

‘Leftover Women’ of China: Choice or Destiny?

Usha Chandran

Assistant Professor, Centre for Chinese and South East Asian Studies, School of Language Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University
ushachen75@gmail.com

The word ‘Leftover’, has the connotation of something that was leftover with no takers, like the leftover food, as if the good part was already taken and what is remaining is not so good. The fact that such a term is being used to tag women who do not marry by the age of 27 and above, and that it was coined by the governing body itself, indicates the underlying androcentric thinking of the society. It is traditionally believed that women are reproductive agents and the primary duty of a woman is to give birth to heirs, essentially male heirs, failure of which questions the very essence of her being a woman. Therefore, if a woman is not married at the appropriate age and has thus diminished the chances of fulfilling her primary duty for which she has come into existence in the female body, then the society rushes to save her from being wasted, and there are attempts to bring her into line. The terming of women who have not married by the age of 27 and above as ‘Leftover Women’ is therefore, one such attempt.

Who are the ‘Leftover Women’ of China?

In China, the early women’s liberation movement was defined by women’s employment and education, which gradually lead to the emergence of a highly educated and

highly paid class of urban women by the 21st century. However, the underlying patriarchal values of the society make it difficult even today for women to get jobs and opportunities for raise within work, as much as they deserve for their qualification. Gender discrimination in recruitment and promotion resulted in several urban women devoting themselves completely to education and work. As a result, they lagged behind in their personal life; to get married and have children. Viewing this as an issue of deep crisis, the government decided to take it up on themselves to solve it. In 2007, China’s Ministry of Education added the term *Shengnv* (剩女) ‘Leftover Woman’ to its official lexicon (New York Times 2012). *Shengnv*, refers to urban women who are highly educated and professionally successful. They are believed to have overly high expectations from marriage partners and thus end up being ‘left behind’, with no men available in the marriage market who are willing to marry them. Coined by the Chinese government themselves, the term is believed to have disseminated to warn women that they will become spinsters if they do not marry between the ages 27-30.

In 2010, the All-China Women’s Federation and other government groups carried out a nationwide survey of more than 30,000 people in 31 provinces. Their findings on ‘leftover women’ have been publicised repeatedly (Zhi

2010). One of the articles even suggested the reader to, 'See What Category of "Leftover" You Belong to'. The article goes on to explain the four stages of 'leftover women', describing it as initial (25-27); 'leftover fighters', 'medium' (28-30); 'doomed singles', high (31-35); 'leftover Buddhas in the battle', and highest (above 35) as 'great sage of leftover', it urges women to ponder, after all why did they end up being 'leftover women' (china.com.cn 2010).

It is believed that the coining and propagating of this phrase, by the government was intended to make the whole society aware about their existence and rapid increase, so that the society takes it upon themselves to urge them to get married, even if they have to make compromises, and convince them of the inevitability and dire need for women to marry and have children. Since its inception in 2007, this campaign entered every newspaper, TV station¹ and internet blogs, through articles, reports, photographs, cartoons and television serials. It was also believed to have been used as an issue to get more viewership, however, it seems obvious that these media agencies were understood to be representing 'male voices' (Wang 2019:17), and thus echoed the men's perspective of what an ideal women should do. A China youth daily report claims that the issue of 'leftover women', was not a result of an imbalance in the marriage market rather it was out of their own choice. (Li & Gong 2014:12) Interestingly similar to the government, many media reports and research scholars look at women not getting married by the age of 30 and above as a major issue of concern and starts from this basic premise to explore the reasons behind the emergence of this so-called problem and then explore ways to solve it. In 2010, the China Central Television's broadcast of a TV series named, "Elder Daughter's Marriage" 《大女当嫁》, wherein the whole family, extended family, neighbours and society at large was shown as being both concerned as well as, at some level, being accusatory towards the girl for not

¹ In recent years there are several television serial which has 'leftover women' as the main or sub theme. Almost all of them depicts the panic and stigma around the need for women to get married on time, many of them even show such women in negative light (Duan 2018).

getting married. The airing of this series opened an overflow of widespread discussion on the issue of urban 'leftover women' (Wang 2012:5). Some scholars observe that the term is both appealing and provocative, and thus draws attention. The wider use of the term both in print and visual media, not only normalises the use of the term in general, but also reiterates the society's expectations from women and norms on marriage (Sun 2013). As a result the society is convinced that, 'not getting married on time', is a problem and needs to be fixed as soon as possible, thus with time the mission is then taken up by other actors in the society.

Increasingly, social media and blogs have become a breeding ground for reiterating traditional gendered ideas, use of gendered internet slangs as one of the major tool. The coining of the term 'leftover women' itself was just the beginning of a trend of a series of derogatory terms for women/girl who is independent, confident, strong, tough and carries herself in a way the society thinks a man should. The term *nuzihan* (女汉子 / 女子汉; *manly women*) being one of the most pronounced one. While, the 'tomboy' like phrase, as parallel to *nanzihan* (男子汉; A true man)², might seem equal, but actually it resorts to typifying women who are strong and independent, also suggesting that it is such kind of women who eventually end up being 'leftover women'. There is a general perception among netizens that most men do not want to marry or be friends with them since they are dominating in a relationship, or are very independent and they soon realise that they do not need men, and leave them anytime. Interestingly, some governing bodies and companies have also tried to "tame" women through media articles, training programs for prospective bride, home makers, cooking etc, aimed at warning women to be careful to avoid

² The term *Nanzihan* 男子汉 has its origin at the Western Han period. During the Western Han, the Hun nationality attacked the kingdom from the Northern borders. During Emperor Wu's regime, the kingdom became very strong and the forces were very brave and fought the enemies at the north. Therefore they were called 'Hans' or the 'good Hans', '汉儿' or '好汉'. With this gradually people started linking 'Man' '男子' with 'Han' '好汉'/'汉儿', thus formed the term 'real man' '男子汉', for defining a man with vigour and strength, one who is not afraid of anything, is independent, takes up heavy task and responsibilities, sacrifices his life for his family, country etc.

the possibility of turning into ‘leftover women’. Other terms used for them is the ‘3S Women’ (3S 女性), stands for Single, Seventies (born in the 70’s) and Stuck (Wang 2012:5). They are also called the Lady White Bone Demon (白骨精)³. Though the word has been revamped by using the same characters to mean, white collar (白领), backbone (骨干), creamy layer (精英) women in golden marriageable age (Gong & Li 2015:12). Social media is flooded with discussions on whether the trend of increasing number of leftover women is a social issue? Several studies have shown that a considerable percentage of netizens feel it is a social issue? (Gao 2011:29). Ironically, while the issue of ‘leftover women’ turned into a national debate, China’s sex-ratio imbalance has resulted in a surplus of tens of millions of men, who are not be able to find a bride.

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Are the women ‘leftovers’, or is it actually the men?

As per the 2018 national statistics, the sex-ratio in China was 104.64 men to every 100 women, thus there are 31 million men more than women (Liu 2019). These men without a bride, were termed as ‘bare branches’ until recently, but are increasingly referred to as, ‘leftover men’. It refers to rural, middle aged men belonging to the lowest strata of the society. While the emergence of ‘leftover women’, as per research is the natural result of factors like, shorter period of marriageable age for women, increasing heterogeneity, awareness and education among women, maturing and development of the urban society (Wang 2012:6-7), the emergence of ‘leftover men’ has largely been due to the skewed sex ratio, especially in rural China. Stemming from this reason there are other reasons like, ‘too poor to pay high bride price’, ‘already passing or

³ 白骨精, Baigujing, A wicket and ruthless women in the novel *Journey to the West*, Often used as a metaphor for a sinister and vicious villain.

passed marriageable age’ etc. Why is it that a large section of the society including the governing bodies are more worried about the leftover women rather than the men? Perhaps since some believe that, since the ‘leftover women’ mainly belong to the highly qualified intellectual class, it will be a waste of their superior genes if they do not marry and procreate. This in turn would result in deterioration of quality of population (Gao, 2011:28). Or is it part of moral policing of women by the society?

Recently, there is a subtle acknowledgement of this unfairness, which has taken the discussion to whether it is the leftover women or the men who are a larger threat to the society? (Xinhua 2015). Research has proven that from 2003-2012 the proportion of ‘leftover men’ have all along been more than the proportion of ‘leftover women’, and that the maximum number of ‘leftover women’ are postgraduates/researchers (Zhang et al, 2015: 14 &18). Moreover, women are dumped in this category when she is merely 27, whereas for men the dumping starts at 35 or even 40. Ironically, both these groups of ‘leftovers’ show diametrically opposite features. The ‘leftover women’, possess the ‘three highs’ (三高): high income, high education and high IQ and the ‘leftover men’ are at the other side of the social spectrum, with the ‘three lows’ (三低): low income, low education and low IQ. The problem is so grave that some men are reportedly resorting to abduction of women or paying for wives from other Asian countries, such as Vietnam, North Korea (Koetse 2015) and even Pakistan (The Associated Press, 2019). Therefore, it is obvious that there can be no convergence amongst these two groups, and while the ‘leftover women’ could be making choices, ‘leftover men’ rather do not have any choice and are actually the doomed ones.

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Choice or Destiny?

Though urban educated women are striving to make their own choices in love and marriage, and more and more women are ambitious and career oriented, nevertheless, even the young women and men continue to remain stubbornly traditional and materialistic when it comes to marriage. Though majority of the women in China are working, but within marriage they are mostly secondary earners. Many women themselves view and wish their partner to be the primary earner and rely on them to prosper economically. Men are expected to earn the extra earnings while women still rear the family's only child along with their secondary earning, this invariably influences their choice in marriage. The internet matrimonies and even dating websites are flooded with demands for grooms owning a house, a car or a thick bank balance. Some research show that women who are highly paid do not feel the need to get married⁴ and some other research show that, in general world over, especially in Asia there has been a decline in the proportion of women getting married, starting from the second half of the last century (Gong & Li 2015:12). On the whole the difficulty in finding a partner for marriage in China in the new century is most pronounced than any other time. The shift in social values of marriage, mainly the increasing practice of connecting marriage with economic status has put both men and women under immense pressure. It reminds us of the striking similarities with the practice of marriage between families of equal status and 'bride price' in traditional China.

Though in the 21st century women are increasingly aware and conscious about their rights, while some women are stubbornly

⁴ A survey in Beijing indicates that 50.2 percent of those women with a monthly salary of 5,000-15,000 RMB may chose to remain single. The survey shows that there are five reasons for this: first, 48.3 percent of them are economically independent and does not feel it necessary to depend on men; second, 6.5 percent are busy with their work; third, 12.2 percent are too outstanding to find superior male partners; fourth, 23.4 percent distrust the existence of true feelings; and fifth, 9.6 percent for other reasons.

Chinese Women, Changes Attitude of Marriage, <http://news.at0086.com/Love-Agency-in-China/Chinese-Women-Changes-Attitude-of-Marriage.html>

looking for Mr. Right, some are consciously or unconsciously influenced by the growing economic prosperity, and are keeping economic factors above love in marriage. With the enormous change in love, desire, sex and marriage, women's scope of choice and freedom to express their choice have surely undergone unprecedented changes. Women view themselves to be able to take their own decisions in love and marriage, however whether these choices are individual choices or are deeply influenced by parents, society, economic conditions, pressure from governing bodies, or even globalization are both subtle and pervasive. In that case can it be seen as a choice taken by women to be single? Since choices are often heavily ridden with life conditions and grooming, it is also closely intertwined with destiny. Isn't destiny also weaved by the socioeconomic conditions of the individual? Does choice influence destiny and vice-versa?

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Conclusion

The Chinese government's initiative to coin the word, 'leftover woman', and create a stigma around it by using media as the powerful medium of propaganda, took the underlying traditional mindset of the society as a tool, which helped in resurfacing women's role as a wife and mother. It has collectively enabled this stigma to enter every household, to the extent that the fear of being a 'leftover women' has successfully entered the heart of every unmarried young woman in China. It is evident that the emergence of this category of women is the result of decades of state sponsored women's liberation movement, as well as the continued existence of gender bias these women have to face on a daily basis. Though their rapid emergence has completely challenged the traditional image of women being weak and vulnerable, who are supposed to depend on men and marriage for identity and survival, nevertheless, it has also posed an

unprecedented challenge to the social structure in China. Therefore, the question is whether a woman who is not married by a certain age, which the patriarchal society feels appropriate, be called a 'Leftover Woman'? Like a constant irritant the existence of these high class unmarried women has become an eyesore for men and the society in general. Perhaps because they realise that it is not these women who are 'leftovers', instead it is the lack of men worthy of them, due to which they have chosen not to compromise and remain unmarried. A choice influenced by prevailing conditions, which can only change when the society evolves and there could be more choices independent of compulsions. ■

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8/17, Sri Ram Road, Civil Lines,
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