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The life experiences of Chinese women after late-life remarriage

Qiong Li¹, Jianyuan Huang¹, Jiayun Liu^{1*} and Pei Zhao^{2*}

Abstract

Background Although late-life remarriage is not a rare phenomenon, it remains a controversial topic in China. Late-life remarriage involves many challenges and crises, especially for elderly women, who are often in weaker positions in remarriage relationships and face more difficulties. Currently, research on the life experiences of Chinese women after late-life remarriage is still limited. The purpose of this study is to explore and describe the life experiences of Chinese women who remarried later in life and to explore and describe their feelings about these experiences.

Methods A phenomenological qualitative research design involving in-depth semistructured interviews was selected. Data analysis was performed via Colaizzi's methodology.

Results Sixteen women participated in this study. Four themes and 8 subthemes emerged: (1) companionship and support attainment (daily companionship and economic support), (2) nanny-like treatment (undertaking most household chores and care work alone, suspected and guarded in terms of money), (3) degradation of social ties (decreased interaction with the original family, reduced contact with friends), and (4) concerns about the future (treatment costs after illness, housing issues after their new husband's death).

Conclusion Our results reveal the complexity and vulnerability of the life experiences of Chinese women after late-life remarriage, which are the result of a combination of sociocultural and structural factors and reflect the pressure and injustice that women endure in a patriarchal society. Moreover, the study reveals the inadequacy of basic medical insurance and basic pension insurance systems. The results of this study will not only help society at large better understand the life experiences of Chinese women in stepfamilies after late-life remarriage but also help to provide numerous important recommendations for professionals who provide support to stepfamilies, as well as for policymakers.

Keywords Chinese women, Elderly individuals Late-life remarriage, Family, Life experiences

Introduction

Late-life remarriage [1] is a form of remarriage in old age that has developed with increasing life expectancy and other changes brought about by modernization. Especially in China, late-life remarriage is no longer a rare

phenomenon but has become a choice for an increasing number of widowed or divorced elderly people. The elderly population in China exceeds 264 million, of which over 50 million people are widowed, accounting for 21.08% of the elderly population [2]. Eighty percent of the people within this substantial group expressed a willingness to remarry. The remarriage rate in China is increasing rapidly and has gradually attracted increasing academic attention [3]. Against this background, the need for research on Chinese people's life experiences after late-life remarriage has become apparent.

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Studying the phenomenon of late-life remarriage in China has far-reaching social and cultural significance. First, as China's elderly population continues to grow, the increase in late-life remarriage reflects the demand for companionship among elderly individuals. By delving into the life experience of late-life remarriage, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the social and emotional needs of older adults and thus provide insights for addressing the challenges of population ageing. Furthermore, the rise of late-life remarriage maps the evolution of family structure in China. Studying this phenomenon provides insights into the changing dynamics of family relationships in China and how these changes affect the well-being of family members, especially older adults; this concerns not only the personal well-being of the elderly but also the harmony and stability of the family as a whole. Second, the increase in late-life remarriage also reflects changes in the concept of marriage among elderly individuals. By studying Chinese women's remarriage in later life, we can gain insight into the evolution of Chinese culture and values and how these changes shape individuals' life choices and well-being. In summary, it is particularly important to conduct in-depth research in the area of remarriage in old age, not only for the well-being of individual older persons but also for the understanding of social change and the formulation of relevant policies.

In the international academic community, many studies have examined the characteristics of remarried families [4], the benefits of remarriage [5], the factors that affect the instability of remarriage relationships [6, 7], and transnational remarriage [8, 9]. However, relatively little research has been conducted on the life experiences of those in late-life remarriage relationships. Currently, the relevant literature focuses on three main aspects. The first aspect is the life experiences of stepchildren. Children living in stepfamilies are often called shared children, and studies have examined their life experiences [10] and investigated the differences between these children and their half-siblings and the life outcomes of both groups [11]. In addition, scholars have conducted in-depth research on how stepgrandchildren establish family-like intergenerational relationships with their stepgrandparents and have found that they actively use available symbols to construct these relationships [12].

The second aspect is the experience of remarriage for men. For example, studies have investigated how stepfathers experience family life and their relationships with stepchildren and extended family members, as well as how they describe their positions within their families [13]. Scholars have conducted face-to-face interviews with 10 Belgian fathers to gain a deeper understanding of the identity-building process of stepfathers in

the family [14]. The research results can help family practitioners understand how stepfathers experience stepfamily life. In addition, research has explored the motivations of older Arab Muslims in Israel to remarry and revealed that they view remarriage as a way to receive care [15]. This phenomenon reflects the maintenance of gender roles in patriarchal systems.

The third stream of research concerns the life experiences of women after remarriage. One study revealed that when children argue with their stepfathers, their mothers play the roles of defenders, gatekeepers, mediators, and interpreters to promote family harmony and development [16]. Another study used semistructured interviews to document the life experiences of women who lived with widowers with young children. These women felt that the deceased wife remained an indispensable part of their partner's life [17]. This discovery highlights the complexity of remarriage relationships between women and widowers. Another study focused on the lives of women who remarried in countries such as Cambodia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, and Singapore. In Cambodia, remarried women are more likely to suffer physical and emotional abuse than those who are in their first marriage or are divorced [18]. Malaysian Tamil Hindu women also face many challenges in the remarriage process; specifically, they experience social and self-shame, and participating in courtship is viewed as a violation of the concept of being a "good" woman, whereas women with children are viewed as abandoning their responsibility to their children [19]. These challenges are closely linked to traditional notions of female chastity, purity, and loyalty to one's husband. Similarly, in Bangladesh, remarriage makes women's lives more difficult. For women, remarrying entails the challenge of regulating marital relationships [20]. The formation of remarried families in Singapore tends to exacerbate the material and emotional vulnerabilities of the women involved [21]. Overall, studies indicate that for most women, remarriage neither provides economic security nor promotes physical or mental health. Therefore, the life experiences of women in late-life remarriages in China, who constitute a vulnerable group, are equally worthy of attention.

Chinese scholars' research on late-life remarriage has focused on its benefits, influencing factors, and problems. Late-life remarriage has benefits for elderly people, such as positive impacts on their physical and mental health. In terms of gender, the protective effect on the health of older women is greater than that on the health of older men, and the protective effect tends to be stronger with a longer late-life remarriage relationship [22]. For older men, late-life remarriage significantly improves their mental health [23]. These studies highlight the critical

role of spousal support in enhancing the quality of life of older adults.

Furthermore, the decision-making and behaviour of individuals in late-life remarriage relationships are constrained by a variety of factors, such as social opinion, children's attitudes, limited social scope, traditional attitudes, and personal finances, which may become obstacles [24–26]. Taking the rural population of China as an example, whether people remarry is influenced by a range of factors, such as socioeconomic status, demographic structure, and cultural traditions, results in differences in the likelihood of individuals within different groups engaging in remarriage [27]. In particular, for widowed or divorced women in rural areas, remarriage is often accompanied by pressures and questions that affect their willingness to remarry [28]. In terms of gender, elderly men have a more positive attitude towards remarriage, whereas elderly women have a more negative attitude towards remarriage; this is because, influenced by traditional Chinese social role norms, women pay more attention to taking care of their families and emotional connections. Once remarried, this may mean that women have to stay away from their original families. This reality has brought tremendous psychological pressure to women; therefore, elderly women tend to be more conservative about remarriage [26].

Finally, life after late-life remarriage involves many practical problems and challenges. Children may be reluctant to accept the new family relationships brought about by elderly people's remarriage; older people may lack an understanding of each other before remarriage; differences in personalities, habits and attitudes may lead to family conflicts; the reasons for remarrying may be complicated; sexual disharmony may occur [29, 30]; and issues related to inheritance and its distribution [31] may become troublesome. Together, these factors increase the vulnerability and sensitivity of families that experience late-life remarriage. Although late-life remarriage has an important effect on improving the physical and mental health of elderly people, it is still a controversial topic in China. On the one hand, the decisions and behaviours of older people in remarriage relationships are affected by many factors, and the process of remarriage itself involves many difficulties. On the other hand, life after remarriage involves many challenges and crises. In particular, elderly women are often in weaker positions than elderly men in remarriage relationships and face more difficulties [32]. Therefore, it is particularly important to conduct in-depth research on the real situation faced by older Chinese women in late-life remarriage relationships.

Although the current literature includes extensive research on daily life after remarriage for stepchildren,

second husbands, and women in countries such as Cambodia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, and Singapore, which has provided valuable insights, research on the life experiences of Chinese women after late-life remarriage is still limited. It is crucial to listen to and value the voices of elderly Chinese women, especially with respect to the family interactions that occur in the intimate setting of the stepfamily after late-life remarriage as well as their internal experiences. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore and describe Chinese women's life experiences after late-life remarriage and their feelings about these experiences, broaden our understanding of this group, and provide these women with better support and assistance. Specifically, the questions we aimed to answer were as follows: (a) "What are Chinese women's life experiences after late-life remarriage?" and (b) "How do they feel about these experiences?" This study begins with a review of the literature related to the phenomenon and theories regarding late-life remarriage, followed by a description of the research methodology used to conduct this study. We then present the results of the data analysis. Finally, the implications and limitations of this study are discussed.

Theoretical framework

Despite the importance of the aforementioned literature on the life experiences of women in late-life remarriage, it should be noted that they lack a clear theoretical framework. Therefore, to better study Chinese women's life experiences after late-life remarriage, we use Yan Yunxiang's theory of new familism and the gender lens as a theoretical foundation to construct a theoretical framework.

First, Yan Yunxiang's theory of new familism was proposed. According to Yan Yunxiang, new familism emphasizes intergenerational attachment and inheritance, recognizes the legitimacy of family members' pursuit of individual rights, places emotional needs on the stage to express, and family resources begin to be transferred to the third generation [33]. Specifically, Yan Yunxiang highlights three basic features of new familism: first, intergenerational solidarity has not been weakened with modernization but rather strengthened, and intergenerational cooperation has been strengthened as a way to cope with risks and uncertainties; second, a balance is sought between family development and individual development. Instead of putting family interests above all else, parents try to balance their emotional, developmental, or recreational needs with family interests; third, parents prioritize the interests of the small family through continuous self-exploitation to satisfy the needs of their offspring [34]. In the field of

family studies, many scholars have used new familism to explain the current changes in Chinese families.

Second, the gender lens is used. The gender lens is a theoretical perspective that emphasizes gender differences and focuses on gender as the core concern, with some of its central categories being socialization and gender roles/practices and power relations or domination systems—subordination between the sexes [35]. In this system, men usually dominate and have more social, economic, and political resources and power. From a historical and sociocultural perspective, patriarchy is the core mechanism of gender hierarchy and runs through various levels of society [36]. In the field of family, traditional family decision-making models are often dominated by men, such as planning major family affairs and allocating economic resources, whereas women's opinions and needs are often marginalized. Even if women earn more than male partners do, they are still likely to have a lower status [37]. At the societal level, men also enjoy more opportunities and advantages in terms of political participation, career advancement, and other areas. For example, in high-level political positions and high paying professions, the proportion of men is much greater than that of women. Thus, gender inequality remains a major challenge facing the world.

The selection of these two theoretical frameworks is justified for several reasons. First, Yan Yunxiang's theory of new familism offers a lens through which to understand contemporary family structure and cultural values. Women who choose to remarry in their later years often engage in the reconfiguration of family relationships and roles, such as seeking emotional support and daily care, which aligns with the enhanced emotional functions of the family emphasized by neo-familism. Moreover, Yan Yunxiang's idea of conflicts of interest between parents and offspring is also applicable in this context. Parents and children may have differences in their positions, needs, and expectations when facing the issue of remarriage in their later years. Children may be more concerned about the distribution of family property and the influence of social opinion, whereas parents are more focused on not wanting to burden their children. Consequently, this theory provides a macrotheoretical framework for comprehending the transformation of family functions underlying the phenomenon of late-life remarriage. Second, the gender lens, with its focus on gender power structures and inequalities, particularly highlights the disadvantaged position of women within the family, society, and culture. In conclusion, this comprehensive and systematic analytical framework is crucial for understanding the experiences of Chinese women who remarry in their later years.

Method

Design

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design involving in-depth semistructured interviews. Phenomenological research originated in Europe approximately 60 years ago and was defined as “research that seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it” [38]. Phenomenological research is particularly effective for exploring the nature and meaning of complex phenomena for those who experience them [38]. Specifically, phenomenological research attempts to explain the subjective experiences of people through their life-world stories [39], with a focus on individuals expressing their shared life experiences [40]; it requires a researcher to set aside all personal opinions and produce a rich textual description of a phenomenon, as it is experienced by individuals [41]. Thus, this qualitative phenomenological study enabled the researcher to conduct a detailed study of Chinese women's life experiences after late-life remarriage. The data analysis was based on Colaizzi's methodology [42], which has been shown to be rigorous and robust. Colaizzi's seven-step analytic methodology [43] guided the data analysis process by providing the researcher with detailed and sequential steps to improve the reliability and dependability of the results [44, 45].

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to obtain a heterogeneous sample for this study to understand the life experiences of Chinese women after late-life remarriage. The women were invited to participate based on their characteristics and experiences related to the research phenomenon. The participants who could best inform the study and maximize the diversity associated with the research questions were chosen. The sample size was determined as follows: after data saturation was reached, two additional Chinese women who remarried in their later years were interviewed. If no new topics emerged, further recruitment was terminated. We recruited participants from 9 communities in Nanjing, an eastern city in China. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) female; (2) aged 65 years or older at the time of remarriage; (3) living with a new husband for at least 5 years; and (4) willing to share their life experiences, especially their family interactions. The exclusion criterion was a diagnosis of terminal illness or severe mental illness.

Sixteen women aged 71 to 83 years participated in this study. Most of them had graduated from primary school ($n=13$), had a past occupation as a housewife ($n=5$) and lived with their new husbands ($n=14$). At the

time of the interviews, the duration of their current marriages ranged from 6 to 15 years (Table 1). To maintain confidentiality, the participants' real names have been replaced with case numbers.

Data collection

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ethics Review Committee of Jiangsu Province Hospital (2023-SR-746). The data were collected through individual in-depth semistructured interviews. The times and locations of the interviews were chosen by the participants, and the interviews were conducted by the first author between October and December 2023 (24 interviews were conducted, averaging 50 minutes in length), mainly in the participants' homes. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher gave the participant a consent form and asked her to read it carefully. If the participant agreed, she signed it. The consent form included information on the research, the right to withdraw from participation, and confidentiality. At the end of each interview, we verified the breadth and depth of the interview questions by asking the participants if there was anything else they thought we should know. Each participant had a similar answer: "No, your questions covered almost everything." All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and were transcribed by the first and second authors within 24 hours after the interview ended. The transcripts were then sent to the participants, who were invited to confirm their accuracy.

The researchers designed an interview topic guide to allow the participants to freely discuss their life

experiences after late-life remarriage. The participants were asked the following questions about their experiences: "Can you talk about your late-life remarriage experience?" "How do your biological children and your stepchildren feel about late-life remarriage? How do you feel about it?" "How would you describe your interactions with your stepfamily (husband, stepchildren, and your biological children) after your late-life remarriage? What changes have occurred? How have these changes affected you?" A professor (J.H.) double-checked the interview guide, modified questions and wording deemed inappropriate, and added an additional interview question, "Can you be more specific and share with us any positive or negative changes you have experienced since late-life remarriage?"

Data analysis

Colaizzi's methodology for analysing the narratives of each interview involves seven steps: (1) read the transcript to become familiar with and understand the content of the interviews; (2) locate and extract statements related to late-life remarriage from the transcript; (3) formulate meanings; (4) divide all meanings into categories, theme clusters, and themes; (5) define all emergent themes in an exhaustive description; (6) describe the basic structure of the focal phenomena; and (7) return the results to the participants to ensure their accuracy [46].

In the first step, the researchers transcribed each interview within 24 hours. All the interview transcripts were read repeatedly by the researchers to fully understand

Table 1 Demographic information

Participant ID number	Age (years)	Education level	Occupation before retirement	Living with	Years in stepfamily
1	74	junior high school	Nurse	husband	7
2	75	primary school	Factory staff	husband, his father and mother	10
3	71	primary school	Factory staff	husband	6
4	73	primary school	Self-employed	husband	6
5	78	primary school	Housewife	husband	9
6	78	primary school	Dustman	husband	11
7	75	primary school	Farmer	husband	7
8	75	primary school	Housewife	husband, his son and daughter-in-law	9
9	76	junior high school	Accounting	husband	9
10	77	primary school	Housewife	husband	11
11	79	primary school	Housewife	husband	12
12	83	primary school	Factory staff	husband	15
13	72	junior high school	Teacher	husband	6
14	73	primary school	Self-employed	husband	7
15	74	primary school	Farmer	husband	8
16	76	primary school	Housewife	husband	7

and appreciate the participants' experiences. In the second step, the researchers extracted important statements from the transcripts by tagging sentences or phrases related to late-life remarriage. Through this process, the number of significant statements is reduced by eliminating repetitions and combining very similar statements. In the third step, the researchers sought to clarify the meaning of these statements. During this process, pertinent quotes were broadly categorized, and subsequently, themes were generated based on multiple statements that conveyed similar meanings. In the fourth step, the two researchers further categorized all the meanings into categories, theme clusters, and themes based on the previous step. To categorize them more accurately, all the researchers collaborating on this paper held meetings to confirm the categorization of the sentences by rereading each statement and discussing the appropriateness of the results of the two researchers' analyses. To classify the statements, the coresearchers discussed the appropriateness of the two researchers' analyses. If one researcher had a different opinion or made a suggestion about the results of the analysis, the discussion continued until all researchers reached a consensus. Finally, similar meanings were clustered into themes, and similar themes were grouped into theme clusters. In the fifth phase, an exhaustive description of all the emerging themes is provided. In the sixth phase, essential structures were derived through the comprehensive description of topic collections. In this process, Chinese women's experiences with late-life remarriage were comprehensively described and integrated. In the seventh step, to ensure that the interpretations resulting from the analyses were reliable, we conducted a member check [47] by sending a copy of the analyses to three randomly selected participants and asking them if their interpretations of the data were consistent with our analyses. The participants were given the opportunity to clarify their positions if they felt they had been misinterpreted. Finally, we invited five women in late-life remarriages with characteristics similar to those

of our participants to check the results. They agreed that the results accurately reflected their experiences.

Results

The following four themes emerged from the categorized interview data: (1) companionship and support attainment, (2) nanny-like treatment, (3) degradation of social ties, and (4) concerns about the future. Each theme comprises several subthemes that collectively describe the life experiences of Chinese women after late-life remarriage (Table 2) and is described in detail below.

Theme 1: Companionship and support attainment

The first theme consisted of two subthemes that together demonstrated the daily companionship and economic support that participants received after late-life remarriage.

Subtheme 1: Daily companionship

All the participants unanimously said that late-life remarriage gave them companionship in their daily lives. For example, even if their own children were not with them, they still had their husbands by their side, and they could chat with each other during the day as well as go out for walks, travel, and engage in other activities. This kind of companionship enriched their lives after divorce or widowhood and gave them a sense of warmth.

Their testimonies are as follows: *"Since my previous husband died, I spent every day alone. Although I would go to play mahjong during the day, I always felt lonely when I got home until I met my present husband and formed a new family. I usually have him to talk and eat with me at home, and the house is much more cosy."* (Case 4) *"The biggest benefit of late-life remarriage is having each other for the company. We can talk, eat, walk, and travel together, which makes my later life less lonely"* (Case 13).

Some participants emphasized the importance of daily companionship for older people: *"Last year, I had*

Table 2 Themes and subthemes of the life experiences of Chinese women after late-life remarriage

Theme	Subtheme
Companionship and support attainment	Daily companionship Economic support
Nanny-like treatment	Undertaking most household chores and care work alone suspected and guarded in terms of money
Degradation of social ties	Decreased interaction with the original family Reduced contact with friends
Concerns about the future	Treatment costs after illness Housing issues after their new husband's death

a sudden brain attack at home. Fortunately, my husband was by my side at that time, and he immediately called the 120 emergency number, and the ambulance took me to the hospital in time to save my life. Without him by my side, the consequences would have been unimaginable... Usually, having someone by your side can truly save your life at critical moments" (Case 9). "Older people like us, if we live alone, in the event of an accident at home, it is very likely that we will not be able to get help in time because our children will not be able to know and come in time. This is very dangerous and regrettable" (Case 1).

Yan Yunxiang's theory of new familism posits that the central functions of the family in contemporary society have evolved from traditional roles of production and procreation to those that prioritize emotional bonding and quality of life. The participants' acquisition of daily companionship following late-life remarriage is a tangible expression of this shift in family functionality. The step-husbands emerge as significant sources of emotional support for the participants, meeting their needs for companionship and spiritual comfort, thus imbuing the stepfamily with the role of emotional sustenance. Furthermore, the readiness of participants and their step-husbands to respond in emergencies and provide mutual assistance strengthens the stepfamily's function in terms of security, which is a crucial addition and development for modern elderly families.

Subtheme 2: Economic support

After late-life remarriage, the participants also received financial support. In particular, for participants who had a low income or no regular source of income, late-life remarriage provided them with more stable financial security.

"I have always been a housewife and never worked. After my ex-husband passed away, he left me with hardly any savings. Although I receive a public pension of over 200 RMB per month, this is only enough to live on for a few days...After remarrying him, I honestly feel like I have found my independence again. He usually gives me living expenses, and I have a stable financial source now." (Case 8) Remarriage relationships provide some participants with economic independence, which is not solely reliant on self-sufficiency but is achieved through the financial support of their step-husbands, highlighting the significant role of the family as an economic support network.

Other participants reported that they chose late-life remarriage mainly because they wanted to ease the financial burden of their biological children through remarriage. "Before remarriage, I was supported by my daughter for my daily food, clothing, housing, and transport. However, in reality, my daughter's life is very stressful. Not only does she have to help her son organize his wedding, she

also has to buy a car and a house for him. As a mother, not only can I not help her, but I am always spending her money. Therefore, seven years ago, I decided to find a man to remarry. In this way, I don't need her to bear my monthly living expenses" (Case 7). "After remarriage, my husband gives me a monthly living expense for both of us. Although my children sometimes give me some money, overall, they don't spend as much money on me as they used to. In this way, life is a little easier for them" (Case 16).

Unlike Western societies, where romance and love are often seen as the centerpiece of a marriage, the needs and responsibilities of the family are often prioritized in traditional Chinese concepts [48]. Furthermore, in traditional Chinese society, the interests of the family are often seen as taking precedence over the interests of the individual. This perception may have led some participants to consider remarriage more in terms of the interests of the family as a whole, e.g., considering the financial situation of their own children, rather than simply pursuing personal emotional fulfilment. Thus, late-life remarriage for these participants is not only about seeking emotional comfort but also about ensuring the stability of the family and the well-being of the children.

Theme 2: Nanny-like treatment

The vast majority of participants described their experiences of being treated like babysitters by their husbands and stepchildren. This theme comprised two subthemes that together presented details of how participants were treated like babysitters in their stepfamilies.

Subtheme 1: Undertaking most household chores and care work alone

In this subtheme, participants were required to perform most of the domestic and care-taking tasks in their stepfamilies on their own. The following excerpt reflects this reality:

"It's been ten years since he and I remarried, and during these years I hardly had a moment of relaxation, leaving me with nothing but heavy housework. Every day, I have to serve him, his father, and his mother three meals a day, wash their clothes, then clean the house, and so on. None of them were willing to help me with any of the household chores...I was truly very tired and felt like I was acting as a free babysitter for them" (Case 2).

This quote reveals the challenges that participants faced with respect to housework. A previous study also revealed that most family caregivers get up very early to get through their own essential housework—washing, ironing, preparing meals, etc.—otherwise, they would

not be able to get through this work at the end of a long day of home care work [49]. These menial and laborious household chores often left the participants feeling very tired.

In addition to household chores, participants were required to take care of their husbands. The husbands of some of the participants were bedridden due to health problems, which made it necessary for the participants to take full responsibility for their care. *"The year after we remarried, he became bedridden due to a stroke. His son and daughter both put the entire burden of caring for him on me alone, citing busy work and lack of time."* (Case 3). Moreover, the participants were often blamed by their stepchildren when their husbands developed new problems or their health deteriorated. An example of this participant's statement is *"As soon as he gets sick, his son and daughter blame me, thinking it is all my fault and blaming me for not taking care of him"* (Case 5) (Case 7). Another participant emphasized that none of the family members in her stepfamily were willing to help her lighten her workload, even though her own health was problematic (Case 10).

The main reason why the above situation occurred, the participants said, was that the husband's care for his biological children exceeded that of the participants: *"Once, he fell ill and was hospitalized. His son, daughter-in-law, and grandson came to the hospital to visit him. His son saw that the urinal was full and wanted to go to the bathroom to pour it out, but he stopped him. Then, he asked his son to pass me the urinal and let me pour it out. He didn't want his son to do these dirty jobs, but he casually sent me around as if I were a servant and didn't need to be respected. This made my heart very uncomfortable"* (Case 5) (Case 14).

Most of the participants agreed that their position in the stepfamily was similar to that of a nanny rather than an equal spouse or relative: *"He has told me that he feels that the point of remarriage is that a family can be better served. Therefore, in his opinion, I have to take care of not only him but also his father and mother...He would only direct me to work one way or the other, never considering how tired I am and treating me as a slave to the household chores. This makes me feel very sad and angry"* (Case 10) (Case 2). Similar feelings are reflected in other studies [50]. This feeling exacerbated the participants' frustration and led to a feeling of marginalization and loss of self-worth within their stepfamilies, resulting in a state of depression and a lack of fulfillment. This phenomenon, when viewed through the framework of feminist theory, can be seen as a reflection of power relations and gender role expectations within stepfamilies, revealing the power struggles and unequal treatment that participants face in their lives within these families.

Subtheme 2: Suspected and guarded in terms of money

Almost all the participants expressed feeling that stepfamily members were very defensive and distrustful of the participants regarding money. This defensiveness and mistrust were reflected in two main aspects.

First, the husbands gave the participants a small amount of money for living expenses, which was usually not sufficient to meet the basic needs of life. The use of these living expenses included not only the participants' personal expenses but also the daily expenses of the whole stepfamily. When the participants asked their husbands to increase their living expenses, it often triggered resentment and arguments.

"He gives me a monthly living allowance of 1500 yuan, but in fact, I need to use it to pay for all the expenses of my stepfamily, such as meals, water, electricity, and gas, so very little of this money can really be left for me to use. He calculated all the expenses needed for life very accurately and didn't want me to save any extra money..." (Case 3). *Over the years, prices have been rising, but the living expenses he gave me haven't increased. And whenever he hears me say I don't have enough money, he gets very angry, arguing loudly with me and asking where I spent my money. He doesn't want to spend a penny more on me because he wants to save as much money as possible for his son and grandson, but it's too unfair to me!"* (Case 6).

The strict control exerted by step-husbands over financial expenditures is, in essence, a limitation on the economic standing of participants within the reconstituted family. This limitation not only strips participants of their financial independence but also accentuates the inequities in the allocation of economic resources and their adverse effects on the marital relationship. To put it succinctly, participants' perceptions within the financial distribution paradigm are a direct reflection of the enduring legacy of traditional gender roles within the contemporary family structure.

What was most aggravating and disappointing to the participants was that they did their best to take care of their stepfamily; however, when the participants fell ill, their husbands were not willing to cover even a small portion of the cost of treatment. *"I do my best to take care of him and do his laundry and cooking for him. However, when I was sick and hospitalized and needed money, he refused to pay...He told me to call my daughter to come and pay. He meant that he wouldn't pay a cent for my illness"* (Case 15).

"What annoyed and disappointed the participants the most was that they made every effort to take

care of their step family members; however, when participants fell ill, their husbands were even unwilling to bear a small portion of the treatment costs. I did my best to take care of him, helping him wash clothes and cook. However, when I needed money for hospitalization due to illness, he refused to pay... He asked me to call my daughter to pay. His intention was that he would not pay a penny for my illness" (Case 15).

Second, the stepchildren were suspicious and defensive towards the participants, sometimes even treating them as thieves and keeping them under strict surveillance and restrictions. At the same time, the children feared that the participants would take their father's property:

"After remarriage, although I moved into his house, his son and daughter-in-law did not give me even the minimum respect. What is most outrageous is that my daughter-in-law often says that there are outsiders in the house and tells her husband to beware of losing money and important items. I know she is saying this to me on purpose" (Case 8). "My husband's daughter has always felt that I'm here to compete with her for property. She used to mock me by saying that she grew up in this house and did not realize that it would end up being mine. She is worried that I will take away this house and all of her father's savings, so she is very hostile towards me..." (Case 11).

The defensive mentality of stepchildren towards the participants mirrors their apprehensions regarding family assets, which are intrinsically linked to the family's power dynamics. Upon the participants' entry into the stepfamily as stepmothers, the preexisting equilibrium of power within the family is disrupted. Stepchildren may perceive a threat to their control over family property, particularly when the property's ownership is ambiguous. This mentality of resource competition intensifies the hostile attitudes of stepchildren towards the participants, thus leading to a defensive response.

Theme 3: Degradation of social ties

The third theme involves the impact that late-life remarriage has on the interpersonal relationships of many of the participants. The two subthemes are decreased interaction with the original family and reduced contact with friends.

Subtheme 1: Decreased interaction with the original family

Some participants reported that since they began living with their husbands, their connections and interactions with their biological children and grandchildren

decreased significantly: *"After I began living with my new husband, the number of times I met my son and grandson decreased. Before I remarried, they often came to my place for lunch. Now, they rarely visit me" (Case 1). "I used to see my daughter and granddaughter almost once a week, but now we have not seen each other for a long time" (Case 6) (Case 9).* The event of late-life remarriage had a great impact on the participants' later life. In traditional Chinese culture, the emotional connection between children and grandchildren and elderly individuals is extremely important, and this close relationship directly affects the quality of life of elderly individuals [51]. Therefore, when participants realized that their loved ones were visiting less often, it made them feel a deep sense of loss.

Two participants revealed that the main reason why their son and daughter rarely visited them was that they believed that late-life remarriage was shameful. The following two interviews reflect this fact:

"My daughter found it hard to accept that I am remarrying at my age... She told me that my relatives at home and neighbours in the village talk a lot about my remarriage, which makes her feel very humiliated. She actually doesn't support my remarriage, so since I remarried, she hasn't come once to the place where my husband and I live" (Case 3).

"Although my daughter supports me, my son and my biological brother have always opposed my remarriage. Both of them believe that as an elderly woman, finding another husband would be ridiculed if rumours spread... However, I insisted on remarriage, so our relationship has deteriorated and we rarely contact each other now" (Case 4).

The above generally corresponds to the current reality in China, where late-life remarriage is still a controversial topic, and Chinese people tend to have conservative views on late-life remarriage [52], with many still believing that the remarriage of an older member of the family will bring embarrassment and shame to the family. These perceptions exacerbated the psychological pressure and negative feelings of the participants, who consequently felt more isolated. In addition, the attitude of the husband is another important factor that affects the interaction between participants and their original family. Two participants described a similar experience: whenever the participant's biological sons, daughters, or grandchildren came to visit their homes, the husbands behaved indifferently or were not polite enough (Case 11) (Case 16).

The participants' interactions with former family members weakened after late-life remarriage, a change that inevitably led to distancing. For the participants, this estrangement was distressing because it signalled

a weakening of emotional ties to the past. This emotional rupture not only diminished their sense of well-being later in life but also led to a sense of spiritual abandonment.

Subtheme 2: Reduced contact with friends

The second subtheme illustrates the participants' experiences of reducing contact with friends due to late-life remarriage. Importantly, this subtheme is divided into active and passive reduction in contact. The active reduction in contact is due mainly to people spontaneously refraining from seeing their friends because of the shame they feel due to late-life remarriage and the fear of being talked about and ridiculed by others:

"After remarriage, I rarely return to the community where I used to live. That was where I lived with my first husband, and my old friends were all there... [With] late-life remarriage, I always feel that I have done something wrong, and I am embarrassed to face them, so I hardly ever get in touch with my old friends" (Case 8) (Case 15).

In addition, some participants reported that they lost a significant amount of time and freedom due to taking care of their sick or disabled husband, thereby passively reducing contact and interaction with their past friends:

"My husband is disabled, and he is now not able to get out of bed at all. He eats, drinks, and urinates while in bed. Therefore, I must stay by his bedside and bring him water and feed him as well as change his nappies. The most I can usually do is go out for a while at most when I buy groceries, and I have no time to catch up, let alone meet friends" (Case 3).

"In May this year, my friend celebrated her birthday and called me to go to a hotel for dinner. I had planned to go, but my husband firmly forbade me because he had cataracts in his eyes and couldn't be left unattended. He was worried that if I would not be at home, he would fall." (Case 14).

As seen from the two quotes above, caring for someone with a disability is a challenging responsibility that not only requires a great deal of time and effort on the part of the participant but also often restricts their personal lives. Despite the participants' innermost desire to be able to engage in social activities and enjoy some personal time to fulfil their leisure and social needs. However, the reality was that these desires were often set aside owing to the need to care for their step-husbands, who had mobility issues, around the clock. Two participants emphasized that if they stayed for a slightly longer period, their husbands called to urge them to come

home. *"I'm buying groceries outside, and often before I finish, he calls and asks why I haven't come back yet. He asks me to come back quickly and pour water for him to drink. His tone is full of blame and impatience" (Case 3). "When I go out for a while he scolds and insults me, asking if I will die if I don't go out. Ugh, I also want to have my own relaxation time..." (Case 5).*

Through the lens of care work, the emotional labour and inequality that participants endure in the process of caring for their step-husbands becomes evident. First, caregiving involves not only physical labour but also emotional labour. Specifically, participants are required to provide emotional support and comfort while managing the emotional responses of their step-husbands, such as blame and impatience. This emotional labour poses a challenge to the mental health and emotional well-being of the participants. Second, the distribution of caregiving work within the stepfamily is relatively unequal. Participants assume the majority of caregiving responsibilities, whereas other stepfamily members may not shoulder their equitable share of these duties. This unequal distribution often leads participants to experience excessive fatigue and undue stress.

Theme 4: Concerns about the future

This theme presents the participants' concerns about their future lives. For example, they were concerned about who would help them share the costs of treatment if they were ill and where they would live following the death of their husbands.

Subtheme 1: Treatment costs after illness

Most participants agreed that late-life remarriage lacks a strong emotional foundation. Therefore, when they suffer from serious illnesses that require large sums of money, their husbands are unlikely to be willing to help them with treatment. Several participants shared their personal experiences of why they were concerned about the cost of treatment.

"Some time ago, I had a constant very uncomfortable feeling in my stomach, so my son took me to the hospital for gastroscopy. During that time, my husband's attitude towards me suddenly became particularly bad, and he kept chanting that he had no more money and couldn't afford to support me, and he asked me to leave his home. He did this because he thought I had a serious disease like stomach cancer and was afraid that he would need to pay for my treatment." (Case 11).

"Previously, he was hospitalized due to illness, and I took care of him alone all day and night for more

than ten days. One day, I ran out of medicine to lower my blood pressure. Owing to the epidemic control measures at that time, it was not convenient to leave the hospital to obtain the medication, so I wanted to take his medical insurance card to obtain a box of antihypertensive medicine. However, he was unwilling, and he let me spend my own money to buy it... I was sad and angry because I thought about how he wouldn't even spend money on a box of medication for me, and when I got sick in the future, would he be willing to cover the cost of my treatment?" (Case 15).

In the case studies presented here, the control of household finances is firmly in the hands of the step-husbands, whereas participants are devoid of independent economic resources. This imbalanced dynamic fostered a dependency of the participants on their husbands for financial sustenance. As a result, when participants confront health challenges and their step-husbands do not assume the conventional roles of economic and emotional support traditionally ascribed to men, the expectations surrounding these gender roles can engender a sense of insecurity and apprehension in the participants.

Some participants turned to their sons and daughters after not receiving much help from their husbands. Two of the participants were explicitly rejected. For example, in the case of a participant with lung adenocarcinoma, her son-in-law thought that medical expenses should be borne by her husband rather than by them (Case 3). This quote depicts the isolation experienced by the participants. Some of the children held the belief that they were not responsible for the maintenance of their mothers who remarried in old age, as the mothers were already married to their step-husbands and maintenance-related issues should be borne by their step-husbands. However, the reality is that step-husbands may be more inclined to think of their own children and are often reluctant to take responsibility for a participant's medical expenses. As a result, when the participants faced illness or other emergencies, they found no one around them to rely on and help; this profoundly reflects the participants' vulnerable position within the power structure and the absence of emotional support during critical moments.

Subtheme 2: Housing issues after their new husband's death

The second subtheme highlights the participants' concerns about the possibility of being homeless following the death of their new husbands:

"My husband is sick, and the doctor has estimated that he has about six months to live. He told me that after he dies, I cannot continue to live in this house because he plans to leave it to his son... but

where can I go? I don't have any other house to live in. I don't want to disturb my daughter's life at her house..." (Case 7).

"My husband's health has been deteriorating recently, and both of his sons have forced me to divorce him because they want me to leave the house... However, if I leave this house, I will have nowhere to live. Although my daughter asked me to move in with her, she actually doesn't have any extra room for me to live in. If I rent a house outside, I don't have enough funds to pay the rent." (Case 10).

One participant's new husband died. She told us that after her husband's death, her step-son told her to leave the house in which she was living immediately: *"My husband and I lived together for more than ten years after we remarried, and during this time, he was on dialysis for six years. I was the one who accompanied him and took care of him all these years, while his son hardly took care of him for a single day... Last month, as soon as he passed away, his son threw me out of the house. Alas, I took care of him wholeheartedly for so long, and in the end, I was not even given a place to live... Now, although I live in my son's house, it is not a final solution to my housing problem because I can clearly feel that my daughter-in-law is not happy about me living in their house. So, I can't keep living in my son's house either; I still have to think of another solution" (Case 12).*

The attitudes and behaviours of step-husbands and stepchildren towards the participants underscore the inequitable distribution of power and resources within the stepfamily structure. The stepchildren's efforts to compel divorce as a strategy to redistribute familial assets, such as the family home, disregard the emotional needs and residential rights of the participants. This disparity in the allocation of power and resources, along with the neglect of the participants' emotional labour, exposes the intergenerational conflicts and competition for resources that are prevalent within stepfamilies. It also reflects the broader vulnerability of the elderly in society, highlighting the complex dynamics of power, resource distribution, and generational tensions within these familial contexts.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the life experiences of Chinese women after late-life remarriage. We found that Chinese women obtain daily companionship and a certain degree of financial support from engaging in late-life remarriage. However, the vast majority of participants feel that they are treated like nannies in their stepfamilies, as they are expected to perform most

of the housework and caregiving alone, and they lack autonomy and trust regarding money. At the same time, their past interpersonal relationships are affected, manifested in weakened interactions with their original family and reduced contact with friends. In addition, they have many concerns about their later years, including the cost of treatment in the event of illness and their housing following the death of their husbands.

All participants in this study received daily companionship and financial support after late-life remarriage. Some participants choose to remarry in their later years, driven by the desire to meet emotional and daily care needs, highlighting the significance of companionship. This motivation resonates with Yan Yunxiang's theory of new familism [33], which posits that as society progresses, the modern conception of family has shifted, with emotional fulfilment and quality of life emerging as central values. Consequently, late-life remarriage is not just an individual emotional decision but also reflects a broader societal trend towards the reconstitution of family functions. This form of familial emotional bonding surpasses the traditional logic of blood relations, indicating that the evolution of family functions in Chinese society has led to more diverse and complex development.

Research has confirmed the positive impact of daily companionship on elderly people [53, 54], such as providing emotional support and positive interactions for elderly people [55], helping to reduce the risk of loneliness [56] and promoting physical and mental health [57]. Therefore, the government and all sectors of society should attach great importance to the emotional needs of elderly people and their need for companionship and actively take measures to provide more support services for them. For example, community day-care centres should be established, and volunteer services should be provided to help people live happy and healthy lives in old age.

Late-life remarriage, as a social phenomenon, also provides some financial support to participants, easing the pressure they might face in their later years. In fact, before remarrying, the participants faced problems such as insufficient income in their old age. In addition to this phenomenon, some problems exist in China's current pension security system. We discuss the issue of China's old-age security system in detail later. Next, we emphasize that the lack of intergenerational support from children has led to the loss of important support for elderly people. Some scholars have noted that intergenerational support by children can significantly reduce the incidence of poverty among the elderly population. However, with changes in China's family structure, especially the significant decline in the number of children, the inhibitory effect of intergenerational support on the incidence

of poverty among China's elderly population is gradually declining [58]. Moreover, in some families, children's economic support and service provision for elderly family members are weakening [59], making it highly unlikely that participants will be able to receive support from their children. These participants choose to remarry to improve their living conditions and gain financial stability. This is largely consistent with the reasons why poor women in Bangladesh seek to remarry [20]. The difference is that this study further illustrates that spousal support from late-life remarriage becomes an important way for some poverty-driven older women to achieve old-age security.

The study also revealed that participants generally felt that they were treated like nannies in their stepfamilies. Although some research suggests that women may do less housework in their second marriages [60, 61], this was not the case in this study. The participants in this study still performed most of the housework and caregiving in their stepfamilies; this may be determined by the division of labour and social expectations in Chinese society. According to the dominant gendered division of labour, men are viewed as the breadwinners of the family, whereas women are expected to take on domestic and caretaking responsibilities [62]. While feminists have exposed the invisible burdens of women in caring for children, relatives and families [63], these gender roles are socially and culturally entrenched. Social gender culture bestows upon women the role of "caregivers," leading them to perpetuate the unequal gender division of labour within stepfamilies by taking on domestic chores and emotional care work, while their own emotional needs are marginalized. The experiences of the participants reveal the persistent existence of gender power relations in family life after late-life remarriage and the dilemmas they face in their roles within stepfamilies. Notably, some participants reported not only a lack of respect from stepfamily members for their housework and caregiving efforts but also frequent verbal abuse and punishment. This phenomenon reflects the neglect and devaluation of women's labour value in Chinese society. Specifically, emotional labour and caregiving work, though crucial for the maintenance and development of stepfamilies, are often regarded by stepfamily members as participants' due responsibilities. This attitude not only overlooks the significance of these labourers but also belittles the participants' contributions within the family. Society should discard prejudices and misunderstandings about remarried women and give them the respect and support they deserve. Stepfamily members should strengthen communication and understanding and share household chores and caregiving tasks so that remarried women can find their own place and value.

The participants were also often suspected by stepfamily members of having the intention of taking ownership of property. According to previous studies, the relationships between stepmothers and stepchildren are usually distant and conflictual [64, 65]. In this study, this conflict manifested mainly in terms of money, which was a sensitive topic between the participants and their stepfamily members, who held a high level of vigilance regarding money because they feared that the participants would steal their belongings or take control of the family's property. This defensiveness may stem from their tendency to view blood ties as more important [66] as well as from distrust and questioning of the participants' intentions. Owing to the lack of blood ties, shared upbringing, and deep emotional bonds, stepchildren viewed the participants as "outsiders" and were resistant to sharing their father's emotional and financial interests. This resistance stems from the scarcity of resources and triggers competition within the family. In other words, the stepchildren feared that their stepmothers would take their place in the family, control the family property, and affect their inheritance rights. The participants felt extremely aggrieved, angry, and disappointed about this, similar to the feelings of remarried women in Thailand [67]. Stepfamilies integrate new, biologically unrelated family members into the family, and this process results in many negative interactions [68, 69], including the readjustment of family roles and the difficult integration of family culture. These negative interactions reveal the challenges faced by stepfamilies in accepting new members. To mitigate these challenges, stepfamilies need to establish open and honest communication channels and encourage family members to express their feelings and needs, which will help enhance mutual understanding and trust. In terms of property management, property ownership and distribution principles should be clarified to avoid disputes. The formulation of detailed family financial planning to ensure that all stepfamily members can participate fairly in the management of property helps reduce disputes over its distribution.

In addition, changes in the interpersonal relationships of the participants after late-life remarriage cannot be ignored. First, these changes were reflected in the weakening of their interactions with their original family members. The participants in this study objected to their elderly mothers' remarriages because they felt that these remarriages were humiliating them. This partly reflects the fact that remarriage is still condemned in China [74]. Indeed, the persistence of stigma and prejudice is not confined to China; in various traditional societies globally, these deeply rooted biases continue to hold significant sway [70–72]. One possible explanation for this phenomenon is that the children were deeply influenced

by feudal thinking [73] and saw their mothers' remarriage as a betrayal of their fathers and a sign of unfaithfulness [19, 74]. Second, the influence of familism focuses on family unity and family pride [75]. Late-life remarriage, an act that goes against traditional marriage and family values, brings shame and stigma to the whole family and may ultimately damage the family's social reputation [76]. Therefore, the children of the participants were strongly opposed to their mothers' decisions to remarry. When their mother's late-life remarriage became an objective fact, they resorted to the punitive measure of reducing their interactions to express their dissatisfaction and to defend traditional marriage morals and family reputation. In fact, the behaviours of the participants' children not only reflected their individual psychological tendencies but were also deeply influenced by the sociocultural and structural context and reflected the patriarchal oppression of women in this cultural context [77, 78].

Second, the participants' interpersonal relationships were also affected in terms of reduced contact with close friends. On the one hand, they spontaneously avoided meeting and interacting with friends from the past due to the sense of shame generated by late-life remarriage, leading to a reduction in social activities. According to the participants' narratives, they feared that they would be talked about or even morally condemned by their former friends and neighbours and would feel ashamed and embarrassed. The participants faced both family rejection and social rejection. Similarly, in Ghana, divorced women are always topics of conversation and gossip and suffer social stigma as the townspeople ridicule them [79]. Despite the general openness of the population as time progresses, criticism of divorce and remarriage still exists. In contrast, in Iran [80], Japan [81], and Azores [82], where there is little stigma attached to remarriage, older widows can be supported and encouraged by family members and society to remarry.

In China, however, owing to the traditional culture and concepts of marriage that emphasize its permanence, divorce is generally not recognized or favoured [83], and no social consensus has emerged in support of remarriage for older people. As a result, the participants' remarriages were not widely recognized and respected, and they were viewed as a departure from traditional marriage morality. Moreover, in China's unique acquaintance society [84, 85], if an individual acts against the expectations of society, they will be condemned by public opinion; this is one of the reasons why the participants experienced social exclusion. The participants had been living in a social environment that held stigmatizing attitudes towards their late-life remarriage, and they had internalized many negative attributes, such as stereotypes and cultural values associated with late-life remarriage.

As some scholars have noted, stigmatization involves emotional, self-biased, and self-discriminatory aspects that are manifested in devaluation and blame at the cognitive level and in the restriction of participation at a behavioural level, which can negatively affect quality of life [86]. In addition, the participants themselves are unable to accept new things due to the limitations of factors such as education level and age. Therefore, when they experience blame and denigration, they are unable to adequately and logically explain the legitimacy and legality of their marriage and defend their rights and interests. To alleviate the pressure brought about by social opinion, they choose to reduce contact or stop communicating with others. This strategy of resisting stigma may be a tool for managing a “spoilt identity” [87]. Society should pay more attention to women in late-life remarriages and, through education and awareness-raising, create a social environment that is inclusive and provides an understanding of older women’s remarriage choices. Moreover, more care and assistance, including psychological counselling, legal advice, and other services, should be provided to this vulnerable group.

On the other hand, there was a certain amount of passivity on the part of the participants in terms of reduced contact with close friends. Specifically, the amount of time and energy they had to devote to caring for their sick or disabled new husbands prevented them from enjoying leisure and recreational time with their friends as they had prior to remarrying. Sick or disabled older people need to be cared for in a meticulous and thoughtful manner. According to statistics, the number and severity of disabled elderly individuals in China are increasing annually [88]. A survey revealed that 89.1% of Chinese elderly people preferred to receive care at home rather than in long-term care facilities [89]; this is closely related to the traditional Chinese concept of family eldercare as well as the financial situation of the family. Approximately 90% of elderly people who receive care at home are cared for by their family members, with spouses and children being the main caregivers [90]. This means that in many cases, the responsibility for caring for disabled elderly individuals is borne by women in the family, such as wives, daughters, and daughters-in-law [91]. This situation is similar to that in other countries [92, 93]. However, the current situation in China is that with the acceleration of modernization and the decrease in family size, an increasing number of Chinese elderly people’s children are moving away from their hometowns to work and are absent from their parents for many years, and mobility and long distances deprive them of the experience of caring for their elderly parents in person [94]. As a result, given the family’s human resources and financial capacity, caregiving is often left to wives. For the participants in this study,

this meant that they had to sacrifice time with friends to devote themselves to caregiving.

Importantly, some participants reported that their disabled husbands were very irritable and restricted their freedom of movement. This situation may be related to the fact that older people with disabilities experience negative emotional responses and are not able to release these emotions effectively [95]. They may not be able to adapt to the psychological changes associated with disability and may have difficulty acclimating to their surroundings, which may make them irritable and anxious. In addition, older adults with disabilities may develop strong psychological dependence [96] on the participants because of their impaired ability to perform daily living activities, reduced social participation, decreased self-care ability [88], and long-term dependence on the participants’ care. To ensure that their needs were met and avoid accidents, they required the participants to stay home as much as possible, which was achieved by restricting their freedom to travel. However, as caregiving involves long hours of hard work, caregivers are usually tired, frustrated, and depressed [97]. As caregivers for their husbands, the participants were required to struggle with their illnesses for long periods [98]. This constant burden of caregiving and lack of time and energy placed heavy strain on them and severely affected their quality of life. When these stresses are not effectively relieved, the risk of suicidal behaviour may increase [99]. Therefore, attention should be given to the mental health of disabled elderly people and their spouses, and professional psychological intervention and treatment should be provided in a timely manner for mental health problems. Moreover, more supportive measures should be provided to alleviate the burden of caregiving on disabled families. For example, through home respite services, families of older persons with disabilities can receive help and support from professional caregivers to reduce the burden on family caregivers and provide quality care services for older persons with disabilities [100].

The participants’ concerns about their future lives revealed the inadequacy of China’s basic medical insurance and basic pension insurance. Although China’s basic medical insurance system has broad coverage, many challenges remain in its practical application. For example, some expensive medicines and treatments are not covered by medical insurance, so many patients face high medical costs [101]. Furthermore, differences between different regions and types of medical insurance [102, 103] result in different reimbursement ratios and ceilings and create uncertainty and additional financial pressure on patients. Especially for low-income groups in rural areas, the level of medical insurance benefits is relatively low, and the burden they face from out-of-pocket

expenses remains heavy in the case of serious illnesses [104]. This increases the risk of poverty as a result of illness. The proportion of poor people in China who become poor or return to poverty due to illness is as high as approximately 40% [105]; this reveals the vulnerability of the formal support system. In addition, informal support networks [106] have obvious deficiencies. Some of the participants' husbands refused to share their medical expenses, and some of their biological children even argued that their new husbands should be responsible for paying for the participants' medical expenses since the participants remarried. In response to these problems, we make the following recommendations. First, the uniform regulation of regional and various types of medical insurance policies should be strengthened to ensure the consistency of reimbursement rates and ceiling lines; this will help eliminate regional disparities so that all patients can enjoy the benefits of medical insurance equally. Second, investment in rural and impoverished areas should be increased to improve the level of medical insurance benefits in these areas and reduce the incidence of poverty or return to poverty caused by illness. Third, for those who lack informal support networks, family members should be encouraged to care for them. Where necessary, spouses and children can be encouraged to fulfil their family responsibilities through legal means or policy guidance.

Basic pension insurance in China, as a system that covers the whole population and guarantees the basic life needs of elderly people, has made some progress in recent years [107, 108], but there are still some problems. In this study, some participants were not included in the pension insurance system because they did not have a formal work unit or because the unit did not pay for pension insurance, which prevented them from obtaining stable pension income after retirement and put them under greater pressure. This situation reflects insufficient coverage and a low level of pension benefits, which directly affects the sense of well-being of elderly people [109]. As a valuable source of income for elderly people, pensions play an important role in improving their financial situation, enhancing their sense of financial security, and alleviating their financial anxiety, thus increasing their sense of well-being [110]. In contrast, older people who rely solely on their personal savings for their livelihoods are likely to be at greater risk of poverty [111]. Although the participants had found support in their old age through remarriage, the lack of sufficient and stable pension income caused them to worry about their future after the death of their husbands, especially the loss of housing security. This concern reflects their uncertainty about old-age housing and highlights the inadequacy of the social security system for old age.

Generally, when older people lack a comprehensive social security programme, they are more inclined to rely on their children for financial support [112]. However, in this study, we observed a different phenomenon. Although most of the participants did not have adequate financial security, they were generally reluctant to rely on their children for financial support after the death of their new husbands; this may be closely related to their deep-rooted family values and maternal care; that is, parents prefer to bear the burden of life alone rather than burdening their children out of concern for their children's well-being. This research provides some evidence of the impact of the concept of new familism on participants [113]. This behaviour highlights the participants' deep concern for family harmony and their children's well-being. As a result, the participants were caught in a contradiction between ideals and reality. They did not want to be a burden to their children but worried that it would be difficult for them to live comfortably in their twilight years on their own, a contradiction that caused them to face greater pressure and uncertainty. To address this situation, the government should continue to expand the coverage of old-age insurance, increase the level of benefits, and provide retirees with more comprehensive protection. Moreover, the social security system for elderly people should be improved, special attention should be given to the problem of housing security for groups in difficult situations, and appropriate relief measures should be provided.

Several limitations of our work should be noted. First, the 16 participants were only from Nanjing, a city in eastern China, which makes it difficult to generalize the results to women in late-life remarriages from other regions who may have different experiences. Second, two of the interviews took place in parks and cafés, public interview settings that may have limited the participants' responses. The participants who were interviewed in public settings may have been less open about sensitive topics than those interviewed in private settings because they were concerned that their comments would be overheard by others. However, to minimize this issue, private and quiet interview settings were chosen wherever possible with the consent of the participants. Finally, the presence of one participant's husband during her interview may have affected the veracity of her responses. This participant may have provided limited information, which may have negatively impacted the quality of the data collected. Therefore, at the end of the interviews, we asked this participant to complete a separate in-depth interview with us for approximately 40 minutes to discuss certain topics. These factors should be considered when interpreting the results of this study.

In future research, interdisciplinary collaboration is particularly important, as it can provide a more comprehensive perspective on complex problems. For example, when the impact of remarriage in later years on individuals, families, and society is explored, sociology can focus on the social structure and cultural background factors of remarriage in later years, psychological research can deeply analyse the psychological state and adaptation process of individuals who remarry in later years, and a legal perspective can provide an analysis of the legal framework and rights protection of remarriage in later years.

Conclusions and Implications

This study adopts a phenomenological approach to describe the life experiences of Chinese women after late-life remarriage. Research has shown that although late-life remarriage brings companionship and a certain degree of financial security to their daily lives, most participants feel that they are treated like nannies by their stepfamilies rather than as equal spouses or relatives and do not receive the respect they deserve. In addition, after remarriage, the connection between the participants and their original family gradually weakened, and their interaction with friends also decreased. Equally importantly, they express concerns about their future, particularly about the cost of treatment if they become ill and housing issues following the death of their husbands. In conclusion, the research findings reveal the complexity and vulnerability of the life experiences of Chinese women after late-life remarriage, which is the result of a combination of sociocultural and structural factors and reflects the pressure and injustice that women endure in a patriarchal society. Moreover, it exposes the inadequacy of basic medical insurance and basic pension insurance systems.

In terms of theory, this study makes several contributions that extend previous research. First, this study deepens the academic understanding of Chinese women's life experiences after late-life remarriage. This study explores and describes Chinese women's experiences after late-life remarriage and their feelings about these experiences through interviews, which provides valuable evidence for understanding their life experiences following remarriage later in life and, to a certain extent, fills the gap in such studies in China. Moreover, the results of this study reveal some of the experiences that Chinese women face after late-life remarriage that are Chinese-specific and largely unexplored. Second, by linking the findings to social structure, this study discusses in greater depth the impact of China's social structure on women in late-life remarriages. This study revealed that these individuals are worried about their future lives, which is

closely related to the imperfect basic medical insurance system and basic pension insurance (BPPI) system in China. Therefore, this study contributes valuable findings to research on women's late-life remarriage and, to a certain extent, promotes more in-depth thinking and reflection on the structural factors behind this phenomenon.

In addition to its theoretical implications, this study also has important practical implications. First, by revealing the difficult situation that Chinese women face in their stepfamilies, this study calls on society to abandon prejudices and misunderstandings about them and to give them full respect and support. Second, considering that Chinese women, after late-life remarriage, have weaker interactions with their families and friends, more support measures should be provided to them, including psychological and legal counselling services. For example, attention should be given to their mental health, and timely professional psychological intervention and treatment should be provided for possible mental health problems. Third, our findings emphasize that Chinese women who remarried later in life were concerned about the cost of treatment when they became ill and about their housing following the death of their husbands. These findings suggest that policymakers should strengthen the social security system for elderly individuals; these include the establishment of a special relief fund for subsidized medical expenses and housing security; the clarification of the rights and interests of remarried elderly persons; and the improvement of the legal protection system. In conclusion, the results of this study will not only help society at large better understand the life experiences of Chinese women in stepfamilies after late-life remarriage but also help to provide numerous important recommendations for professionals who provide support to stepfamilies, as well as for policymakers.

Supplementary Information

The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-025-03665-8>.

Additional file 1.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the community workers in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, China, who assisted us in recruiting participants. Special thanks to all the participants in this study, without whose generosity in sharing their real-life experiences we would not have been able to complete this study.

Authors' contributions

Conceptualization, Q.L. and J.H.; data curation, Q.L. and J.H.; formal analysis, Q.L.; funding acquisition, J.H. and J.L.; investigation, Q.L.; methodology, Q.L. and J.H.; software, J.H. and P.Z.; writing—original draft, Q.L.; writing—review and editing, Q.L. All authors had critical discussions of the manuscript. All authors have approved the final version of the manuscript.

Funding

This research was financially supported by a key project of China's National Social Science Foundation (Grant number 17ARK003). This research was financially supported by basic scientific research business expenses of central universities (Project No. B200203158) and the Jiangsu Postgraduate Research and Practice Innovation Plan Project (KYCX20-0414).

Data availability

The datasets analysed during this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ethics Review Committee of Jiangsu Province Hospital (2023-SR-746). Informed consent was obtained from all the subjects involved in the study. The participants were informed of our research topic and related information. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher gave the participant a consent form and asked her to read it carefully. If the participant agreed to its terms, she signed it; if not, the interview was terminated, and we moved to the next interviewee. The participants' private information was used only for scientific records, kept confidential from the public, and collated anonymously to prevent identification. All methods were performed in accordance with the relevant guidelines and regulations. This study complies with the Helsinki Declaration.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Received: 15 April 2024 Accepted: 10 March 2025

Published online: 22 March 2025

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