

THE PERCEPTION OF “LEFTOVER WOMEN”: WHAT DOES CHINA’S YOUNGER GENERATION OF WOMEN THINK ABOUT MARRIAGE AND “LEFTOVER WOMEN”

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ABSTRACT

In China, the term "leftover women" is used to describe young, successful and single women in their twenties. Popular Chinese media depict these women as picky and selfish. Current literature explores the role of the Chinese media and state in creating this image. Additionally, the perception of "leftover women" themselves is covered in existing literature. How much influence does this image have on the younger generation of Chinese women? And do they make important choices in life in order to avoid becoming a "leftover woman"? By conducting in-depth interviews with young Chinese women that study in the Netherlands, this study aims to create an understanding of their opinion about "leftover women" and how their life is influenced by the image around "leftover women".

KEYWORDS: Leftover women, marriage, media representations, marriage squeeze

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INTRODUCTION

The Chinese character *sheng* 剩 can be translated as “leftover” and is used to describe leftover food, for example. In the past two decades, however, the word has often been used together with the Chinese word *nü* 女, which means “women” (Yu 2019, 3; Yao 2019, 116). The use of the degrading term “leftover women”² has caught international attention as it is surprisingly used to describe highly educated women above the age of 27, usually with a successful career (Ji 2015, 1057). Chinese women have increasingly been receiving higher education, female enrolment at universities sometimes surpasses male enrolment (Feldshuh 2017, 49). Scholars have noted that both highly educated men and women in China have started to postpone their marriage, however, only for women the likelihood of marriage decreases significantly when they are highly educated (Gaetano 2014, 125).

The reason behind this double standard seems to be multifaceted. Historically, marriage is nearly universal in China and happened early, in 1990, the average age for women to get married was 21.4 (Yao 2019, 116). Furthermore, the Chinese society has adhered to Confucian patriarchal traditions for centuries. These traditions entail that a woman’s most important priority in life is their family and that men are the main breadwinner in a household (Ji 2015, 1058). However, women have increasingly been enjoying higher education, are getting married later and have successful careers, which is a common reason for family conflict (Zhang and Sun 2014, 127). Finally, hypergamy is common in China which means that men tend to marry women that are younger than they are and have received less education. Therefore, women that are slightly older and have received higher education, experience difficulties when looking for a partner (Gaetano 2014, 125).

Why were these women given the derogatory name “leftover women”? China is facing a population decline, an ageing population and a skewed gender ratio after enforcing the one-child policy for decades. In order to keep the economy afloat, the Chinese population must grow (Cai 2013, 392; Zang and

² Throughout the article, I will put the word “leftover women” in between quotation marks, as I disapprove of the term. I am of the opinion that these women are not truly leftover.

Zhao 2017, 47). Therefore, the Chinese government is encouraging young citizens to get married and have children, preferably more than one. One way in which the government is promoting these traditional gender roles is through media, which are mostly state-owned (Gui 2020, 1965; Qian, and Qian 2014, 1341). Chinese official and popular media use the term “leftover women” to imply that they are forming a social problem (Feldshuh 2017, 39; Zhang and Sun 2014, 127). The term was first used by Chinese newspapers in 2001 and in 2006, the term was officially added to the lexicon of the Chinese Ministry of Education (Gui 2020, 1960-1961). By creating a negative connotation around the term “leftover women”, Chinese media pressure young women to get married early in order to avoid becoming a “leftover woman” (Ji 2015, 1057; Feldshuh 2017, 39). Furthermore, singlehood and high education among women is stigmatized in Chinese media. Women with educational achievements such as a PhD are depicted as abnormal and the opposite of feminine and marriage is characterized as universal and socially required (Feldshuh 2017, 44-48).

Existing literature on the topic of “leftover women” demonstrates the role of Chinese media and state in creating the negative image around “leftover women”. Other scholars have covered the perspective of “leftover women” themselves. However, the perception of other people towards “leftover women” has not yet been examined in an in-depth manner. In this shortened version of my thesis, I will therefore analyze how China’s younger generation of women perceive “leftover women” and marriage.

METHODOLOGY

In order to understand how China’s younger generation of women perceive “leftover women”, and how they view late marriage, singlehood and high education among women, I conducted five in-depth, semi-structured interviews with female Chinese exchange students in the Netherlands. The age of my interviewees ranged from 22 to 26. Two of them were single and three of them were in a relationship. To ensure anonymity, I have changed the names of my interviewees to Anna, Bonnie, Claire, Diana and Erin. All my interviews were conducted online, as the Coronavirus made it impossible to meet people in real life. The results of my interviews will be discussed in the following sections.

MARRIAGE IN CHINA

Historically, early marriage was nearly universal in China but in the past two decades trends have changed, especially in urban areas (Yao 2019, 116). This transition is also noticeable in the answers of my interviewees, as most of them would only like to get married if they find the right person. All interviewees told me that their parents think it is extremely important that they get married as early as possible and some of them explicitly mentioned that they do not want to get married to satisfy their parents. Most of my interviewees’ friends agreed that marriage is important but my interviewees also mentioned they have friends that think marriage is not that important or that do not want to get married. This exemplifies that marriage is still an important institution in the lives of my interviewees. They talk about it with their friends and their parents see it as an indispensable part of my interviewees’ lives. They do, however, seem to take more agency in how and when the marriage happens.

When we discussed marriage among women over thirty, some of the interviewees said that the Chinese society does not approve of this. Four of them, however, strongly express that they themselves, do accept marriage after thirty among women. They each gave varied reasons for why some women may marry late. The interviewees all have very open-minded opinions about late marriage among women and extensively gave reasons why they support these women. The general public in China is not supportive of this phenomenon, according to my interviewees. This social disapproval of late marriage might encourage my interviewees to marry early, while they are actually open towards late marriage.

According to the definition of that was added to the lexicon of the Chinese Ministry of Education, a woman is “leftover” when she is 27 (Gui 2020, 1960-1961). When I asked my interviewees whether they would be okay with marrying after twenty-seven, all of them said they would. However, three of the interviewees would ideally like to be married before their thirties. Erin thinks she will not look pretty in a wedding dress after she turns thirty and Bonnie mentions it is better to have a baby and thus get married, before you turn thirty. All of them also stated that it is not important for them to avoid becoming a “leftover woman”. Here, some of the interviewees give somewhat contradictory

answers. They first state they want to wait for the right person to get married, but then give varied reasons for why one has to get married before the age of 30. This implies that they are still experiencing pressure to find the right partner before that age despite the fact that they are open-minded towards late marriage.

This pressure might come from their parents and extended family, as three interviewees noted that their parents would worry if they would not be married at the age of thirty and thus be labelled as a “leftover woman”. Bonnie told me about her cousins to exemplify the pressure from family that “leftover women” and also single men experience:

I have a [female] cousin who is over thirty and she is working in Australia, she is an architect and my family is still nervous about her relationship or marriage. Until now she hasn't find a boyfriend, she had but not now. My parents, her parents and my grandparents are all worried about it. My [male] cousin (33) as well. Of course he is male but he faces the same issue as my cousin.

Erin also noted how it is very common in Chinese TV series that each time a girl calls her parents or visits them, they interrogate her about their dating life. This shows that the pressure that young Chinese women experience from their parents, extended family and society to get married early and not to become a “leftover woman” is normalized.

BALANCING CAREER AND FAMILY

Due to gender inequality, a lot of Chinese women experience a double burden, which means that besides having a job, they are expected to shoulder most of the household tasks and take care of their children (Gui 2020, 1973; Ji 2015, 2060; Cook, and Dong 2011, 961). When I discussed the topic of task division in households with my interviewees, three of them immediately told me they do not want to become a housewife. Most of them expressed their desire to split tasks such as taking care of children and other household duties with their partner. All interviewees said that it is important that their future partner shares this idea with them. However, combining career and family as a woman in China will be very hard according to all the interviewees. They all think it is possible

but because women are also expected to take care of the children and cook, it will be difficult. PhD student Claire gave the following answer:

It's really very hard I have to say, but I need to do it. One of my best friends is very talented and she wanted to do a PhD but fell in love and so she gave her career to be a housewife and have children. Because she said it's so hard to combine her career and family, so that's her choice. And some of my teachers are female, they gave up having children to catch their career. They also live a wonderful life, I think it's about someone's choice, I will try to do it even though it's so hard to balance. I will not give up anything.

The answers of my interviewees show some contradiction here again. All of them express their desire to pursue a career and do not want to become a housewife. However, they all think combining career and family as a woman is difficult, as a woman is expected to cook and take care of the children. This contradiction was also noted by Ji (2015, 1069) and Gui (2020, 1966). It can be seen as a desire of Chinese women to equally divide household tasks with her partner, but this is not common in China at all.

My interviewees think that as a woman in China nowadays, it is very difficult and hard to combine work and family. It seems they want this situation to change for themselves, as they told me they are discussing this issue with their future partners. This could indicate that my interviewees are trying to change the gender roles in the private sphere. Unfortunately, they do not always feel supported in their wish to have a successful career. They told me that they were supported by their friends, but their family was not always positive about their educational progress. Erin said that her parents "just want her to have a job to earn a salary so she can support herself, they don't want her to make a lot of progress on her career". Erin also told me she wants to be financially independent so she can live on her own without her parents "limiting her development". Concluding, young women are still not always encouraged to pursue a successful career or to achieve high results in education. As my interviewees are experiencing this in urban areas, the discouraging of young women to achieve a successful academic and professional career probably happens even more in rural areas. The traditional notion that women should take

care of the family is withholding young women from thriving in their academic and professional career. My interviewees, however, said that they will not adhere to their parents' wishes. This could imply that at least some of China's younger generation of women is strong enough to step out of the traditional gender roles.

“LEFTOVER WOMEN”

In order to analyze the perception that my interviewees have of “leftover women”, I asked them questions about these women in general and how they think that “leftover women” are viewed among the general public. When I asked the interviewees to define a “leftover woman” four of them first expressed their dissatisfaction with the term. They called it “rude”, “insulting”, “embarrassing” and “impolite”. Claire said that she and her female friends would never call a woman “leftover”. Bonnie said:

No matter your educational background or successful career, it's just a name that erases your identity or who you are. You are just a woman that is leftover.

We then discussed how “leftover women” are defined and what characterizes them. The interviewees would describe them as in their thirties, unmarried, career-oriented, living in big cities and highly educated. However, three of the interviewees also described them as independent, strong and free. This shows how despite the negative connotation of “leftover women”, my interviewees still assigned positive characteristics to them.

All the interviewees, however, said they never talk about the topic of “leftover women” with their friends. Bonnie told me she thinks her friends are all very open-minded towards “leftover women” but she noticed that for themselves they still prefer to “follow the traditional path of finding a partner”. This again is contradictory behaviour: they hold a very modern and open-minded view towards “leftover women”, yet they would rather not face this future themselves. This could lead to believe that even though they are open to the idea of late marriage, they would rather not get married late due to the social pressure that they will be facing.

What might withhold young women from marrying later, is that there are a lot of prejudices about “leftover women”. From preliminary research, I derived several stereotypical characteristics of “leftover women” which I discussed with my interviewees. First of all, it is sometimes said that these women are single because they are picky and fussy (Gui 2020, 1970). Claire and Erin noted that these women might be picky but this is not a bad thing. They just have not found the right partner that meets their standards, and according to the interviewees this does not mean that the standards of “leftover women” are too high. Secondly, it is often said that “leftover women” are single because they put their career first (Gui 2020, 1960-1961). Four of the interviewees agreed with this, three of them mentioned that this is only one factor that influences their singlehood. They did not view it as something negative, but “leftover women” do often put career first, according to my interviewees. Finally, when I mentioned that “leftover women” are said to be egocentric (Ji 2015, 1057), four of the interviewees immediately disagreed. Bonnie argued that maybe “leftover women” put themselves first but this is not a bad thing. Anna and Claire said it is wrong to think a woman should sacrifice everything to have a family. From discussing these stereotypes with my interviewees can be concluded that they do not at all support the stereotypes. They strongly disagreed with most of them or, when they did agree, they explained the “leftover women’s” decisions in a positive way.

Additionally, we discussed the saying “There are three genders: Men, women and women with a PhD” which implies that highly educated women are abnormal (Gaetano 2014, 126; Gui 2020, 1957; Fincher 2014). When I asked my interviewees about this saying, most of them started laughing and Claire explained it is “treated like a joke”. Anna said she thinks women who want to obtain a PhD “have to become stronger both mentally and physically” and are therefore not like “the traditional stereotype of a woman”. Bonnie said that obtaining a PhD makes you a “distinguished person” and told me about her own experience with female PhD’s:

Most female PhD I met are very interesting, they have their own hobbies like playing ukulele or something. They are very good in something and they are the experts in a field. I really admire them actually, because I think they are brave enough. In China generally speaking we still have the stereotype that women should get married or something. But they can fight for it and they put it behind to pursue their own goals, I think that's very brave. They are not different from us, if you put her with other people you cannot pick her out because she has the PhD, no.

Claire, who is a PhD student herself, thinks she is different and is proud to be “the third gender”. She told me that some male PhD’s in China think that women are not supposed to obtain a PhD and she likes to prove them wrong. From this can be concluded that my interviewees think that a woman with a PhD is special and a bit different from the traditional Chinese woman. However, they see this as something positive and some of them even see female PhD’s as an example in life.

This was confirmed again, when I discussed the character Hu Yifei from the series *iPartment*, the Chinese equivalent of *Friends*, according to my interviewees. The character Hu Yifei is a female PhD, she is single but wants to be in a relationship with another character from the show. Feldshuh (2017) argues that in the series, Hu Yifei is depicted as tough, aggressive and dominant. According to her, she is socially undesirable and a tomboy who is unfeminine (Feldshuh 2017, 48). When I asked my interviewees about their opinion of Hu Yifei, their answers were the opposite of the image that Feldshuh (2017) had described. Diana thought she is “great” and Claire said that she is “independent and stronger than any other character in the series”. Bonnie said:

I think if I can be a PhD like her, I won’t worry anymore about my marriage or relationship because I am charming enough. It doesn’t matter if I have a partner or not. It’s not a big deal because I can do a lot of things myself. She is the kind of girl that a modern girl wants to be.

Claire described Hu Yifei as “outgoing and fashionable” which is not at all in line with how Feldshuh (2014) depicted her. From this can be concluded that

my interviewees look up to women with a PhD and see them as an example, rather than something they are scared to become.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown how my interviewees, who belong to China’s younger generation of women, perceive “leftover women”. According to them, Chinese society does not support “leftover women” nor late marriage among women. My interviewees, however, disapprove of the term and do support these women. In fact, they can assign positive characteristics to them which indicates they can also perceive “leftover women” as an example in life. Furthermore, my interviewees hold very open-minded views towards late marriage among women and only want to get married if they find the right person. However, their parents want them to get married early and my interviewees are of the opinion that the general public in China is also not supportive of late marriage among women. When married, my interviewees deem it important that their partner shares the opinion that household tasks need to be divided equally. From discussing the characteristics of female PhD’s on Chinese television and in real life with my interviewees, it can be concluded that they admire highly educated women. They see female PhD’s as a different type of woman but in a positive way. However, my interviewees also gave somewhat contradictory answers, which exemplifies how the general public and the parents of Chinese young women withhold them from pursuing their aspirations and ideals.

My research indicates the importance of researching China’s younger generation of women, as they are trying to step out of the traditional gender roles. This should be encouraged and research has to be done on what tools these women need to pursue their goals. Instead of only focusing on “leftover women” in contemporary society, it is important to focus on the future as well. By doing this we can enable young Chinese women to thrive academically and professionally. I suggest more research should also be done on China’s younger generation of men’s perception of “leftover women”, as this is still missing in current literature. Moreover, men can play an important role in enabling women to combine a career and family. My research suggests that some of the young

women in China want to step out of the traditional gender roles and to achieve this, we must not forget to include men in the process.

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