Literature Review: "Leftover Women" in the People's Republic of China

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“Leftover Women” in the People’s Republic of China: How did Their Success (sheng li) Become Their Downfall in Marriage (sheng nv)?

This review centres on the small but rising number of unmarried women over the age of 27 in contemporary urban China. It will begin by defining the term “leftover women” (sheng nv), and proceeds to a statistical outlook and comparison between the number of single women over the age of 25 in China and other countries in the Asia Pacific region. A brief insight into the current situation of Chinese single women will also be established via media reports. Following which, the bulk of the review will focus on scholarly articles charting the reasons behind the rise of women’s economic and social status in the Chinese and global society, the resultant impacts of this new found success of women on marriage patterns, and the different opinions on marriage and life partners in China and worldwide. Through the presentation of existing literature, this review aims to give an in-depth understanding of the situation of women and marriage in China to better examine whether these “leftover women” are self proprietors of their situation, or victims of a perpetuating gender inequality inherent in patriarchal China. This knowledge will allow us to more critically examine the status and resultant societal impacts of the “leftover women”, to decide if change is needed or possible.

First coined in 2007 by the Women’s Federation in China and inducted into the official wordbook by the China Ministry of Education, “leftover women” (sheng nv), refers to women in China who remained single over the age of 27 (Hong Fincher, 2012). These women are usually highly educated, have a promising career and draw a comfortable salary, in short – very successful according to society’s definitions. However, the term associated with them is a largely derogatory one; likening women to “leftover food” that no one wants (Sebag-Montefiore, 2012).

According to the United Nations World Marriage Data (2012), the number of unmarried Chinese women between the ages of 25 to 39 has seen an almost triple fold increment from 8.7% (age 25 to 29), 1.4% (age 30 to 34), 0.5% (age 34 to 39) in 2005, to 21.6%, 5.4% and 1.8% in 2010 (UN, 2012). While the figures remain significantly lower
relative to other countries in the Pacific region such as the Republic of Korea (59.1%, 19.0%, 7.6%), Singapore (54.1%, 25.1%, 17.1%), and Japan (60.3%, 34.5%, 23.1%), China showed the greatest increment over the five years. This is despite the nation’s emphasis on marriage, evident in the state inception and modification of marriage laws since 1950 (Engel, 1984; Xu and Whyte, 1990).

“Leftover women” have also become an increasing feature in global mainstream news. Katie Hunt of CNN reported in 2013 about the abundant supply of women in Shanghai’s marriage market. In the same year, The Economist reported that career women over the age of 27 had even lower marriage rates compared to same age men who are inferior to them in terms of career and income (S.C, 2013). Business Insider also drew attention to the emerging course of “yin sheng, yang shuai” in China (rise of the women, fall of the men) in terms of income and career. However, the success of Chinese women in their economic and career achievements do not appear to translate to a victory in the marital aspect (Keenlyside, 2012). Following the opening up of China’s market economy, and the rising number of highly educated women to enter the job market, this pattern forebodes “leftover women” as a potential dominant demographic feature in China, and therefore, a social phenomenon that should warrant further study.

Literature surrounding the topic of women and marriage can be organized into three aspects:

1) Factors accounting for the rise of successful women.
2) Criteria of marriage partner and outlook on marriage of both genders.
3) Society’s view on urban women who are successful and single, and how these women deal with society’s perceptions and limitations on them.

Taken together, existing literature will allow the charting of the development of the urban Chinese woman, and how her educational and career attainment that made her a successful woman (literal translation: sheng li de nv ren, 胜利的女人) made her into a “leftover woman” (literal translation: sheng xia lai de nv ren, 剩下来的女人) in the marriage market.
The Rise of Women

The issue of demographics in China can scarcely be separated from the One-Child Policy (OCP), where it posits a strong reference point for many scholars who touched on the topic of gender or family in China (Hong, 1987; Fong, 2002; Wang, 2005; Yu and Zhu, 2006; Zhang, 2009; Zhu, 2013). Its objective was to reduce the number of people competing for resources in the Chinese society to ensure a higher standard of living for all (Chen, 1981; Fong, 2002; Zhu, 2013). Since its inception in 1979, the OCP has proven to be very effective in achieving its aims, and birth rates in China went from a high of 5.8 children per woman in 1970 to 1.47 by the 2000s (Wang, 2005).

A reduced birth rate was not the only positive outcome of the OCP. Daughters born following its inception became the default only child, and as a result, were save from the need to compete with male siblings for educational and welfare resources from parental support (Fong, 2002). Furthermore, parents, limited by the law to have more children, sought to make the best of their situation by investing fully in their only daughter, allowing many singleton daughters to achieve high education qualifications that prompted their entry into the professional job market (Fong, 2002; Zhang, 2009; Hong, 1987). Furthermore, mothers who are freed from the constraints of excessive childbearing and care-taking, are able to take up paid work to become a significant income contributor in the household.

Women’s ability to earn income also enhanced their ties with their parents, since like a son, they too can support their parents in a display of filial piety. The OCP and its empowerment of women effectively contested the saying that “a married out daughter is like spilt water,” (Zhang, 2009) further increasing people’s willingness to have and invest in daughters, providing women the economic, cultural and social capital to rise in the ranks of society.

While the effects of the market reforms on women are seen with ambivalent lenses – some believe that women lose out in the highly competitive yet patriarchal free job market that favours men – women, instead of being assigned to jobs by the government, are allowed the chance for social mobility should they possessed the relevant qualifications (Lin, 2003). Statistics and research findings not only showed that women are given more opportunities for education, but female students are constantly outperforming male students academically (Wong, Lam & Ho, 2006; Power, Edwards, Whitty & Wigfall, 2003). Hence women has proven their ability to compete with men equally, allowing
them to enter into professional fields previously only limited to males, as well as more choices and opportunities in
the social and economic aspects of Chinese society (Lin, 2003; Zhang, 2009).

The combined pull and push factors of market reforms and auxiliary effects of the OCP on empowering daughters allow women, especially those in the urban areas, to rise in the economic and job market. This is also a self-perpetuating cycle, in which women’s increasingly strong presence in the workplace will reinforce their economic indispensability, and continue to open up further opportunities for women to enhance their economic and social status in the society.

Criteria of Marriage Partner and Outlook on Marriage

Studies in the Western and Asia Pacific region have converged on the correlation between high education, increased employment opportunities, and delayed marriage for women (Salaf, 1976; Dixon, 1978; Jones, 2007; Nemoto, 2008). Common reasons that reemerged in such discourses include the reluctance to give up the freedom gained from being more culturally and economically endowed, dedication to education and job, and the greater opportunity cost of marriage and childbirth for higher educated women as it compromises her career advancement and income. This echoes Ruth B. Dixon’s theory on the factors shaping marriage, where “early and universal marriage should be more desirable in a social class... where opportunities for female education and employment are limited” (Dixon, 1978, pp. 449), and explains why high-flying working women are more likely to delay marriage.

Women are also seen as employing marriage delay as a strategy to avoid the gender inequalities inherent in a marital relationship. In a study done on unmarried women in Japan, respondents living at home cited their reliance on their parents for domestic responsibilities like laundry and bills (Nemoto, 2008). Another study by Janet W. Salaff (1976) on unmarried women in Hong Kong also reflects the double burden that marriage places on working women. Hence, women may see delayed or non-marriage as a strategy to escape gender oppression and inequality that occurs as a result of marriage norms. However, Nemoto’s study also reveal that women are willing to enter into a traditional marriage and take on the corresponding roles of a wife is she is able to find someone of higher status and earnings (Nemoto, 2008).
Hypergamous marriage is still very much valued in Asian societies – China included – and successful women are finding it difficult to find men of equal or higher qualifications than them, since men also want a woman of lower status than them (Dixon, 1978; Jankowiak, 1989; Jones 2007). Women and men also have huge differences in their criteria of a marriage partner. While women value educational and financial achievements, men focused more on looks, and are willing to overlook a woman’s lack of educational qualifications as long as she is “young, pretty and submissive” (Jankowiak, 1989, pp. 70). Interestingly, men value qualities that contrast directly with the rising crop of successful woman in China, who are increasingly educated and thus more opinionated, and usually over the age of 25 due to their education and career pursuits.

The value placed by men on youthfulness and looks also takes a toll on the marriage value of women past the age of 27 in China, rendering her unwanted despite the financial and career stability she possessed. Vanessa Fong posits that the ability for women to marry up provides them a shot at social mobility that men lack. However, such an advantage is taken away once women reached a certain age. On the contrary, men possess a type of age related capital and leeway that women do not. Men above age 35 are still seen as eligible as long as they possessed economic and financial stability. However, women’s career and financial success do not translate in the same way, with age and looks still being her most valuable assets (Jankowiak, 1989).

A woman’s delayed or non-marriage appears to be a result of the conflict between genders and their preferences for a life partner, resulting in an outcome that once again disadvantaged women in the marriage market. However, examining their outlooks also suggest that women may be unwilling to compromise on the new found freedom and status that come with their education and career achievements. This can be interpreted from the strategies they employ to maintain their status, either through non-marriage, or marriage to someone of higher status and qualities.

**Strategies and Societal Perceptions**

Due to the universal emphasis on marriage in China, women who are not married are perceived negatively (Kaur, 2013; To, 2013). The societal discourse surrounding single and successful women past the marriageable age blames women as self-proprietors of their spinsterhood, an outcome brought about by their own high expectations,
“choosiness,” and their success and ambition as unfeminine and undesirable (Nemoto, 2008). Furthermore, society’s emphasis on looks does no favours to these women, since it further reinforces their unattractiveness in contrast to the new cohorts of young women eligible for marriage that emerges every year (Jankowiak, 1989). This has allowed for younger men to make use of these successful, older women by marrying them in order to enjoy the latters’ status and financial advantages, playing on the insecurities of these women on not being able to get married (Jankowiak, 1989).

On the other hand, certain scholars see these women as the victims of society. In his review of Elisabeth Croll’s “The Politics of Marriage in Contemporary China” (1982), Martin King Whyte posits that despite changing times and development, the ideas held towards marriage still remain largely unchanged. The younger and older generation today holds the same values towards the qualities of a desirable partner, the importance of a wedding feast, and the setting up of households with the husband’s family (Whyte, 1982). The shortage of women in China may also reinforce the gendered female roles of reproduction and domestic duties (Kaur, 2013). These factors suggest that the status of these women as “leftover” could be due to the discord between the rise of the modern women against perpetuating traditional ideas of marriage, hence, making it difficult for Chinese women to enjoy both career and marriage success (To, 2013). Instead of being picky or against marriage, Dr Sandy To, sociology professor at the University of Hong Kong also posits that these highly successful women share the same desire of marriage as all other women, only to be turned down by prospective partners due to their accomplishments.

To also drew out the four strategies employed by successful, older women to negotiate their “leftover” status, namely, Maximizers who seek a foreign husband, or an accomplished and superior local partner by concealing their own status; passive Traditionalists with a strong identification with hypergamy who have the highest chance of remaining “leftover”; Sacrificers who choose men of lower status; and Innovators, who opt for non-conventional methods like cohabitation of staying single, but are also the type subjected to greatest parental and societal disapproval (To, 2013).
While society holds a negative perception towards unmarried women being picky and individualistic, alternative viewpoints position “leftover women” as another example of the unfair treatment of women in a patriarchal system. Despite the development in China, increased modernization and cosmopolitanism in urban cities, marriage is still very much staunched in tradition, where hypergamy, gendered norms and ideas of women being subordinated to men are still very strongly held. The consequence of such a contention falls on women again, where they are tasked to deal with negative consequences that they are not necessarily responsible for.

Where Do Women Go from Here?

This literature review uncovers a few patterns surrounding women in China. Firstly, women appears to be on an upward trajectory in terms of their economic status, especially with the success of women in education, and the increasing open-mindedness of parents in having daughters. Secondly, the conflicting criteria of both genders in seeking partners puts women in a less favourable position as they get more successful and older, and there is an emerging trend of women who opt out of marriage to escape its resultant oppression. Finally, while society has a general negative outlook on “leftover women”, studies have tried to turn this around by suggesting that women are the victims of a society still deeply embedded in the ideas of traditions and patriarchy instead.

Considering the demographic trends in other Asia Pacific countries of delayed marriage, the three patterns suggest that the social phenomenon of the “leftover women” looks set to develop further, but little has been said about how changes can be made such that this derogatory narrative surrounding successful women can be divested. While women have employed strategies to handle this undesired status, such actions has little effect in changing the gender inequality in Chinese society, and is another exemplification of women adjusting themselves to the unequal dominant ideals of society that further entrenches their subordinate status. Women are still very much defined by men, retaining their status as the Other to the man’s One (De Beauvoir, 1993).

Delayed marriage has proven to be the root of larger social consequences, such as low birth rate, talent drain, and problems with migrants and xenophobia which have emerged in developed Asian cities like Singapore, Republic of Korea, Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong. China has an advantage due to its landmass, human and natural resources, but
steps should be taken as early as possible to mitigate any potential future problems. At present, China is still
developing, and as shown in the statistics comparison at the beginning of this review, its percentage of unmarried
women between the ages of 25 to 39 are significantly lower than other Asian countries. China should make use of
this opportunity to change societal discourse on gender norms, women, and the ideas of marriage.

I hypothesize that the stigma on unmarried, successful and older women in China is a result of fundamental gender
inequality, that is further exacerbated by social institutions such as government bodies, organizations linked to
marriage like matchmaking agencies, marriage expo and conventions, as well as the media portrayal of unmarried
women such as TV serials, entertainment shows, newspapers, and the Internet. I propose that further studies can
look into the social institutions and their narrative surrounding the “leftover women” in China, how their influence
can be used to transform the negative discourse surrounding successful, single and older women in China, and
eventually changing the unequal gender relations that continues to dominate the world.
References


