

Leta Hong Fincher

Leftover Women

The Resurgence
of Gender Inequality
in China



ASIAN ARGUMENTS

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LETA HONG FINCHER



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Asian Arguments is a series of short books about Asia today. Aimed at the growing number of students and general readers who want to know more about the region, these books will highlight community involvement from the ground up in issues of the day usually discussed by authors in terms of top-down government policy. The aim is to better understand how ordinary Asian citizens are confronting problems such as the environment, democracy and their societies' development, either with or without government support. The books are scholarly but engaged, substantive as well as topical, and written by authors with direct experience of their subject matter.

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Introduction

Li Fang* is relieved that she found a husband just in the nick of time. The parents of the university graduate and former human resources manager in Beijing feared that their only daughter was getting old and might never be able to marry. Li worried that she would pass the “best child-bearing age” and might no longer be able to give birth. She is 26.

Just after marrying, Li lost her job because her company did not want her to take two weeks of unpaid leave for a honeymoon. She does not share a bank account with her husband and does not know how much is in his account. Yet Li does not wish to discuss finances with her new husband now that she is unemployed, for fear that the topic would “hurt his feelings.” Rather than ask her husband to share more of his spending money with her, she is drawing down her own savings to pay for groceries, transportation and clothing. She also feels she has no claim to ownership of the marital home she shares with her husband because the home is registered in his name alone.

“I do not have the right to expropriate property from someone else’s family,” says Li. So marriage does not provide Li with any

* In order to ensure the anonymity of interviewees, most names in the book are pseudonyms, and in some cases minor details of an interviewee’s profession have been altered. All translations are my own.

shared ownership of assets, property or income, even though she lost her job precisely because she got married: why, then, does Li consider herself lucky? Well, she avoided the fate of her good friend, an executive at a multinational company who earns a top salary, but is still single at 31 years old and therefore branded a “leftover” woman.

“Several men have pursued her, but she’s not willing to marry them because her standards are too high. If she carries on like this, she will never find a husband,” says Li.

Something is wrong with this picture.

In China, the derogatory term “leftover” woman or *shengnü* (剩女) is widely used to describe an urban, professional female in her late twenties or older who is still single. Many urban Chinese women, like Li, express anxiety about becoming a “leftover” woman if they are not married by their late twenties. And many marry quickly – often within several months of meeting a man – specifically to avoid being designated “leftover.” The intense pressure to marry comes from parents, relatives, friends and colleagues. But this pressure is magnified multiple times by the Chinese state media and government-sponsored matchmaking events.

Even the state feminist agency, the All-China Women’s Federation, has perpetuated the “leftover” women term. China’s ruling Communist Party established the Women’s Federation to “protect women’s rights and interests.” The emancipation of women was a key goal of both the Communist Revolution, which culminated in the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, and, decades before that, of the Republican Revolution, which toppled the country’s last dynasty, the Qing (1644–1911). Yet the Women’s Federation today has taken a leading role in the campaign to

pressure urban, educated women in their mid- to late twenties to stop being so ambitious and get married.

In 2007, the Women's Federation defined the term "leftover" women as single women older than 27, according to the state-run Xinhua News Agency, the official mouthpiece of China's Communist Party. That same year, China's Ministry of Education added the term to its official lexicon. Since then, the Chinese state media have aggressively promoted the term through articles, surveys, cartoons and editorials stigmatizing educated women who are still single, often referring to a "crisis" in growing numbers of educated women who "cannot find a husband."

Typical headlines run by Xinhua News scream like sensational tabloids: "Overcoming the Big Four Emotional Blocks - Leftover Women Can Break out of Being Single"; "Eight Simple Moves to Escape the Leftover Women Trap," and the column "Do Leftover Women Really Deserve Our Sympathy?," which was posted on the Women's Federation website in March 2011, just after International Women's Day:

Pretty girls don't need a lot of education to marry into a rich and powerful family, but girls with an average or ugly appearance will find it difficult. These kinds of girls hope to further their education in order to increase their competitiveness. The tragedy is, they don't realize that as women age, they are worth less and less, so by the time they get their M.A. or Ph.D., they are already old, like yellowed pearls.

This brazenly insulting statement may have come from the Chinese state media, but its message of gender discrimination is all too familiar for many women in other parts of the world who encounter some of the same obstacles facing Chinese women.

This book argues that the state-sponsored media campaign about "leftover" women is part of a broad resurgence of gender

inequality in post-socialist China, particularly over the past decade and a half of market reforms. I focus on urban, educated, emerging middle-class women in China. Yet I have received messages through my Twitter account from women in countries such as India, Pakistan, Russia, Turkey, Singapore, Nigeria, Kenya and the Philippines telling me that they, too, face intense pressure to marry and stigma if they remain single. Women in highly industrialized countries such as the United States and Great Britain share some of the same problems of gender inequality in wealth now experienced by women in modern China. I hope that this book will speak to readers everywhere.

In China, the world's most populous country, gender-discriminatory norms are exacerbated by a one-party state intent on social engineering, with a massive propaganda apparatus that maintains a tight grip on information and whose goals increasingly go against those of women.

The Chinese word “*sheng*” (剩) refers mainly to leftover or spoiled food, which must be discarded. When used in relation to women, the term adds to the emotional resonance of China's mass media campaign. The irony of this campaign to denigrate single women is that China's one-child policy, preference for sons, and widespread abortion of female fetuses have caused a surplus of *men* due to the severe sex-ratio imbalance, which the State Council calls “a threat to social stability.” The official Communist Party newspaper, the *People's Daily*, writes that millions of men unable to find wives are more likely to take part in “rioting, stealing and gang fighting.” China's National Bureau of Statistics data at the time of writing show that there about 20 million more men under 30 than women under 30.

Some economists argue that the shortage of women in China

ought to give them the upper hand in the marriage market. Yet patriarchal norms are still deeply entrenched throughout Chinese society. And urban, educated women who are beginning to reject these discriminatory norms are bombarded daily with media reports about how they had better stop focusing on their careers or they will never be able to find a husband.

Although some women may marry for money, I have found very little evidence that urban women overall have turned their scarcity into economic gain. On the contrary, my research suggests that Chinese women have largely missed out on what is arguably the biggest accumulation of residential real-estate wealth in history, valued at around 3.3 times China's GDP, according to figures from the bank HSBC. That amounted to over US\$30 trillion at the end of 2013. Many women have been shut out of China's explosion of housing wealth because urban homes appreciating exponentially in value tend to be registered solely in the man's name. Chinese parents tend to buy homes for sons but not daughters. And women often transfer all of their assets to their husband or boyfriend to finance the purchase of a home registered in the man's name alone.

Many scholars focus on income as the primary indicator of a woman's socioeconomic status, but I argue that when analyzing economic inequality in China, it is more important to focus on wealth in the form of residential property. Chinese consumers have very few places to invest their money, so most people invest it in a home, which is the most valuable family asset and worth much more than income alone. In fact, my interest in real-estate wealth and gender began with a desire to find out why urban Chinese consumers are so obsessed with buying residential property, in spite of the fact that homes in cities such as Beijing and Shanghai are by some measures among the most expensive in the world.

Yet the more interviews I carried out, the more troubled I was by how many young, highly intelligent, university-educated, urban, professional women were willing to cede ownership of an enormously expensive home to their boyfriends or husbands, even when these women had contributed their entire life savings to the property purchase. Why would so many educated women in their mid- to late twenties act against their own economic interests? I was baffled for a while, until I started explicitly asking my interviewees about “leftover” women. And then I discovered that, in spite of their high level of education, many young women genuinely believe the destructive myths perpetuated by the state media. These women make excessive personal and financial compromises out of fear that they will never find a husband otherwise.

In one sense, “leftover” women do not exist. They are a category of women concocted by the government to achieve its demographic goals of promoting marriage, planning population, and maintaining social stability. The state media campaign against “leftover” women is just one of the signs that in recent years, contrary to many claims made by mainstream news organizations, women in China have experienced a dramatic rollback of rights and gains relative to men. It is in this larger sense that women have been “left over” and left behind by the ruling Communist Party in its breakneck race for economic growth at all costs.

It was not always like this. For all its failings, the early period following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China was a time when overcoming traditional forms of male–female inequality was declared an important revolutionary goal. After the Communist revolution of 1949, Chairman Mao Zedong proclaimed that “women hold up half the sky.” In the years after the revolution, the Communist Party publicly celebrated gender equality and sought

to harness women's labor in boosting the nation's productivity with expansive initiatives such as assigning urban women jobs in the planned economy. Yet women's historic gains of the past are now being eroded in China's post-socialist reform era.

A combination of factors – skyrocketing home prices, a resurgence of traditional gender norms, legal setbacks to married women's property rights, declining labor force participation among women, and the media campaign against “leftover” women – has contributed to the fall in status and material well-being of Chinese women relative to men. That's more than 650 million women, almost one-fifth of all the women in the world.

This book is the result of two and a half years of research conducted during my Ph.D. program in Sociology at Tsinghua University in Beijing. In November 2010, I began an ethnographic study of several Beijing real-estate agencies, where I first noticed the prevalence of traditional gender norms in home buying. Then in August 2011, China's Supreme People's Court issued a stark new interpretation of the country's Marriage Law, reversing a cornerstone of the Communist Revolution. The Marriage 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. These figures already demonstrate an alarming disparity between property ownership by men versus women, but my research suggests that the inequality is even more extreme when considering the number of homes owned *solely* by men. Defenders of the 2011 judicial interpretation of the Marriage Law argue that women are entitled to compensation for their share of the home payments, but most women do not keep receipts of their contributions. And stay-at-home mothers have even less financial protection in the event of a divorce.

Curious about the effects of the revised Marriage Law on urban women and men, I set up a Sina Weibo account (China's version of Twitter) shortly after the legal change was announced, and called for people to take part in my study on how gender norms affect home buying. I crafted questions about the participant's identity, home-buying aspirations, and how financial contributions were divided, and sent these to everyone who expressed interest. I promised anonymity for everyone who responded to my online survey. Within days of setting up my account, over 950 men and women across China had signed up to "follow" my account publicly, and I had received around 150 private messages. I asked follow-up questions of roughly 100 people, which resulted in many extended, online interviews. My final survey results included a sample of 283 people (151 women and 132 men) from cities across China, including Beijing, Shanghai, Xi'an, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Xiamen, Chengdu, Chongqing, Dalian, Fuzhou, Hangzhou, Suzhou, Kunming, Nanjing, Shenyang, Tianjin, Wuhan, Wenzhou, and Hohhot.

In addition to my Weibo survey, I conducted formal, in-depth interviews with 60 people (36 women and 24 men): 39 in Beijing,

18 in Shanghai, and 3 in Xi'an, with some people interviewed several times. I chose Beijing and Shanghai because they are both "first-tier" cities, where residential property is most expensive, and I conducted three interviews in Xi'an to gain some insight into whether gendered home-buying dynamics would be different in a "second-tier" city, where real-estate prices are significantly lower. Most of my formal interviewees have a college-level education or above, with an average to above-average income (and could be considered "middle class"), and are in their mid-twenties through early thirties – the prime age for marriage and first-time urban home buying in China.

China is experiencing rapid urbanization, as people from rural origins moving to cities have caused a historic shift in the country's population from majority rural to majority urban. While around half of my formal interviewees are from one-child families, the other half have siblings and have moved to Beijing, Shanghai or Xi'an from a place with fewer family-planning restrictions. I included both siblings and people from only-child families to obtain information on parents' differential treatment of daughters versus sons. Almost two-thirds of China's population are not bound by one-child policy restrictions, and urban couples can also circumvent restrictions in various ways (such as paying a fine), according to research by demographer Wang Feng and his colleagues.

I also analyzed the content of multiple state media news reports, editorials and images on the Internet regarding home buying and the phenomenon of "leftover" women. I drew on casual conversations with hundreds of Chinese women and men in Beijing over three years about gender and home buying. And at the time of writing, I continue to receive messages on my Weibo

account from thousands of Internet users in China commenting on “leftover” women, home buying and gender inequality.

My thinking is informed by a lifetime of visiting the People’s Republic of China as the daughter of two China scholars, Beverly Hong-Fincher and John Fincher. I made my first trip to Beijing with my mother as a three-year-old in 1971, after Henry Kissinger’s secret talks with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai paved the way for US President Richard Nixon’s landmark visit in 1972, which re-established long-severed US–China relations. I continued visiting China during many childhood summers throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and I later worked as a China-based journalist for several American news organizations from the late 1990s through to 2003.

In other, wealthier parts of East Asia, such as Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan, women are increasingly delaying marriage. In mainland China, at the time of writing, studies show that almost everyone still marries by age 35. Yet China’s demographic trends may be changing, particularly in large cities such as Beijing and Shanghai.

Take 26-year-old Zhang Yu, a university graduate from Changsha, Hunan province in central China, who moved to Shanghai in 2013 to escape her family and jumpstart her career. After years of being badgered by her parents to get married, Zhang had finally had enough. “I have decided never to marry or have a child,” she told me.

Zhang’s vow never to marry is rare in a country where educated women are constantly told by their families, friends and the state media that they will be ostracized if they do not find a husband quickly. Yet if women’s rights do not improve in China, more and more women, like Zhang, may reject marriage altogether.

Zhang had been living with her parents in Hunan to save money after obtaining her college degree, and for a time fell sway to her parents' worries that she would become a "leftover" woman. But after reading feminist websites, she came to believe that the term existed to make women return to the home. She then took a risk by moving to Shanghai without a job and leaving the comforts of home for a dorm room shared with nine other roommates. Now she loves her new friends and the sense of freedom. "Men are still thinking in the old ways, but women's values have evolved. I feel very relaxed now," said Zhang, who had just received a sales job offer when I interviewed her.

Another young woman in Beijing came to the same conclusion as Zhang. "The institution of marriage basically benefits men, and when women get hurt this institution doesn't protect our rights," she told me. "The most rational choice is to stay single."

Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China will debunk the popular myth that women overall are faring well as a result of China's post-socialist market reforms. It is impossible to address all aspects of China's gender inequality in one slim volume, and I do not focus on rural women or migrant women workers without a college education. The book focuses primarily on the consequences of the state media campaign regarding "leftover" women since 2007 and the unprecedented gender inequality in wealth created by China's urban real-estate boom. Contrary to the stereotypes of single, professional women being miserable and lonely, I will show that the reality is quite the opposite: it is young women rushing into marriage too early that tend to wind up in trouble.

Chapter 1 examines how the Chinese state media campaign regarding "leftover" women is related to the government's attempts