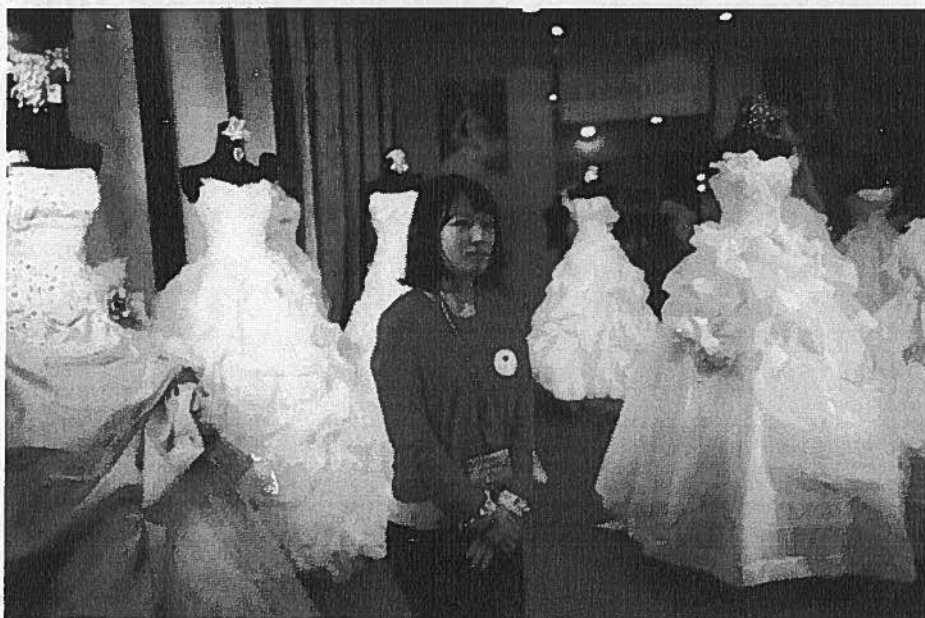


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All the shengnu ladies

Accomplished Chinese women are a new "leftover" generation: Too successful to marry, but disrespected without a man

BY ROSEANN LAKE



Wedding dresses at the China International Wedding Expo in Shanghai (Credit: Aly Song / Reuters)

Barring the odd empress, China is historically not a very glorious place to be a woman. From foot-binding to female infanticides, Chinese women have suffered their share of gender-specific hardships. Today, these women are 650 million strong. They represent the world's largest female population, the highest percentage of self-made female billionaires, and with 63 percent of GMAT takers in China being female, they're attaining MBAs with a ferocity that's making the boys blush. And yet, no matter how ambitious or accomplished, they remain bound. Not by their feet, but by something

that can be just as inhibiting — marriage.

In China, there's a deep-seated tradition of marriage hypergamy which mandates that a woman must marry up. This generally works out, as it allows the Chinese man to feel superior, and the woman to jump a social class or two, but it gets messy for highly accomplished females. Their educations and salaries make them hard to compete with, and so their Chinese male counterparts shy away in favor of younger, more "manageable" beauties.

As these women age, their marriageability plummets, and they acquire a snazzy new name: "shengnu." Used to describe an unmarried woman ever so precariously teetering near the age of 30, this word literally means "leftover woman." The prefix "sheng" is the same as in the word "shengcai" or "leftover food." Loosely translated, it implies that single women of a certain age in China are the stuff of doggy bags, Tupperware and garbage disposals.

Lynette (her English name) is turning 30 in two months, and all her parents wanted this Chinese New Year was for her to announce that she was getting married. A successful television producer in Beijing, she returned home for the holidays with plenty of gifts — but with no romantic prospects on the horizon, she was subject to endless

needing from family and neighbors.

“One of my neighbors heard that I worked in television, and offered to set me up on a blind date with someone compatible,” she said. “I learned that he was a network administrator, and that he made 3,000 RMB (\$476) a month. My neighbor considered this to be a good salary, because she thought I worked in a TV factory. Little did she know, as a producer, I pay my entry-level directors more than that. But I still went on the date. The man was very uncomfortable. It was supposed to be for dinner, but we just ended up having soybean milk, because I think he knew nothing could come of it.”

That well-educated, well-employed American women are finding themselves with fewer “marriageable” (men who are better educated and earn more money than they do) options around them is a well-documented phenomenon. It’s the “All the Single Ladies” crisis, as described by Kate Bolick in the Atlantic. “All the Leftover Ladies” of China are facing a similar fate, but with slightly different characteristics.

As a result of China’s one-child policy and ensuing female infanticides due to the traditional preference for males, China’s male to female ratio is seriously skewed in favor of the fairer sex. According to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, by 2020, there will be 30 million more men than women of marriageable age in China. This surplus is unprecedented for a country at peace, and equates to 1 in 5 Chinese men being unable to find a bride. Fears of China expanding its military have been expressed, as have concerns over the increased prostitution, violent crime and bride trafficking that such a disproportionate number of males generally spurs. But certainly, and perhaps more trivially, a surplus of 30 million men should at least improve a girl’s chances of finding someone she might want to marry?

- That’s not been the case. In 2007, the Chinese Ministry of Education listed “shengnu” as one of the 171 new words of the year. The Communist Party sponsored All China Women’s Federation, China’s most influential women’s organization, published the results of a survey that breaks women down into different categories of “leftover.” Beginning at 25, it details how women must “fight” and “hunt” for a partner, so as not to wind up alone. By 28, it implies the heat is really on, telling women “they must triumph.” Between 31 and 35, these women are called “advanced leftovers,” and by 35, a single woman is the “ultimate” leftover. This woman has met great professional success, but like the Monkey King — to whom she is compared — she is flawed in thinking that she is higher than the mandate of heaven, which we can only assume is marriage.

The survey appears to stress the urgency to marry, which, this being a Party-propagated document, is best viewed with a critical eye. Here we have a government that is feeling the aftershocks of one of its most onerous policies. Since statistically, men will already be hard-pressed to find a wife, might the Chinese government have a vested interest in ensuring that a maximum of its female citizens are married off? And, as Leta Hong Fincher suggests in Ms. Magazine, might the government, in a gentle swipe at eugenics, be particularly keen to pressure the country’s best and brightest females to get married and produce babies that could be especially enriching to the nation’s gene pool?

- While the exact motives of Zhongnanhai are difficult to discern, the political power of marriage in China is undeniable. Towards the decline of the Qing Dynasty at the end of the 19th century, Chinese women were considered a negative influence on their own children because they were uneducated and superstitious. In an attempt to strengthen the nation, Chinese intellectuals during the first half of the 20th century championed the idea that a stable home space meant a stable nation, and began a movement to train women for their jobs and responsibilities as household managers. The home came to be seen as a small-scale model of the imperial order of society, and its management became central to national concern. As Helen M. Schneider writes in “Keeping the Nation’s House, Domestic Management and the Making of Modern China,” “Managing the domestic space was an important responsibility; a wife who managed well and without complications enabled her husband to

attend fully to public 'outside' affairs."

This historical precedent for marriage makes it easier to see why the "shengnu," a woman who is very much involved in the "outside" space, might encounter challenges when it comes to marriage. It also provides insight into how the Chinese government has used marriage as a political tool in the past, making it plausible that it may still be doing so with its slanderous classifications of single women.

But truth be told, a government campaign does little to shake the confidence of a single Chinese woman. Far more perturbing is the flak a "shengnu" gets from society. People talk. The neighbors inquire. "Xiao Hong is 29 and still unmarried? Her prime childbearing years are coming to a close. After 30 nobody will want her. She'd better speed things up," they'll say. Parents feel social intimidation and start pressuring their daughters. They set them up on endless blind dates. They go on about how much they'd like to have grandchildren. They threaten

- disinheritance.

Surely, this is not a phenomenon unique to China, but the country's cultural conviction that everyone should be married certainly doesn't help. As noted by Yong Cai, a sociologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, "In most societies of the Western world, there is always at least 10-15 percent of the population that remains single, but in China, until the 1980s, that percentage was always less than 1 percent."

Basically, marriage in China has the equivalent social force of a steamroller. It's simply what one does. There are Chinese work units that have an in-house matchmaker who is tasked with pairing off single employees. Almost every day of the week, there are marriage markets in parks around the country where parents and grandparents gather to flip through tomes and tomes of Xeroxed copies listing the names, occupations and salaries of available singles with whom they might be able to pair off their progeny.

"We talk about helicopter parents in the U.S., but when it comes to marriage in China, I'd say parents are air hawks," says Berlin Fang, a cross-cultural commentator. "Sometimes they even drop a few bombs."

The holiday blitzkrieg around Lynette, the TV producer, also included another neighbor who offered to set her up with a man who had "excellent conditions," meaning he earned a good salary and owned a home in the astronomically priced real estate market of Beijing, what most Chinese — parents, especially — see as a very coveted asset to marriage.

"We went on two dinner dates. After the second date, he brought me back to his apartment ... to show me how close it was to the local kindergarten."

Lynette laughs about these blind dates because she knows most of her single friends are being shuffled through the same motions, but admits that both instances were terribly awkward. In the first, her superior education and job made the man disinterested in her. And in the second, the meeting was so pragmatically marriage-minded, that a bit of chemistry — something she is looking for — seemed completely out of the question.

Critics say that shengnu are single because their standards are too high. While it is no secret that some women in China use marriage as a means to acquire wealth, shengnu are generally educated, well-to-do females who support themselves and have less of a need than their mothers and grandmothers did to enter a marriage for economic reasons. This allows them to be selective, and they are. Most of them disagree with the idea of marriage just for the sake of it, even if it means facing ultimatums from their parents and endless reminders that nobody will want them after 30.

Nobody, though? Where are the 30 million surplus men?

In the countryside, tending to their parents and their farms. Because in Chinese society, it's expected women will

marry up, that's exactly what most women in rural areas do. They migrate to bigger cities, find better jobs, marry men in higher classes, and in some cases, even end up providing more money for their parents than the males who remain on the farms taking care of them. In a fascinating piece for the Pulitzer Center, journalists Sushma Subramanian and Deborah Jian Lee report that these women are known as "golden turtles" for the wealth they are able to provide for their families by migrating and marrying up. Their "success" has given pause to China's traditional preference for sons, all while leaving thousands of men behind in perpetual bachelorhood. These men, also known as "guan gun" or "bare branches," are at the rock bottom of the marriage chain, and although equally strapped for an available pool of partners to choose from, are not very compatible with the average shengnu, socially, intellectually or geographically.

Shengnu tend to congregate in China's largest cities, where the big jobs are. The sixth national census reveals that there are now more unmarried women than men in Shanghai. Things are not much better in Beijing, where in 2008, according to Baike reports, there were already over half a million shengnu. The numbers in other Chinese first-tier cities show a similar trend.

Making matters worse, according to a survey conducted by the All-China Women's Federation — again, the organization founded to further women's rights — out of 30,000 men, more than 90 percent said women should marry before 27 to avoid becoming unwanted. This stems partly from beliefs about the prime years for bearing children, but mainly, from the value that Chinese men place on youth and looks. While they're hardly the only men in the world to do this, they are rather unforgiving. A 35-year-old Chinese male CFO is much more likely to go for a 19-year-old head-turner than a fellow female executive. Because he can. He is successful, and therefore has his pick of the lot. But by the same logic that makes a divorced man in China "broken in," but a divorced woman in China, "sloppy seconds," his female professional equivalent is likely to remain single.

And so emerges the modern shengnu: the imperishable leftover who braves the tide of political, cultural, social and parental waves pushing her towards marriage. For better. Or for worse. But at least, on her own terms.

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