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# Exploring Situational Triggers of Intimate Partner Femicide within the Ecological Framework: Evidence from Married Females in China

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## ABSTRACT

In the extensive research on intimate partner violence (IPV), the emphasis on female victimization has led to a detailed exploration of intimate partner femicide (IPF) as its most severe outcome. Although numerous studies have investigated IPF risk factors, the specific situational triggers leading to these incidents remain under-examined, particularly in the Chinese context, where research on this topic is notably limited. This study addresses this gap by analyzing 238 Chinese judicial cases of IPF involving married females. Utilizing an ecological framework and qualitative analysis, the study identifies situational triggers of IPF across various levels: societal (e.g. bride price conflicts, return to *Niangjia*, oppression and termination of economic dependence in uxorilocal marriage), relationship (e.g. broken intimate relationships, infidelity, and situational arguments in marital life), and individual (e.g. offender with mental illness, offender suicide, and alcohol use by the offender). The study, however, finds no evidence that community-level factors serve as situational triggers of IPF. This study not only empirically validates the identified situational triggers of IPF but also enhances the ecological framework's applicability in understanding this phenomenon.

## KEYWORDS



Intimate partner femicide; ecological framework; victim; homicide; China

## Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a pervasive global issue, with intimate partner homicide (IPH) representing its most severe manifestation. Notably, intimate partners are responsible for approximately 13.5% of all homicides (Stöckl et al., 2013). The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2014) reports that while males constitute 79% of global homicide victims, females disproportionately suffer from familial and intimate partner homicides, accounting for two-thirds of such cases. Furthermore, data from 2017 indicate that over one-third of female homicide victims were killed by a current or former intimate partner (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2019). Consequently, research into the determinants of IPH and the development of preventative strategies often focuses on intimate partner femicide (IPF).

Global awareness of IPV surged with the women's rights movement of the 1970s (Corradi & Stöckl, 2014). The 1990s subsequently ushered in a focus on "risk factors" in

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academic research, leading to numerous studies on the risk factors for IPV and related homicides. The existing literature extensively analyzes the relationship between IPV and various factors at individual, institutional, societal, and national levels, proposing diverse models and strategies for predicting, intervening in, and managing IPV (Bagwell-Gray, 2016; Cunha & Gonçalves, 2019; Echeburúa et al., 2009; Frye et al., 2008; McFarlane et al., 1999). Despite identifying numerous risk factors, the specific situational triggers of IPV, particularly those leading to homicide, remain elusive, partly due to challenges in accessing comprehensive research data (Freestone et al., 2017). These situational triggers, which serve as the final impetus for potential offenders to commit a crime at a specific moment, involve the fundamental motives for violence. Understanding these triggers requires a deep comprehension of criminal intent and relies heavily on qualitative oral or textual narratives rather than mere quantitative data. Consequently, studies focusing on triggers specific to IPF are scarce, and none have examined this within the Chinese context. Investigating these situational triggers is crucial for developing targeted screening tools and procedures that more accurately reflect the intricate dynamics of partner violence.

To construct a dataset, this study utilizes detailed narratives from Chinese judicial documents – including prosecution records, defense statements, surviving victim testimonies, eyewitness testimonies, court records, and related documents. This study seeks to identify the situational triggers of IPF, contributing to the scholarly understanding of the underlying conditions of IPF and providing qualitative insights to enhance theoretical frameworks aimed at preventing IPF.

## Literature review

### *Situational triggers of IPF*

Previous research has well-established the correlation between risk factors, such as alcohol consumption by offenders (Catalá-Miñana et al., 2017; Eckhardt et al., 2015; Sharps et al., 2001), access to firearms (Glass et al., 2008), coercive control (Hamberger et al., 2017; Stark & Hester, 2019; Tyson, 2020), and the act of leaving the intimate relationship (Nicolaidis et al., 2003), with an increased likelihood of females becoming IPF victims. These factors, deeply embedded in both personal and societal contexts, set the stage for potential violence. However, situational triggers – a specific category of risk factors – remain relatively under-explored compared to more generalized risk factors. While the identification of these generalized risk factors has significantly advanced the understanding of intimate partner femicide, situational triggers provide a more focused perspective on the immediate incidents that directly lead to lethal violence (Babcock et al., 2004; Hui, 2023). This concept shifts the emphasis to specific, immediate events that precipitate femicide.

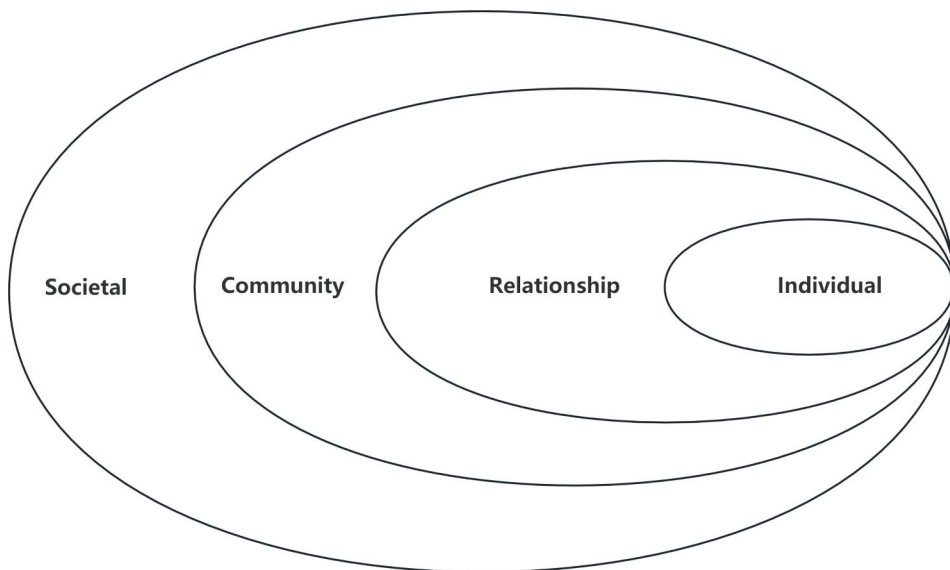
More specifically, situational triggers underscore the significance of immediate, tangible events or interactions that, when combined with existing risk factors, ignite the spark leading to lethal violence. Such situations are marked by acute stressors, sudden escalations, or critical incidents (Brown et al., 2009) that act as the final catalyst in the complex interplay of factors leading to IPF. For instance, consider a scenario where a woman filed for divorce, leading to ongoing arguments with her husband, who refused to accept the separation. Eventually, the woman decided to leave the marital home. One day, after consuming alcohol, the husband arrived at her new residence and fatally stabbed her. In this case,

divorce, arguments, separation, and alcohol consumption are all risk factors for IPF, but this study posits that alcohol consumption specifically acted as the situational trigger. So, an analogy to show these situations is:

A term best defined in analogy to the “trigger of a gun:” A bullet cannot be discharged without the operation of the trigger, which then becomes a necessary component in the gun’s functioning (Freestone et al., 2017).

### ***Ecological framework***

Interpreting social phenomena through a holistic framework has long been a strategy in social science research. Since the functionalist era, scholars like Durkheim have viewed society as a structure of interconnected components to clarify complex societal relationships (Durkheim, 2005). In IPV research, early theories often focused on individual-level explanations, such as psychopathological reasons for violence against females (Bland & Orn, 1986; Hamberger & Hastings, 1986; Stark & Flitcraft, 1988), or on socio-political explanations, with Dobash and Dobash (1979) arguing from a feminist perspective that such violence stems from patriarchal structures that institutionalize male dominance and control over females, using violence to perpetuate this power dynamic. However, the limitations of single-factor theories in accounting for IPV led to a shift toward more systemic and integrative theoretical models (Lawson, 2012). Consequently, in the realm of IPV, systemic theories and ecological models have gained prominence. Straus (1973) incorporated elements of general systems theory, such as “positive feedback” and “negative feedback,” into IPV analysis, suggesting that violence is a systemic issue rather than a result of individual pathology. This approach has found support across research into broader family and marital issues (Abera et al., 2020; Gelles & Maynard, 1987; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). Additionally, some perspectives offer an ecological viewpoint on IPV and broader domestic violence issues. Bronfenbrenner (1979) provided an ecological perspective based on anthropological study, which gained widespread acceptance, with subsequent developments by Belsky (1980) and Dutton (2006). The broad ecological theory encompasses such violence within four levels of consideration: macrosystem, exosystem, microsystem, and individual. The ecological framework developed by Heise (1998), often seen as an extension of such an ecological model, has been particularly influential. Building upon the foundational work by Heise (1998) and subsequent efforts (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005; Heise, 2011), the ecological framework is articulated through four distinct levels: societal, community, relationship, and individual (see Figure 1). More specifically, at the individual level, the framework underscores the critical role of personal history and biological factors in shaping an understanding of both the offender’s and victim’s backgrounds, highlighting the intricate interplay of personal predispositions and experiences in the risk of IPV. At the relationship level, the focus shifts to partner dynamics, emphasizing how interpersonal interactions can contribute to IPV by examining the influence of the immediate social circle, including family and friends. The community level expands the analysis to societal structures and institutions, like neighborhood characteristics and social networks, examining their impact on IPV. At the societal level, the framework addresses broader norms, cultural beliefs, and policies that influence gender perceptions, violence, and relationships.



**Figure 1.** Ecological framework.

Some view Heise's ecological framework as a component of the broader ecological theory (Ali & Naylor, 2013), while others argue that it represents an independent, integrated theoretical perspective distinct from broader ecological theory (Lawson, 2012). This argument arises because Heise's framework attempts to integrate feminist views into the ecological approach, moving away from the polarized perspectives that currently dominate the IPV academic discourse (Lawson, 2012). While this study does not resolve the debate over the positioning of Heise's framework within broader ecological theory, it acknowledges the critical discussions surrounding it for future scholarly engagement.

This study is grounded in Heise's ecological framework due to its comprehensive applicability to complex issues, not only in IPV research but also in its sub-domains, such as IPH and IPF (B. Kim, 2022). The widespread application of this framework in IPV/IPH/IPF research, alongside endorsements from institutions such as the World Health Organization (2023), the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2023), and the International Rescue Committee (2019), underscores its utility in identifying, preventing, and addressing violence within intimate partner and domestic relationships on a broad scale. The framework posits that behavior results from the interaction between individuals and their social environments, with behavioral development influenced by various societal (Ali & Naylor, 2013). Recent studies within the IPF domain have further substantiated the ecological framework's significant operational value in deciphering the complexities of IPF (Caicedo-Roa & Cordeiro, 2023; S. Kim et al., 2022; Sorrentino et al., 2022). Thus, the application of ecological frameworks, particularly Heise's model, to IPF research signifies a shift toward a more integrative and systemic understanding. By acknowledging the interplay of factors across different ecological levels, this framework enables a more

robust and nuanced analysis of IPF, thereby contributing to the development of targeted prevention and intervention strategies.

### **The current Chinese context**

The determinants of violence against females vary significantly across regions (Abramsky et al., 2011). In China, substantial studies have been conducted on IPV, leading to the development of numerous predictive tools and intervention strategies (K. L. Chan, 2012; T. Wang et al., 2017; Wong et al., 2016; Xiao Xu et al., 2005; Yang et al., 2019). These studies span various disciplines, not only including criminology and criminal justice, but also medicine (Q. Li et al., 2022; Peng et al., 2020), psychology (Xiaohe Xu et al., 2022), economics (C. K. Li et al., 2023; Z. Wang & Sekiyama, 2023; Zheng et al., 2021), education (L. Wang, 2019; D. Zhou et al., 2021), social work (Tam et al., 2016; Tiwari et al., 2010), employing quantitative, qualitative, and mixed research methodologies.

However, research specifically on IPF, a subfield of IPV/IPH in China, remains limited despite a substantial body of global research on this subject (S. Zhao, 2022). The sparse investigations into IPF within China are concerning, given the country's unique socio-cultural dynamics that may influence IPF differently from Western contexts. Existing studies mainly address the aftermath and characteristics of IPF incidents, such as characterizing IPF (Dayan, 2022; Densley et al., 2017; Shuhong, 2020), exploring the perpetrator-victim relationship in IPF (S. Zhao, 2022), and examining post-killing responses among IPF offenders (A. C. Chan et al., 2010). However, there remains a significant gap in understanding the situational triggers of IPF in China.

In one aspect, the discourse on homicide in China – a society that venerates the myth of harmony and stability – is frequently considered sensitive, thereby hindering the expansion of related discussions (H. C. Chan et al., 2019). From another aspect, although the development of various disciplines has contributed to the early stages of criminology, the unclear interconnections among these fields demonstrate that Chinese criminology lacks specialized scholars (Shuai & Liu, 2023). Consequently, these factors collectively indicate that crime research in China faces significant challenges, particularly in terms of devoting greater academic attention to more specific subtypes of crime. This also explains why studies in the field of IPF are so scarce in the Chinese context, highlighting the need for more scholarly exploration to develop targeted interventions and preventative strategies tailored to China.

## **Research method**

### **Data**

The data for this study were collected from Chinese judgment cases available on China Judgments Online (CJO). In 2013, following extensive academic debates and a series of pilot projects, Chinese judicial authorities commenced uploading court judgments to CJO. This initiative has transformed CJO into the most extensive judgment database in China and made it accessible to the public (Liebman et al., 2020). The availability of these judicial documents has provided the academic community with an unprecedented resource, and researchers in criminology and criminal justice have extensively utilized CJO data (Qi, 2020;

Qiu et al., 2023; Xin & Cai, 2019; Y. Zhou et al., 2023). As of 2023, CJO contains over 140 million judicial documents and has amassed more than 100 billion visits (China Judgments Online, 2023). In this context, the present study draws on the sample from CJO for in-depth analysis. More specifically, the search strategy within CJO meticulously needed to be designed with specific criteria, so this study set the search keyword to “marriage,” case name to “intentional homicide”<sup>1</sup>, case type to “criminal case,” trial procedure to “criminal first-instance procedure”<sup>2</sup>, document type to “judgment,” court tier to “grassroots court”<sup>3</sup>, case reason to “criminal reason” and set the time frame to “2016–2020”<sup>4</sup>. This strategy yielded 383 judgments pertinent to IPF ( $N = 383$ ). An initial screening excluded cases that did not align with the study focus, such as those where the victim was not female, resulting in a final sample size of  $N = 238$ . The specific analyses for this study were the sections of litigation record, facts, reasons, and judgment result in adjudicatory documents<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, it is undeniable that the analysis content will be affected by legal culture (further discussed in the limitations section).

## Method

This study employs qualitative thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), who defined it as a technique for identifying, examining, and presenting patterns found in data. Braun and Clarke (n.d.) also emphasized that thematic analysis provides a structured approach to organizing and detailing research data sets comprehensively. Specifically, thematic analysis is used to identify patterns of meaning, or themes, within a dataset that responds to a research question, with these patterns being generated through a meticulous process of data familiarization, coding, and theme refinement, making the method versatile and applicable to diverse datasets and research questions.

Additionally, this study employs a macro theoretical framework, namely the ecological framework, to explore IPF situational triggers in the context of China. Hence, in the coding strategy, such an approach that combines both inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-driven) coding methods is generally named a mixed coding strategy. As a result, it enables researchers to generate codes from the data while simultaneously applying existing theoretical frameworks. Proudfoot (2023) argues that this approach aligns with contemporary qualitative research methodologies, signifying an evolution beyond the traditional dichotomy of inductive versus deductive coding. Furthermore, by leveraging established theoretical frameworks and allowing for the emergence of new insights, this strategy offers a balance between stability and innovation (Morgan & Wells, 2016). Its widespread application across humanities and social sciences highlights its dual emphasis on structure and critical reflection (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Swain, 2018).

According to Kuckartz (2019), p. 185, mixed coding typically begins deductively by establishing a coding frame, followed by inductive coding within research data. In this study, the deductive phase involved identifying situational triggers for IPF within the ecological framework, resulting in four superordinate clusters: societal, community, relationship, and individual levels. In the inductive phase, similar to other studies focusing on violence against females, the researcher conducted solo coding (Subramanian, 2023). To ensure coding validity, the six-stage strategy proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was rigorously applied<sup>6</sup>. The researcher first familiarized with the data, excluding irrelevant cases, and then conducted a detailed review to highlight pertinent contents. Preliminary



codes were generated by comparing the data with the four established clusters (Notably, this study ultimately identified only three superordinate themes, which are discussed in detail later). Following initial coding, a review and organization of potential themes were conducted. Like other solo coding by a single researcher, a phased repetitive coding strategy was employed, involving a one-month interval between coding sessions to compare and refine codes, thus preventing premature conclusions and fostering the emergence of unintended themes (Kawamoto et al., 2023; Y. Liu, 2023). Such a strategy is believed to enhance the validity of the analysis (Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019). Finally, the themes derived from inductive coding were then mapped onto the ecological framework, forming a thematic model that informs subsequent findings and discussion. The Appendix shows an example of coding for the thematic analysis used in this study.

## Findings

Through deductive analysis, this study identifies a primary theme: the situational triggers of IPF, and four subordinate themes at societal, community, relationship, and individual levels. However, subsequent inductive analysis reveals no situational trigger at the community level. This finding aligns with prior studies suggesting that community-level factors – such as neighborhood environment and social cohesion – do not significantly influence IPF (Frye & Wilt, 2001; Frye et al., 2008). A plausible interpretation is that community factors do not directly trigger IPF, as situational triggers of IPF predominantly involve direct interpersonal dynamics and are deeply rooted in broader sociocultural conflicts. While neighborhood and institutional factors may shape attitudes toward IPF, they appear less likely to act as immediate catalysts – a point that will be further discussed later. Furthermore, the inductive analysis phase elucidated sub-themes within each subordinate theme (see Figure 2 and Table 1). Table 1 illustrates the prominence of different themes and subthemes across the 238 cases of IPF. It indicates that, within the ecological framework,

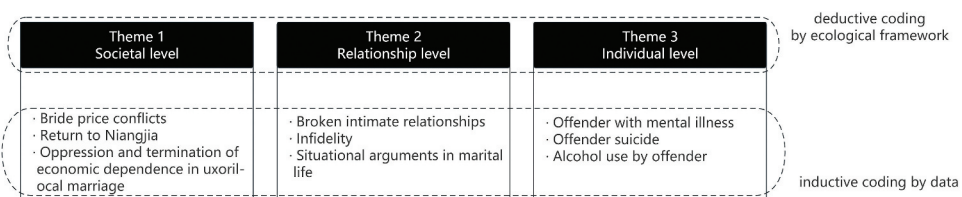


Figure 2. Thematic analysis.

Table 1. Distribution of cases by themes.

Themes	Subthemes	Cases	Total
Societal level	Bride price conflicts	7	20
	Return to <i>Niangjia</i>	10	
	Oppression and termination of economic dependence in uxori-local marriage	3	
Relationship level	Broken intimate relationships	126	203
	Infidelity	28	
	Situational arguments in marital life	49	
Individual level	Offender with mental illness	4	15
	Offender suicide	3	
	Alcohol use by offender	8	

situational triggers of IPF are predominantly found at the relationship level, comprising about 85.3% ( $N = 203$ ) of cases. Among these, broken intimate relationships are the most prevalent, with 126 instances. Cases at the societal and individual levels constitute 8.4% ( $N = 20$ ) and 6.3% ( $N = 15$ ), respectively. A more detailed analysis of the sub-themes will be discussed below.

### ***Societal level: bride price conflicts, return to Niangjia, oppression and termination of economic dependence in uxrilocal marriage***

Heise (1998) proposed the ecological framework, emphasizing that it is dynamic and must be contextualized within specific cultural backgrounds. This is particularly relevant in Asian countries, where cultural influences play a uniquely significant role (Qu et al., 2018). As a result, the ecological framework of IPF must be adapted to account for regional variations and socio-cultural factors. This study identifies three societal-level situational triggers of IPF.

#### ***Bride price conflicts***

Bride price, a marriage expense paid by the groom to the bride's family (Ashraf et al., 2020), is a tradition rooted in rural China and continues in modern urban areas. The study indicates that conflicts over bride price can act as situational triggers for some incidents of IPF in China. For example, the court records from Case 2017 SHAN-0327 XINGCHU-73 reveals:

Following negotiations, it was agreed that Jinting Hu (the victim) would repay a bride price of 150,000 yuan to Ningbo Wang (the offender) to facilitate a mutually agreed divorce. On January 18, 2017, Hu returned 100,000 yuan, but the remaining 50,000 yuan was not paid despite repeated requests from Wang and his family. Consequently, on March 13, 2017, Wang, armed with a previously purchased machete, confronted Hu at her residence to demand the outstanding amount. (Case 2017 SHAN-0327 XINGCHU-73)

In the Chinese cultural milieu, the bride price reflects deeply entrenched patriarchal values within traditional marriage customs (Q. Jiang & Sánchez-Barricarte, 2012). Despite global advancements, the bride price continues to escalate in many developing nations, sometimes amounting to several years' worth of income, particularly in rural areas (J. Li & Li, 2021). In parts of China, the expected bride price has soared to the equivalent of purchasing a house, forcing many rural families to deplete their savings or incur debts (T. Liu, 2023). This financial burden can cause significant stress if the groom's family must borrow funds, contributing to increased poverty among rural Chinese families due to high marriage expenses (Lyu & Zhang, 2021). Moreover, high bride prices may commodify intimate relationships, shifting the focus from mutual affection to financial transactions, as suggested by social bond theory (Hirschi, 2017). This commodification can erode the emotional foundation of a partnership, increasing the likelihood of conflict and potentially triggering IPF incidents.

#### ***Return to Niangjia***

In Chinese context, *Niangjia* (娘家) is defined as:

The relations of married women with their natal families are referred to by the people involved as women's ties with their *Niangjia*, or mother's family. This is a term used by women themselves or in reference to them; it has no symmetrical male equivalent (Judd, 1989).

In the cultural context of China, *Niangjia* often serves as the sole refuge for many women, particularly those from rural areas, seeking to escape abusive relationships. Bossen (2007) noted that in China, a woman without the support of her *Niangjia* relatives faces a significant risk of homelessness and loss of land upon divorce, compelling her to remarry quickly. Additionally, within the patriarchal system, women may return to *Niangjia* only on specific ritualized occasions (Ardizzoni, 2021), such as the Chinese New Year. Although this phenomenon has improved markedly in modern society, the historical imprint remains unmistakable. Consequently, in some families, husbands are reluctant to see their wives residing in or frequently returning to their *Niangjia* long after marriage, as such behavior is perceived as an act of defiance against their husbands' control. As Stark (2024) argues, "Control may be implemented through specific acts of prohibition or coercion." (p. 284). Opposition to returning to *Niangjia* represents such an act of prohibition, particularly after incidents of abuse or violence, as it symbolizes dissatisfaction with the husband's family, challenges patriarchal authority, and undermines the husband's role and status. These actions can exacerbate tensions, potentially triggering IPF, as illustrated in the court records of Case 2015 JING XINGCHU-236:

Zhang and his wife, Li, had a quarrel over a trivial matter. Zhang physically assaulted Li, who then returned to her *Niangjia* in XX county. During this period, Zhang tried multiple times to persuade Li to come back home, but Li insisted on staying at *Niangjia*. This led Zhang to harbor thoughts of killing Li. ( Case 2015 JING XINGCHU-236 )

Furthermore, returning to *Niangjia* not only challenges the authority of the husband's family but also results in a loss of face for the male. In Case 2018 Gan-0983 XINGCHU-165, the defense statements reveal his genuine intention to kill his partner due to the loss of face:

On the afternoon of February 5, 2018, my parents and villagers went to her *Niangjia* to pick her up, but she told them to get out. . . On February 11, with the Chinese New Year approaching and friends and relatives coming over, I felt humiliated that my wife wasn't home. I resolved that if she didn't return that day, I would kill her. (Case 2018 Gan 0983 XINGCHU-165)

The concept of "face," as explored by J. Wang and Spencer-Oatey (2015), is pivotal in Chinese and broader Asian cultural studies. Within the *Niangjia* context, a woman's return to her familial home can be perceived as a public exposure of private discord, thereby causing the man to lose face – an act considered a serious insult. To restore his face, a man may escalate his actions, sometimes resorting to violence to resolve the conflict.

### ***Oppression and termination of economic dependence in uxorilocal marriage***

Uxorilocal marriage refers to the practice where, after marriage, the husband leaves his natal family to live with his wife's family, a phenomenon also known as matrilineal residence (S. Z. Li et al., 2006). During the Chinese agrarian era, uxorilocal marriage was a familial strategy to continue the lineage and enhance agricultural labor from the perspective of wife's family (C. H. Li et al., 2020). Conversely, from the husband's perspective, assimilating into the wife's household often represented a survival strategy (Y. C. Zhang & Du, 2022), particularly when his own family faced poverty, leading him to merge with a more affluent

wife's family to secure sustenance. Traditionally, Chinese culture accorded low esteem to men in uxori-local marriages, associating them with discrimination, stigma, and humiliation. This was due to shifts in male power dynamics, which challenged the conventional roles of men as breadwinners and heads of households. Such role reversals could lead men to feel emasculated or inferior. Despite the legal recognition of uxori-local marriage following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, deeply rooted patriarchal beliefs and the continued preference for males over females meant that such marriages faced societal prejudice for an extended period (Qiao Q. Li & Liu, 2019). The following case shows how uxori-local marriage is a situational trigger for IPF:

Defense attorney: "This case stems from ongoing domestic disputes. The defendant, Yuefeng Jiang, has experienced a prolonged sense of oppression since entering into an uxori-local marriage arrangement." (Case 2016 LU-1392 XINGCHU-135)

Defendant: "Since marrying Wang in 1993 and as an uxori-local husband integrating into her family, I have dedicated decades to their care, spanning three generations. Following our divorce in September 2015, Wang negated our relationship, claiming there was neither sustenance nor a place for me within the family. My arguments about the sacrifices made to support her and our daughter escalated. Caught up in the intensity of the moment, I lost control and brandished a chef's knife. . . ." (Case 2017 YUE-0222 XINGCHU-15)

The phenomenon of IPF within the context of uxori-local marriage is particularly notable due to the rarity of this marriage style in societies with deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. For instance, Case 2016 LU-1392 XINGCHU-135 highlights IPF triggered by familial interference and oppression. This oppression often stems from the discrimination or humiliation associated with the husband's subordinate role in uxori-local arrangements. In these marriages, the husband's integration into the wife's family can lead to increased parental intervention in marital matters, potentially escalating tensions and conflict, thus creating a situational trigger. In contrast, Case 2017 YUE-0222 XINGCHU-15 explores the dimension of economic dependency. Uxori-local marriages, often formed as survival strategies, can generate relational strains due to economic dependence on the wife's family. Tensions may arise when there is a disparity between the husband's contributions and the benefits he receives. Specifically, in Case 2017 YUE-0222 XINGCHU-15, the uxori-local husband's substantial labor input to the household was met with material dispossession upon divorce.

### ***Relationship level: broken intimate relationships, infidelity and situational arguments in marital life***

The relationship level often serves as a primary situational trigger for IPF. This phenomenon goes beyond the inherent challenges of interpersonal conflicts, encompassing a range of complex scenarios, psychological dynamics, and family-related factors. This study identifies three sub-themes as situational triggers for IPF: broken intimate relationships, infidelity, and situational arguments in marital life.

#### ***Broken intimate relationships***

This study identifies two forms of intimate relationship dissolution – separation and divorce – as situational triggers for IPF. Both represent relational estrangement. Current

study indicates that estrangement is a factor in approximately 25% to 52% of cases involving the homicide of females by intimate partners (Wilkinson & Hamerschlag, 2005).

**Separation.** Separation, distinct from official divorce, provides an opportunity for de-escalation in intimate relationships. However, study shows that women who are separated face a higher risk of homicide compared to those in intact relationships (Johnson & Hotton, 2003; Kelly & Johnson, 2008). A critical factor in IPF during separation is male intolerance toward the end of the relationship. As the prosecution records illustrated by the following case:

After waking up, upon discovering Wei was intent on departing with her belongings, Guichun Wu was overtaken by homicidal impulse. He retrieved an eight-pound hammer from the kitchen and repeatedly struck Wei's head and face, inflicting grave injuries that rendered her unconscious. (Case 2020 GUI-1228 XINGCHU-21)

In many societies, males are often perceived as the dominant or leading figure in families or relationships, with patriarchal cultures reinforcing male authority and female subordination. When females challenge these norms – such as by choosing to separate or leave – it is often perceived as a threat to male authority. Both separation and the return to *Niangjia* challenge male control over intimate relationships in a patriarchal context. The difference lies in how these actions are interpreted in triggering IPF: separation is seen as an expression of intolerance toward the relationship, while returning to *Niangjia* is viewed as bringing shame and causing the male to lose face. Moreover, IPF also occur in cases where separation has happened and when a woman insists on maintaining the break, rejecting the male's attempts at reconciliation. As demonstrated in the defense statements in Case 2018 GAN-0732 XINGCHU-197:

I rolled down the vehicle window and asked my wife to get in (to come home with me). She rejected me. I raised my voice and asked her, "Are you sure?." She still said no. I sternly asked again, "Are you certain?." She still responded negatively. Enraged, I warned her, "Don't push me!." In my fury, I released the car's handbrake, shifted gears, and accelerated towards her. (Case 2018 GAN-0732 XINGCHU-197)

**Divorce.** Previous research has extensively demonstrated that divorce is a significant risk factor for IPV and IPF. Expanding on these findings, this study posits that divorce functions not only as a crucial risk factor for IPF but also as a situational trigger. Three sub-themes are identified within the context of divorce, each indicating that specific divorce-related events may act as situational triggers for IPF.

The first sub-theme addresses situational conflicts that arise during the divorce process. Studies indicate that divorce fosters a conflict-ridden environment where intense emotions such as despair, anxiety, and anger can escalate, potentially leading to violence (Kafonek et al., 2022). These situational conflicts are complex, involving disputes over child custody, asset division, and residual dissatisfaction from the marital relationship. Discussions surrounding divorce often lead to heated exchanges and rapid emotional escalation between partners. As the survivor victim testimony in Case 2016 WAN-1523 XINGCHU-304 shows that:

I asked for a divorce, and Yunfei Dong agreed. But when we were talking about the topic of children, Dong were accusing me of ignoring the children and thinking that I was too cold to

talk about this, so he thought that the topic was nothing to talk about. I didn't know what Dong was thinking of. He became highly agitated. I stood up and attempted to calm him. That's when he hit my left shoulder a couple of times with his right hand, and I backed up against the wall. He pulled a paring knife out of his pants with his right hand and grabbed me by the hair with his left hand and I fell to the ground. (Case 2016 WAN-1523 XINGCHU-304)

The second sub-theme is intolerance toward the dissolution of marriage. Defense statements in Case 2018 YUE-0381 XINGCHU-198 and the court records in Case 2019 YU-0233 XINGCHU-104 reveals how an inability to accept divorce can act as a situational trigger for IPF:

In a desperate plea, I kept begging her, expressing my unwillingness to divorce. Yet, she remained resolute about finalizing it at the Civil Affairs Bureau. In utter despair, I lost control, drew the fruit knife I had on me, and frenziedly stabbed her in the abdomen, then slashed her neck. (Case 2018 YUE-0381 XINGCHU-198)

The defendant, Xiankun Xiao, wanted abandoned his wife, Chen. When she refused to divorce him, he contemplated killing her. . . While Chen was asleep, Xiao attempted to murder her by strangling, suffocating, and spraying her with Qiangshou (a Chinese brand) mosquito repellent. (Case 2019 YU-0233 XINGCHU-104)

In cases of situational conflicts during divorce, both male and female partners agree to divorce, but certain situational argument factors during the process can trigger IPF. However, in instances where IPF is triggered by an inability to tolerate the dissolution of the marriage, it is typically incited by one partner's resistance to the divorce. This resistance highlights that IPF can stem from one partner's inability to accept the end of the marriage. The emphasis on "one partner" in this study is due to the observation that there are both cases of men refusing to divorce, triggering the victimization of women (e.g., Case 2018 YUE-0381 XINGCHU-198), and cases of women refusing to divorce, triggering their own victimization (e.g., Case 2019 YU-0233 XINGCHU-104). This contrasts with situations where only men exhibit intolerance during separation. In cases where men refuse to grant a divorce, similar to IPF triggered by separation-related intolerance, the refusal to end the relationship triggers the victimization of women. However, in cases of IPF triggered by women's refusal to divorce, the violence stems from the perception that women are obstacles to their husbands' desire to leave the marriage. In these situations, extreme violence is often viewed as a final recourse when other solutions fail.

The third sub-theme examines post-divorce triggering events. Generally, one key strategy for reducing relationship violence is to help victims leave abusive situations. However, the risk of violence may persist after divorce or separation, as evidenced by increased incidents of stalking and violence against women post-divorce (Brownridge et al., 2008; Ornstein & Rickne, 2013). Three post-divorce cases represent the three typified post-divorce situational triggers identified in this study:

After divorce, Xueliang Zhu and the victim, Zheng, had multiple verbal and physical altercations over child custody. Zhu repeatedly threatened to kill Zheng through verbal threats, text messages, and self-written suicide notes. (Case 2018 ZHE-0803 XINGCHU-36)

After our divorce, my dating another man infuriated him. He threatened to kill both me and my boyfriend. (Case 2019 JI-0194 XINGCHU-110)

Weixi Li visited his ex-wife, Zhang, in her house. When his plea for reconciliation was rejected, in a fit of rage, he grabbed a chef Knife and violently slashed Zhang multiple times on her face and upper body. (Case 2017 YU-1503 XINGCHU-34)

This study corroborates that following a divorce, the risk of IPF not only persists, but post-divorce incidents can also act as triggers for IPF. The first situation is the continuation of situational conflicts from pre-divorce (Case 2018 ZHE-0803 XINGCHU-36): persistent conflicts often stem from unresolved issues related to child custody, property, or financial disputes. These unresolved matters can extend the conflict into the post-divorce period. Then, the remaining both situations relate to control. As emphasized by Stark (2024), depriving women of the means needed for autonomy or escape is one of the tactics at the center of coercive control (p. 343). Post-divorce romantic jealousy (Case 2019 JI-0194 XINGCHU-110): cultural perceptions of marriage as a form of “ownership” may lead some men to retain a misplaced sense of entitlement and control over their former partners. This mind-set can result in the belief that they have the right to dominate or influence their ex-partner’s life, even after separation or divorce. When the ex-partner begins to establish new romantic relationships, this sense of ownership may evoke intense jealousy and hostility, becoming a situational trigger for IPF; Rejection of attempts at reconciliation proposed by males (Case 2017 YU-1503 XINGCHU-34): Similarly, viewed from the lens of ownership, divorce represents a shift in power dynamics. The act of divorce can exacerbate a sense of lost control of males. In efforts to regain this control, violent means may be employed, such as homicide.

### ***Infidelity***

A multitude of cross-cultural studies has shown that infidelity in intimate partner relationships is a significant risk factor for various forms of violence (Chester & DeWall, 2018; Conroy, 2014; Kyegombe et al., 2022). Nemeth et al. (2012) further argue that jealousy stemming from infidelity may lead to immediate violent outbursts, causing significant harm to victims. This study identifies three specific types of infidelity that can act as triggers for intimate partner violence: infidelity on the part of the victim, infidelity on the part of the offender, and suspected infidelity.

***Infidelity on the part of the victim.*** Intimate partner relationships, as a social construct, are deeply shaped by societal and cultural beliefs regarding romance and marriage (Noller, 1996). These relationships are commonly held as sacred unions, founded on mutual trust and respect across most cultures. A breach of this trust, especially through infidelity, can lead to significant emotional distress and harm. As the court records illustrated by Case 2017 JIN-0116 XINGCHU-80145:

After discovering that his wife, Wang, had an extramarital affair with Li, Qi Wang drank alone. When he was driving his blue Chery (A famous Chinese company) sedan in Tianjin Airport Economic Area, upon seeing his wife and Li riding together on an electric motor, in a fit of rage, Qi Wang drove directly into them, knocking them to the ground before fleeing the scene. (Case 2017 JIN-0116 XINGCHU-80145)

This case demonstrates that actual infidelity can serve as a situational trigger for offenders after witnessing a victim’s infidelity.

***Infidelity on the part of the offender.*** The situation of homicide that underlies infidelity on the part of the offender stems from the perception of female partners as significant impediments to extramarital affairs. The court records of Case 2020 Shan-0824 XINGCHU-80 reveals such an extreme situation:

Fuqiang Qiao harbored intentions of marrying Li and felt that his wife, Jiang, was obstructing their relationship. On the evening of September 5, 2019, at approximately 7:00 PM, after returning from herding sheep, Qiao discovered Jiang asleep at home. It was at this juncture that he conceived a plan to electrocute her, intending to subsequently dispose of her body. (Case 2020 Shan-0824 XINGCHU-80)

In this instance, the offender viewed his spouse as an obstacle to his desire for a new romantic relationship and sought how to dispose of this hurdle rather than perceiving the existing partnership as a sacred bond. More specifically, instead of pursuing legal means of dissolution, such as separation or divorce, the offender chose extreme and violent measures to eliminate what he perceived as an impediment. These extreme situations contrast sharply with cases where infidelity on the part of the victim.

***Suspected infidelity.*** Situational triggers of IPF, particularly when tied to suspected infidelity, often indicate deeper psychological crises that can lead to extreme emotional and behavioral reactions. These intense psychological states frequently manifest as romantic jealousy. Prior studies have identified male sexual jealousy as a key factor in motivating physical and sexual violence against intimate partners (Kaighobadi & Shackelford, 2009). Without effective regulation and coping mechanisms, the psychological drivers of jealousy may escalate to fatal violence. Illustratively, the court records from Case 2020 SU-0305 XINGCHU-146 reveals this fact:

Xianglei Zheng, suspecting his wife Wang of having an affair, contemplated murdering her. After dinner, as Wang was preoccupied with her phone, Zheng seized the moment of inattention, assaulting her head with a hammer in a repeated fashion. When the hammerhead dislodged, he resorted to using pliers, resulting in Wang suffering hypovolemic shock. (Case 2020 SU-0305 XINGCHU-146)

### ***Situational arguments in marital life***

Among the various situational triggers of IPF, arguments within marital dynamics are particularly complex. This complexity stems from the inherently dynamic nature of these disputes, which are deeply rooted in human behavior and influenced by numerous internal and external factors. This study elucidates how two distinct forms of marital arguments – acute and chronic – can serve as situational triggers for IPF, each reflecting distinct relationship patterns and circumstances.

***Acute arguments in marital life.*** Violence is usually an escalation of verbal and physical mutually reinforcing behaviors (Wilkinson & Hamerschlag, 2005). In contrast to relationships with a history of abuse, acute arguments leading to IPF are typically marked by sudden, explosive points of conflict or crisis that are not necessarily preceded by a long-standing pattern of violence or tension (Burge et al., 2016). Instead, they are frequently sparked by immediate stressors or situational provocations, such as financial strain or contentious exchanges over trivial aspects of daily life. Thus, such incidents are often



impulsive and unplanned, characterized by a rapid escalation to violence. The prosecution records, as exemplified in Case 2018 WAN-0822 XINGCHU-158, illustrates this phenomenon:

On the morning of February 8, 2018, the defendant Housheng Jiang picked up his wife, the victim Wang, who had been working in another city for one year, from the Anqing Railway Station. At about 7 p.m. that night, he asked her why she did not call to greet him when he was sick, and they had an argument at home. When the victim was sitting on a small chair in the bedroom washing her feet, the defendant Jiang took out a fruit knife from the bedroom closet and stabbed the victim in the head. . . The defendant Jiang and the victim Wang were married, and they were living together. There was no serious conflict in their lives, they dined together before the homicide, the defendant did not have the preparation and motive to kill. (Case 2018 WAN-0822 XINGCHU-158)

This study believes that such an incident underscores the unpredictable nature of acute arguments, which can rapidly intensify without a discernible pattern, thereby posing significant challenges to prediction and prevention efforts.

***Chronic arguments in marital life.*** Whereas, chronic arguments in marital life are not merely isolated disputes but often stem from a long-standing environment characterized by ongoing abuse, control, and power imbalances. These arguments frequently recur in intimate relationships, aligning with the well-documented cycle of violence (Pretorius & Botha, 2009; Widom, 1989). This cycle typically escalates from building tensions to severe assaults and, subsequently, to phases of regretful reconciliation, and then repeating. Over time, the chronic nature of these arguments in marital life can be seen as a cumulative process. This is exemplified in the court records of Case 2016 SU-0505 XINGCHU-215 mentions:

On August 7, 2006, the defendant Zhenggang Xu registered his marriage with Wu. After then, they had constant arguments and deep grudges over trivial family matters. As a result, the defendant Xu had the idea of killing Wu. (Case 2016 SU-0505 XINGCHU-215)

In instances of chronic arguments, homicide may represent the ultimate assertion of control or the apex of a predictable escalation in violence, a pattern often discernible through prior behavior. However, predictability does not equate to preventability. Prior research has demonstrated that victims may be trapped by complex psychological barriers, such as learned helplessness, financial dependency, or emotional bonds, which impede their capacity to exit the abusive context (Heron et al., 2022; Piquero et al., 2021; Wilson, 2019).

### ***Individual level: offender with mental illness, offender suicide and alcohol use by offender***

The situational triggers of IPF at the individual level are less complex than those at the relationship level, with many relevant situations already identified in previous research. This study explored three sub-themes: offender with mental illness, offender suicide and alcohol use by offender.

### ***Offender with mental illness***

Current clinical research predominantly examines the link between IPF and mental illness, with a particular emphasis on the psychosocial factors of violence (Coker et al., 2002; Wessells & Kostelny, 2022). This study identifies mental illness in offenders, rather than victims, as a situational trigger for IPF. Specifically, it observes four mental illnesses as situational triggers: schizophrenia, delusional disorder, psychiatric syndromes due to cerebrovascular conditions, and epilepsy. For example, the court records of Case 2018 LU-0203 XINGCHU-594 shows how delusional disorder triggers IPF:

The confession of defendant Yan Jia to the investigative agency confirmed that defendant Jia had a conflict with his wife Wang after they got married because he suspected that his wife Wang was having an affair and wanted to poison him. On the day of the incident, he again suspected that Wang had put poison in the cigarette he smoked, so he had a quarrel with Wang. Out of anger, he lost his mind and stabbed Wang two or three times in the abdomen with a knife, causing the death of the victim. In view of the fact that this case was caused by marriage and family conflicts, the defendant's mental state at the time of the crime was identified as having a delusional disorder, and his ability to carry out criminal responsibility was limited, which means can be a mitigating factor in his sentencing. (Case 2018 LU-0203 XINGCHU-594)

Mental illness is increasingly recognized as a potential risk factor for IPF, particularly violence against females, with potential etiological connections to various mental disorders (Yu et al., 2019). Severe mental conditions, especially those involving delusions, paranoia, or heightened impulsivity, can distort an individual's perceptions and behaviors, leading to misinterpretations of a partner's actions, unfounded feelings of threat, or extreme emotional states such as anger or despair. Without timely psychological intervention, these distorted perceptions and intense emotions may escalate routine disagreements into violent confrontations.

### ***Offender suicide***

Most study categorizes murder-suicide within the context of IPH/IPF as a behavioral pattern (Salari, 2007), attributing the primary triggers to factors such as jealousy and health issues (Marzuk et al., 1992). However, this study posits that suicide in IPF scenarios should not be viewed merely as a behavioral pattern but also as a situational trigger for female fatalities in IPF cases. The Case 2020 YUN-2627 XINGCHU-12 provides concrete evidence for this:

The defendant Guobing Lu contemplated suicide due to a loss of confidence in life. On the morning of August 24, 2019, after taking the rodenticide he had prepared in advance, he had the idea of letting his wife Luo die with him, so he stabbed his wife with a fruit knife. Luo, who was sleeping, was stabbed with a total of 35 incisions on her neck and upper body. (Case 2020 YUN-2627 XINGCHU-12)

This incident underscores the situationalized effect of the offender suicidal intent on the IPF event. The sequence of events illustrates a distinct pattern: faced with existential despair, the offender opted for suicide and, upon making this decision, attempted to coerce his wife into a shared fate. In this complex individual psychological state, the victim often becomes a scapegoat in the suicide of the offender.

### **Alcohol use by offender**

In the context of IPV or IPF, alcohol use by the offender has been frequently examined as a situational trigger. This study explores the situational role of alcohol in IPF incidents, drawing upon following cases:

The defendant, Ji, consumed alcohol at home. Amidst intoxication, familial discord surfaced in his thoughts, culminating in a burgeoning resentment towards his wife, Long, which escalated to him contemplating her murder. (Case 2016 NIE-0524 XINGCHU-163)

The defendant Jingming Huang and his ex-wife Wang met with Liu and Yin as mediators for mediating their marriage at the Wuxianghua Dumpling Restaurant opposite the Rangcheng Road Stadium in Dengzhou City due to a marital dispute. During the meal, the defendant Huang drank a lot of alcohol. When they were about to leave in front of the restaurant, the defendant Huang suddenly took out a diesel bottle from the seat of his electric motor, lit it, and threw it at Wang. (Case 2020 YU-1381 XINGCHU-277)

I had a meal with my friends and drank about half a kilogram of baijiu. Thinking of the unpleasant divorce with Qie, I wanted to argue with her. Then, I drove to the pedicure shop where Qie worked to find her. When I got out of the car, I put the knife I had put in the car in the morning into the left pocket of my pants. I thought that if Qie didn't talk to me properly, I would have to stab her with the knife. (Case 2019 JI-0131 XINGCHU-63)

Among research on violent crimes against females, there is already substantial evidence of a link between alcohol consumption and IPF (Devries et al., 2014; Leadley et al., 2000). This study argues that alcohol is a typical situational trigger for an IPF, and that there are often underlying nonacute or static factors that precede alcohol consumption that set the stage for violence. For instance, in the aforementioned cases, alcohol consumption coincided with the recollection of or engagement in unresolved relationship conflicts, which then triggered IPF. In the Case 2016 NIE-0524 XINGCHU-163, the offender thought about previous family conflicts after drinking alcohol, and then had the idea of murder; In the Case 2020 YU-1381 XINGCHU-277, the situational trigger was that the offender drank alcohol while the two parties were mediating marital conflicts; In the Case 2019 JI-0131 XINGCHU-63, after drinking alcohol, the offender thought about the conflict with the previous divorce, which triggered IPF.

### **Discussion**

This study utilizes data from CJO to conduct a qualitative analysis of IPF cases in China. The results highlight both similarities and differences compared to previous research findings in China and globally. Intimate partnerships and marital forms are complex, multi-layered structures rather than simple combinations (S. Y. Zhang, 2022). This complexity is evident in the various situational triggers of IPF in China, examined through an ecological framework.

At the societal level, bride price conflicts, return to *Niangjia*, oppression and termination of economic dependence in uxori-local marriage are situations that trigger the occurrence of IPF. At this level, bride price conflicts explain how economic pressure and conflict in a cultural context shape IPF. Return to *Niangjia* challenged the male authority of the patriarchal system and brought a loss of face to males, creating a situation of IPF, while uxori-local marriage made the situation of IPF is explained by

the oppression of intimate relationships caused by reversed power dynamics and the destruction of economic dependence after marriage. Therefore, at the macro-social level, bridging the gap in IPF caused by Chinese traditional culture requires the development of social enlightenment, which means social enlightenment projects on legal awareness, gender equality, and marriage equality should become targets of the cultural roots of the adjusted practice (Xiong, 2022).

As previously stated, situational triggers at the community level were not captured in the phase of thematic analysis. Echoing this perspective, Frye et al. (2008) observed that indicators of community disorganization did not significantly correlate with the occurrence of IPF. IPF often involves direct disputes between individuals, and the community, as an external entity, cannot fully explain the origins of such conflicts. Therefore, it is difficult for the community to be considered a situational trigger. For instance, while community cohesion might influence the overall environment in which individuals interact, it does not directly create a situational trigger for IPF. It is challenging to establish a direct link between low community cohesion and an offender's decision to commit femicide. The relationship between community factors and IPF is complex and indirect, involving multiple layers of influence on individual behavior rather than acting as situational triggers for specific violent acts.

Then, this study examines relationship level situations, and it is found that broken intimate relationships, infidelity, and situational arguments in marital life are situation triggers of IPF. In broken intimate relationships, IPF is often triggered by an inability to tolerate separation and a refusal to accept reconciliation or a return to cohabitation. In addition, sudden situational conflicts during divorce, intolerance of divorce, and post-divorce events can also become situation triggers of IPF. Regarding infidelity relationships, infidelity on the part of the victim angers the offender, while infidelity on the part of the offender sees the victim as an obstacle. Both patterns trigger males to adopt homicidal strategies in response to such infidelity. Also, suspected infidelity triggers IPF, which involves a much deeper level of romantic jealousy. Furthermore, another point worth noting at the relationship level is the situational arguments in marital life. Both acute arguments and chronic arguments can serve as situational triggers. It is important to note, however, that marital conflict is highly complex. The lack of a comprehensive risk assessment framework in current research limits the ability to forecast and mitigate these adverse outcomes effectively. Marital relationships are uniquely nuanced, which means a minor disagreement in one context can escalate into a serious issue in another due to hidden, underlying factors. Consequently, there are intrinsic challenges associated with making precise predictions. Nonetheless, it can be believed that across all examined samples, relational situations predominantly trigger IPF. This is attributable not solely to the inherent difficulties of interpersonal conflict but also to a confluence of intricate situational, psychological, and familial elements.

Finally, at the individual level, this study clarifies how situations such as mental illness, suicidal behavior, and alcohol use by the offender trigger IPF. Mental illness in offenders encompasses various psychiatric disorders, each with multiple medical interpretations. Also, this study underscores the significance of considering suicidal behavior by the offender as a situational trigger of IPF, rather than merely a behavioral pattern. Additionally, the connection between alcohol use by the offender and IPF is well-

documented and consistent with the findings of numerous prior studies. Alcohol is recognized not only as a significant risk factor for the onset of IPF but also as a situational trigger.

## Limitation

The interpretation of the findings from this study must be contextualized within its limitations. Primarily, the reliance on data from CJO suggests that the conclusions drawn are particularly relevant to the Chinese context. As with many geographically constrained studies, the generalizability of certain findings, especially those pertaining to cultural nuances, may not extend beyond the studied locale. This underscores the need for future research to engage in cross-cultural comparative analyses.

Moreover, the focus of this study is predominantly on female victims of IPH, reflecting the gendered dynamics often observed in such crimes. While females are statistically more likely to be victims, this should not diminish the importance of male victimization. This means male victims of IPH represent an understudied issue that needs further exploration in future research. Additionally, this study specifically focuses on married individuals involved in IPF, excluding cases involving unmarried individuals or other circumstances. This limitation should be addressed in future research.

Then, an argument may arise concerning the research method. This study employs qualitative thematic analysis, focusing on retrospective accounts such as defense statements, surviving victim testimonies, and eyewitness testimonies. Although these accounts are sourced from authoritative judicial records, the possibility of retrospective distortion cannot be ignored (Zamble & Quinsey, 2001). Some may argue that these narratives, derived from personal experiences, are influenced by trial culture and thus appear subjective, reflecting strong individual perspectives. For example, an offender might conceal certain truths to secure a more lenient sentence. However, this study believes that such narrative data also deserves to be analyzed in the academic field. As described by Bennett and Feldman (2014), the criminal trial is structured around storytelling, which underscores the significance of narrative as an essential source for analysis. Additionally, it is worth noting that this study is not the first to use narrative materials for analyzing triggers, which means that previous studies have already demonstrated the feasibility of such an operation<sup>7</sup>.

Therefore, despite these limitations, the study makes a contribution to the understanding of IPF. To its knowledge, this is the inaugural study dissecting the situational triggers of IPF within the Chinese context through an ecological framework. It enriches the discourse with vital insights into the situational triggers of IPF and expects further implications for the broader domain of IPH and IPV research.

## Conclusion

To fully comprehend IPF, it is essential to consider not only the risk factors but also the situational triggers. This study posits that events at the societal, relationship, and individual levels serve as situational triggers for IPF, whereas factors at the community level do not directly trigger them. As a result, this study offers a valuable framework for future research, suggesting that discussions on situational triggers of IPF should primarily focus on the social, relational, and individual domains. Although community-level situations may not

directly trigger IPF, this study recognizes that examining how these factors indirectly contribute to IPF remains a valuable area of investigation. Previous evidence suggests that such influences significantly affect behaviors and perceptions, which may, in turn, lead to these homicides indirectly. Overall, this study aims to catalyze further discourse on IPF and contributes to the understanding of IPH and IPV.

## Notes

1. As this study investigates IPF, a subset of the broader IPV/IPH, with a specific emphasis on homicide, the keyword chosen is “intentional homicide” rather than alternatives like “intentional injury.”
2. China’s criminal instance process follows a two-tiered system, which means the court in the second instance is the one in the last instance. The second instance procedure can only be activated through filing an appeal or a protest (except for special circumstances), which means all cases go through the criminal first-instance procedure, but not all cases proceed to the second instance. Therefore, setting the search strategy to criminal first-instance procedure will not result in the omission of cases.
3. China’s people’s court system consists of courts at four levels: namely the grassroots, intermediate, higher and supreme people’s courts (The National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China, 2007). Specialized courts, such as the Military Court, Maritime Court, Railway Transportation Court, etc., are in a different situation and will not be discussed in this study. According to Criminal Procedure Law of the People’s Republic of China (2018), the article 20 shows that the primary people’s courts shall have jurisdiction as courts of first instance over ordinary criminal cases; however, those cases which fall under the jurisdiction of the people’s courts at higher levels as stipulated by the Law shall be exceptions. Article 21 Intermediate people’s courts shall have the jurisdiction as courts of first instance over the following criminal cases: (1) cases endangering State security or involving terrorist activities; and (2) cases of crimes punishable by life imprisonment or capital punishment. According to Criminal Law of the People’s Republic of China (2020), the article 232 shows that whoever intentionally kills another is to be sentenced to death, life imprisonment or not less than 10 years of fixed-term imprisonment; when the circumstances are relatively minor, he is to be sentenced to not less than three years and not more than 10 years of fixed-term imprisonment. Therefore, according to the Criminal Procedure Law and the Criminal Law, defendants in homicide cases are not necessarily sentenced to death, because this depends on the specific circumstances. Hence, such cases are not necessarily tried by intermediate courts. Moreover, influenced by the traditional judicial attitude of mediation in China, most violence/homicides involving intimate partners are often viewed as internal family conflicts (He & Hang Ng, 2013; J. Jiang, 2019), which are considered as mitigating factors affecting sentencing (Y. Zhao, 2000). Therefore, even in cases of completed homicide, there may be situations where the defendant is not sentenced to death or life imprisonment. This also means that some completed homicide cases may be tried by grassroots courts. Additionally, the number of cases handled by grassroots courts is usually much higher than that by intermediate courts, making the data from grassroots courts more voluminous and more representative of general circumstances. Cases handled by intermediate courts are often more complex or are appeal cases, which may not as accurately reflect the typical situations of IPF. Moreover, grassroots courts are widespread across China, covering a broader geographical area and population. This implies that using data from these courts can more comprehensively represent IPF situations across different regions and socio-economic backgrounds in China. In summary, given this context, this study prefers to use cases from grassroots courts in hopes of capturing a wider array of instances.

4. The time frame, spanning from 2016 to 2020, is based on two key considerations. Firstly, 2016 marks the official implementation of the Anti-domestic Violence Law of the People's Republic of China. Secondly, starting in 2021, the supreme people's court began targeted rectification measures on the CJO website due to safety concerns. This led to a substantial decrease in available documents, with sensitive information such as cases involving the death penalty, national security, and picking quarrels and provoking troubles being increasingly excluded from the database (Chen, 2024; Hale & Xueqiao, 2024).
5. The search strategy of CJO is primarily structured as following sections: introduction, litigants, litigation record, facts, reasons, judgment result, and conclusion. The sections of introduction, litigants, and conclusion mainly provide demographic information about the institutions and litigants involved, which are irrelevant to the research objective, and therefore are not analyzed.
6. The most recent articulation of the six-phase process by Braun and Clarke (2021) is: 1) data familiarization and writing familiarization notes; 2) systematic data coding; 3) generating initial themes from coded and collated data; 4) developing and reviewing themes; 5) refining, defining and naming themes; and 6) writing the report.
7. Freestone et al. (2017) carried out an exploratory analysis of external trigger factors for violent offending by conducting interviews with prisoners and examining police or court records. They highlighted that these materials inevitably contain elements of subjectivity and interpretation, and data collection may be subject to certain limitations, such as the inaccuracy of prisoners' descriptions of their actions. Despite these limitations, they argued that the study held exploratory value due to the lack of relevant research. Similarly, McMurrin and Cusens (2005) utilized self-reported information from prisoners to investigate the relationship between alcohol consumption and violent crime, concluding that heavy drinking and problematic alcohol use are significant drivers of both violent and nonviolent acquisitive offenses. Therefore, based on previous studies, the use of narrative materials to understand triggers is feasible, especially in the context of the lack of exploration of situational triggers of IPF in the Chinese context. This study still holds corresponding research value.

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## Appendix

### Example of Coding

**Case:** I had a meal with my friends and drank about half a kilogram of baijiu. Thinking of the unpleasant divorce with Qie, I wanted to argue with her. Then, I drove to the pedicure shop where Qie worked to find her. When I got out of the car, I put the knife I had put in the car in the morning into the left pocket of my pants. I thought that if Qie didn't talk to me properly, I would have to stab her with the knife. (Case 2019 JI-0131 XINGCHU-63)

**Coding Explanation:** The offender explicitly mentions consuming a significant amount of alcohol (baijiu) before deciding to confront Qie, indicating that “Alcohol use by offender” is a present factor. There is no mention of other substances, external influences, or psychological disorders, so these factors are excluded from coding. Although there are elements of anger (unpleasant divorce) and premeditation (carrying a knife), these are secondary to the immediate influence of alcohol on the offender's decision-making.

**Code Explanation:** “Alcohol use by offender” was coded as a situational trigger because the consumption of baijiu directly influenced the offender's decision to confront and potentially harm Qie. This decision was made while under the influence of alcohol, which is known to impair judgment and increase aggression. Other situational factors, such as the premeditation of carrying a knife or the emotional state related to the divorce, were considered but not coded as primary triggers. The primary situational trigger is the alcohol use, as it is the most immediate and significant factor leading to the violent intent. There was no evidence of external provocation by Qie at the moment of the offense, reinforcing that alcohol use was the primary situational trigger.