

# MODERN MARRIAGE LANDSCAPE IN URBAN CHINA

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# ABSTRACT

## Modern Marriage Landscape in Urban China

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In China there is a great gender imbalance, with men outnumbering women by 15%. This is a result of the One Child Policy which was enacted in 1979. At the same cultural moment, in 1978, Deng Xiaoping initiated the Open Door Policy, which opened China's economy to foreign investment. As the controlled market economy shifted to become more of a "free market", this led to a breakdown of traditional Chinese family values that had been previously unchallenged. A historical trend that has remained present is women engaging in hypergamous marriages, in which women marry older, better-educated, and wealthier men. Simultaneously, as a result of the increased economic opportunities, more and more women are obtaining higher educational degrees, earning more money, and becoming financially independent. A modern trend, stigmatized by Chinese media, is the rise in "leftover women," these high-achieving females who are unmarried and "unwanted." The causes and factors behind these seemingly contradictory

trends have a correlated and interconnected effect on the future of Chinese urban society and women's well-being. A historical framework is used to evaluate the effect of governmental and economic policies on modern society. Also, a combination of Chinese and Western sources brings a balanced perspective on Chinese culture and values in modern day. These seemingly contradictory forces of the oversupply of males and the increasing number of "leftover women" coexist under the influence of the One Child Policy instituted decades earlier. Governmental policies of the Chinese Communist Party affect the daily lives of the current generation of young adults and the future generations to come as a result of these imbalanced marriage trends.

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## INTRODUCTION

Modern marriage trends, including hypergamy, “leftover women,” and skewed gender ratios, are the result of a very complex combination of the One Child Policy (OCP), Open Door Policy (ODP), and traditional Chinese values. The collision of the continuation of certain traditional Chinese family values with the rise of Western values, including materialism and individualism presents a distinct challenge for modern Chinese men, women, and future families. These challenges include but are not limited to the difficulty in finding suitable partners, double standard of professional success and also conforming to traditional gender norms.

In the context of global studies, my research addresses current marriage trends in China and the extent to which they are the effect of specific past policies. I analyze the historical genealogy of the unique combination of four main factors; gender ratios, falling fertility rates, traditional values, and a change of women’s status in the context of contemporary China. In particular, my analysis focuses on the role that the OCP and ODP played in determining current social and demographic trends that characterize Chinese society. Other nations also have skewed gender ratios, falling fertility rates, and change of women’s status, yet the combination of these factors alongside other realities is special to China. The OCP and ODP are also exclusive to China, necessitating this to be a localized discussion to Chinese policies, demographics, and societal trends. However, it is beneficial to compare the current reality of nations who had similar initial population trends but did not implement equivalent policies to the OCP or ODP.

To assess these factors I evaluate different sources and scholars coming from unique fields of study to provide a well-rounded understanding of the polices, Chinese demographics, and cultural realities. I use a historical framework to evaluate the OCP, ODP, and other realities

in China from 1970 to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Regarding modern trends, I primarily utilize sociological and feminist frameworks. The scholars that I review use various lenses in addition to the historical framework to construct their understanding and evaluation of these policies and more significantly, how they have contributed to the current situation. A feminist framework evaluates trends through the lens of gender equality. The transdisciplinary approach includes sociology, family studies, anthropology, feminism, and Asian studies. Each scholar brings a particular combination of those fields into this discussion requiring consideration of their backgrounds.

The transdisciplinary approach involving multiple fields requires a use of overlapping frameworks, including historical, sociological, and feminist frameworks, while I also use comparative analysis, to evaluate the scholars' different backgrounds. The primary scholars' articles I use are Yong Cai, Wang Feng, and Baochang Gu's "Population, Policy, and Politics: How History Will Judge China's One-Child Policy" (2012); Andrew Quach and Elaine Anderson's "Implications of China's Open-Door Policy for Families: A Family Impact Analysis" (2008); Yu Xie's "Gender and Family in Contemporary China" (2013); Arianne Gaetano's "Leftover women: Postponing Marriage and Renegotiating Womanhood in Urban China" (2014); Vanessa Fong's "China's One-Child Policy and the Empowerment of Urban Daughters" (2002).



## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Sociologist Yong Cai is a leading expert in Chinese social demography and offers a pivotal contribution to the understanding of the OCP. His findings guided a general consensus on the inaccuracy of the assumptions leading to the OCP, flawed conclusions on the effects of the policy, and that the fertility rate had actually decreased to levels below the replacement. This new consensus influenced the Chinese government to end the policy that had been in place for three decades. By ending, or adjusting the policy according to this new consensus, the CCP acknowledged Yong Cai's findings that exposed the inadequacies in their approach to population control and the profound effects of the policy on the nation and future generations.

Alongside Cai, Feng and Gu are both sociologists, at University of California Irvine and Renmin University respectively. All three scholars are Chinese but were educated at American universities, so their understanding of China is influenced by both their national background yet Western education. Their work reflects their multifaceted framework and understanding of Chinese policies from a western lens. They are not sympathetic to the Communist Party and offer a thorough critique of the OCP and its profound impact on Chinese society.

They analyze the motivations for the OCP, the validity of those reasons, the politics involved, and its continued legacy. They argue that although it was not as significant in controlling population growth, as other factors would accomplish the same goal, the long-term societal impact is underestimated. They are wary of the unimaginable effects of a nation of one-child homes, socially, economically, and demographically. They affirm that the policy only persisted because of the nature of the CCP's control and sovereignty. Their voices are a crucial contribution to this field as they examine the original purposes of the OCP.

Andrew Quach and Elaine Anderson- scholars in the field of family science at the University of Maryland, examine the under researched effects of the ODP on Chinese families in the article, “Implications of China’s Open-Door Policy for Families: A Family Impact Analysis”. Their background in family studies provides a novel evaluation of the OCP as their analysis is focused on the impact on families and changing family dynamics. The main argument is that the ODP affected employment, poverty rates, household composition, and family values, as it introduced Chinese families to other cultures, societies, values and opportunities. They claim that the ODP changed family responsibility, reduced family interdependence and increased independence, minimized significance of extended family, among other effects, many of which are still not yet understood. Their contributions are significant to understand the unintended social effects of an economic policy, as the impact of a policy always extends beyond its original focus. Likewise, the OCP had economic effects beyond its expected social impact.

Chinese American sociologist, Yu Xie, offers a combined framework of understanding Chinese culture, providing a very statistical analysis of trends, nuanced understanding of current trends in China from his diverse background. His main research interests are social stratification, demography, statistical methods, Chinese studies, and sociology of science. In his article, “Gender and Family in Contemporary China,” he evaluates the changes in China following the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. He assesses the departure from and continuation of traditional norms and values. These include filial piety, son preference, gender inequality, hypergamy, multi-generational co-residence. He links much of the changes in society to improvement of women’s socioeconomic status and increased individual consumption aspirations. His results from his statistical analysis challenge many assumptions surrounding current gender and marriage realities, including the impact of the imbalanced sex ratios. Xie

argues that the socioeconomic changes impact family, marriage, and gender dynamics most substantially. It will be discussed later whether this is linked to the OCP, ODP, or is simply correlated and not directly caused by either policy.

Sociologist and anthropologist, Arianne Gaetano, at Auburn University researches gender, migration, marriage, and their interrelation in China. Her field of study is directly applicable to this discussion as she studies the interwoven factors that affect modern gender roles and evolving marriage expectations and dynamics. In her article, “Leftover women: Postponing Marriage and Renegotiating Womanhood in Urban China,” she addresses the complex situation facing unmarried Chinese women who are achieving more than any previous generation of Chinese women, and yet if they remain unmarried are stigmatized as less valuable and feminine. Her background in China studies coupled with a feminist approach offers a critical eye to policies or cultural norms that inhibit women’s growth yet champions efforts to not conform to unnecessarily burdensome societal pressures. Although disapproving of the stigmatization of “leftover women,” she also is optimistic and hopeful regarding women’s renegotiation of womanhood, that benefits all of society. Different from the other scholars in this discussion, she employs personal interviews in her research with Chinese women to understand diverse stories and lived experiences of the women she studies in abstract. Her contributions are vital as it applies sociological and feminist frameworks to the modern reality lived by millions of Chinese women. She personalizes the discussion of impersonal policies and a vast population.

Anthropologist Vanessa Fong applies anthropological, sociological, and psychological theories to her longitudinal studies of Chinese singleton children and how their childhood experiences have shaped their adult lives and personal decisions. Fong was born in Taiwan but immigrated with her family to America when she was three years old. She earned her PhD from

Harvard University. Fluent in Mandarin and still connected to her family's background, yet educated and enculturated in America, she brings a unique transnational and culturally-blended perspective. She studies the trends from afar while also conducting her cohort study, providing a localized representation of the former findings. Her framework is a combination of feminism, anthropology, sociology, Asian studies, and family studies. Most notably are the first two, feminism and anthropology as those guide the latter. Amidst all of her research on families, she chose to develop her career at the exclusion of a family, as she believed it would be difficult to succeed at both. This is interesting to note and emphasizes her value of gender equality over traditional family roles.

Her article, "China's One-Child Policy and the Empowerment of Urban Daughters" addresses the demographic shifts following the policy's implementation and argues that daughters have benefited from receiving greater investment from their parents than before. Her research consisted of following a cohort of 2,273 singleton children from junior high to their 20s-30s. Her cohort was not representative of the rural population, nor of highly elite classes, however represents a large majority of the Chinese population: low to middle income families with only one child. These families' parents invest greatly in their one child so they can achieve high academic and career success. From her findings, Fong concludes that compared to previous generations, these daughters gained greater education opportunities, occupied a substantially larger number of jobs outside the domestic sphere, and were expected to continue their filial duty by providing for their parents in late age. This fundamentally shifted the traditional preference of sons over daughters and partial treatment of sons. Fong acknowledges the tragic consequences of the policy's enforcement, but seeks to offer an alternative understanding of the OCP, focusing on its elevation of women in Chinese society. This also highlights her uniquely feminist approach.

## 2. OUTLINE

The trends discussed in this paper are the gender ratio imbalance due to the OCP, hypergamous marriages, and leftover women. During the OCP, sex-selected abortions led to approximately 30 million more men than women, with the largest imbalance being in the youngest generation and marriageable age generation. In China the hypergamous trend has been perpetuated for many generations. It is common and expected for younger women of lower education level, socioeconomic status to marry men who are older, better educated, and wealthier. “Leftover women” (*sheng nü*) is a term used to describe women “deemed increasingly unmarriageable due to their advancing age—starting from their mid-20s, and perceived unfeminine natures” (Gaetano, 124). It began to be propagated by the media in early 2000s and has become common vernacular. It is perceived in a multitude of ways by the women who are labeled as such and is surrounded by a multitude of cultural norms that will be further explored later. Yet at the same time the traditional values and pressures are put on bachelor men, including the expectation for men to provide material wealth before being eligible for marriage. The key terms that should be noted are One Child Policy (OCP); Open-Door Policy (ODP); hypergamy; leftover women; women’s status, referring to the general trends in education, income, material achievement achieved by women in modern China; filial piety; CCP, the Chinese Communist Party.

I will review the previously stated scholars’ work, their main arguments, and evaluate the claims they make and their overlapping contributions and contradictions. I begin with the ODP and Quach and Anderson’s article, followed by the OCP. In both sections I evaluate the policies’ intentional and unintentional effects on Chinese society and demographics. From there, I analyze

the different cultural factors and traditional values that co-exist to produce certain gender and marriage outcomes. Finally, I address the stigmatization and experience of “leftover women”. Throughout the paper I compare and contrast the various scholars’ arguments to evaluate the extent to which the aforementioned policies have led to the current marriage trends in China.

### 3. REFORMS

#### 3.1 Open Door Policy

The Reform and Open Door Policy (*gai ge ke fang*), an economic policy implemented around the same time as the OCP, affected families more profoundly than initially suspected. Family policies exist to alleviate societal problems and the OCP's main goal was to curb China's growing population and its anticipated repercussions. A year after the OCP's implementation, China's Marriage Law underwent several revisions liberalizing divorce and giving women more rights in that process, including property distribution favoring women. Quach and Anderson explain the research findings from various sources on the effects of the OCP including, the "increases in parental involvement in the lives of children and some gender bias favoring boys to girls related to parental care" and simultaneously a rise in divorce rates (Quach, et al. 1090). The marriage laws created a more "equal" society, empowering women to be equal contributors in marriages. This is an interesting parallel implementation of family policies, and both policies inadvertently gave more power and persuasive power to women. Wives, the mothers of the first generation of singleton children, were now empowered to divorce and address the systemic issues in marriage that had been present for generations. These singleton daughters were now being raised in family contexts that validated their role in society as women and were receiving more investment from their parents—emotionally, financially, etc. These trends will be discussed in greater detail later when presenting Fong's contributions to the field.

The OCP is clearly a family policy, yet even the ODP directly affects families. Anderson and Quach quote a leading scholar in family studies, Bogenschneider, whose research focuses on policies' impacts on families. Her research reveals that economic policies impact families much

more substantially than expected. Also, the consequences are often unforeseen. The ODP “can be considered family friendly in that it strove to enhance a family’s capacity to help itself and others by improving the financial status of the country during a severe economic depression (Bogenschneider, 2006; Yeung & Sung, 1996)” (Quach, 1090). The ODP was instituted to improve the nation’s trade and industry, which in turn, advanced families’ financial status. Their findings challenge Feng’s analysis because Quach and Anderson emphasize the positive effects and motivations of the ODP and how together with the one child policy, they benefited Chinese families and allowed for the overall progressive growth of society. Within the families, women, both mothers and daughters, profited most substantially as these policies contributed to their rise in social status and contributions to society. This was unprecedented in Chinese history. Under Mao, women were given more responsibility as equal citizens, but advancement in economic opportunities were not made available to women.

The ODP increased jobs and services available to families, including factories in rural China providing more employment opportunities for men and women. The government had more financial strength to help families and provide better housing, healthcare, and food resources.

Quach and Anderson write:

Even though the goal of the Open Door Policy was to restore China’s economic status, the program directly affected families and their monetary problems by improving their financial security, lifting many out of their impoverishment and helping to improve their mental, physical, and emotional health. The Open Door Policy can be viewed as a tacit family policy, in that it was constructed in a manner to profoundly affect families in China even if not initially created with families or family policy in mind. The Open Door Policy was the government’s answer to several family problems, and the programs and ideas implemented by this economic policy brought tremendous revenue into the country and helped to reduce a lot of the poverty in China. (1093)

Consequently, within the family structure support and responsibilities changed. The ODP stimulated the economy, increased employment and led to higher salaries, so parents could better



care for their children and the elderly in their kinship network. This allowed children to begin at a more advantageous position than any generation before in Chinese history. Quach and Anderson cite Tsui and Yi, who are both reputable family studies scholars. Tsui's work is referenced from "Changes in Chinese Urban Family Structure. *Journal of Marriage and Family*". Yi is quoted from his work titled, "A Demographic Analysis of Family Households in China, 1982-1995. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*". From their works, Quach and Anderson conclude that Chinese families were introduced to the "idea of individualism, which focuses less on doing what is good for the family and more on what is beneficial for the individual (Tsui, 1989; Yi, 1996)" (Quach, et al. 1094). This opposed the traditional value of collectivism and family responsibility. But as families could earn more, parents were better equipped to support their children and provide more advanced opportunities for them, which was revolutionary, but especially for daughters. Before this, succeeding and earning more was not much of an option, so individualism was of no real value to personal advancement. However, as this shifted, the whole society benefited economically. In comparison though, the daughters gained substantial advantage, resulting in increased gender equality.

This is due to the fact that traditionally, higher paying and more respectable or prestigious jobs were occupied only by men, and women were limited to the domestic realm of jobs. Yet, as diverse employment opportunities increased and the influx of western values, women were given more access to opportunities beyond the traditional domestic sphere. The ODP adjusted the cultural landscape as it increased the total number of jobs available and higher education opportunities, enabling women to begin to aspire for more. From 1978 to 1995, female labor force participation rate increased from 32.9% to 39.4% and has only increased since (Quach, et al., 1095). Quach and Anderson claim that "filial piety has less influence on Chinese

children now than before the implementation of the ODP” (1096). Integral to this discussion is the claim that ODP, specifically the introduction of Western values, has led to the elevation of women’s status and shifted the power dynamic, giving more power to women in and outside the family.

Arguably, this did not eradicate the traditional value of filial piety but expanded the responsibility of caring for the elderly beyond just the sons, which Gaetano and Fong would agree with. Daughters and mothers are increasingly responsible for their family kin networks, as they hold more equal positions throughout the rest of society. The advancement in education and jobs also led to women being expected to be equal contributors. At the same time, there appears to be a double standard in that women *are* equal contributors— both in reality and in familial expectations, yet in some aspects are still confined to the traditional understanding of their roles.

Most notably, the double standard contains the continued expectation for women to engage in hypergamous marriages. As women’s status continually rises, or becomes more equal with men, either men need to proportionately rise in society, the expectation for hypergamous marriages adapts, or the “advanced” women remain unmarried. This is discussed more later regarding Gaetano’s work.

### **3.2 Origins and Consequences of the One Child Policy**

After the demise of Mao Ze Dong as the first leader of the Chinese Communist Party, Deng Xiao Ping became the head of the country in 1978. He instituted many reforms to loosen the country’s original restrictive, isolated, communistic policies to become more open to the rest of the world. This entailed foreign investment as Western economic institutions could now establish a presence in China and begin to develop their consumer base. This also started to open up China’s export sector to the rest of the world, leading to major financial growth for the entire

country. This transformed China's focus from Mao's industrial production for domestic use to mobilizing the population to generate real output for exports. Following Mao's death, the population continued to grow as he encouraged families to have many children to increase the nation's willpower for industrial production. The rising numbers were being perceived as a growing threat to the wellbeing of the nation and perceived success of the government. There is a broad range of views on the true motives behind the OCP and even more diversity of conclusions regarding its effects. Outside of China, most scholars acknowledge there were fertility planning programs already in place before the implementation of the OCP. These original fertility planning programs technically required voluntary cooperation but were in fact quite coercive. There is also a shared understanding of the inconsistencies in the enforcement of the OCP based on rural or urban and the Han majority versus other ethnic minorities. These all reflect the CCP's general attitudes towards the different population segments and their ability to control the population without accountability or justification.

Yong Cai, Wang Feng and Baochang Gu analyze the different forces contributing to the OCP and the political motivations of the national government. They claim that the CCP's motives were deeper than mere population control, but rather to achieve political end goals, such as garnering political legitimacy and laying the foundational sovereignty of the CCP. Feng writes:

The measure used to gauge its success in increasing living standards of the population was per capita GDP growth. With this new mandate and focus, controlling population growth became a critical component of this legitimacy. In 1982, birth control was announced as a "basic state policy" (*jiben guocce*). (118)

Feng also notes three forces in the Chinese political system that contributed to the unquestioned legitimization of the one-child policy. These include a "statist tradition and bureaucratic institutions that treat individual citizens as subjects of the state; a post-revolutionary

regime that places birth control at the heart of its political legitimacy; and a policymaking process that is carried out among political elites shrouded with secrecy and lacking public scrutiny” (Feng, et al. 118). Other scholars in this discussion inevitably interact with these three forces as the CCP’s sovereignty is intricately woven into the fabric of society and the everyday lives of families and individuals.

From an outside perspective, not living under the CCP’s authority, these three forces are clearly visible. Therefore, their connection to the policies is an evident connection. The statist tradition is firmly entrenched by the establishment of the CCP due to Mao’s leadership and intrusive policies. The Cultural Revolution, spearheaded by Mao and the CCP, eradicated any questioning of the government and upheld subservience to authority and conformity to the general masses as second nature. Policies that intruded into the very lives of families were not new at the implementation of the OCP. Throughout the 20th century, the CCP established several laws that affected family structure, family duties, the marriage law, and the daily lives of individuals. Furthermore, the massive bureaucratic institutions and all of their processes group the public nation together as a collective entity rather than a collection of individuals. Yet, new to the ‘70s and ‘80s was that the regime was no longer in a mindset of perpetuating revolution, but was establishing political legitimacy post-revolution, placing birth control at the center of that. Continuing the statist tradition, the policymaking process lacks public accountability or discussion and assumes total submission from the people. These forces established at the beginning of the CCP during Mao’s leadership continued to shape the trajectory of the political system that led to drastic policies affecting individual lives that compose the nation state.

Feng is correct in that China established an unparalleled policy of population growth control. Yet at the same time, many nations were experiencing similar phenomena and were

implementing different types of policies. Wei Huang, a researcher from the National University of Singapore notes that “in the mid-1990s, large-scale family planning programs were active in 115 countries” (Huang, 2). Wei Huang’s findings challenge Feng’s assertions of the OCP’s total penetration into all of Chinese society, because although the policy was mandatory and implemented across the nation, “the birth quota varied according to residence (urban/rural) and ethnicity (Han/non-Han)” (Huang, 3). Rural and minority groups were impacted less by the policy as it was enforced with less severity. The CCP had the type of power to establish the OCP, and also to enforce it in various measures according to them. There was no public outcry to the inconsistency or unfairness.

The motives of the CCP are consistent across all sectors of society; economic, political, social. The CCP intends to maintain power and social order through social submission. This makes the one child policy less significant in light of the CCP’s general aims. The CCP’s assertion of its total authority is visible even in its varied implementation, treating various demographics differently regarding the policy. This is shown by the variance in local governments fines imposed for violations of the policy.

In the decade of the 1970s, “China’s total fertility rate dropped by more than half, from 5.8 in 1970 to 2.8 in 1979. Most of the births averted [after the implementation of the one-child policy], if any, were due to the rapid fertility decline of that decade, not to the one-child policy that came afterward” (Feng, et al. 121). Other countries that had similar birth rates to China in the 1970s without the one-child policy resulted in having a birth rate below the level predicted for China. The baby boom was a global trend following World War II, but the OCP was unique to China. In contrast with China’s government intervention, other nations saw a natural decline in their fertility rates. The most substantial consequence of China’s one child policy was not the

declining birth rate, as many other countries experienced similar trends, but rather the unintended effects on Chinese families' kinship structure. Other unexpected results included “physical abuse, sex-selective abortion, and a risk of a depressed fertility level that could lead to irreversible population aging, labor shortage, and economic slowdown and stagnation” (Feng et al. 120). The sex-selected abortions came from the traditional values of valuing sons over daughters, because daughters once married would join the husband’s family and would be unable to support her aging parents.

This policy narrowly focused on family planning profoundly affected society both broadly and deeply. The OCP not only led to a gender imbalance, but changed the structure of Chinese society and molded traditional values and families to conform to the new reality of a one-child family unit. The aging population outnumbered the younger generation resulting in increased pressure for the adult children to provide for their aging parents, due to the continued traditional value of filial piety. Arguably, the oversupply of bachelors, disproportionate aging population, and persistence of traditional family values did not alleviate pressures but added burdens and expectations for daughters to achieve more, provide more, and marry well to secure provisions for elderly parents. However, embedded in those familial pressures is a crucial change in women’s status. Prior to the OCP, sons would be treated preferentially. Anthropologist Fong highlights, despite the societal pressures facing the young adult generation, that urban daughters benefited substantially from the OCP.

She notes that a region’s fertility rate is typically directly correlated to its economic development. In her estimation, a modern economy is characterized by urban areas being the main place of residence, children consume more than they put out, mothers and fathers work jobs incompatible with child-rearing at home, and education is extensively available to both genders,

paving the road to future success. Traditionally in China, gender inequality was differentiated by men's superior public sphere roles with women occupying subordinate domestic sphere roles. Yet, due to the ODP and decreased fertility rates from the OCP, women dedicate themselves to work and education instead of motherhood. The group that benefits the most, according to Fong, is the daughters born to low-fertility mothers, since they are socialized to value educational and career success in the new modern, developed economy. The generation of singleton daughters following the OCP received greater parental investment and thus began the "transformation of their society's kinship system from a patrilineal, patrilateral, and patrilocal one to a bilinear, bilateral, and neolocal one," because "paid work enabled women to provide their own parents with financial support in old age and thus, prove that daughters could be as filial as sons" (Fong, 1101). In a society that values filial piety, the ability to care for one's aging parents is a sign of financial well-being, personal responsibility, and reflects well on the family in the community. In 1949, motivated to mobilize the female portion of the labor population, the CCP provided employment opportunities for women, yet women were too restricted by their childbearing responsibility to attain much financial success. The OCP changed that as parents had to invest in their child, regardless of gender, for their own future stability. Fong articulates the complexity as such:

Parents whose love, hope and need for old-age support are all pinned on just one child tend to do whatever is necessary to make that child happy and successful, regardless of the child's gender. Daughters and their parents face the extra challenge of winning and happiness and success in a society structured by gender norms that have long disadvantaged women. They meet this challenge with a strategic combination of conformity and resistance. For academically unsuccessful daughters of poor parents, gender norms provide a means of upward mobility through marriage and job markets unavailable to their male counterparts. Women face a glass ceiling produced by their extra burden of domestic responsibility, by gender norms that favor men in elite professions and by inequalities between elite husbands and their less elite, hypergamous wives. Women also enjoy the protection of a glass floor created by the hypergamous marriage system, by gender norms that favor nonelite women in the educational system,

and by the rapidly expanding market for feminine jobs in the service and light industry sectors. (1102)

Women's combined strategy of conformity and resistance is necessary in order to achieve economic success, fulfill family obligations, and attain personal satisfaction. Conformity includes continuing the traditional values like caring for aging parents and contributing to the collective kinship network. Resistance, as Gaetano also writes about, means challenging the terms of womanhood and happiness that have been assumed for so long. Yu Xie and Gaetano also touch on the dynamic continued roles as wives and daughters, but also the reconfiguration of what a successful woman looks like.



## 4. SHIFTING GENDER DYNAMICS

### 4.1 Cultural Factors

Yu Xie, in “Gender and Family in Contemporary China” explains the changes to and continuation of traditional practices of gender norms and family. These shifts include women’s rise in socioeconomic status, increase in premarital cohabitation and divorce, the elderly depending on both sons and daughters for support, as well as the continued traditional expectation for wives’ main contribution to be domestic responsibilities, multi-generational cohabitation, and significant preference for sons. Xie does not directly correlate it to the ODP, but notes externally, “in recent years, rapid economic development and the associated high consumption aspirations have exerted economic pressures on young persons entering marriage” (Xie, 2). This reveals the collision of traditional values, expectations, and roles, intermingling with the rise in women’s status and gender equality. Is this collision a result of the CCP’s policies or did the effects of these policies merely reveal trends that would manifest regardless, due to the change in times? What causes women to be simultaneously elevated and held back, both promoted and punished for their advancement?

Xie argues that the answer lies in the historical importance of family lineage in which individuals are valued for the role they play as temporary carriers of the family line and ancestral lineage. As noted previously, sons have historically been valued over daughters not because of any characteristic besides they return the investment their parents put into them. In this family system, sons are permanent members of their natal family and retain life-time financial relationships with their parents. They are expected to contribute to their parents’ economic stability even after they are married themselves. Thus, it is in their self-interest for parents to

invest in sons because they may reap long-term returns from this investment. In contrast, daughters are only temporary members of their natal families before marriage, upon which a woman serves her husband's extended family. Thus, due to the limited time during which daughters serve their natal families, parents often extract resources from unmarried daughters, for example in terms of remittances from daughters' market labor or housework, to improve the family budget and invest in sons. This has evolved as brotherless daughters now must provide for their aging parents and share the responsibility of filial duty.

Outside of the home, women have been gaining greater socioeconomic status and educational attainment yet experiencing continued disparity in income and unequal share of household responsibilities. Because of this dualistic expectation, women are arguably not fully maximizing their potential contributions to the labor market. Their increased socioeconomic status has resulted in an older median age of marriage for women. Despite this increased median age, status hypergamy, a traditional practice in China, remains in practice in contemporary society. There has been an increase in love-based marriages, away from parent-arranged. This is arguably due to the ODP's introduction of other cultural values, including romantic relationships and understanding of marriage. Xie claims that since women are closing the educational gap, hypergamy is not as easily achieved through educational standards, but now there is a "trend of increases in the age gap between husband and wife so as to allow prospective husbands to accumulate more economic resources than prospective wives of similar education" (Xie, 5).

As gender equality rises, the continued expectation for men to hold higher positions or earn more has placed unique pressures on men in the marriage market. Economic factors have increasingly become an important factor in getting married, especially housing prices. As men compete for brides, financial stability becomes a key part in being an attractive prospective

spouse. While it may be due to the imbalance sex ratios, Xie links it to broad and diverse factors like continued hypergamy, women's improved socioeconomic status, and greater consumption aspirations. Arguably, this pressure of attaining financial success in order to be considered as a viable lifelong mate is not new but rather from family pressure, a direct implication of traditional filial piety. This pressure to achieve personal financial stability may be present in multiple cultural contexts, but is unique to the modern Chinese context as the pressure originates from parents' need for their children to have more financial stability to care for them as they age. Furthermore, parents put pressure on their adult children to get married not for reasons of personal happiness, but rather for the sake of the family "saving face", another traditional Chinese concept of an honor and shame culture that is perpetuated in the modern experience. Hypergamy stems from this too, as men would "lose face" and discredit their family's reputation if they were to marry women who are older, wealthier, or better educated than themselves. Thus, the two segments of population that are at the opposite ends of the spectrum and experience difficulty in finding a spouse are men with little education and highly educated women (Xie, 6).

The family pressure to find a spouse is magnified by the responsibilities once married. It is common practice for multi-generational families to live together in the same house. In 2012, 43 percent of elderly persons aged 60 above lived with a child, 31 percent have a child living in the same neighborhood, and 13 percent more in the same county (Xie, 6). Since the traditional Chinese family is patrilineal and patrilocal, a high number of the elderly prefer or expect to live with their adult children and/or receive financial help. These pressures continue and weigh on the singleton child more heavily than if the family had multiple children to share the responsibility. Chinese adults are fully aware of the responsibilities they assume when entering upon marriage, which is arguably a factor in the delayed marriage ages. As the nation's economy continues to

develop and individual consumerism increases, marriage becomes more of an option than a requirement for financial stability, especially for women.

#### **4.2 Combination of Traditional Values and Changing Modern Socioeconomic Realities**

When policies are introduced to improve gender equality, it ironically places a double burden on women to act as men's equals in public society, while also continuing to be the main contributor in private. For example, "The New Marriage Law" implemented by Mao Ze Dong in 1950 eliminated a great deal of hierarchical and traditional gender norms from ancient Chinese history. It gave women a new equal status in the marriage relationship, including equal duty, rights, and option for divorce. This was a pivotal moment in Chinese history that allowed women to be viewed as equals, or as "comrades" that were a vital component to the flourishing of society. The law revised the status of concubines from "minor wives" and made concubinage a "de facto marriage" (Yun). Mao's Cultural Revolution brought women into the public sphere and elevated the significance of their contributions. However, women were encouraged to grow their roles in public spheres, they often had to continue to tend to roles traditionally relegated to women such as taking care of elders, cooking and cleaning, and raising children. In essence, Mao's statement of equality represented a double bind, forcing women to actually hold up far more than half the sky, as Maggie Wedeman writes in her article "Mapping Gender Onto the Cultural Revolution: Masculinity's Triumph in a 'Genderless' Struggle".

This double standard has arguably continued and taken new forms as women are attaining higher levels of education and income, and yet are still expected to fulfill certain family obligations and gender roles. Gaetano articulates these realities experienced by modern Chinese women, to attain high levels of education and career growth yet to conform to the traditional expectations of hypergamous marriages.

### 4.3 Leftover Women

Gaetano explores the differing experiences and ongoing pressures of women in modern China despite professional and personal advancement. Fong noted their advanced socioeconomic status as merely positive, for the women themselves and society as a whole, which is agreed upon from a Western and feminist perspective. Yet, as Gaetano notes, these social advancements can come at a personal cost in romantic relationships, due to the persistent traditional values and societal pressures to conform to those values regarding marriage. Gaetano also explains the Chinese media's portrayal of these women combined with the cultural understanding of these women who are advancing. A contributor to *The Economist* writes, in "Married to the Mortgage":

Women, especially "A-quality" women, who do not marry early often do not marry at all. Indeed, women over 30 who boast a university education have even lower marriage rates than poorly educated, similarly aged men who lack a high-school education. This "marriage squeeze" impels women to try to marry before they turn 27. The pressure to do so is far greater than the pressure men feel to provide a home, argues Leta Hong Fincher, a PhD student at Tsinghua University. Eventually, the compulsion to marry early outweighs the wish to marry well. (*Economist*)

In the marriage market, Chinese males technically are at a disadvantage, due to gender imbalance ratio and pressure to get married and provide for their families. According to Gaetano's research, up to 10% of Chinese men born after 1980 are or will become "bare sticks:" "lifelong bachelors without offspring" (Gaetano, 125). Yet surprisingly, "a larger proportion of women than men remain unmarried after age 30, and the likelihood of marriage for women decreases significantly with increased education levels" (Gaetano, 125). Urban Chinese women's rising education levels, as Fong points out, was a positive outcome of the OCP. Simultaneously, there are cultural expectations and gender norms that stifle the matching of highly educated women with potential male spouses. Related to hypergamy, "men prefer to marry someone

slightly younger and having equal or less education than themselves, who is attractive and has a good personality” (Gaetano, 125). Gaetano finds that according to this criterion and the current reality of China’s urban demographics, “women characterized by so-called “three highs” (high levels of education, high income, and advancing age) are distinctly disadvantaged” (Gaetano, 125).

The question is, should this lead Chinese women to have lower personal and professional aspirations in order to attract a future husband? Should Chinese men change their expectations? Is something innately wrong or is society adjusting to new normals and new trends? And do these women, who are achieving more and are becoming increasingly independent, care or are they indifferent to difficulty in finding a mate? Has the media, and or parents’ expectations and traditional values, exasperated, or exaggerated, the negativity of this situation?

Gaetano blames the media for beginning and bringing attention to this trend of “leftover women” and for labeling single women as “being too fickle, too materialistic, self-centered, and generally unrealistic in their expectations of marriage” (Gaetano, 126). The media circulated not only these negative stereotypes but also sexist and misogynist jokes, including the following example: “the world has three types of humans: Men, Women, and Female PhDs,” suggesting that such highly educated women are extremely aberrant” (Gaetano, 126). Even in circles of women, namely the “official organization for Chinese women, the All-China Women’s Federation, warned women that they must marry by age 27,” otherwise becoming “leftover women” and thus forever unmarriageable. (126)

What is at risk, as Gaetano reveals, is not only the well-being of these women and their own personal happiness, but also the symbolic nature of the family unit and its reproduction of social stability. Fong links advancement of women to the advancement of society, which is true.

But also, family units, not just individuals, contribute to the flourishing of society, as a “building block for the modern-nation state, as the producer of citizenry and of labor” (Gaetano, 126).

Gaetano does not subscribe to this sentiment but does recognize the significance of the family unit and the role of marriage within that. Even more than seeking women’s elevated status, Gaetano is most inflamed about the unnecessary and negative stereotypes of these “leftover women” as being less valuable women.

Despite the presumably harmful effects, at the same time, through her interviews and research, she finds a profound ambivalence about marriage among the women. Instead of prioritizing romantic love, these women have a broader understanding of the “good life,” entailing financial security and romantic love marked by autonomous spouse selection, and an “egalitarian, companionate-style marriage” (Gaetano, 124). Instead of pursuing marriage as their main goal or completely dismissing it, these women are renegotiating the terms of marriage with new expectations. This is a key way they resist the media’s critical stereotype. As their terms change, societal understanding of marriage changes form to accommodate the shift in women’s significance in society.

As mentioned before, in China there is a double standard for women to fulfill traditional motherly roles yet also achieve higher degrees and be financially secure. Typically, women making gains in education and employment delay marriage, as is the case in China too. In 2012 in China, the proportion of women earning Bachelors and Masters degrees exceeded the proportion of men. If women are achieving more, hypergamy, “leftover women,” and other cultural norms seemingly have to adjust. Gaetano argues that the term “leftover women” is a conservative reaction to the advancement of women and general social changes, in a society accustomed to men holding superior positions to women for thousands of years. Despite their

overall advancement, there are still legal restrictions such as the retirement age which is lower for women than men. This harms women's job promotions and overall life earnings. Gaetano notes an obvious but crucial point:

The experiences and perspectives of unmarried professional women in urban China are diverse and complex. Importantly they are not all succumbing to official pressure on so-called "leftover women" by rushing into unequal marriages, or marrying for money rather than for love, or lowering their expectations of a spouse. Most women in my study adhered to firm expectations of egalitarian companionate marriage, honed through rich past history of dating or divorce, as well as by contrasting to friends' unsatisfactory relationships. A few were contemplating marriage to men who did not meet normative criteria of the ideal spouse in terms of looks or status, but who were likely to meet more important criteria of mutual affection, compatibility, and respect. Some women in my study were already over age 35, and increasingly unlikely and even unwilling to marry. The women's accounts are also similar in that they all express ambivalence toward marriage. Their attitude indicates the tensions and contradictions of women confronted with numerous opportunities and choices, and new expectations and desires, including for both successful and fulfilling careers and marriages, which are not easily attained within a patriarchal environment. In contemporary china, femininity implies traits like being "tender" and nurturing, which reinforce a normative womanhood grounded in domestic roles and asymmetrical gender relations. Their stories illustrate the lack of social acceptance and support for single women in contemporary China. Yet these women are independent, confident, and intelligent. They are constructing meaningful lives by attaining educational and career goals, building social networks, and playing important social roles in their families of origin and elsewhere. Their refusal to conform to rigid gender prescriptions or compromise their aspirations implicitly challenges patriarchal constraints. (145-146)

Fong's argument is that these women were invested in and that is why these changes occur, Gaetano argues that this is a choice they are making to resist the modern experience of traditional confines of gender norms and understanding marriage.



## CONCLUSION

The ODP and OCP, implemented around the same time, have had direct implications on decreased fertility rates, increased materialism via widespread economic growth, skewed gender ratio, and women earning and achieving more. From a cultural understanding, Chinese families still esteem filial piety, saving face, and hypergamy. Simultaneously, materialism, individualism, and an expectation to achieve and earn more have all risen. These arguably stem from the ODP's expansion of China's economy, foreign investment, and also the increased investment into daughters as a result of the OCP. The term "leftover women," due to continued hypergamy point to the continuation of traditional values. Depending on the lens used, feminist or family studies, these policies and marriage trends can be seen as beneficial or harmful, respectively. Analyzing these trends causes one to question the lens through which equality, marriage, and family values are understood and judgements are based. Is material success or family growth seen as the highest aim in society, or are they mutually exclusive? To what extent did the One Child Policy alter societal values and priorities within the family unit? How do women, or those subjected to certain expectations, conform to, resist, or subvert these pressures and stereotypes? How has this changed over time and what might the future hold?

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