

Chasing Geborgenheit: A Life Course Understanding of Domestic Violence Survivors' Leaving Process in China

Abstract

This article examines how cohort effects, age effects and linked lives constrained domestic violence survivors' choices about whether to seek help through the legal system or not. This research design builds on Pamela Neumann's (2023) conceptualization of legal ambivalence. To extend the discussion to domestic violence survivors' leaving process in China, this research adds a life course perspective to stress that early life experiences, changing socio-legal contexts, and marriage norms influence survivors' legal ambivalence and direct their course of action. I interviewed domestic violence survivors and lawyers in the family and marriage area in China, and I found that the post-1960s and post-1970s birth cohorts paid more attention to their adult children's interests than themselves, while the post-1980s and post-1990s cohorts positioned themselves as players of the legal system. The post-2000s cohort started out to resort to the Anti-Domestic Violence Law but became disillusioned with the response from legal actors and the judicial system. They may finally not enter the legal system because of the barriers created by intergenerational relationships and economic disadvantage.

Keywords Domestic violence, Legal ambivalence, Life course, China

Key messages

- Women survivors from the earlier birth cohorts prioritized their children's interests over their own. The post-1980s and post-1990s cohorts continued to navigate the legal system after encountering difficulties. The post-2000s cohort had a strong belief in the law at the beginning stage but became disillusioned with the response from legal actors and the judicial system.
- Intergenerational relationships and economic disadvantages are additional dimensions which may be added to the conceptualization of legal ambivalence.
- Government authorities and policymakers may consider making accommodations for adults who have family members facing allegations of domestic violence when conducting political background checks.

Introduction

The first Chinese Anti-Domestic Violence Law was implemented in 2016. This law includes the definition of domestic violence, responsibilities of relevant institutions (e.g. law enforcement agencies), determination of pursuing perpetrators' accountability, and the introduction of personal safety protection orders (Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, 2015). This recent intensification of top-down legal reform is significant not only in relation to the Chinese socio-legal context, but also more generally in relation to domestic violence survivors' attitudes toward seeking help through formal systems.

Individuals subjectively interpret laws in different situations and in turn manifest these interpretations into actions variously, which in general align with social norms and expectations in the context (Liu, 2023; Nalder, 2017). Therefore, the variety of pathways among domestic violence survivors should be considered when discussing the effects of Anti-Domestic Violence Law. Mills reminds us that understanding the intersection between biography and history (how broader social forces shape individuals' lives) is important when developing a sociological imagination (1959). Life course researchers took this idea seriously and developed a theoretical framework and analytical tools to investigate how lives are embedded in historical contexts. In particular, the concept of "cohort" is leveraged to map individual lives onto historical timelines (Mortimer & Shanahan, 2007). Norman Ryder (1965) conceptualized cohort as a structural category with unique conditions that can be used to index social and structural change.

Appropriating "cohort" to the Chinese context, this research uses the Reform and Opening-up movement (Gai Ge Kai Fang) (1978) as a significant historical event to categorize domestic violence survivors. China's Opening-up policy introduced private business and market incentives to what was previously a state-led planned system since 1978 (Garnaut et al., 2018). Over the past few decades, more than 800 million people have escaped from poverty and the country has posted average economic growth over 9 percent (The World Bank, 2023). Therefore, individuals who spent their childhood and adolescence in the era of the planned economy and those who were born after the Reform and Opening-up movement have markedly different life experiences. The different circumstances of each particular cohort have the potential to shape their worldviews respectively. Because worldview emerges from individuals' prior experiences and influence how they perceive and respond to new experiences (e.g. whether they should find legal support or not) (Chua & Engel, 2019).

Specifically, the post-1960's and post-1970's cohorts who were born before the movement have grown up in the period of the planned economy and then experienced the transition from a planned economy to market economy in adulthood. These people received education in more orthodox socialist values and traditional Chinese culture in their youth. The relative scarcity of material products and slow social mobility in the planned economy era rendered these cohorts of individuals accustomed to conforming to the norms established by others in their collective (such as getting married at an early age for a better material condition) (Sung & Chan, 1987). Although society is gradually opening up and new ideas are beginning to be introduced (e.g. Western culture), these cohorts still have conservative tendencies (Zhao, 2020). The post-1980's and post-1990's cohorts have experienced the one-child policy, the expansion of higher education admissions, the rise of the Internet, urbanization, and globalization (Zhang & Chen, 2014). This cohort has lived in a more inclusive society since their early life stages compared to the cohorts born prior to 1978 (Liu, 2020). The post-2000's birth cohorts have experienced similar historical

events as the post-1980's and post-1990's, but many of them are still college or graduate students without personal income.

While there is a growing literature on the heterogeneity of abuse experiences, few scholars have considered the intersection of law & society and life course perspective in the Chinese domestic violence context. This article leverages the contributions from both of these research traditions by unpacking how women survivors of domestic violence from different birth cohorts are dealing with the changing socio-legal context in leaving their abusive relationships in China.

Law and Society Perspective & Barriers of Disclosing Domestic Violence

Law and society scholars treat law and legal institutions as social phenomena. Researchers provide real-world assessment for law reform and social change. Moreover, this perspective clarifies that law cannot operate independently from its environment (Chua et al., 2023). The analysis of law, judicial opinions, statutes, and regulations should be situated in its embedded social and cultural context. Although sometimes studies begin with black letter law, scholars rely on field research to investigate how the law was working and taking actual effects. Law and society scholars document ordinary people's experiences to present how law works and fails in specific situations, instead of just providing elite legal actors' opinions.

Domestic violence scholarship encompasses survivors' experiences within the judicial system and their daily interactions with legal actors. Existing literature has shown that survivors are only acknowledged by the legal system when they conform to conventional expectations within a specific socio-legal context. For instance, Sweet (2019) found that credible survivors in the American context are those who extracted domestic violence from their life stories, explained abuse through the lens of "self-esteem", and performed survivorhood through "respectable" motherhood and sexuality. However, in the Chinese context, "worthy" survivors are people who described how their abusers challenged legal authorities or disturbed public order, submitted multiple external documents with a clear description of the domestic violence, or mentioned children as direct survivors of physical child abuse committed in public (Author's own, 2024; He, 2025).

Domestic Violence and Life Course Perspective

A life course perspective offers an analytical framework for understanding individual developmental changes in cultural and historical context. It highlights the interdependence of lives across historical, family, and individual levels (Mortimer & Shanahan, 2007). This paper addresses two concepts related to timing, age effects and cohort effects, to investigate the diversity of experiences among domestic violence survivors. The first term, age effects, refers to individuals' biological and social processes of aging, including people's physiological changes and accumulation of social experiences (Age-Period-Cohort Analysis, 2023). Ryder (1965) first popularized the second concept, cohort effects, as a means of providing a record of social change in 1960s. Each birth cohort has a specific social historical location, specifically a birth cohort is uniquely embedded in a social, economic, political, and cultural context (Alwin & McCammon, 2003; Elder, 1998; Wiggins, 2022). Ryder argued that the conditions, barriers, and resources that each cohort lives through can in turn shape their experiences and worldview. He explained that through the process of demographic metabolism, societal transformation happens. Specifically, the cohorts of young adults are significant when discussing potential social change, because they are old enough to engage in movements and not old enough to have become committed to a way

of life (Danigelis et al., 2007; Mannheim, 1952; Ryder, 1965). Lance Gore's (2020) research in the Chinese context echoes this conclusion by saying that the impact of important historical events would be particularly strong on young people because their later actions and experiences would tend to be influenced by their early crystallized outlook. Moreover, Riley and colleagues contribute to this area by focusing on issues "concerning the dynamic intersection of individuals and structure throughout the life course" (Dannefer et al., 2005, p. 298). For instance, Matilda Riley (1987) discussed the cohort succession process, which refers to people in a particular age-strata being replaced by younger entrants who come from more recent cohorts. Considering that each cohort has experienced different historical events, people in different birth cohorts age in different ways (develop new regularities of behaviors). Therefore, the members of each cohort can contribute to social change as they move through the age-stratified society. Additionally, the linked lives principle can be applied to domestic violence studies. It emphasizes that the individual's personal life is intertwined with those they are closely connected with (Landes & Settersten, 2019). This research concerns how survivors' leaving process is constrained by family interests.

Using the life course perspective to examine the long-term influences of domestic violence experiences is an emerging area in China. The handful of existing studies center on how survivors from various age groups handled domestic violence issues differently. Xiying Wang and her team (2019) focused on how women survivors from different age groups perceived their abusive experiences. Young survivors (under 44 years old) thought domestic violence qualified as a crime and found formal help to leave their abusers. On the contrary, the middle aged (45 to 59 years old) and older (above 60 years old) women survivors were more likely to stay in their abusive relationships and refer to Buddhist philosophy to justify their decisions. These survivors expressed that the abusive experiences are part of their destiny, because they may have conflicts with their partners in the previous lives (*qian shi*). The traditional Buddhist view of causality (*yin guo*) is that the present negative effects in individuals' lives are a result of negative circumstances that they created in the past. Thus, these survivors tend to find informal support (normally family relatives) to mitigate domestic violence. Based on these findings, Xuebin Gu's (2014) research paid attention to the intersection of age, patrilineal cultures, poverty, and ethnic group in domestic violence. The middle-aged Miao women's perceptions toward marital relationships, family, and local community were discussed by using oral testimony methods. The main finding is that these marginalized survivors who are living in Southwest China (a less developed region) were suffering from conservative local culture. For example, drinking, as a cultural marking of Miao, is considered as a hospitable form of entertainment. Thus, individuals' alcohol addiction and violent behaviors after drinking are acceptable in this subculture and resulting domestic violence.

The research reviewed above emphasized how age plays a significant role in survivors' perception of domestic violence. However, past research did not consider to what extent their findings reflect developmental differences attributable to age or differences in the intersection of historical and individual timelines, as measured by birth cohort.

The current research builds upon previous findings and asks how women survivors who were raised in different socio-legal contexts (defined by birth cohorts) navigate the legal system (e.g. interpret the Anti-Domestic Violence Law and decide on following actions), cultural

expectations, and conflicting expectations between family and individual interests when they are deciding whether or not to leave their abusive relationships.

Theoretical framework

This article builds on Pamela Neumann's (2023) conceptualization of legal ambivalence and adds a life course perspective as well. Neumann defined legal ambivalence as "women's hesitancy or reluctance concerning if, when, and how to pursue legal claims" (p.203). The dimensions of this conceptualization include cultural norm or gender role expectations, socio-economic constraints, the gendered structure of legal institutions, and the everyday interactions between women survivors and state officials. Though Neumann applied this theoretical framework in the social-cultural context in Nicaragua, the dimensions addressed in the conceptualized can be transferred to another context (Zhang, 2023).

Additionally, this research adds a life course perspective to examine how cohort effects, age effects and linked lives influence survivors' legal ambivalence and constrain their choices to mobilize the law or not (e.g. because of cultural expectations, marriage norms or intergenerational relationships).

Bridging law and society scholarship as well as life course perspectives on social change, this paper aims to examine how Chinese domestic violence survivors responded to their abusive experiences differently.

Data Collection

This project draws on data from three sources: one well-known law firm which worked on women's legal aid, one law firm that has a wide range of business including family law, and one NGO which developed the first domestic violence help-seeking application in mainland China. These organizations provided me with entry in the community I was interested in studying.

The first law firm included in my analysis was founded in September 2009; it is a non-profit law firm following the model of the former X University Law School Women's Legal Research and Service Center. I joined their workshop on the topic of "The Deterrent Effect of the Personal Safety Protection Order on Domestic Violence." The participants in this workshop included lawyers, social workers, and researchers. The process of this workshop was like a focus group. Thus, I had the opportunity to build connections with these experts in domestic violence areas and then collected rich data.

The second law firm is a medium-scale firm named Y. I have communicated with three lawyers who are working in the Family and Marriage department. One of the lawyers previously worked as a mediator in a basic level court in Beijing.

The NGO was founded in July 2015 (earlier than the Anti-Domestic Violence Law legislation), and it is a social organization dedicated to family and community development and the assistance of vulnerable groups. It is one of the most influential legal protection public welfare organizations for the rights and interests of women and children in China. I communicated with one staff member at first, then I joined their online mutual help group as a volunteer (to answer some questions about the Anti-Domestic Violence Law and how to find support from social

work agencies). Based on my own training across social work and Law & Society, I therefore argue I am able to respond to survivors' concerns in an appropriate way. Then, I introduced myself and my research design. The participants who were interested in participating in my research contacted me individually.

Participants

This project enrolled women survivors of domestic violence (who have separated from their abusers, either in the process of divorcing or after divorce) as well as service providers (lawyers and social workers) who are working in advocacy for survivors of domestic violence. These different kinds of participants' experiences may provide a panoramic view of the help-seeking process under the implementation of the Anti-Domestic Violence Law. All the participants were interviewed between September 2022 and April 2023.

To minimize the potential risks, I communicated with staff in the selected NGO first to make sure my research design was appropriate to interview survivors in a Chinese context. I have a social work degree and work experience with domestic violence survivors. Thus, I have the ability to communicate with disadvantaged people, and I can identify the participants who might not be appropriate for my project as well. Considering some participants may feel uncomfortable when recalling their traumatic experiences, I also provided information on mental health services (a social work agency located in Beijing) to my participants in case they needed it after the interview. Nevertheless, another important consideration is that this current research excludes participants who have psychological problems (determined by medical institutions) for ethical reasons. Detailed information on the enrolled participants is presented below.

This research includes 41 women domestic violence survivors. 3 participants come from the post-1960's generation, 8 participants come from the post-1970's generation, 16 participants come from the post-1980's generation, 9 participants come from the post-1990's generation, and 5 participants come from the post-2000's generation.

In addition, there are 8 lawyers who are working in domestic violence areas participating in this study, including 5 women and 3 men. 2 women social workers joined this research process as well. These professionals will not be categorized by birth cohort. Their general conclusions about the characteristics of the domestic violence survivors in different cohorts and their personal understanding of the enforcement of the Anti-Domestic Violence Law will be cited as a supplement when appropriate. Their front-line experience in the domestic violence area provides an insider perspective on domestic violence issues in China.

Method

Semi-structured interviews were used in this research. Each interview took approximately 50 minutes. Considering some participants were still in the process of divorcing (though separated from their abusers), interviews for this research were conducted at a place which was convenient and safe for the participants. Thus, five of the participants were interviewed online via WeChat, and the rest of the participants were interviewed face-to-face. A questionnaire was offered at the beginning of the interview to collect their demographic information, such as age, employment status, education level and so on. Then, the interview questions were formulated based on research questions and the existing literature, such as participants' perceptions towards family

and marriage (since the relationship between survivors and their abusers varies across the cohort groups, including marital and intergenerational relationships), participants' help-seeking processes, understanding of Chinese contested divorce process and so on.

Data Analysis

NVivo was used to process and analyze raw data. It is a software program designed for qualitative research and includes foreign languages. Thus, the transcripts in Chinese can be entered directly. These transcripts were coded using both deductive codes and inductive codes. The deductive process was based on the draft interview questions, which were categorized into background, family, marriage and external resources (including knowledge of the Anti-Domestic Violence Law) sections. In addition, Neumann's (2023) conceptualization of legal ambivalence was applied to identify participants who mentioned gender roles, socio-economic constraints, as well as interactions between themselves and legal actors. The inductive codes emerged through the interviews, mainly about participants' experiences with police officers, lawyers, and other survivors from mutual aid groups. The coding scheme was pilot tested in randomly selected interview transcripts, because this strategy was evaluated as an effective way to increase coding reliability (Yick & Oomen-Early, 2008).

Findings

This section presents how survivors from different birth cohorts perceived the Anti-Domestic Violence Law as well as how these subjective interpretations result in various social actions. In addition, lawyers' understanding on the survivors' individual choices is provided below. The findings were categorized into four themes: Participants from the post-1960's and post-1970's cohorts; Participants from the post-1980's and post-1990's cohorts; Participants from the post-2000's cohort; as well as cases which seemed to be outliers.

Participants from the post-1960's and post-1970's cohorts

The survivors coming from the post-1960's and post-1970's birth cohorts (earliest cohorts) have experienced domestic violence for years before this topic came into the public debate and caused legal consequences. In general, participants from these two birth cohorts in this project have lower education levels, personal income, and confidence towards the legal system than younger cohorts.

Ms. Cao summarized the changing public attitudes toward family and marriage and how the choice to stay or leave her abusive relationship depended on the social and legal context. She comes from the post-1960's cohort with a diploma. She had a small company with her abuser.

In my generation, getting married is a necessity for individuals. For those who are unmarried, they were treated as outliers. And few people got divorced 3 decades ago. Staying in the marriage (or even the abusive relationship), the woman's grievances only come from her husband. If the woman got divorced, it is certain that she has to face gossip from family members and acquaintances. But now we are living in a more civilized society and few people criticize other's privacy.

She added her attitudes towards legal professionals and the effects of the Anti-Domestic Violence Law.

It was common [to experience domestic violence] when I was a teenager. I saw my dad throw the plate out the window when he was angry. Do you think the police officer will treat it as domestic violence? Police officers can only comfort the two parties...Even if they use the detention for the abuser, what else? They (the abuser) will finally come back to the family.

Ms. Cao indicated that the social context in Beijing right now gives women more freedom if they want to get a divorce. However, she doesn't think getting access to the legal system and letting the police officers intervene in the case is beneficial. Based on the observation of her parent's marital relationship when she was a teenager, this participant viewed police officers as mediators who will not conduct further investigation in domestic violence cases. Thus, the survivors are in a disadvantaged position when proving themselves as survivors. This participant never called police officers though she suffered domestic violence for years.

Additionally, this participant addressed a significant topic— how to change the abusers' behavior pattern. The quotes above reflect that the survivor thought the abusers' behavior pattern would not be changed through the legal professionals' persuasion and education (shuo fu jiao yu). Even if there is punishment towards domestic violence abusers, after they are released and go back to the family, the domestic violence issue may continue to exist (Fraga Rizo et al., 2021). Considering China does not have court mandated domestic violence intervention programs, she was thinking about finding a therapist to help her abuser change his behavior. This participant was recruited from the online mutual support group.

The survivors' mistrust in the legal system was illustrated in the case of Ms. Jin as well, more specifically regarding how the survivor's economic interests and domestic violence compensation cannot be guaranteed. Ms. Jin's highest education level is high school. She has retired with a pension. She comes from the post-1960's cohort. When I conducted the interview, she was living with her son, daughter in law and two granddaughters. Her husband (the abuser) was living alone in another apartment. Ms. Jin said that,

I have an acquaintance who decided to leave her abusive husband. After their divorce, the survivor rented an apartment herself and is now living alone. [The apartment is registered under her ex-husband. The survivor had to moved out after divorce.] Her retirement allowance is barely enough for the rent. The rest of her expenses are now supported by her son. Isn't this a nuisance to the child?

This discussion reflects that the participant worried about the division of property in the divorce petition. Her acquaintance's experience has demonstrated that leaving the abuser may cause decreased quality of life. An important piece of contextual information is that normally the man prepares the apartment before getting married in China. If the apartment is registered under the man (without his partner's name), then it is viewed as the man's pre-marital property.

Ms. Jin further explained that if the perpetrator remarried, the house he is living in now may become the joint property of the new wife (if he adds his new wife's name) or be given to his

child with the new wife. The following quote by Ms. Jin presented her attitudes towards getting divorced:

If you decide to divorce, it is very important to find a good lawyer to fight for property. I cannot leave my son's apartment to others. [Entering the legal system may put her son's property at risk, so this survivor lives separated from her abuser without divorce]

Considering the potential economic risk, this participant has stayed in her abusive relationship for more than a decade. Her coping strategy is to physically separate herself from her abuser.

I asked this participant how she obtained relevant information and legal knowledge. She said she mainly relied on her friends' expressions, because *"I don't know how to find the official explanation. They [legal authorities] should increase publicity efforts to let ordinary people understand. [the content of the Anti-Domestic Violence Law and available services]"*

One participant who is over 50 years old (in the post-1960's cohort) explained how the criminalization of domestic violence may influence her family interests. This participant (Ms. Zhu) has retired with a pension. Her highest education level is high school. Ms. Zhu said:

I have called the police. And the police told me that the abuser's criminal record not only influences himself, but also my child's career. If the immediate family members are serving prison sentences, the child cannot pass the political background check. (# Participant 24)

Ms. Zhu was hesitating about whether to sue the abuser. She has understood that civil servants, soldiers, and police all need to pass a political background check in China. These kinds of careers are always considered as good choices for young people because they are decent and stable work. Thus, the participant was weighing the consequences for her child. If she pursues perpetrator accountability, her individual action may go public and in turn affect her child's career.

These quotations reflect the participants' deep concern with the division of joint property and suggest their skepticism about the current legal system's ability to protect their interests. Furthermore, these survivors' stories highlight the legal loopholes that could potentially have unintended consequences for their adult children.

Participants from the post-1980's and post-1990's cohorts

A lawyer discussed divorce cost issues and summarized the general patterns among different cohorts:

For many litigants, it is a long process from the initial consultation to the formal entrustment and divorce proceedings. It may be the first time she was beaten, then consulted a lawyer. After that, the two reconciled again. Then a few months later the domestic violence happened again. After this pattern repeated several times, the survivor finally decided to divorce. ... In general, women survivors who come from the post-1980's and post-1990's cohorts have stable income, strong legal consciousness (jiao

qiang de fa lv yi shi), which caused a higher divorce rate than other cohorts... The cost of divorce proceedings in Beijing is around 30,000 yuan (\$4,350), the cycle is normally at least one year. If there is a matter of child custody, it would take a longer time. (Ms. Yu)

The quotes of the lawyer reflected the characteristics of the survivors from the post-1980's and post-90's cohorts. They are the most independent individuals in this research. All of them have personal income and a bachelor's or higher degree. Because these participants were born after the Reform and Opening-Up movement, the context when they were growing up and material conditions, they enjoyed are much better than the earlier cohorts.

Ms. Yang, who was born in 1980's, clearly described her leaving process and her subjective perception regarding the Anti-Domestic Violence Law and legal actors' capacity. Ms. Yang is an interior designer with stable personal income. She briefly introduced her abuser's condition at first. *"My ex-husband drank every single day after work. The refrigerator was always full of beer. He started by smashing electronics and then proceeded to beat me."*

This survivor searched the content of the Anti-Domestic Violence Law herself and called the police officers for support because she believed her ex-husband's behaviors fit the definition of domestic violence. The police officers' intervention would in turn help her apply for a personal safety protection order. At this beginning phase of her leaving process, Ms. Yang had confidence in the legal system.

However, *"the police didn't care about the victim's safety...they even questioned me why I irritated a drunken man."*

After noticing that police officers are "helpless" in her case, this survivor changed her strategy as "stalling for time" (tuo shi jian). She went back to her family of origin and stayed at there for half a year. Eventually, her ex-husband said, *"Let's get divorced"*.

Ms. Yang has economic independence, and she never talked about division of the property, which is much different than the survivors from the post-1960's and post-1970's cohorts. Living independently and bearing the cost of time is the key to decoupling in this case.

Compared to the participants who gave up seeking formal help through the legal system after encountering difficulties, the case of Ms. Wang introduced below showed how she navigated this process. Ms. Wang was recruited through the law firm and working with a lawyer to maximize her interests and leave her abuser. She has an online store with a stable income.

Ms. Wang introduced the communication process with the police officers at first:

15 minutes after I called the police, the police arrived at my house (the abuser had already left the site). Then, they directly said that this is a family conflict, they can't intervene in it. The police officer emphasized that they can only mediate family issues.

She still felt angry when she told me about her help-seeking process with the police officers.

Of course, I am not willing to compromise, I said you have to follow the procedure. The police report must be signed, and the warning letter must be issued, and I must also be given a report for the identification of the injury, so that I can use it for my divorce petition as evidence. Then, one police officer said that “I don’t want to increase my workload”. He even told me that “you are not considered domestic violence. You were only hit once every other year. If this is the case, let me tell you, I also beat my wife, which is a normal thing.”

This quote reflects that Ms. Wang has much knowledge of the proceedings of contested divorce and the importance of using external documents as evidence (e.g. police record). She searched online and acted step by step to play this game.

... (Ms. Wang sighed and said that)

Good Heavens (Wo de lao tian ye), this is how the Chinese People’s Police officers dealt with domestic violence. I asked these two police officers how to teach my abuser a lesson (deter the abuser). One of them explained that “unless you let him beat you continuously in a short period of time. And it will cause you minor injuries (forensic identification is divided into minimal injuries and minor injuries, and minor injuries are considered serious). Under this kind of situation, we can take corresponding detention measures.”

Based on the police officer’s response, we can see that the standard of detention is difficult to meet. In other words, the Anti-Domestic Violence Law is actually applied to deal with the serious results rather than intervene early in domestic violence cases to avoid continued abuse. When I was conducting this research, this survivor was communicating with lawyers to find another strategy to bypass police officers and collect evidence herself.

Discussion of the police officers’ lack of training occurred in the workshop, which was organized by the X Law Firm, and one lawyer (Mr. Lin) said:

Some police officers have very limited knowledge of the Anti-Domestic Violence Law and the judicial interpretation of Personal Safety Protection Order (issued by the Supreme People’s Court). It brings great difficulties to our work. For example, the police were called and they went to the location of the incident (normally the perpetrator’s house), but the perpetrator ran away before the police arrived. This situation may repeat several times with the couples. But the police did not follow up with the investigation. Then, it is extremely difficult for the survivor to gather evidence on her own.

Though it is a difficult legal system, survivors who finally enter it may do so because they were not able to mobilize help from their personal social networks. Ms. Zhao comes from the post-1980’s cohort and experienced domestic violence for several years. She is now in the process of divorcing her abuser. This participant has personal savings, which allowed her to use an experienced senior lawyer. She explained:

He hit me hard on the head with his fist, hit my head with an iron lounge chair, blood was all over the floor, and dragged me to the bathroom while I was calling for help. He flushed the blood with freezing water in the winter, and I got three stitches afterwards...

Ms. Zhao tried to find help from family members and friends first, however,

He [the abuser] has two-faced personality, and he is too polite to those around him. After he abused me at home, he still pretended to be a good person and polite in front of others. His family thought it was a trivial matter and blamed me for calling the police because of this small thing (xiao shi). I get nervous easily, constantly reading his expression to avoid risks. I want to know what side of his personality it is.

Ms. Zhao's family members downplayed her claim of domestic violence as a household affair. She had to rely on herself to interpret the abuser's behaviors every second for security reasons when they were living together. This participant took a long time to realize that she could not receive support from her family members and started seeking help from her lawyer.

Survivors from the post-1980's and post-1990's cohorts in general searched for information on the Anti-Domestic Violence Law or other survivors' leaving processes online before they asked for help from police officers or lawyers. They have the basic knowledge not only for their own rights but also regarding how to ask legal actors to perform their duties. These better educated survivors with stable personal income have the resources to navigate the legal system. These advantages of the post-1980's and post-1990's cohorts are due to their location in historical time, more specifically, they have experienced widespread college enrollment expansion since 1999 (Wang, 2021). The old marriage norms and pressure from the families of origin are not mentioned in this birth cohort.

Participants from the post-2000's cohort

Participants from the post-2000's cohort are all college students. Compared to the earliest cohorts, one significant characteristic of the post-2000's cohort is that the Anti-Domestic Violence Law passed when they were teenagers. Considering the popularization of the internet, people in this cohort get information easier than the earlier cohorts. For example, the Supreme People's Court of the People's Republic of China, All-China Women's Federation, and many law firms have official accounts on Weibo and WeChat, and these free platforms make getting access to information possible. Additionally, Chinese college students are normally required to live on campus, which allowed college student survivors to keep a physical distance from their abusers and browse relevant support information without surveillance. Thus, the post-2000's cohort expressed extremely high expectations of legal actors and the judicial system at the beginning phase of finding formal support as presented below. However, the biggest challenges faced these participants is that they do not have stable personal income, which means they are not independent from their families of origin. These participants started off positioning the law as panacea, then they were disappointed with the unsatisfying results.

Xiao Fang was recruited from a mutual online support group. She told me that her father has committed physical and verbal violence to her and her mother for several years. So, this participant searched the content of the Anti-Domestic Violence Law herself and browsed the

official account of the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) before going to the police officer.

The police told me that there are only children who are wrong, and there are no parents who are wrong. Then, they kept scolding me for being shameless, and said they were not afraid of my complaining (tou su).

Xiao Fang further explained that she had read the "Provisions on Application of Personal Safety Protection Order" (which was issued by SPC). Thus, she wanted to file a police report and in turn use it to apply for a personal protection order for her mother and herself. But she found that "the police officers are unhelpful. I feel very disappointed."

Xiao Fang's experience reflects that the police officer prioritized the intergenerational relationship rather than the abusive relationship when dealing with civil cases. When this "child" made an accusation about the parent's behavior, she was regarded as a rebellious, trouble-making person. Her desire to protect herself and her mother was totally ignored by the legal professionals. When I conducted this interview, this participant had joined an online survivor mutual support group for 2 months and did not plan to access the legal system again. Although her quotes mentioned that she intended to file a complaint against the police officer, she did not do that in the end. The one-shot experience in the police station shattered all her illusions about the Chinese legal system. Her situation may be explained by the fact that she does not have knowledge and time to contend with police officers.

Another college student Xiao Sun's experience is more complicated because of her conflict with her mother. They have not entered legal proceedings yet.

He banged on the door for an hour, and I stood at the door and got ready to fight him. That's great, the door of the new house is very strong (the participant and her mother rented a house to separate themselves from the abuser). ... Ten years later, we finally made a call to the police. [The participant's mother stayed in this abusive relationship without finding external help. Finally, the participant called the police as an adult.] When the police came, I found that he was actually not that scary. He is just an 85kg middle-aged man whose body was hollowed out by wine and meat (bei jiu rou tao kong shen ti) and his brain was ruined. In the second half of the night, my mother and I stayed in the hotel, and we didn't fall asleep till four o'clock in the morning. I was determined to get my mom away from him, and I figured everything would be better.

This quote reflects that Xiao Sun had positive attitudes regarding police officers and the legal system. However, her mother did not believe the legal actors could help them when the abuse escalated.

After waking up the next morning, he probably calmed down. He admitted his mistake very regretfully and returned my mother's mobile phone to her. Mom knew he would do it again. However, she had a lot of worries (if we leave my father). I am still in college and my brother is still in high school. If we separated from him, he would definitely harass my mother's relatives and friends. If things get serious (e.g. filing a domestic

violence lawsuit) and he will lose his job in the regional government. It is possible for people who are not normal (my father) to go crazy and commit crimes against someone.

Xiao Sun presented that her own attitudes on domestic violence tended toward definitely leaving the abusive relationship. At the same time, she knows that she cannot impose her opinion on her mother. She tried to understand her mother's perception of "family". It is as if she believed that sacrificing her personal safety and happiness could at least prevent more serious consequences (such as losing access to her children, division of property). Xiao Sun's presentation implied that her mother did not believe the legal system could ensure the extended family's safety if she left the abusive relationship. Other potential serious consequences are that a domestic violence allegation would affect the living conditions of the teenage children and the abuser's career prospects. Additionally, these quotes implied that this college student survivor tended to compromise and follow their mother's decisions, though her personal perception on marital and intergenerational relationships maintains zero tolerance for violence.

This section presents that intergenerational relationships and the mothers' attitudes towards marriage and family influenced the survivors from the post-2000 cohort's final decision on mobilizing the law or not. The cases referenced in this section also reflected that the survivors from the post-2000 cohort are vulnerable when facing family pressure (mother survivors hold different attitudes) or unhelpful legal actors. Being a good child is more important than their survivor identity in the opinion of some of the police officers and survivors themselves.

Cases which seemed to be outliers

The following two cases are survivors who were separating themselves from their families of origin (they not only cut off contact with their abusers but also other family members) and putting aside the domestic violence issues.

Xiang is a college student who actively shared her experiences in the online support group.

The blood relationship between me and my parents is not the product of my choice, it just stems from their inexplicable sexual intercourse... Now that I am being pestered by so-called family members again, I must stand firm and never return. I have my pursuit and mission, and I have no obligation to become a victim. I can only change what I can change and control what I can control. What I have to do now is to firmly refuse to go home to prevent myself from becoming the next victim.

Xiang put aside the domestic violence issues and kept telling herself "eyes front (wang qian kan)" in a firm and rational tone, without any subjective feelings. She did not express sadness, anger, or disappointment towards her experiences during the interview.

Another survivor "Miao Miao" told me:

My father abused my mother at home, smashing doors and windows at two o'clock in the morning. I went out and tried to stop him, but he grabbed me by the collar and slapped my mouth. Then, I had perforated eardrum.

The survivor, her parents, her younger brother, and her grandparents were living together when the abuse happened. When her father abused her mother and her, her grandparents did nothing. Then Miao Miao called police. The police officers just mediated the two parties. After the police officers left their house, Miao Miao's grandmother said *"Even if I get beaten, I won't call the police. It was originally a trivial matter, but you made it so serious."*

After that, Miao Miao immediately found a house, signed the contract, and moved out three days later.

It is not easy for Chinese survivors to cut ties with their families of origin. It is definitely immoral under the Confucian value system even though the family members conducted violent behaviors to the survivors (Jackson & Liu, 2017).

Discussion and Conclusion

The survivors coming from the post-1960's and post-1970's cohorts hold a more conservative attitude towards marriage and family than the later cohorts. These survivors are not familiar with the content of the Anti-Domestic Violence Law and other available services in Beijing. Their decisions on whether or not to mobilize the law depend on the observation of their acquaintances' experiences. For the survivors who ultimately decide to stay in their abusive relationships, their inner peace comes from subjective feelings of protecting their family's interests and children's future. These survivors were born before the Reform and Opening-up movement and grew up in a less-developed context (both economically and legally). Because of these conditions, social norms played a significant role in the average person's daily life. Family or marriage as significant institutions can guarantee people's basic standard of living and let them meet the social expectations of a "normal person". Thus, these earlier survivors are in relatively weak positions compared to the later birth cohorts because of their cumulative disadvantages, such as less education, poverty and an unfriendly socio-legal context (Dannefer, 2003). It is worth mentioning that some of these older survivors had limited knowledge of specialized terminology when they recounted their past experiences. These survivors' narratives may influence legal actors' judgement (Durfee, 2015).

Survivors from the post-1980's and post-1990's cohorts are more assertive to mobilize the Anti-Domestic Violence Law. These participants did not passively accept the police officers' indifference to domestic violence cases. Rather, they clearly described the content of the law then asked the police officers perform their duties. Their narratives of their past experiences and future expectations are more centered around themselves which is different from the older cohorts who mentioned family relatives' safety, children's living condition and even the abusers' situation. Both age and cohort effects differentiate the experiences of these cohorts. The post-1980's and post-1990's cohorts agreed with the idea of zero tolerance for domestic violence and used their own ways to leave abusers if they encountered unhelpful legal actors. The private feeling of peace for these two cohorts are starting a new life (National Working Committee on Children and Women under State Council, 2021).

Participants from the post-2000's cohort who are college students and represented themselves and their mothers may encounter more difficulties than those who only represented themselves in the formal support system. Although the participants from this later cohort position themselves

as being with the law with extremely high expectations, they lacked resources to manipulate the legal actors and judicial system. Additionally, multiple social roles and intergenerational relationships in the context of Confucianism led college student participants to prioritize their role as “kids” over their role as survivors. Therefore, even though these young people perceived violence in marriage or intergenerational relationships as unacceptable, they did not effectively mobilize the law.

Based on the lawyer participants’ experiences, survivors who come from recent cohorts with stable employment and legal knowledge on the Articles are better able to garner external support. These survivors spend less time in the process of leaving their abusive relationships than earlier cohorts. Although Beijing is becoming a more accepting city, traditional thoughts like I discussed above and attorney fees still constrain survivors’ choices. Moreover, the lawyer participants depicted structural level problems. For instance, the critique of the poor law enforcement reflects that a top-down legal reform is needed to address the domestic violence problem.

Moreover, some outlier survivors isolated themselves from their families of origin and gave up pursuing perpetrators’ accountability. These survivors expressed that they cannot bear any more pressure, so the best strategy to deal with their past abusive experiences is putting the relevant issues away for now and focusing on their own lives. Cutting ties with their abusers (fathers), the other survivors (mothers), and the rest of their family members, these outliers give up the pursuit for family affection. At the same time, they face moral pressure in a Confucian culture because of their disengagement from extended families, which is much different from cutting ties with ex-partners (abusers).

The main contribution of this paper is adding a life course perspective to Neumann’s (2023) studies on legal ambivalence to address survivors’ location in historical time (each cohort has experienced different historical events) and individual time (age effects). Changing social and cultural norms result in the variety of responses to domestic violence and mobilization of the law in China. The Reform and Opening-up movement brought tremendous social change in the past four decades, which allowed more recent birth cohorts to have more resources to break free from the conservative values of family and marriage. Moreover, individual time (chronological age) together with the complicated intergenerational relationships and economic disadvantages may impede the survivors who positioned themselves as being with the law to mobilize the Anti-Domestic Violence Law and pursue perpetrator accountability. For government authorities and policy makers, a locally-devised solution is needed to ensure that the criminalization of domestic violence does not impact the career development of perpetrator’s adult children.

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