Book Review

China's Leftover Women: Late Marriage among Professional Women and Its Consequences

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Chinese women have been popular subjects of much social science research on East Asia. From Patricia Ebrey's (1993) classic depiction of Song Dynasty Chinese women's love and marriage lives in "inner quarters" to Tamara Jacka's (2006) keen observations on rural female migrants working in urban China, a wide array of studies provide extensive coverage and insightful analyses of Chinese women in various arenas. Given the wealth of scholarship on Chinese females, why do we need yet another book on this seemingly well-studied population?

Sandy To's *China's Leftover Women* zooms in on a particular subgroup of Chinese women who, on the surface, are the beneficiaries of China's booming, globalizing economy and the socialist gender equality policies. To's female informants are all young, cosmopolitan, well-educated, and exceedingly achieved: One could easily imagine them being heralded as role models of autonomous, self-reliant modern women, and being quickly "snapped up" by male suitors for their financial and educational capital. Instead, these women not only experience great difficulties in finding a marriage partner, but are also taunted by the Chinese government, media, and public as undesirable "leftovers." This baffling mismatch, sensationalized in much discourse in major Chinese societies (mainland, Taiwan, and Hong Kong), raises the central question of the book: Are these "leftover" women indeed too invested in work (and presumably, neglectful of their personal life) and too picky in partner choice as they are accused of being? In other words, are these women themselves to blame for their "leftover" status, which, arguably, not only compromises their "personal happiness" but also harms the social stability?

The author begins her argument by debunking the widespread myth

of "leftover" women's disinterest in marriage, as her interviewees are actually keen to have long-term romantic relationships, preferably in the form of legal marriage. Be it out of personal idealization of harmonious family life or as a result of legal constraints on childbearing, these successful career women, though displaying varying degrees of traditionalism and egalitarianism, view marriage as an important goal, if not a "must." Many indeed take proactive steps and go to great lengths to achieve this status. This finding, which is the exact opposite of what the state media claim, sets the context for further problematization: How is it that these highly educated, highly salaried, and young women, despite their motivation to get married, fail to find satisfactory long-term partners in today's China, where males are in surplus?

Vivid accounts from in-depth interviews with the "leftover" females revealed two major obstacles that stand in the way between these women and the happy marriage they envision. On the one hand, straightforward rejection by potential male suitors, often due to their male superiority beliefs, deny these professionally successful women opportunities to even start romantic relationships. On the other hand, the gender-unequal conditions that partnership and marriage entail, such as requirements for females to abandon promising careers, often lead to dissolution of existing romantic relationships and open the women's eyes to the brutal truth about conservative gendered norms. Both obstacles stem from deep-seated "traditional Chinese" patriarchal values, and both result in the women's suffering from tremendous psychological distress in their pursuit of a satisfying marriage.

The same group of women, despite rejections and gendered constraints, navigate themselves towards their marriage goals using creative strategies. Some avoid patriarchal discrimination by focusing their partner search on potential mates who will appreciate their resources or at least overlook their "transgressions" of traditional female roles; others combat gender-unequal constraints attached to the marital institution by resorting to alternative relationship forms such as friendship networks. Each strategy has its own complications, however, which are often related to the powerful institution of filial piety. As exemplified repeatedly throughout the book, even the most independent, power-assertive female professionals feel the pressure from their parents, and find themselves caught between their aspirations for egalitarian partnership and

the indisputable filial demands.

The author claimed in the introductory chapter that *China's Leftover Women* serves not only as an academic analysis of achieved yet unmarried Chinese women, but also as a source of suggestions to those who are experiencing (and suffering from) this negatively connotated single status. The various partner search strategies adopted by To's female informants were summarized into four major categories (Maximizers, Traditionalists, Satisficers, and Innovators) along two dimensions (marriage value and economic goals). It is particularly interesting to see how some women, after discovering their own hidden inclinations (e.g. the need for non-docile lifestyles) or other external factors (e.g. parental suspicion about western partners), shift course during their courtship experiences. Therefore, these categories are not rigid instructions to be observed, but rather guidelines to be applied flexibly and reflexively by these resourceful women, who do not need to be regimented by the government or public media.

China's Leftover Women constitutes a timely and valuable contribution to the scholarship on the ever-changing gender landscape in China. Grounded in rich qualitative data, this book paints a diverse, complex, and fluid picture of the "leftover women" population by featuring women with different views and values, by intersecting gender dynamics with intergenerational relationships, and by charting women's flexible trajectories in partner search. The prevailing patriarchal norms portrayed in this book corroborate with international reports on China's recent decline in gender equality (see World Economic Forum, 2015). In addition, the author demonstrates considerable sophistication by contextualizing the "leftover women" group in China's widening social gaps through reference to less privileged single women and "leftover" rural men. While this book focuses on Chinese female elites, its findings converge with existing studies on their disadvantaged counterparts (e.g. see Yan, 2003) by highlighting the women's agency and resilience to survive and thrive in patriarchal China.

There are several ways in which this book's arguments and analyses could be refined, however. Firstly, the conceptualization of women's "marriage goal" as one single construct, as in Chapter 2, contradicts later chapters which suggest that the "marriage goal" actually consists of multiple components such as marriage views (whether to get married or

not) and egalitarianism expectations (whether the relationship is egalitarian or not). A more careful conceptual unpacking of these heterogeneous "marriage goals" would prevent and reduce readers' confusion. Secondly, several statements in the book are speculative rather than empirically supported. The rejections from male suitors, for instance, are sometimes hastily attributed to patriarchal "discrimination" or "constraints" without disentangling gendered expectations and personal preferences. Additional contextual information would help rule out alternative interpretations. Thirdly, the final categorization of leftover women's partner search strategies could be reconsidered, given the female informants' high demands for egalitarianism in partnership, demands which often override economic benefits from marriage, as shown in many cases. It is thus perhaps more relevant to put "gender role" rather than "economic values" as a central axis in typology building. Despite these minor limitations, To's book, as a pleasant and thought-provoking read for those interested in women and gender in contemporary China, exhibits great potential to open up new avenues for future research and to propel social change.

References

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