High Educated Single Women As “Left-Overs”: A Case Of Study

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Abstract
In Shanghai there is a “marriage market”, where parents look for suitable candidates for their daughters and sons. If they find one, they are not going to organize a wedding but a blind date. This phenomenon is not an old tradition. In fact, the marriage market was created in 2004 as a result of China’s modernization. Almost thirty years after the one child policy, there are a considerable number more of men than women. However, there is an increasing population of highly educated and successful single females. This paper focus on the experience of those women, through interviews and ethnographies in China’s biggest city, suggesting that birth policies, changes of the gender roles, and new working habits are changing the ways to understand and being single in the Middle Country.

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"Woman born in 1975. Height 1.65. Master in Finance at Fudan University. She works as a manager in one of the five hundred most prominent companies in China. Five hundred-thousand-yuan annual salary. Shanghaiese hukou, and a house without any debts. She is comprehensive and traditional, looking for a man born between 1969 and 1975, with similar qualities: responsible and with a pleasant personality", says a handmade plasticized poster. The careful calligraphy of Chinese characters and the plastic cover that protects the message from the weather show a concerning father. Huang, with the piece of paper hanging on his chest, walks among bushes, benches, and trees in Shanghai People's Park.

Searching a husband for his daughter is a daily task for him. During weekends, the possibilities rise, and hopes are renovated. At the exit 9 of the Metro 1, hundreds of umbrellas show personal information; shopping carts carry on papers with phone numbers and weighs; even some single men or women stand next to their parents. Every Saturday and Sunday, a wedding market persist in the center of China's most cosmopolitan city.

Like Huang, hundreds of parents get together to find the next son or daughter-in-law, in general without the authorization of their offsprings. If there is a possible match, they have time from Monday to Friday to make out how the gallant appeared.

In China, it is said that marriage is not between two persons, but between two families. In this sense, the market works like an open-air dating app, where tradition converges with blind dates. Those who attend every weekend know precisely what they are looking for, but they don't arrange or force any marriage (something forbidden since a marriage law in 1950). They just look for someone similar to their sons and daughter to get them know each other.

In this paper, we focused on Chinese single women, socially called "leftover women." The study case shows how social media and popular discourse reinforce the common representations as 剩女 (shèng nǚ). This discourse works through sophisticated devices, including social control, sexual performances, and indirect sexism to establish normative and stereotypical gender expectations.
In the park, it´s difficult to see young people looking for a mate. So photos, weight, height, university titles, place of birth, residence, zodiac sign, and salary are the exchanged references to know the candidate. Although it is impossible to have an exact number, some newspapers estimated that almost 3,000 couples met through the wedding market. Additionally, some Chinese couples refuse to admit that they met through their parents.

"Too old," "quite poor" or "very high" are phrases that can be heard in the local dialect, while you walk through the park. The idea of parents looking for a good candidate for their offspring sounds like a vestige from dynastic times. However, the market was created almost spontaneously in 2004, and became a tradition during the last decade.

In fact, the 剩女 (shèng nǚ: leftover women) appears as a result of China´s modernization: a phenomenon that involves accelerated economic development, social and health policies with different results, and traditional culture.

During the one-child policy (introduced in 1979 and abolished in 2015), there were 30 million selective abortions according to overseas statics. As a result, today official reports estimate 136 men for every 100 women born after 1980. By 2020, Chinese Academy for Social Sciences says that it will be 30 million males more than females, between 24 and 40 years old. Although the unbalanced numbers, accordingly to social discourses the women are the ones in troubles.

Mei work as a Chinese language teacher for foreigners. She is tall, skinny, has a long black hair, and speaks perfect English. Besides her physical appeal, her parents think it will be hard for her to find a husband because Mei has a Ph.D. High-educated women are said to be in the bottom of the wedding market. Under this perspective, her parents grab the umbrella, a presentation letter, and go to the park to find the future father of their grandchildren on weekends.

"I once went out with a man who was introduced to me by my parents. It was terrible. Since that moment, I stopped answering messages from unknown numbers. I got sick of my parents giving my phone to anyone. The excuses diverse: from 'I saw your profile in a job website' to 'your contact appeared me on WeChat' I’ve listened to all of this excuses", she said.

In a period of profound transformations, everyday life changes are hardly assimilable to the traditions. The social measure to show the masculine success is based on economy and work, while the female success seems to still be focused on marriage and family. However, China is the country with the highest number of women billionaires (and also the youngest).

The shèng nǚ, as a term, was accepted in 2007 by the Chinese Women Federation (a department of State created in 1949 to defend women's rights). The definition refers to single women over 27 years old with high-education.

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As the researcher Roseann Lake explains in her book *Leftover in China: The Women Shaping The World's Next Superpower*, those unique daughters of urban areas who were accepted by their families during the eighties had opportunities like never before. Today 60% of them studied at university, compared to the 20% thirty years ago (124). Titles, better jobs, and better salaries contribute to the gap between classes and genders. In contrast, most single males come from rural areas and have low education. To the statistical imbalance (the largest in the world) we have to add a cultural gap. "The current single men are for women who do not exist," (354) Lake concludes.

According to Hannah Feldshuh, "in Chinese popular media, 'shengnü' representations help to normalize and routinize rigid concepts of gender, blurring the distinction between gender and performance to suggest that gender has an inherent definition" (7). In fact, there are few articles focused on single men on popular media. Instead, single females are common topic. There are dozens of videos about leftovers, TV dramas (such as the Chinese version of *Sex and the City* or *Ode to joy*, which show women only concerned about romance), dating programs and hundreds of reports talking about women on their thirties without a ring in their hands. During 2018, an editorial in a national newspaper invited women "to lower their standards," "to return to reality" or "to understand that there are always imperfections". With this type of expressions, media transforms a social problem into a personal decision of women.

"At school and even at university, it is expected not to have a boyfriend to spend all your time studying. However, as soon as you finish, people pretend that you get married", explains Yan Yan. She is only 23 years old and has just broken up with her boyfriend a few months ago. As she says, she is not worried about getting married because she is young. However, when she is asked about the possibility of being alone during her thirties, her face changes.

The discourse of "leftover woman" could be understood as a "dispositive" of power and control according to Michel Foucault's theory ([1978]1990). The French philosopher showed that some terms combined State macro-policies, political institutions, and personal attitude, that become tools for control. As he studies in *The History of Sexuality* ([1978]1990), gender imbalance and sexual performance are conducted by power relations to ensure population growth and social production.

As a discourse, *shèng nǚ* is used insistently and pejoratively in the popular imagination: a destiny that every young girl wants to escape from. Even, for some families, 25 years old is a moment to start worrying about marriage. "Shanghai woman, an only daughter, born in October 1993. Height 1.63 cm Secondary title, works in Bank with a legal contract. 13621814419 mother's phone", says an umbrella in the market.

As Leta Hong Fincher analyzes in *Leftover Women*, the gender inequality and social stigma in China force women, who have to deal with emotional and economic conditions in disadvantage. This discourse could support engages that they don't want or, even, physical violence. Her book searches cases and analyzes the progress of State policies that look to get gender equality. According to her study:

2 Didi Tang, "Don’t wait for Mr. Right, Chinese told." *The Times*, March 7, 2018. URL: https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/dont-be-so-fussy-about-marriage-chinese-women-told-cp0z89gwh
“Law of 1950 granted women rights to property, divorce and freedom of choice in marriage, among other rights. Subsequent revisions of the law over the years have also strengthened the notion of common marital property. Yet the Supreme Court’s latest interpretation in 2011 specifies that, unless legally contested, marital property essentially belongs to the person who owns the home and whose name is on the property deed. And in China today that person is usually a man. According to a 2012 survey by Horizon China and iFeng.com of home buying in China’s top real-estate markets – the cities of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen – only 30 percent of marital home deeds include the woman’s name, even though over 70 percent of women contribute to the marital home purchase.” (21)

"Do you think you can find a boyfriend in dating apps? I am a person that needs to have a couple", Yan Yan asks, before she leaves. She is the owner of a start-up and has a meeting with wine importers.

The conflict seems to be socially restricted to women. After writing shēng nán ("leftover male") in searching websites, the results are a soap opera actress’ photos, while if we write shēng nǚ, many women appear: alone or in a group, they are crying, waiting in long lines, or with the seal of "rejected" on the face.

In fact, the word 好 (hăo: fine) may indicate that a woman (女) needs a child (子) and, therefore, a husband to be happy. As Susan L. Man explains in Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History, in the dynastic past "the unmarried women were directly a person without a social identity" (54). Something that, maybe, was stimulated by Confucianist scholars. The philosopher Julia Kristeva wrote an extensive work on Chinese Women: "This philosophy (Confucianism), which disdains women or is severe, will not demand from them more than procreation (...) there is no cult to the Virgin, the Mother (if it is not the mother of the wise person) reigns in the shade" (93).

Social changes are ongoing, as the booming economic development. According to the Ministry of Civil Affairs, since 2013 the numbers of marriages has decreased, while the divorces have risen. Today, almost 40.1% of women workers questions motherhood or at least decide to delay it. Nowadays, more than seven million single women between the ages of 25 and 34 study or work in China, but they can surely live without a man.

"The house is seen as a microstate, and in this conception the single woman is destabilizing," says Lin, a feminist who works on the project "We and Equality." She shows statistics: according to The Global Gender Gap Report 2017, China is below the global average in gender disparity. In addition to the glass ceiling barrier, that puts a roof on professional growth, most women are encouraged to study, but not to succeed or overcome men.

"My husband says that so much knowledge ruined me," says one interviewee in The Good Women of China (Xinran, 2002), a book that collects stories during Deng Xiaoping’s government.

Intensive study or a successful career are seen not only as a male threat, but also a delay in the family lifestyle since the children’s care is still a women task. "There has been progress, but there are still lots of injustice in the labor market. Most of the men do not help with the housing or the children, and that gives them more time and better performance at work. Many women lose competitiveness and will in their professional development," says Yin, a Spanish professor.
Meanwhile, Xia, born in 1985, works in a publishing house. When she talks about hypothetical motherhood, she glazes with resignation. "If I finally get marry and I have a child, I will surely have to quit my job. I would not like my children to be raised by my parents," she says without even mentioning the father's role.

It is said that if a Chinese man have cash, car and a house, he can get the woman he wants. However, Hui Ying, an audiovisual producer who studied abroad and maintains a long distance relationship, accepts that she could never go out with a boy who was not from Shanghai. "The men here are a little more open-minded, they are used to do the housing," she says.

Something similar emphasizes Lian, a university student of 24 years, single and without problems. Now she is focused on her career, but when she talks about finding a partner, she reveals: "I would like someone who is not traditional, who shares domestic work." However, her parents feel more pressure than her. She says: "Now they have more normal standards... a house and a car, at least a Shanghai hukou, it's enough for them".

In all these years Chinese women have lived progress in different areas. Living in big cities helps to relieve ancient cultural models. Having the parents far away for most of them is a condition to enjoy a more open life pattern. For this reason, the Chinese New Year is often seen as a clash between tradition and urban life.

There are those who, under big pressure, rent a boyfriend to present to their parents. In fact, specialized websites offer males, between 25 and 30 years, to accompany them visiting their hometown. According to height, appearance, and languages they speak, prices vary from one thousand to three thousand yuan over the weekend. They offer services, such as visiting parents and relatives, participating in social gatherings, shopping together, singing in a KTV or watching movies and answering WeChat messages and calls.

In other cases, the situation is not so hard, but it's still annoying. "After a long time of going crazy, I sat down with my parents, and I explained them that they must trust me and leave me alone," says Xia.

In a society that develops with vertiginous speed, personal behaviors are dissimilar and dynamic. It is common to hear phrases like "I feel young," "I do not worry about getting a boyfriend," "I have a happy life," "I do not think I'm alone," among girls who are thirty years old. In fact, many started using the term shèng nǚ to empower themselves. For example, ladies from "We and Equality" believed that shèng nǚ is the woman who is just independent and happy.

References

