

Women in China: “Baby Makers” and “Bed Warmers”?

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Abstract

From the country’s Marriage Law – the very first legislation passed in the 1950s in New China – to the long-awaited Civil Code passed last year, gender equality and the freedom to marry or not to marry are legally guaranteed rights in the People’s Republic of China. In a recent study published in China, nearly half the number of women who participated in the survey do not want to get married. Yet, the policy makers at least in one of the provinces have decided to “encourage” young women to not leave their hometowns and become “baby makers” and “bring warmth” to the beds of unmarried, aging rural men.

Keywords: China, Marriage Law, Gender Equality



Image: China’s “Baby Makers”

Source: sixthtone.com

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China's Chairman Mao once declared women "hold up half the sky." But the Chinese communists (men) have always joked about it, saying "Mao never meant Chinese women." Mao further said "Whatever men comrades can accomplish; women comrades can do too." To this, "men comrades" seriously upheld: "except when it comes to running the country." Now, last week, Xiangyin county-officials in Mao's native, central Hunan province released a document¹ announcing that the "issue of aging, unmarried rural men" is no longer an individual but a societal problem, and the authorities have promised to work out a plan to "encourage young women to stay in their hometowns."

The *gender insensitive* Party orthodoxy continues to treat the single, unmarried women actually as the "problem for single men."

It is not at all surprising that the local authorities have decided to seriously take up the problem of single, unmarried men and have resolved to announce a few concrete measures to address the issue. In fact, since the establishment of New China, the Chinese Communist Party and its various mass organizations such as the Communist Youth League, All China Women's Federation and All-China Federation of Trade Unions etc. and so on, have been taking initiative in organizing social activities such as "match-making" get-togethers and "mass weddings" etc. Besides, the country has been

struggling for long to come to terms with the so-called epidemic of "leftover" single women.



Image: Don't brand China's single women with the "L" word

Source: news.cgtn.com

Interestingly, or rather shockingly, in the country's official discourse, while on one hand "leftover" single women – a typically post-reform era phenomenon – are looked down upon as "essentially worthless without husbands and children," on the other hand, the *gender insensitive* Party orthodoxy continues to treat the single, unmarried women actually as the "problem for single men."

A few years ago, ACWF – a government organization founded in 1949 to defend women's rights – actually asked²: "Do leftover women actually deserve our sympathy?" Perhaps more shockingly, the Party mouthpiece People's Daily, worried that there were 117.7 boys to every 100 girls had published an article a few months before the Party congress in 2012 pronouncing³ "the continual accumulation of unmarried men of legal marrying age greatly increases the risk of social instability and insecurity."



Image: China's Growing Problem of Too Many Single Men...
Source: forbes.com

“Single women” is typically a product of China’s reform era, and is reported to have been acknowledged as a social problem engulfing both rural and urban China in 1997. The country’s dominant official and political discourse including the media and academia – largely the result of prevailing traditional value-system – disdainfully and condescendingly dismisses single women as “leftover women” (剩女 *Shengnu*) or “old aunts” (老姑派 *Lao Gupai*). In sharp contrast, the truth is women in China have been increasingly challenging the old, obscurantist attitudes as unequal and discriminatory. According⁴ to Professor Jiang Yunfei, who teaches gender studies in one of China’s leading universities “there is now little difference in attitudes toward marriage between women who live in small towns and those from China’s major cities. Modern [Chinese] women now have more opportunities in education and work, so they no longer need men and marriage to guarantee their survival.”

Daisy Guo, a “Global shaper” and social media activist advocating equal rights for women in

China, recently said at the World Economic Forum that “Leftover Women” was one of the 171 new Chinese terms included in a *Report on Language Situation in China* published by the Chinese Ministry of Education just before the Beijing Olympics in 2008. “The term, Leftover Women, refers to single women at or beyond the socially-recognized marriageable age of around 27. However, among people born in the 1980s, the ratio between men and women meeting the age requirement for ‘leftover women’ is 136: 100. Therefore, it is men, not women, who are the leftovers,” Daisy explained⁵.



Image: Daisy Guo, Chinese social media women’s rights activist
Source: weforum.org

Interestingly, both socially and in the official reckoning, it is not the “single men” phenomenon that far exceeds “single women” in numbers but instead the latter is frowned upon as a social menace. Not unsurprisingly therefore, as pointed out in the party publications both at local and national level, the societal problem of “single men” is the result of increasing numbers of single women in the past few decades. According to available data, in 2014, there were 33 million more single men than women in China. The country’s official Xinhua⁶ news

agency described the imbalance as a result of China's dangerously high birth ratio of 115.88 boys born to every 100 girls. While Xinhua did not provide the reasons for the highly imbalanced birth ratio which is far above the global average, demographic experts and sociologists have blamed traditional attitudes favouring boys over girls and one-child policy as the main factors.

what is extraordinarily shocking is the gender insensitive, condescending and discriminatory language as well as the attitude of the accompanying op-ed piece in the local media.

Citing 2004 birth ratio figures, which according to China's National Health and Family Planning Commission stood at 121 boys, gender studies scholar Lu Pin blamed the government for colluding with the traditional ideas that "boys are more valuable to girls." Lu Pin, who once also edited the online newspaper *Feminist Voices*, said "one-child policy" introduced in the 1970s was "combined with a preference in Chinese traditional culture for male heirs, whose duty it is to take care for their parents in old age." Moreover, everyone in China knows that in rural areas "one-child policy" was always in effect "one-and-a half child policy," because couples would be allowed a second child if the first was a girl, Lu added. Not surprisingly, *Feminist Voices* or 女权之声 *Nuquan zhisheng* in Chinese, was

permanently banned in 2018 for its grass roots feminist activism and for playing proactive role in #Me Too Movement in China.



Image: Lu Pin, editor of *Feminist Voices* and women's rights activist. *Feminist Voices* 女权之声 was shut down by the Chinese authorities in 2018
Source: zqb.cyol.com

As mentioned, the fact that the local county authorities have decided to treat the aging, unmarried rural men's problem as a societal problem of immediate concern, is neither anything new nor extraordinary. However, what is extraordinarily shocking is the gender insensitive, condescending and discriminatory language as well as the attitude of the accompanying op-ed piece in the local media. A signed article by Jiang Wenlai, popped up in *moment.rednet.cn* in Chinese under the title "We must immediately resolve the problem of elderly rural men in need of a bride." According to a report in one of China's semi-official digital media platforms, while Jiang Wenlai, a rural issues expert, may have been genuinely concerned about the plight of such rural unmarried, aging single men, where he (Jiang Wenlai) crossed the line was that in the write-up

he reduced women to mere “baby makers” and “bed warmers.”



Image: A poster in protest against permanent ban on *Feminist Voices*

Source: eaglevisiontimes.nz

Professor Jiang Wenlai has been writing on China’s “three rural” problem for years. In the op-ed commentary, he writes⁷: “Rural single, unmarried aging men have become a widespread problem in rural China. It is a natural matter of human continuity and for society’s forward movement that men must be married. However, in quite a few rural areas in our country it is increasingly becoming common that many older men are without a wife. So much so that some villages are now called the *village of singles*.” Reacting sharply and angrily to the commentary, Shen Bin, chief columnist with *The Paper*, one of China’s recently launched semi-official but privately funded Chinese language experimental cyber platforms, called Wenlai’s write-up “offensive, crude, and coloured by a total disrespect for women.” Wenlai’s piece has sparked a swift backlash on China’s social media. “If policymakers fail to consider issues like the rural marriage market from the perspective of both genders, and instead approach it through a patriarchal, utilitarian lens, they will end up

making the problem worse, not better,” observed⁸ Shen Bin.



Image: 30 million single men in China, and their numbers are growing...

Source: outlookindia.com

Shen Bin’s rather strong views can be seen as indirectly referring to the CPC’s “patriarchal” authoritarianism. As Leta Hong Fincher succinctly pointed out just days after China’s “Two Sessions” earlier this year: “It is impossible to understand China’s Communist Party without recognizing the patriarchal underpinnings of its authoritarianism.” Fincher, the first American to receive a PhD on gender issues in China from Beijing’s Tsinghua University, has authored two books on the subject – *Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening of China* (2018) and *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China* (2014). Fincher equated recent crackdown on China’s feminist activists with the rise of Xi Jinping as China’s strong man. “Xi Jinping views patriarchal authoritarianism as critical for the survival of the Communist Party,” Fincher told *Politico*, the European political magazine in an interview⁹ in April this year.

As scholar Lu Pin claims, cited above, the Chinese authorities have not only colluded but even promoted anti-gender patriarchal values. Therefore, it is crucial to discuss the yet another shocking commentary penned by a scholar associated with a province-level government institution, and surely a party member, as recently as in February this year. The bizarre commentary written by Wu Xiuming, deputy director of Shanxi (northern Chinese province) Think Tank Development Association, a non-profit organization funded by the province's Academy of Social Sciences, suggested a way out for getting the province's large number of rural "bare branches" married. The article, in Chinese, entitled "'New Three Burdens' are as heavy as 'three old mountains' as marriages now cost as high as over one million RMB - - adding to the woes of unmarried old, young rural men" proposed that "leftover women" in the cities should be encouraged to marry the rural "bare branches." Once again, and no more a coincidence, the article was first published and circulated in the Chinese edition of the country's official Xinhua news agency. According to Professor Wu Xiuming, to solve the dual "problems" of rural "single men" and mostly city-based "single women," it is time the Chinese authorities should encourage rural-urban migration. "Male villagers should receive vocational training and be sent to cities, while urban women shouldn't fear *a more bucolic life in the countryside*," Wu wrote¹⁰ (*Emphasis added*).



Image: A man holding “blind date” placard. Single men and women are put under family or peer pressure to “bring home” a life partner by frequently trying out “blind date” – a code word for bride/bridegroom “hunting.”

Source: xinhuanet.com

Furthermore, “bare branches” or *Guanggun* 光棍 in Chinese, is a sympathetic slang to refer to single, unmarried men in China. Perhaps, the Xiangyin county decision to not allow women to leave their hometowns and professor Wu Xiuming’s article, are reflections of more a fear than concern that “lonely, angry men are not good for social stability.” In addition to the influence of traditional ideas that a man must have a household and preferences for sons, experts have cited “bride price” as another factor for rise in the numbers of China’s “bare branches.” According¹¹ to Jessica Levin who writes for *Tea Leaf Nation*: “Given a combination of China’s one child policy and a traditional preference for sons, China may be looking at 12 to 15 percent of its male population being unable to find a wife.” In the words of Jiang Quanbao, who co-authored a study published few years ago on the growing social menace of “bare branches,” many single, unmarried males in China are from poor and rural backgrounds with little or no education.

“In recent years, as the shortage of eligible females has become more pronounced, these ‘bare branches’ have become less attractive mates,” Quanbao observed¹² in the study.

What is no less bizarre and weird in the Xinhua report is that it pointed to usual “obstacles” these rural, aging, single men faced in not succeeding in getting married. Instead of emphasizing on the decades-long failures of the government policies for addressing issues such as skewed sex ratio, further spreading of traditional preference for male offspring in rural areas, rural attitudes of equating marriage to “family lineage passage” etc. and so on, the news agency report highlighted exorbitantly high “bride prices” in rural areas leaving cash-strapped rural men unmarried. Blaming “single women” for becoming increasingly demanding and “independent” thinking, the report sympathized with rural men who must shell out between 500,000 and 1 million RMB to “woo a bride and her family.” In the words¹³ of Cheng Yuan, director of an NGO in Guangzhou (or Canton) city, thanks to the stringent population controls of the past four decades, it is rather unfortunate “China’s aging problem is more apparent today at a time when the government has withdrawn heavily from the social security and welfare system.”

China’s educated netizens are far more gender sensitive, wear a progressive outlook and are pushing back against traditional ideas



Image: A man checks the list of women available at a matchmaking event in Shenzhen

Source: AFP (in inkstonenews.com)

At another level, spirited reactions and debates such as bizarre reports and articles incite on the Chinese social media, is a clear indication China’s educated netizens when compared with the attitudes of the party authorities and government officials, are far more gender sensitive, wear a progressive outlook and are pushing back against traditional ideas. Within a few days of the publication of Wu Xiuming’s article, a related hashtag¹⁴ on Weibo – China’s most popular microblogging platform – was viewed by over 320 million netizens. As mentioned in an English language semi-official digital news platform based in Shanghai, one Weibo blogger, ridiculing Wu Xiuming’s simplistic logic, wrote¹⁵: “The real root of the problem is patriarchal norms. Please don’t conflate marriage with breeding and don’t reduce people to tools for procreation.”

It is pertinent to recall, four years ago, as President Xi Jinping geared up to start his second five-year term, the China correspondent of the Guardian had observed¹⁶: “For not once since Mao’s communist took power in 1949 has a woman been appointed to China’s top political

body – the politburo standing committee.” Why? Because Xi once again prevented a highest-ranking woman comrade, Sun Chunlan, from being elevated from the 25-member politburo into the 7-member politburo standing committee. According to an article in *The Diplomat* in 2015, in the middle of Xi’s first five-year term – as at the CPC 18th Congress in 2012 too, when Xi Jinping was given the Party’s reins – the then vice premier and politburo member Liu Yandong had failed to break¹⁷ that glass ceiling. Further, it is no coincidence that since Xi’s ascendance both in the Party and in the PRC state, the Chinese women have been forced to accept to play their traditional role in family and in society.



Image: China’s single men are referred to as “bare branches”

Source: the conversation.com



Image: China’s single women are looked down upon, those above age 27, are called “leftover women”

Source: qz.com

Xi Jinping has been increasingly compared with Mao, some have even called Xi a greater authoritarian than the Great Helmsman. Yet it is no doubt true, as I wrote¹⁸ in March this year, Xi has become the first communist leader, not just inside China but in the world, to openly call upon women to go back home and take care of the family. Not only as Fincher has drawn our attention to the critical link between patriarchy and the Communist Party’s survival, but also because under Xi’s leadership, the Party wants “women to stay at home so that men stay on the frontline and do the important work of the nation.” Though, perhaps rightly, in what some are recalling as the days of the Cultural Revolution, in its latest onslaught on the indecent culture, the Party has come down heavily on feminist activists, effeminate styles, sissy men, homosexuality, and LGBTQ groups etc. And all this is happening in the name of cultivating or preserving a masculine image of China. As the country’s official news agency had started a campaign in 2018¹⁹ in order to “cultivate a new generation that will shoulder the responsibility of national rejuvenation.”

In summation, if one goes by what some claim is China’s “solo dining revolution,” then the fast changing trends among the country’s millennials – mostly women, China’s “patriarchal” society is in for a rude shock. As it is too well known, dining out alone used to be rare in China, where food has been traditionally shared by family or friends “gathered around a

large circular table.” But as claimed in an article²⁰ published last year in the month of August - in the midst of social distancing due to the Covid19 pandemic – the number of young, single, affluent Chinese who are dining solo is ever rising. And if you thought the reason for this new trend was social distancing, you are grossly mistaken. The truth is China’s younger generation loves to be single and is embracing the single lifestyle. According to reports, China now has over 200 million singles and the total number of single people living alone is expected to reach 90 million by the end of this year.



Image: Millennials embrace solo lifestyle. A “single dogs” noodle bar in *Sanlitun*, Beijing
Source: sixthtone.com

Sun Yun, 33-year old female co-owner of *23 Seats* – a popular upmarket restaurant in Beijing’s posh *Sanlitun* area – the noodle bars’ interior is deliberately antisocial, in order to attract people who simply want to enjoy a good meal without feeling anxious about their lack of company. “We wanted to create a space where solo diners – who self-mockingly call themselves *single dogs* – wouldn’t feel uncomfortable when they walk in,” Sun Yun said. Du Yusang, 23, a young single woman, who is a popular social media star, frequently

shares videos of herself eating alone on popular streaming platforms. Mostly on weekends, she cooks lavish meals for herself and posts videos of her cooking and eating alone on Bilibili, a popular Chinese streaming platform where vlogger Du has nearly 70,000 followers. “Even when you live alone, you can still have a great life,” says Du. Like the solo dining revolution, the “solo” trend is spreading online, too.



Image: China’s leftover women choosing to stay single
Source: Image: cnn.com

Today, all thanks to China’s fast swelling ranks of singletons, more and more industries are benefitting from the rising ranks of young people choosing to go single. Contrary to the growing concern among the country’s policy makers about the adverse impact of people going “solo” on the economy, many experts believe young singles will actually give a much-needed boost to the economy. “Unlike married couples who often save to provide for their family and their children’s education, single people tend to be free-spending,” says²¹ Yuan Yibo, an analyst at investment company Mude Capital. Food delivery, restaurants, for-rent real estate, pets, and gaming are businesses which have been thriving thanks to the growing number of singletons.

Yitian, a 30-year old Shanghai resident, who has been living on her own for the past eight months, told the Shanghai-based *Sixth Tone*: “Tired of my parents’ whining over my lifestyle, I decided to move out. Now, nobody will shout at me about why I come home after midnight anymore.” I estimate my additional monthly expenses have gone up by 6000 RMB since I started living alone, she added. Market analysts in China say more and more singles-friendly consumer products are being sold both online and offline. “The ‘family’ is no longer the smallest unit we design our products for,” Deng Caike, director of an appliance maker company, told *Sixth Tone*. According to data released by e-commerce giant Alibaba, Chinese online buyers bought 2.3 million “mini electric appliances” during last years’ Singles’ Day shopping festival, popularly known as “11.11” or November 11.

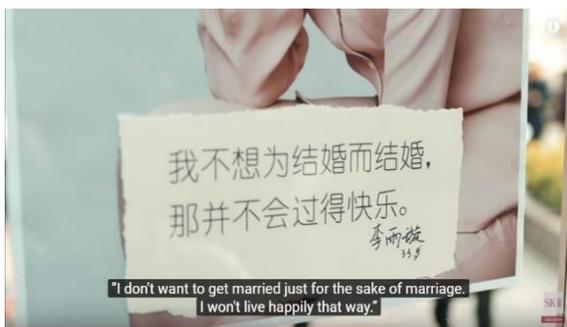


Image: Screenshot from the film *Marriage Market Takeover* showing a 33-year old Chinese woman holding a placard

Source: weforum.org

Finally, it is not only ironic but also speaks of how the CPC has regressed from Mao’s declaration “women have to be liberated and their economic potential must be harnessed” to

Xi Jinping emphasizing the importance of women’s reproductive function.

According to experts, the recent relaxation from one-child to two or even three-child policy is not going to make any fundamental difference in the attitudes of many women who are against marriage.

But as a study published by China’s Communist Youth League has shown, nearly 44% of Chinese women surveyed say they have no intention of getting married. Once again, the country’s communist authorities have failed to gauge the mood of women in China. According to experts, the recent relaxation from one-child to two or even three-child policy is not going to make any fundamental difference in the attitudes of many women who are against marriage. As well-known woman, Chinese writer Qian Zhongshou once said: “Marriage is like a besieged fortress, where those outside want to get in, and those inside want to get out.” A similar sentiment was echoed in the controversial advertising film *Marriage Market Takeover*, which shows²² a Chinese woman holding a placard with Chinese characters written on it screaming out: “I don’t want to get married just for the sake of marriage. I won’t live happily that way.” And if Xi Jinping is listening, the reason²³ these women are “unsure” if they will ever get married is the “motherhood penalty.”

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