 13 independent categories were generated, which are: mate selection conditions, remarriage attitude, children's opinions, living conditions, emotional needs, social pressure, intergenerational relationships, daily life needs, fear of betrayal, practical problems, financial support needs, acquaintances' views, and illness care needs. During the process of selective coding, 4 core categories were identified: factors affecting remarriage, remarriage problems, remarriage attitudes, and remarriage needs.

Qualitative Analyse

Elderly Blind Date

Due to the influence of traditional Chinese culture, many elderly individuals were unhappy in their past marriages. However, due to various reasons, they could not freely choose their partners and had to settle. With the progress of time, the elderly have become more independent and autonomous in their attitude towards marriage and love. They now prioritize their own subjectivity and personal choice in these matters. M3 retired two years ago after working as a freelance writer, photographer, and book and video buyer. He has been in three relationships, including two official marriages and a short-lived cohabitation that ended unhappily. Despite this, M3 remains hopeful of finding a suitable partner through the Blind Date Corner.

Despite experiencing failed relationships, I still believe in love and the importance of having a companion in old age. As a romantic person who loves life, I hope to find a life partner to share experiences with, such as taking photos together and traveling during retirement. These memories will be cherished in our old age. (M3, 62 years old, divorced)

Remarriage Needs

Emotional Needs

For elderly people living alone, emptiness is the biggest problem they face, and they are eager to alleviate their psychological loneliness. F4 is 62 years old, but she has never met anyone suitable for her, so she has never been married.

The primary reason is that being alone for extended periods can be quite isolating, while my close friends often have companionship. It's a fun and interesting way to spend my time. I enjoy coming here to socialize once or twice a week. (F4, 62 years old, single)

Although the elderly can socialize during the day, they often return home to an empty house, exacerbating their feelings of loneliness.

They need someone to go home to. It's important for them to have someone to talk to and share their life with, rather than relying on technology for communication. They need companionship and emotional support to continue living happily. (Mr. G)

Financial Support Needs

When selecting a spouse, certain older women have specific requirements such as independent housing and financial stability. Some even request that their partner leave their real estate to them in the future. This is often due to a lack of pension or a small pension, and the hope of improving their living conditions and quality of life through a partner. This statement aligns with social exchange theory, which proposes that older women seek to exchange resources to provide caretaking services for their partner, who in turn will fully cover household expenses or provide a fixed amount of financial support each month.

Older men would like to find someone younger than themselves, and older women would like to find someone of a similar age. This is also because older men would like to find someone to take care of them, and they certainly can't find someone who is as old as they are. The woman can live in his house, because some old women have no place to live and come to watch their children for their sons and daughters, and they can also earn some money on the way. (Mr. G)

Daily Life Needs

Some economically independent elderly women have pensions that cover their daily expenses and even leave them with some extra money, sometimes with financial support from their children. Despite their financial stability, they desire a younger partner to provide food and living arrangements so they can spend their twilight years together. There are also older women who seek to make up for regrets from their past love affairs and hope to find a partner

with mutual respect to live with. F1, who lives with her father, appears saddened when discussing her past marriage due to her lack of happiness during those years and never experiencing true love. In addition to caring for her husband and daughter, she also takes care of her father, but has never felt cared for herself. She is seeking someone who can assist her and preferably help her care for her elderly father.

I no longer wish to wait on others as I have done in the past. Ideally, I would like to live with a partner and mutually care for each other, allowing me to live a more relaxed lifestyle. This way, I can enjoy activities such as shopping and dancing with my friends. (F1, 66 years old, divorced)

Illness Care Needs

The elderly often experience one or more chronic illnesses due to the natural aging of their bodily functions. F2, who is 81 years old, mentioned that she needs 2,000 yuan per month to purchase medication for her eyes and heart. F5 has not remarried since her divorce due to her ex-husband cheating on her, but she has recently decided to try blind dates because of her health condition. "In the past two years, I have noticed a decline in my health. Having a companion to take care of each other would be beneficial."

Disease poses a significant threat to the elderly population, and there is concern that unexpected events may go unnoticed.

Remarriage Attitudes

Official Remarriage

Most of the older adults in the Blind Date Corner were divorced or widowed. The researcher asked whether the participants would choose to get married if they met a suitable partner.

Some older adults won't accept if they don't register for marriage. They believe that they are decent people who are looking for a genuine partner. If I do not register, what will my neighbors think? I am searching for a serious partner who will live with me happily. (Mr. G)

Cohabitation

During the interviews with the participants, the elderly frequently commented that they have reached a stage in life where they no longer feel the need to register for marriage to bind themselves to each other like young people do. They value the freedom to engage in marital relationships and can separate at any time if they do not live in harmony. Some elderly people believe that they do not need a certificate to live their lives.

In Harbin City, there is a term for cohabitation without a certificate called 'DaHuo', which means partnering. Mr. G mentions that "there are older men who want to 'DaHuo', that is, the two of them get together and live their lives." This phenomenon is common among the elderly and can be explained by social exchange theory, where elderly women seek financial support and elderly men seek care.

I do not intend to remarry. I can find like-minded individuals to chat with about it. As I am already over 80 years old, even if we are together, it is more important to share life together rather than worry about formalities. Like our age, remarriage for the elderly involves too many problems such as housing. Therefore, I am not considering remarriage. I am simply looking for a spiritual partner. It is not necessary for us to live together, we can chat on WeChat or other platforms. However, if we can live together, that would be even better. (F2, 81 years old, widowed)

Remarriage Obstacles

Intergenerational Relationships

The consent of the children directly affects the choice of the elderly regarding marriage, particularly in the unique intergenerational relationship context of Chinese society and culture. If the children do not agree, the relationship may have to be “cut off.”

An elderly woman in my area was pleased with her partner, and they had a good relationship. However, the woman's son disagreed, and unfortunately, there was no resolution. The old woman was upset and felt helpless because she had to return home and take care of her grandchildren. She expressed that there was nothing she could do, and that was the final decision. (Mr. G)

In response to the question “How do you feel about your mother's blind date in her later years?”:

I support her to make her own decision without considering what I think. Out of loneliness and the fear of facing death alone, an elderly person chooses to have the company of someone of her own age who can understand her more easily, which is something that we cannot do. (F6's son)

Although the children of the elderly may try to alleviate their parents' loneliness by providing care or financial support, their role differs from that of a partner.

F2's daughter and F5's daughter do not support their mothers' remarriage. Due to their concern about the authenticity of information in the Blind Date Corner and their consideration of the reality of remarriage, they doubt about the idea of blind date for the elderly, although they can understand it.

Fear of Betrayal

Due to the decline in cognitive ability of the elderly, sometimes it is easy to believe the words of others, some people in the Blind Date Corner to take advantage of the convenience of information disclosure, private contact with the elderly to add a social group, or marketing organizations to invite the elderly to participate in dating activities on the grounds that the elderly in a car to the community to the closed room, cut off all the mobile phone signals, promoting health care products, brainwashing of the elderly, and even forced the elderly to consume.

One day while walking around the square, a man approached me and informed me of a community that welcomes retired singles to participate in activities. He mentioned

that both men and women are financially well off and invited me to attend a party to get to know others. About ten people joined the car and I followed them to the community room, which could accommodate thirty to forty people. The result was later found to be a pyramid scheme selling health care products. To participate, you must apply for a member card. Payment is required to exit the room. (F4, 62 years old, single)

Practical Factors

In today's society, the remarriage of the elderly is not just a matter of two elderly people. It involves many practical factors that can create a gap that is difficult to cross. F5 thinks that "Getting married can be a hassle due to the need for property notarization and potential family conflicts. However, it is just as simple to live together without getting married."

Additionally, elderly individuals may consider the potential burden of caring for their spouse in the event of a serious illness. Marriage registration would result in a joint obligation to bear this burden, whereas remaining unmarried may allow for more flexibility in managing such a situation.

When asked about the possibility of using 'agreed remarriage' as a means of planning the distribution of property in advance to minimize potential conflicts between the two families, most participants indicated that they were not familiar with this form of remarriage and had not previously considered it.

Social Pressure

Society often lacks tolerance for elderly dating, and gossip can hinder the dating process and be a psychological burden for older individuals. For instance, F5 plays mahjong every afternoon at the parlor downstairs, but the comments she receives from other players put her under pressure. "The people at the mahjong parlor often tease me, claiming that I am still searching for a partner, and that I am old and immoral."

However, not all participants encountered this problem. For instance, M3, who retired just two years ago and appears relatively young, reported that society is still quite open and he has not heard any negative comments. The researcher suggests that age may play a role, as people may not be equally tolerant of blind date among older individuals of different ages. As people age, social pressure to date increases, and tolerance decreases. However, for newly retired seniors, the pressure of public opinion is not as pronounced.

Therefore, social pressure and the concern of elderly individuals about the opinions of others restrict their freedom to seek partners to some extent. This psychological pressure makes them more cautious in the dating process due to the fear of public judgment. As a result, older individuals may encounter challenges in finding a suitable partner and must navigate the constraints of social norms to do so.

Conclusion

This study collected primary data through non-participatory observation and in-depth interviews. The three-stage coding approach of grounded theory was used to explore the

subjective consciousness of older adults who spontaneously visit the Blind Date Corner in the park to find a partner in their later years.

It is worth mentioning that most of the older people participating in the Harbin Blind Date Corner tend to cohabit without registration, due to the fact that this is a freer form of relationship for older people, which is more flexible in terms of distribution of property and risk of illness, and allows them to end the relationship at any time if they find the other person unsuitable. Through the analysis of the original materials, the study found that the elderly mainly go to the Blind Date Corner to look for a partner in their old age because of their emotional needs, financial support needs, daily life needs, and illness care needs. The study's findings align with existing literature on gender differences in mate selection among elderly individuals, specifically within the framework of social exchange theory. This theory suggests that the exchange of economic and caregiving resources is the driving force behind the 'older man, younger woman' phenomenon (X.J. Zhang, 2021). However, this study also uncovered a different mate selection pattern among elderly women who are financially well off. These women seek younger partners to provide care for their daily needs. Additionally, through interviews with the children of the investigated elderly people, this study has learned about the attitudes of the children of the elderly people towards blind date and remarriage in old age from the first perspective. Some children understand their parents' need to find a partner because they want to make up for the deficiencies in love and marriage when they were young, whereas some children doubt about their parents' marriage in old age due to their concern about the authenticity of the information on the Blind Date Corner itself. Under the framework of social support theory, Blind Date Corner provides a place for free matching and mutual communication, which is not only a place to find a partner, but also an important platform for the elderly to satisfy their own needs. They can not only meet with friends to kill time, but also communicate freely with their peers, gain the understanding of their peers on the issue of marriage in old age, and get emotional satisfaction and help in life through this social support.

Limitations

This study did not consider the impact of household registration on the issue of elderly remarriage. Future scholars should address this issue based on the findings of this study. Additionally, the researcher did not receive any responses from the participants regarding their sexual needs, which contradicts the existing literature. This may be due to issues with the interviewing technique or a lack of complete trust between the participants and the researcher. Future studies are expected to modify the interview strategy to provide more realistic and detailed answers to this question.

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