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CHINA'S 'LEFTOVER' WOMEN PHENOMENON:  
MEDIA PORTRAYAL AND 'LEFTOVER' VOICES

by  
Mazie Katherine Merriman

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for completion  
Of the Bachelor of Arts degree in International Studies  
Croft Institute for International Studies  
Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College  
The University of Mississippi

Oxford, Mississippi  
May 2015

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## ABSTRACT

China's "*shengnü*" – or "leftover women" – are a group of highly-educated, single, urban women that the Chinese government has targeted in a scare-mongering media campaign intent on pushing these women to give up their careers or education in order to marry and produce children for the "betterment" of the state. Since 2007, this group of women has faced highly negative articles and images published both by the All China Women's Federation and other news outlets encouraging *shengnü* to "fix" their problems and marry. These highly-educated, unmarried women are seen as violators of traditional gender norms and roles, and the "leftover women phenomenon" campaign is an attempt to reinforce these gender norms. This thesis project examines changes in Chinese marriage throughout history in an attempt to show the inevitability of highly-educated, single women in Chinese society, coupled with an analysis of media articles and images, which is contrasted by an analysis of blogs written by the *shengnü* themselves.

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## FOREWORD

*“In 2006, the Chinese magazine Fashion · Cosmopolitan published an issue of their magazine with the front cover headline ‘Welcome to the Era of Leftover Women.’ Although many people believed that the magazine was [intentionally] exaggerating women’s anxiety in order to increase sales, it is an undisputed fact that marriage in China is thoroughly changing; women in urban areas are getting married later, as [a woman’s] educational attainment increases, marriage comes later, and more and more highly educated women are not getting married at all.”<sup>1</sup>*

The fate of China’s single, highly-educated women was indefinitely sealed in 2006 when the popular Chinese edition of *Cosmopolitan* christened the group “leftover” from the marriage market. The pejorative “leftover” label, explained by the above quote as *Cosmopolitan* magazine’s scare tactic to increase sales, took roughly a year to circulate through the Internet’s various channels until it was chosen by the Chinese government to headline a media campaign that held single, highly-educated women as responsible for the country’s unmarried men epidemic.

Prior to the 2007 creation of the “leftover women phenomenon” campaign, someone, somewhere in the Chinese government became aware of a terrible problem: even if every woman got married, there would still be millions of men unable to find a wife, thus threatening the harmony of society. However, not every Chinese woman is willing to get married. The number of single women in China continues to grow alongside the number of single males, much to the disdain and confusion of the marriage-obsessed society. Despite the insurmountable evidence that the Chinese government was to blame for the highly-skewed sex ratio imbalance (and thus the estimated 20 million bachelors), the

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<sup>1</sup> “Zhongguo: Shengnü de kunjing” (China: Leftover women’s predicament), *Weizazhi Diary, Douban*, last modified May 7, 2012, <http://site.douban.com/136100/widget/notes/6051842/note/213344331/>.



government instead decided to exploit the “leftover women” as a scapegoat to quell growing dissatisfaction with population planning.<sup>2</sup> Chinese society, which has long been viewed as a marriage-centric culture, is unable to comprehend singlehood as a lifestyle. As such, the “leftover women” became a terrifying new phenomenon that some viewed as a threat to traditional marriage values and gender norms. Thus, the not-so-humble roots of *Cosmopolitan China’s* “leftover” woman morphed into a country-wide movement to both scare and guilt single, highly-educated women into running to the altar, eventually “saving” Chinese society.

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<sup>2</sup> By year 2020, men of marriageable age will outnumber women by 24 million. Xue Li, “Why is the Sex Ratio Unbalanced in China? The Roles of the One-Child Policy, Underdeveloped Social Insurance, and Parental Expectations” (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2011.)

## INTRODUCTION

In early 2007, most likely after receiving a distressing report on its population statistics, China's State Council issued an edict on strengthening the Population and Family Planning Program<sup>3</sup> to address "unprecedented population pressures."<sup>4</sup> These pressures include a "sex-ratio imbalance"<sup>5</sup> — which 'causes a threat to social stability,' an aging population coupled with a sub-replacement fertility rate<sup>6</sup>, and the 'low quality'<sup>7</sup> of the general population, which makes it hard to meet the requirements of fierce competition for national strength."<sup>8</sup> In response, the Chinese State Council appointed the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF)<sup>9</sup> to help aid the Population and Family Planning Program in upgrading population quality.<sup>10</sup> In conjunction with the State Council's edict, the ACWF began to post articles encouraging "*shengnü* (剩女)," or single, highly-educated

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<sup>3</sup> Cuntong Wang, "History of the Chinese Family Planning Program: 1970–2010," *Contraception* 85 (2012): 563-569, accessed November 15, 2014, doi:10.1016/j.contraception.2011.10.013.

<sup>4</sup> "Zhonggong Zhongyang Guowuyuan guanyu quanmian jiaqiang renkou he jihua shengyu gongzuo tongchou jie jue renkou wenti de jue ding" (The CCP's State Council's verdict regarding all-around strengthening population and planning to solve the population problem), *Xinhua News*, January 22, 2007, accessed November 15, 2014, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2007-01/22/content\\_5637713.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2007-01/22/content_5637713.htm).

<sup>5</sup> From a study done by Therese Hesketh of the UCL Centre for International Health and Development, the Chinese sex ratio imbalance in 2007 was nearly 120 male births to 100 female births, where the normal sex ratio at birth (SRB) is 1.07 male(s)/female

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Eberstadt, "The Demographic Risks to China's Long-Term Economic Outlook," *Cgd.Swissre.Com*, [http://cgd.swissre.com/topics/Demographic\\_risks\\_to\\_China.html](http://cgd.swissre.com/topics/Demographic_risks_to_China.html).

<sup>7</sup> Low quality referring to the portion of the Chinese population that is considered "low education" and has a "low standard of life" as discussed in an interview with Leta Hong Fincher; Yining Su, "It Boils Down to the Government's Obsession with Population Quality': Interview with Leta Hong Fincher [Part 2]," *Shanghaiist*, April 19, 2014, accessed December 29, 2014, <http://shanghaiist.com/2014/04/19/interview-leta-hong-fincher-leftover-women-part-2.php>.

<sup>8</sup> Leta Hong Fincher, "China's 'Leftover' Women," *New York Times*, October 11, 2012, accessed October 10, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/12/opinion/global/chinas-leftover-women.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/12/opinion/global/chinas-leftover-women.html?_r=0).

<sup>9</sup> The ACWF is China's leading authority for women's livelihood and wellbeing, first established in 1949 as a women's rights organization.

<sup>10</sup> Fincher, "China's 'Leftover' Women."

“leftover women,” to get married quickly and have children.<sup>11</sup> The ACWF, and in turn the government, believed that the path to “upgrading population quality” and increasing marriage rates in the name of social harmony was exclusively through targeting the “leftover women” at the expense of gender equality. What came to be known as the ACWF’s “leftover women phenomenon” campaign coincided with Chinese President Hu Jintao’s “Harmonious Society” campaign from the early 2000s, where President Hu encouraged the nation to strive towards a more “harmonious” existence, claiming that in order to do so, his government would “crack down on various social ills, which are a poisonous tumor in a harmonious society and must be eliminated.”<sup>12</sup> The timing of the “leftover women phenomenon” campaign suggests that President Hu believed that “leftover women” were not conducive to a harmonious society, and it was the ACWF’s job to fix that.

In August of 2007, months after the ACWF’s first few articles on “leftover women” were published, the word “*shengnü*” was officially added to the Chinese Ministry of Education’s lexicon. The term “*shengnü*” originated under the guidance of Cosmopolitan China editor, Xu Wei, who in 2006 coined the term to describe women who hold high expectations for finding a husband, but remained single.<sup>13</sup> Since conception, the term “*shengnü*” has evolved and expanded to its current definition of

“[a woman who] has already surpassed society’s suitable age for marriage, but still not married, generally 27 years or older single women, most of whom have high educational background, high salaries and an outstanding appearance, but also have numerous shortcomings. Many [of these women] have high requirements for choosing a spouse, which brings about be-

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Hu Jintao, “Harmonious Society,” *China Daily*, September 29, 2007, accessed April 17, 2015, <http://en.people.cn/90002/92169/92211/6274603.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Zi Xin Yang, “A Woman's Way,” All China Women's Federation, March 13, 2011, accessed October 11, 2014, <http://www.womenofchina.cn/womenofchina/html1/news/newsmakers/12/7689-1.htm>.

ing unable to find an ideal ending in marriage, so they become older aged ‘leftover women.’”<sup>14</sup>

Other definitions state that *shengnü* are commonly referred to as “3S” or “3 *gao* (高)” ladies; “3S” standing for Single, Seventies (referring to the decade of their birth, the 1970s) and Stuck (meaning unmarried), while “3 *gao*,” or 3 “highs,” refers to a highly educated, highly paid, high expectations woman. In a different cultural context, these characteristics would not necessarily be negative, as many Westerners would celebrate a “3S” or “3 *gao*” lady as an independent woman in control of her life and goals. However, since the ACWF picked up the term in 2007 and began publishing semi-controversial articles like “Overcoming the Big Four Emotional Blocks: Leftover Women Can Break out of Being Single,” “Eight Simple Moves to Escape the Leftover Women Trap,” and “Do Leftover Women Really Deserve Our Sympathy?” the redeeming “3S” and “3 *gao*” qualities transformed into flaws. The *shengnü* term slowly began to assume negative characteristics and the women themselves began to appear as perpetrators of traditional marriage values and gender norms.

For several years, the term’s negative connotation fluctuated in severity, but in 2010, *shengnü* was viewed definitively as a highly pejorative term after gaining negative

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<sup>14</sup> Original text from a Baidu dictionary entry: “是指已经过了社会一般所认为的适婚年龄，但是仍然未结婚的女性，广义上是指 27 岁或以上的单身女性，很多拥有高学历、高收入和出众的长相，但也有很多自身条件较差。多数择偶要求比较高，导致在婚姻上得不到理想归宿，而变成“*shengnü*”的大龄女青年。” Link to original text:

<http://baike.baidu.com/link?url=OC2BdUMzzqRrJzUTYkjAVMu0slsxq8CNBwXVedmx1OS5q5xQupJclSBgA8vugypxXVR3depv0ol2mCBAMwr7Tb8zcloHSY9P8NH8X2fvMpu>.

attention from China's popular dating gameshow "*Feicheng Wurao* (非诚勿扰)."<sup>15</sup> On the most infamous episode of *Feicheng Wurao*, one prospective female dater replied "I would rather cry in a BMW than smile on a bike," after being asked by the unemployed male contestant if she would be willing to ride on a bicycle as a date.<sup>16</sup> This response received enormous public backlash. Many older, conservative generations proclaimed that the Chinese youth, especially the female portion, were "too materialistic" and "too obsessed with money." Materialism, a seemingly imported Western ideal, offended and infuriated older, more conservative generations. Although the *Feicheng Wurao* woman's one-liner was more emblematic of urban Chinese youth as a whole (with many younger Chinese men and women agreeing that economic background is an important factor in deciding whether or not to get married), many seized the opportunity to associate the reply as synonymous with the confusing "leftover women" phenomenon instead. Aided by society's confusion, various articles published and republished over the course of several years by the ACWF and other media outlets, and by the opinion of a woman on a gameshow, the once-neutral term for unmarried, older women, quickly spiraled into a highly-negative stereotype that girls hoped to avoid.

Combined, these various parts created the "leftover women phenomenon" campaign propagated by the state-controlled media. In the beginning, a series of articles published and republished by the ACWF and other media outlets depicted the *shengnü* in a highly negative way, as the aforementioned article headlines demonstrate. These articles

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<sup>15</sup> *非诚勿扰*, "If You Are The One," is a Chinese dating gameshow that began in 2010 where several women judge a single male contestant on several features, with the end goal of a woman agreeing to go on a date with the male contestant.

<sup>16</sup> Original text: "我宁愿坐在宝马车里哭，也不愿意坐在自行车上笑," "Wo ningyuan zuo zai baomache li ku, ye bu yuanyi zuo zai zixingche shang xiao."

served as a foundation for the campaign, the goal of which is to highlight perceived weaknesses and flaws of *shengnü* as a way to “help” them fix their personal problems and find a spouse (thus alleviating the marriage woes of millions of unmarried men and redirecting highly-educated, successful women to traditional gender norms). Outside of the articles, the daily discussion and other non-print materials help solidify the idea that *shengnü* is a societal problem that every citizen – the *shengnü* themselves – is liable to fix. And, when quickly searching on Chinese search engines, there are several sources doing just that – offering guides and services in “fixing” the *shengnü* problem. At the beginning of the campaign in 2007, the ACWF was also a culprit, guilty of publishing lists on how to “fix” the *shengnü*'s inherent flaws. However, the Chinese government has not admitted to playing a role in the scare-mongering campaign via the ACWF, and subsequently many of the original negative ACWF articles have been retracted or revised in order to showcase a more fair depiction of the *shengnü* (and suppress gender inequality arguments). Nevertheless, by the time they were deleted or revised, the original articles had already been republished by other media outlets, thus simultaneously perpetuating the government's original “leftover women phenomenon” campaign and freeing the government of blame. The “leftover women phenomenon” campaign was successfully implanted within both the Internet and Chinese society.

Who is the *shengnü* that the government is exhausting itself over “fixing”? Simply put, the average *shengnü* is merely a product of society's unclear demands. The first few generations of *shengnü* were born in a time of expanding educational, political, economic, and social opportunities for women. Availability of advanced educational opportunities for young women from the 1970s to the present, combined with societal rever-

ence for education founded in traditional Confucian ideals and older generations' personal experience with schooling, resulted in a large influx of women with MA's and PhD's. Chinese society encourages women to pursue higher education and careers, yet the pursuit of an advanced degree or a high-profile job comes with what the government would consider adverse side effects. When weighing the costs of marriage and education, many women choose to postpone dating or starting a family in order to pursue personal goals and interests, as marriage and child-rearing are considered to be too demanding on top of a full-time job. Thus, a typical Chinese woman is faced with a decision between marriage and education that is inherently paradoxical. Chinese girls are encouraged to go to school in order to become successful in a highly competitive arena. Intelligent Chinese women are then pushed to obtain a Master's or a PhD, but as they receive their diploma are greeted with "why haven't you married and had a child yet?" by society. By the time these women are ready to marry and have children, they are considered too old or too powerful or too wealthy and not appealing to many men, and in turn are unable to find a partner to settle down. Then, as the rest of China sees them, they become a *shengnü*, and are faced with the daily onslaught of media, societal, and family pressures to marry quickly and bear a child. However, if a woman values marriage more than education, and foregoes educational opportunities for matrimony, some would argue that she was wasting her parents' hard work in her upbringing and not setting herself up for success, or that her lack of education is not beneficial to a highly successful man's image. In either decision, a young Chinese woman is faced with negative responses that are seemingly only avoidable by achieving some sort of education then giving it up to have a child. The *shengnü* is locked in the vicious circle of society's disapproval.

When considering the “leftover women phenomenon” campaign, it is hard not to believe what the Internet is broadcasting; the sheer magnitude of anti-*shengnü* rhetoric available online easily leads viewers to believe that the *shengnü* is too picky, or that she does have a personality disorder, or that she is the reason why so many men cannot find a wife. Endless reposts of the same article fill up entire pages of search results online, and a viewer would have a hard time disagreeing with dozens of otherwise convincing posts that *shengnü* is bad. In this milieu, the thoughts, opinions, and answers of the *shengnü* are buried deep beneath articles about her “problems,” and her voice, and who she really is, is lost upon society. However, among the countless anti-*shengnü* articles, several voices via blogs and other social media posts have proclaimed “I am a *shengnü*!” The existence of such proclamations should be indicative of a small pushback against the “leftover women phenomenon” campaign and the aggressiveness of the Chinese government towards gender norms; however, most of these female bloggers wear the *shengnü* label as a badge of shame. Few female bloggers are truly accepting of the term “*shengnü*” and rejecting of the self-help guides – the majority of the Chinese Internet’s *shengnü* are ashamed of their singlehood and cling to society’s diagnosis of their “problems” hoping to “fix” themselves and re-conform back to normalcy.

Since conception of the “leftover women” term, much has been written on both China’s *shengnü* – who they are, why they are single, what they should do in order to marry, etc., and male and female gender norms in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. When researching this topic, the available literature combined economics and gender, sometimes displaying gender and identity as a result of economics, and sometimes showing that economics was in some way fueled by gender and identity. The discussion surrounding Chinese women’s



identity is inextricably tied to economics, and as such, so is the *shengnü*'s identity. Works by Leta Hong Fincher and Wang Zheng provide the most in-depth analysis of the modern Chinese woman's economic standing, with some additional discussion of gender and identity, while works by Susan Brownell, Jeffrey Wasserstrom, and Elisabeth Croll detail the Chinese idea of femininity and female gender norms, with supporting economic evidence. These works are useful in examining Chinese women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and in what kind of environment the *shengnü* exists.

The only book published on the “leftover women phenomenon” is Leta Hong Fincher's *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China*.<sup>17</sup> Fincher describes in detail the creation of the term “*shengnü*,” how Chinese women have been left out of one of the largest economic opportunities in China's history via the housing market, and the current state of domestic violence and women's rights in mainland China. The main narrative of her book argues that the term “*shengnü*” is a government tactic to frighten highly-educated, high-quality women to forfeit their economic standing to marry and produce a child for the betterment of the state rather than personal fulfillment. All of the other chapters and components stem from this claim. While Fincher tends to focus more heavily on the economic aspects of the *shengnü* identity, her work is invaluable when establishing an accurate depiction of the *shengnü* and what has been done in resistance to this label. Another leading scholar of Chinese women's identity is Wang Zheng, associate professor of History and Women's Studies and associate scientist of the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at the University of Michigan. Zheng's ar-

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<sup>17</sup> Leta Hong Fincher, *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China* (London: Zed Books, 2014).

ticle, “Gender, Employment, and Women’s Resistance,”<sup>18</sup> complements Fincher’s detailing of the *shengnü*’s economic identity. Zheng provides a detailed account of the urban middle class woman and changes in employment patterns in times of economic reform and during leaps to “modernity.” Zheng also provides a brief overview of feminist voices and strategies in mainland China, similar to Fincher’s conclusions. Fincher and Zheng’s works are crucial in establishing a solid foundation to analyze both the 21<sup>st</sup> century Chinese woman and the “leftover women phenomenon.” Both are crucial works when analyzing who the urban, middle class *shengnü* really is and why she is persecuted by both the state and society. Both Fincher and Zheng argue that these *shengnü* women are a product of their economic surroundings yet the environment that produced the “leftover women phenomenon” is rejecting them, thus creating their identity through what they are not economically.

In the same vein as Fincher and Zheng’s analysis, Susan Brownell, Jeffrey Wasserstrom, and Elisabeth Croll discuss gender and identity with supporting economic details. In Susan Brownell and Jeffrey Wasserstrom’s *Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities*, the two provide ideas of gender throughout various time periods in Chinese history, as detailed by various authors.<sup>19</sup> The entire book focuses on the changing nature of gender and identity for Chinese males and females, sometimes progressive in nature, while sometimes regressive in nature, all as following general economic trends. One detailing in particular by Harriet Evans titled, “Past, Perfect or Imperfect: Changing Images

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<sup>18</sup> Wang Zheng, “Gender, Employment and Women’s Resistance,” in *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance*, 2nd ed., ed. Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden, (London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 158-182, <http://www.ou.edu/uschina/texts/ChiPol/WangZhengChinWomen.pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> Susan Brownell and Jeffrey Wasserstrom, eds., *Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2002), 331-360.

of the Ideal Wife,” discusses the “continuity” of gender norms throughout the reform era and the “state’s new attention to issues of sexuality [appearing] to be as much a strategy of control as a liberation of sexual behavior.”<sup>20</sup> Evans discusses the “ideal” wife and mother, and what that identity means in contrast to the masculine counter-narrative established throughout the reform era. In Elisabeth Croll’s book *Endangered Daughters: Discrimination and Development in Asia*, she discusses Chinese daughters (in sections titled, “Wishing for a son,” “Rural demands,” “Urban preference,” and “Daughter neglect”) and how the economic standing of most families helped aid in male-preference.<sup>21</sup> Croll also familiarizes the reader with discussion pertaining to the “cultures of gender, divisions of labor, gender perceptions, and gender development,” which aid in once again combining gender, identity, and economics. Brownell, Wasserstrom, Evans, and Croll corroborate evidence given by Fincher and Zheng that the modern Chinese woman, who she is and how she lives, has been shaped by (sometimes unfair) economics. The modern Chinese woman, including *shengnü*, can be seen as a reaction, or an effect, of economics shaping gender and identity.

In this project, I will examine the inevitable formation of China’s *shengnü* from the changing marriage patterns, image of *shengnü* that is propagated by the media’s “left-over women phenomenon” campaign, and if and how *shengnü* are resisting this image. This project will also briefly consider the possible emergence of a civil society<sup>22</sup> from the

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<sup>20</sup> Harriet Evans, “Past, Perfect or Imperfect: Changing Images of the Ideal Wife,” in *Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities*, eds. Susan Brownell and Jeffrey Wasserstrom, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2002), 335-360.

<sup>21</sup> Elisabeth Croll, *Endangered Daughters: Discrimination and Development in Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>22</sup> “Civil society” is defined by the World Health Organization as a “wide range of organizations, networks, associations, groups and movements that are independent from government and that sometimes come to-

combined efforts of individual bloggers and high-profiled women's rights activists following the creation of the "leftover women phenomenon" campaign. I hypothesize that because the *shengnü* is a product of her surroundings (as the aforementioned authors also argue), that she should be adamantly opposed to the unjust label "*shengnü*" and actively pursuing to reclaim the title and fight for equality within the economic and social spheres. However, because the overwhelming amount of information provided on Chinese search engines, databases, and blogging sites promotes the anti-*shengnü* rhetoric established by the early ACWF's articles, it is difficult to find many female voices behind the *shengnü* label, especially voices coming together to work together, thus impeding any breakthroughs by Chinese feminist voices to create a civil society. While several blogs and posts written by self-proclaimed *shengnü* do exist, the majority of these women are not proud of the title "*shengnü*." The "leftover women phenomenon" campaign broadcasted by the media is highly effective in depicting the *shengnü* outside of established gender roles; the counter-narrative to the anti-*shengnü* discourse exists, where women are proud of their achievements, but after almost a decade since the term "*shengnü*" was created, these voices have made little impact in society, and the term remains highly negative. The voices of anti-*shengnü* bloggers, however few, do not make the case for an emerging civil society, one where women take back the title and work towards women's rights. However, the combination of pro-*shengnü* voices and demonstrations by well-known women's rights activists could be the start of an emerging civil society, or at the very least the creation of public acknowledgement and eventually acceptance of single, highly-educated women.

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gether to advance their common interests through collective action"  
(<http://www.who.int/trade/glossary/story006/en/>).

This thesis is divided into four chapters, the first of which will examine the changing nature of marriage in China and the inevitability of “*shengnü*.” Specifically, chapter one discusses changing marriage patterns from the Qing Dynasty to present through analysis of age at first union patterns. The second chapter will examine media portrayals of *shengnü* in articles and images. Chapter two will also explain the relationship between mass media and society and will utilize English-language articles<sup>23</sup> posted by the ACWF, non-ACWF articles, and images from other sources to provide a portrayal of China’s *shengnü* in the media’s “leftover women phenomenon” campaign. When acquiring and analyzing media articles, I first used ACWF articles, then searched various keywords or phrases on Baidu search engine to find the most popular *shengnü* articles and images; I then took note of the overall message the article or image was sending, and how this message influence the image of the *shengnü*. The third chapter will establish an accurate picture of how China’s *shengnü* view themselves. To do this, I searched the same keywords and phrases on blogging sites Sina Weibo, Tinya, and RenRen; I then took note of whether or not the blogger was a female proclaiming to be *shengnü*, and whether or not she viewed this positively, and for what reasons. To conclude chapter three, I will consider if the few pro-*shengnü* bloggers online, combined with demonstrations of famous women’s rights activists makes the case for an emerging civil society, or if the “leftover women phenomenon” campaign has successfully fragmented single, highly-educated women.

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<sup>23</sup> The Chinese language website for the All-China Women’s Federation has the same articles posted on the English language website, but are harder to track down

## CHAPTER 1: CHANGING MARRIAGE PATTERNS IN URBAN CHINA AND THE INEVITABILITY OF SINGLE WOMEN

The persistence of traditional marriage views and gender roles in modern Chinese society can be viewed as an obstacle to individual goals and interests, and groups of women such as *shengnü* bear heavy criticism from much of society for disregarding established societal norms. In order to fully understand the existence of the “leftover women phenomenon” and how *shengnü* remained single past their so-called expiration date, a brief summary of Chinese marriage practices and how the marriage market exists today is detailed below.

Marriage and family have been fundamental parts of Chinese society and culture throughout its history, albeit existing in a way that restrains and restricts a woman’s livelihood. Newborn girls were destined for a life of wifedom and expected to bear a son to continue the practice of ancestor worship and prove her worth to her marriage family. Until a girl married, she possessed no basic human rights. There existed no right to have sex before marriage for a girl, and no house was allocated to her by her *danwei* [government work unit] before marriage during the Maoist era.<sup>24</sup> While sharing some characteristics with various other countries, historic Chinese marriage patterns are vastly different from what has been practiced in the West. Maynes and Walter explain that “the Chinese marriage system was traditionally characterized by early age at marriage, nearly universal marriage for women, virilocal residence (a newly married couple resided with the groom’s parents), concubinage for elite men, and norms that discouraged widow remar-

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<sup>24</sup> Christina Larson, “The Startling Plight of China’s Leftover Ladies,” *All China Women’s Federation*, April 24, 2012, accessed October 11, 2014, <http://www.womenofchina.cn/womenofchina/html1/news/sports/14/404-1.htm>.

riage.”<sup>25</sup> These patterns characterized marriage through late imperial China. During this time virtually all Chinese girls became brides, though not all of them married as principal wives, and all Chinese women were born to become a bride and subjected to the instruction of their husband.<sup>26</sup>

The Republican era (1911-1949) experienced a series of social, economic, and political revolutions that expanded women’s rights and subsequently modernized the practice of marriage. In 1950, just a year after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, the New Marriage Law (an improved reworking of the marriage law in the Jiangxi Soviet Republic in 1931) was written into the new legal framework, granting women the right to a divorce. Niida states that “the new Marriage Law enacted in May 1950 is based on a philosophy negating the old Chinese marriage system, the nature of which may be inferred from the expression: ‘noodles do not make a meal; likewise, women are not counted as human beings.’”<sup>27</sup> Niida continues to state that “throughout the successive stages of development, the reform of the marriage law in revolutionary-period China has been geared to a consistent, basic aim - the upholding of the principles of free marriage, monogamy, equal rights for men and women and the negation of feudalistic and patriarchal marriage practices centered on the interests of the family, husbands and males - such as bigamy, concubinage, child marriage and human traffic marriage.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Mary Jo Maynes and Ann Waltner, "Women's Life-Cycle Transitions in a World-Historical Perspective: Comparing Marriage in China and Europe," in *Journal of Women's History* 12 (Winter 2001): 11.

<sup>26</sup> Maynes and Waltner, "Women’s Life-Cycle Transitions in a World-Historical Perspective: Comparing Marriage in China and Europe," 11.

<sup>27</sup> Noboru Niida, "Land Reform and New Marriage Law in China," *The Developing Economies* 2 (1964): 3-4, accessed October 9, 2015, doi: 10.1111/j.1746-1049.1964.tb00667.x.

<sup>28</sup> Niida, "Land Reform and New Marriage Law in China," 6.

Prior to the 1950 New Marriage Law, women were seen as property, like noodles, and some went so far as to explain that a one-year-old girl was worth one “shih” of grains and her value increased by one “koku” per year as she grew up.<sup>29</sup> Traditional Confucian values further depreciated the value of a woman, as “the husband is the ‘heaven’ for the wife, as the wife was rooted in the lot of the peasant, whose wife could not afford to leave her husband no matter how badly she might be treated because she had no hope of living by herself.”<sup>30</sup> The New Marriage Law greatly impacted the lives of Chinese women. No longer were women compared to noodles or forever tied to their husbands. In accordance with Mao Zedong’s slogan “women hold up half the sky,” the mid-twentieth century fostered positive growth for women in China where women were actively participating in politics and strengthening the state. “Men and women are equal; everyone is worth his (or her) salt,” during Mao’s time.<sup>31</sup> The New Marriage Law of 1950 also saw an increase in women’s economic rights, where land ownership and participation in cooperatives were possible. This is one of the first moments in Chinese history that women have been granted immense and unprecedented freedoms, and the effects of this liberation have had a lasting impact on the lives of successive generations.

During the past few decades, Chinese marriage trends have continued to transmute into a more Western style of practice. Several new defining features characterize marriage in present-day China. Since the 1980s, researchers have consistently identified five unique features of Chinese marriage, several of which are eerily similar to pre-Republican marriage features and suggest that Chinese marriage, while changing and

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 10-11.



modernizing, still possesses some backwards characteristics, like the deeply engrained gender norms that say a man is to work and provide for the family, while the woman is to stay inside and manage household affairs. First, marriage in China is universal, meaning that everyone participates or is expected to participate in marriage.<sup>32</sup> Second, marriage patterns are characterized by early marriage compared to developed countries, yet with the average age at first union increasing in a linear fashion over recent decades.<sup>33</sup> Third, female hypergamy is present, where women seek to find a man of higher age, wealth, and education for marriage.<sup>34</sup> Fourth, there is a marriage squeeze, where there are not enough women for all the men to marry, owing to skewed sex ratios at birth and a generation of excess males.<sup>35</sup> Finally, marriage in China is seen as a necessary precursor to family formation – where the old rhyme “first comes love, then comes marriage, then comes so-and-so pushing a baby carriage” rings true and is upheld as the correct sequence of life events in China.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> G Barclay, A. Coale, M. Stoto and T. Trussell, “A Reassessment of the Demography of Traditional Rural China,” in *Population Index* 42(1976): 606-635.

<sup>33</sup> W. Wang and W. Yang, “Age at Marriage and the First Birth Interval: The Emerging Change in Sexual Behavior Among Young Couples in China,” in *Population and Development Review* 22(1996): 229-320;

H. Y. Tien, “Age at Marriage in the People’s Republic of China,” in *The China Quarterly* 93(1983): 90-107;

E. E. Pimentel, “Just How Do I Love Thee? Marital Relations in Urban China,” in *Journal of Marriage and Family* 62(2000): 32-47.

<sup>34</sup> Elisabeth Croll, *The Politics of Marriage in Contemporary China* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>35</sup> Stuart Basten, “Family planning restrictions and a generation of excess males: analysis of national and provincial data from the 2010 Census of China,” in *Oxford Centre for Population Research Working Paper* 59(2012).

C. Z. Guilmoto, “Skewed sex ratios at birth and future marriage squeeze in China and India 2005-2100,” in *Demography* 49(2012), 77-100;

K. Trent and S.J. South, “Too many men? Sex ratios and women’s partnering behavior in China,” in *Social Forces* 90(2011): 247-267.

<sup>36</sup> Wei Yan, Jiang Quanbao, and Stuart Basten, “Observing the Transformation of China’s First Marriage Pattern through Net Nuptiality Tables: 1982-2010,” in *Finnish Yearbook of Population Research* 48(September 2013): 65-75.

What is most interesting about these five defining characteristics is that the second feature, early age of marriage, is increasing in a linear fashion. An increasing average age at first union indicates that women are waiting longer to marry. This increase “threatens” the Chinese marriage market, where women traditionally marry young and produce a child right away. Now, more women are either waiting longer to marry and have children, or foregoing marriage altogether.<sup>37</sup> An increasing age at first union is due to natural changes in contemporary marriage patterns<sup>38</sup>, which correlates with economic and educational gains made by Chinese women over the past few decades.

The graph below was taken from an open-source data site, Knoema<sup>39</sup>, and depicts the average age at first union for men and women in urban China since 1982.<sup>40</sup> Represented is an increase in age at first union of females from 22.40 years of age in 1982 to 24.70 years of age in 2010 – a 2.3 year increase across 30 years. For men, the age of first marriage in 1982 was 25.10 years of age. Since 1982, the age of first marriage for men has increased by roughly 1 year, to 26.50 years of age at first union in 2010. The graph indicates that both men and women are marrying later in life, and that average age at first is likely to continue in the future.

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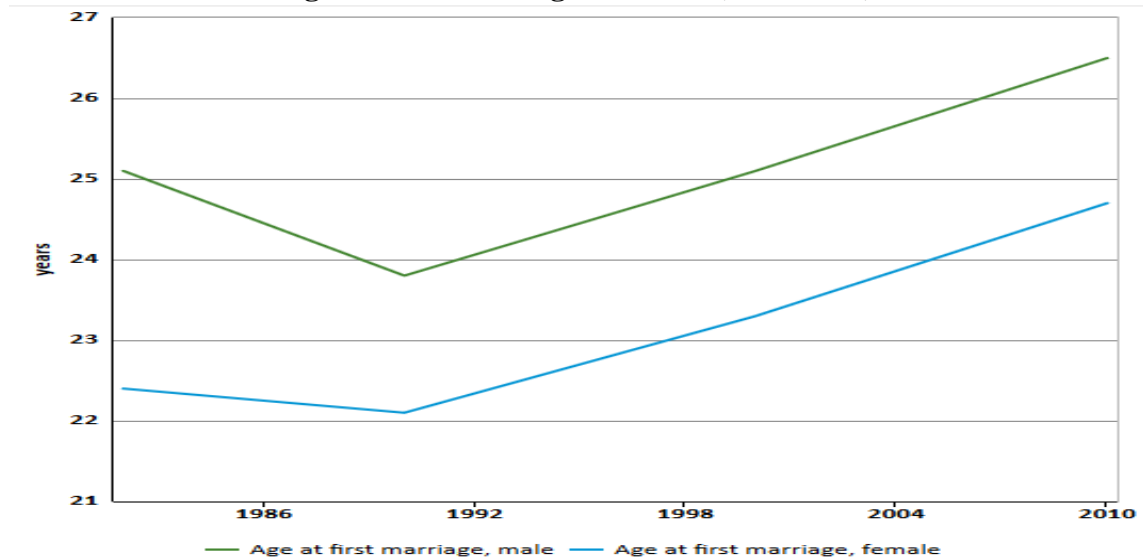
<sup>37</sup> A. J. Cherlin, “First Union Patterns Around the World: Introduction to the Special Issue,” in *Springer Science+Business Media* (2013).

<sup>38</sup> The five characteristics of Chinese marriage as depicted on the previous page still exist in China today, yet in recent years, more liberal or alternative relationship styles (as seen by the Chinese government) have come to the forefront of marriage culture. Cohabitation and divorce rates are on the rise, as well as a significant increase in tolerance towards homosexuality.

<sup>39</sup> The data is taken from census reports published by the Chinese government over four periods, republished by the Health Nutrition and Population Statistics from the World Bank in January of 2015, and then graphed and republished by Knoema.

<sup>40</sup> “Health Nutrition and Population Statistics (World Bank): Age at First Union, Male and Female,” last modified January 2015, <http://knoema.com/WBHNPSStats2015Jan/health-nutrition-and-population-statistics-world-bank-january-2015?tsId=1578570&action=export>.

**Figure 1.1:  
Age of First Marriage in China (1982-2010)**



Source: Knoema

In 2012, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs published the World Marriage Data report on the Marital Status of Men and Women to depict marriage trends across the world.<sup>41</sup> The data supplied by various data collection agencies and surveys and gathered and organized by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, grouped individual countries' marital data (percentage of men/women single/married/widowed/divorced) by time period, providing a numeric representation of marriage trends worldwide. From the previous graph, it is evident that average age at first union is increasing over time, and the World Marriage Data report is useful in showing exactly how many men and women as a percentage of their respective age groups are remaining single over time.

The graph below depicts varying levels of single men and women in various age groups as percentages of the total population of each age group. From 1990 on for both

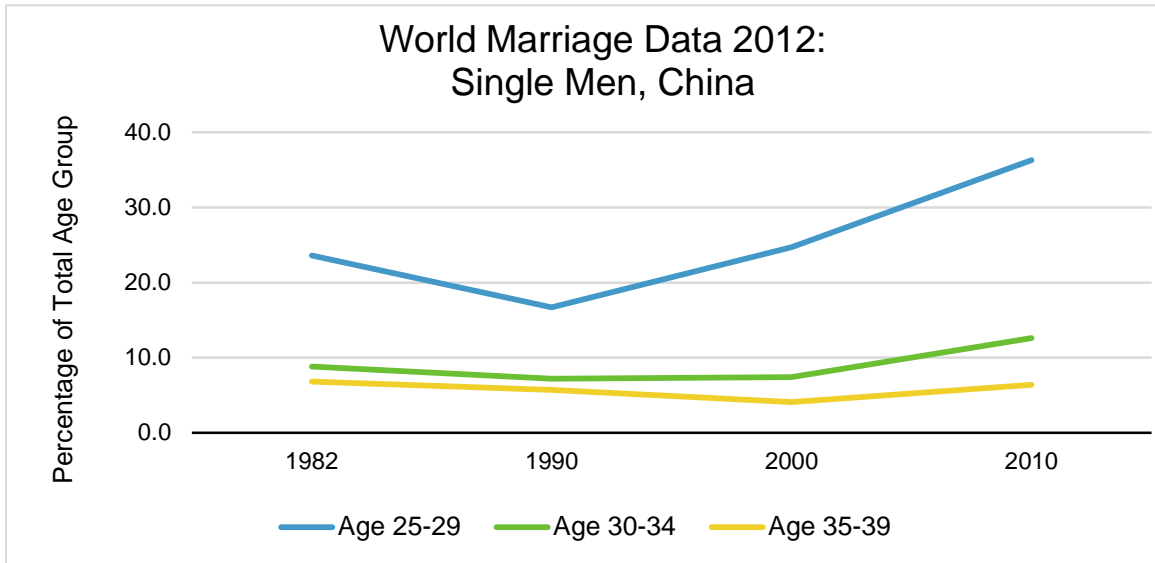
<sup>41</sup> "World Marriage Data 2012," last modified January 2013, <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/dataset/marriage/wmd2012.shtml>.

sexes, each age group saw an increase in number of individuals remaining single later in life. The second graph shows the three age groups over time for just single women. The age group that coincides with a younger *shengnü*, the 25-29 age group, experienced a huge increase in percentage from 2000 to 2010. The other two age groups, 30-34 and 35-39, also experienced dramatic increases during that time relative to their previous values. Research by Yan Wei, Quanbao Jiang, and Stuart Basten supports the idea that “patterns of singlehood have changed at younger ages, with an ever increasing period of singlehood, especially for males,” which can be seen on both graphs below.<sup>42</sup> The conclusions made in their report coincide with the data analysis several researchers have conducted and that the following graphs confirm: there is an increase in the amount of single males and females over time, for all age groups, and this trend is indicative of changing marriage patterns.

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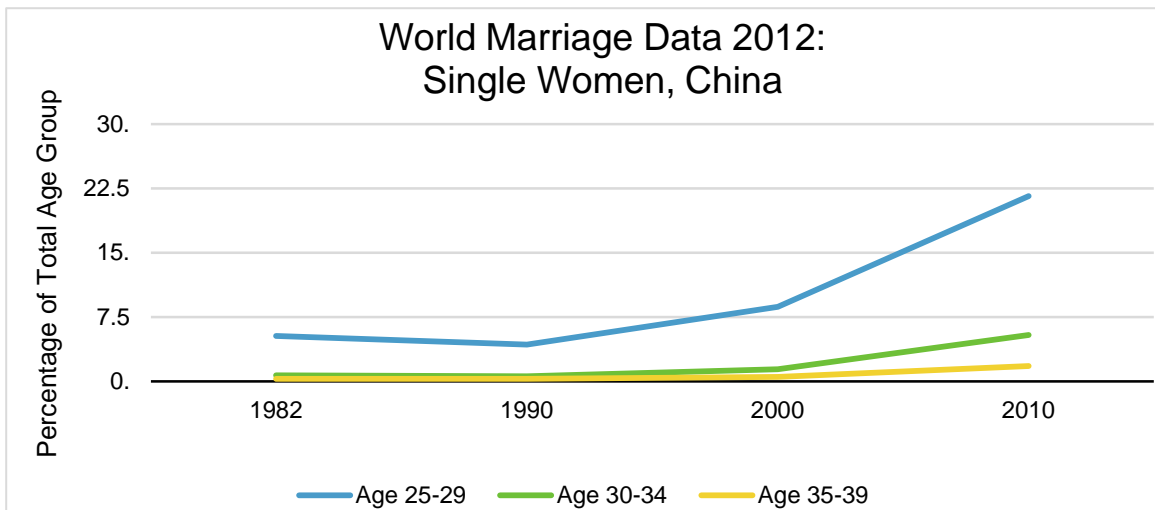
<sup>42</sup> Wei Yan, Jiang Quanbao and Stuart Basten. "Observing the Transformation of China's First Marriage Pattern through Net Nuptiality Tables: 1982-2010."

**Figure 1.2:**  
**Single Men as Percentage of Total Age Group, China (1982-2010)**



Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, World Marriage Data

**Figure 1.3:**  
**Single Women as Percentage of Total Age Group, China (1982-2010)**



Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, World Marriage Data

The fluctuation in age at first marriage (where some years the average age is higher or lower), correlates with changes in the social structure of society (movement away from or toward traditional marriage customs) and in the labor market (increased or decreased participation). As more women stay in school longer or choose to play an active role in the

labor market, the opportunity cost of finding a spouse and producing offspring increases, and in turn average age at first union increases. For men, the increases in percentages of those remaining single is less defined than those for women. Men historically tend to marry later in Chinese society, but the increase of singles over time could be in part due to an increase of females remaining single longer. Also at play is the effects of the One Child Policy's male-preference culture, where increasing amounts of males were born each year, suggesting that the percentages of singles in each age group would also increase each year.

In the case of China's "leftover women phenomenon," many researchers have cited availability of education as the main reason why more women are staying single longer or staying single as a lifestyle. An inverse relationship between marriage and education exists, where well-educated women marry "late and less often."<sup>43</sup> This trend is explained by the economic independence theory, which posits that education provides women with independent economic resources to reject the caregiver role in marriage. Education reduces women's likelihood of marriage because highly-educated women may view marriage as a "less attractive option than continuing to work outside the home."<sup>44</sup> Felicia Tian explains that

"Though education provides women with increased earning potential, the relative deterioration of their labor market conditions makes it difficult to transform the benefits of education into household bargaining power. Thus, college-educated Chinese women who feel more attached to the labor market and hold egalitarian gender attitudes are even more reluctant to enter marriage, an institution that is increasingly differentiated by traditional gender roles. In addition, the gender-asymmetric mate selection

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<sup>43</sup> Felicia Tian. "Transition to First Marriage in Reform-Era Urban China: The Persistent Effect of Education in a Period of Rapid Social Change." *Population Research & Policy Review* 32, no. 4 (August 2013): 529-552.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

preference also makes it more difficult for highly educated women to find desirable partners.”<sup>45</sup>

In short, women with higher education are less likely to marry, or marry later, increasing the average age at first union over time. However, in data released by the World Bank in 2014 and graphed on Knoema, percentage of females in secondary education has decreased slightly since 2009, and total enrollment of females in secondary education has dropped significantly from 2006 to 2012, both depicted in the graph below.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, the percentage of female participation in the labor force has also decreased from 2006 to present, depicted in a second graph below.<sup>47</sup> Information depicted in both of these graphs conflicts with the idea that increasing education and economic (labor force) opportunities will lead to more singles over time, creating the “leftover women phenomenon.” While education and economic opportunities do provide evidence for the inevitability of *shengnü*, there must be something else at play causing women to stay single longer.

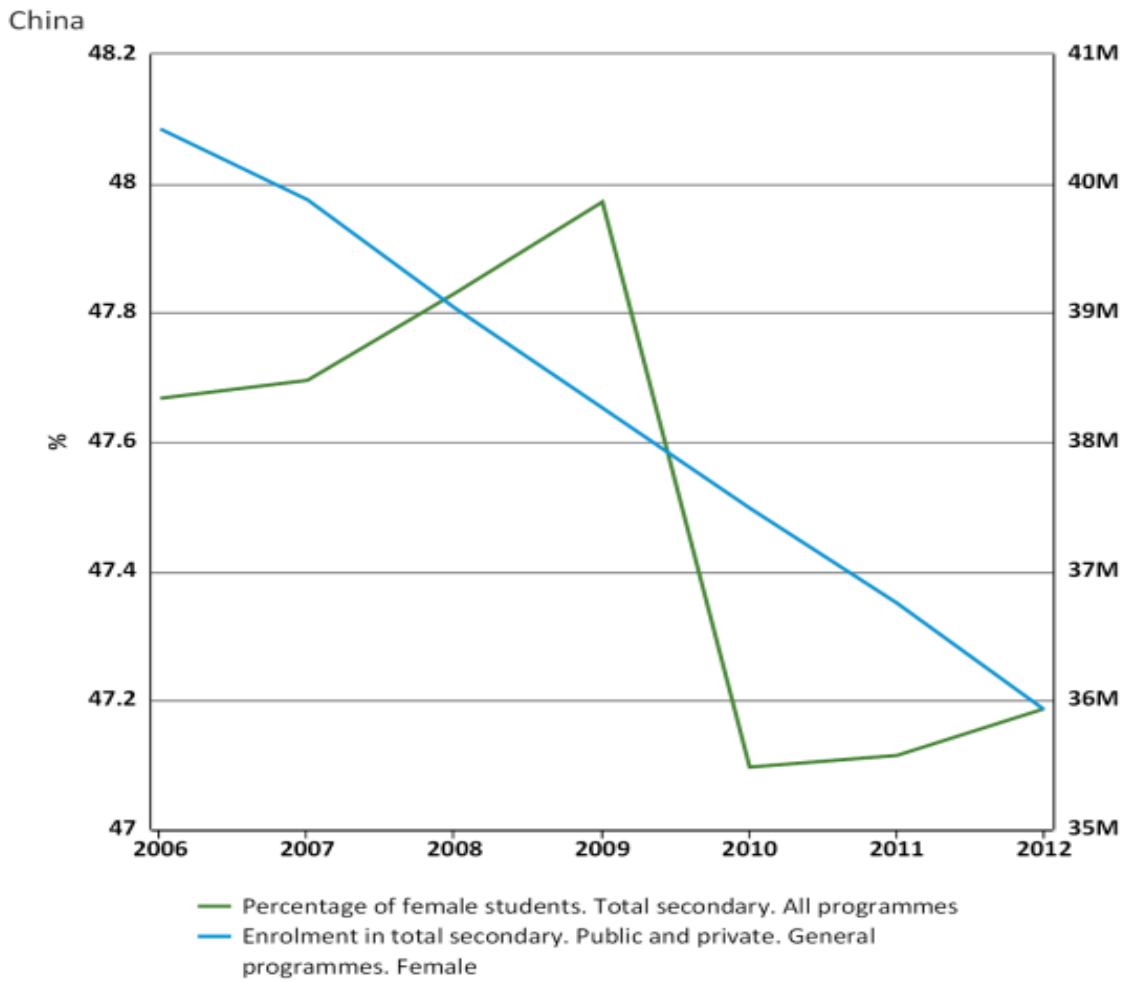
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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> “Education Statistics, World Bank (2014),” last modified September 2014, <http://knoema.com/WBEdStats2014Dec/education-statistics-world-bank-december-2014>.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

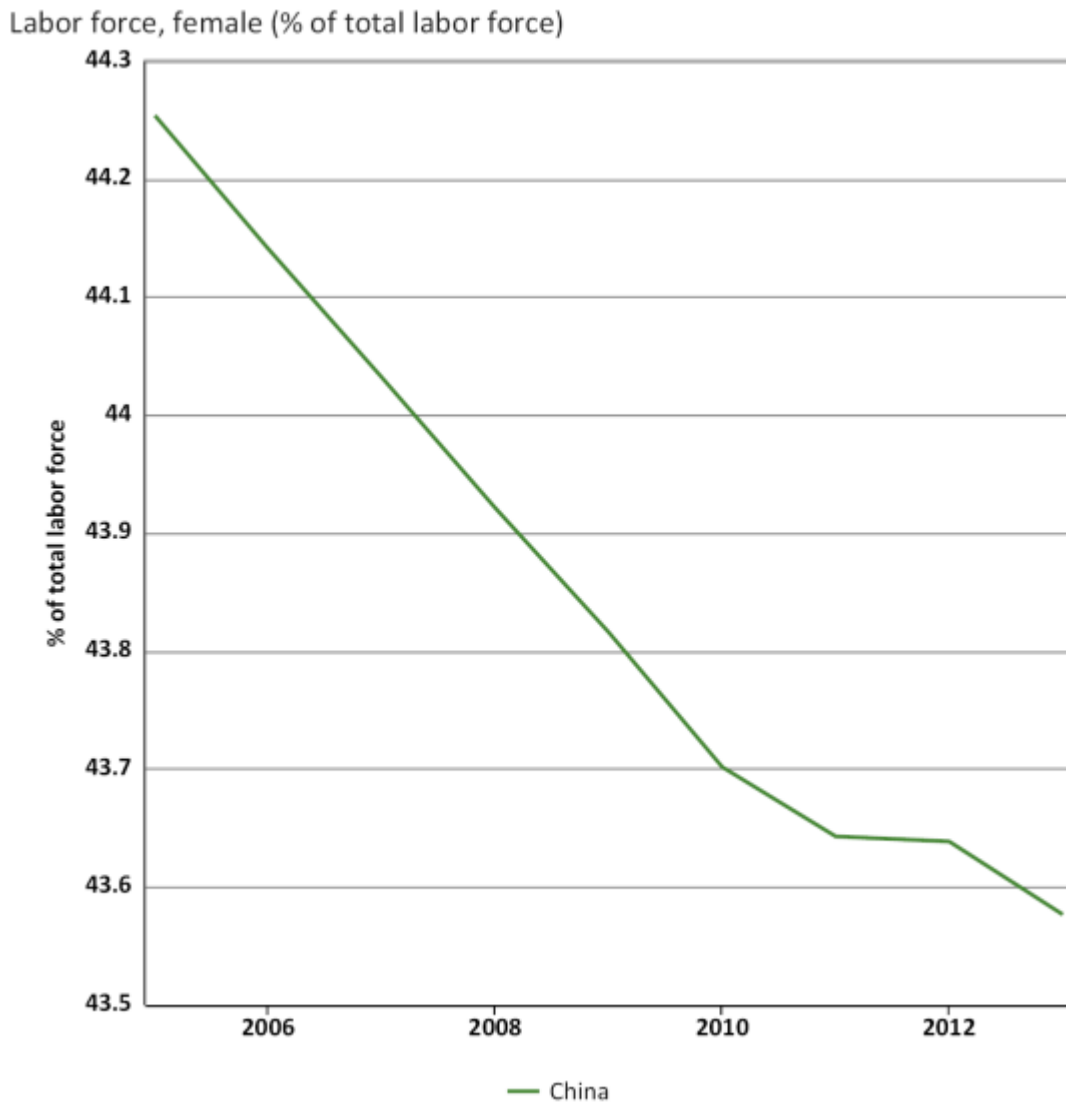
**Figure 1.4:**  
**Percentage and Total Enrollment of Females in Secondary Education (2006-2012)**



Source: Knoema



**Figure 1.5:**  
**Percentage of Female in Total Labor Force (2006-2012)**



Source: Knoema

While female education and participation in the labor force are both causes for the increase in average age at first union and the number of singles in China, these factors do not explain either the existence of the “leftover women phenomenon,” or how the number of singles is increasingly yearly despite recent drops in school enrollment and labor force participation. The economic independence theory alone does not adequately address the importance of “cultural and historical continuity in marriage formation that sometimes causes early average age at first union to fluctuate.”<sup>48</sup> Tian discusses the “path dependency theory,” which emphasizes the importance of culture and institutions that “constrain family change and legitimizes marriage as a fundamental and structural component of societal and individual identity.”<sup>49</sup> Non-marriage has a high social penalty, which can be viewed as “deviant, illegal, or anti-social.”<sup>50</sup> Being a *shengnü* is equivalent to being an outsider in Chinese society, not just in terms of high education and economic attainment, but because of deviation from accepted cultural norms or gender norms (i.e. enrollment in higher education or participation in the labor force). Evidence also suggests that the stigmatized labeling of “being single” in China and being called “*shengnü*” both indicated a woman’s personal failures to participate in cultural norms and institutions. As such, since the *shengnü* term’s creation in 2006, both enrollment rates and labor force participation rates have declined (there is correlation, causation is yet to be determined), while there has been an increase in single females across every age group. Lower enrollment rates and labor force rates should lead to higher rates of marriage (and lower percentages of single females), since the female is abiding by cultural and gendered norms, but from the

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<sup>48</sup> Felicia Tian, "Transition to First Marriage in Reform-Era Urban China: The Persistent Effect of Education in a Period of Rapid Social Change."

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

World Marriage Data, this hypothesis does not hold. One possible reason for why more women are remaining single as fewer enroll in school or participate in the workforce is that the stigmatized *shengnü* label has caused many women to fear that they, too will become an ostracized, marginalized member of society, so they are backing off from education or work in order to re-conform to cultural and gendered norms. The stigma associated with single status prevents highly-educated women from rejecting marriage completely or postponing it for too long, but when they give up their careers or education, they are still remaining single.<sup>51</sup>

China's "leftover women phenomenon" was inevitable. A series of economic reforms and legislative policies<sup>52</sup>, along with an increase of educational opportunities, provided several facets for the modern Chinese woman to finally reach some sort of independence, so in full force Chinese women rushed to obtain MA's, PhD's, and jobs. However, the government never intended for increased educational and economic opportunities to result in a decline in marriage. The Chinese government, as mentioned by Fincher, wants women to receive diplomas and have careers, but only in order to give them up and help "upgrade population quality." But, due to deeply engrained gender norms, the women who are supposed to "upgrade [the] population quality" are unable to find a husband, and the yearly percentage of single females increases, thus strengthening the "leftover women phenomenon." Changing marriage rates (higher percentages of singles) indicates movement away from traditional marriage values and towards a more progressive society (in terms of educational and economic opportunities), yet do decreasing enrollment and

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> A list of these economic reforms and legislative policies that directly influence the lives of women can be seen in the appendices.

labor force participation rates suggest that society is shifting back to these same traditional marriage values and gender norms since the creation of the “leftover women phenomenon” media campaign? What is the “leftover women phenomenon” campaign, propagated by the state-run media, doing in order to convince viewers that being a single, highly-educated *shengnü* is to be avoided at all costs?

## CHAPTER 2: THE STATE MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF *SHENGNÜ*

The way we view ourselves, others, and the world around us is shaped by the omnipresent mass media outlets and the onslaught of words and images that these outlets broadcast. The effects of mass media on society has long been a topic of research and debate for social scientists, especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century where news and information is spread via newer and faster social media platforms. Social scientists agree that mass media strongly influences society and the individual, yet to what degree and in what exact terms these effects happen are still disputed. There are roughly five functions of the media that most researchers can agree on.

“First, the media can attract and direct attention to problems, solutions or people in ways which can favor those with power and correlatively divert attention from rival individuals or groups. Second, the mass media can confer status and confirm legitimacy. Third, in some circumstances, the media can be a channel for persuasion and mobilization. Fourth, the mass media can help to bring certain kinds of publics into being and maintain them. Fifth, the media are a vehicle for offering psychic rewards and gratifications. They can divert and amuse and they can flatter. In general, mass media are very cost-effective as a means of communication in society, they are also fast, flexible, and relatively easy to plan and control...”<sup>53</sup>

These functions depict the power that mass media is capable of in any given society or situation including China and the “leftover women phenomenon.” The influence and effects of mass media and the most important media situations for assessing influence and effectiveness are broken down into “five categories: (1)

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<sup>53</sup> Denis McQuail, "The Influence and Effects of Mass Media" in *Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction* (London: Sage Publications, 1983), 21.

the campaign; (2) the definition of social reality and social norms; (3) the immediate response or reaction; (4) institutional change; (5) changes in culture and society.”<sup>54</sup> The campaign and the definition of social reality and social norms are crucial in understanding the Chinese media’s “leftover women phenomenon,” and should be discussed before specific media examples are analyzed.

In China’s “leftover women phenomenon” the campaign is an attempt to inform the public of the existence of highly-educated single women and to encourage those who know of a *shengnü* to take it upon themselves to encourage her to marry quickly and produce a child. Since its country-wide debut in 2007, the *shengnü* campaign has reached nearly every news station, newspaper, blogging site, and has been projected into the minds of each single, highly-educated woman. The “leftover women phenomenon” campaign is defined by the general characteristics of a media campaign:

“The [general media] campaign shares, in varying degrees, the following characteristics: it has specific aims and is planned to achieve these; it has a definite time-span, usually short; it is intensive and aims at wide coverage; its effectiveness is, in principle, open to assessment; it usually has authoritative sponsorship; it is not necessarily popular with its audience and has to be ‘sold’ to them; it is usually based on a framework of shared values.”<sup>55</sup>

McQuail explains that “the message that the campaign sends should be unambiguous and relevant to its audience, while reinforcing existing opinions to achieve success,” where the most effective campaigns rely on information-spreading, unlike campaigns that seek to “change attitudes or opinions.”<sup>56</sup> The “leftover women phenomenon” campaign is informative in nature, yet this was done purposefully in order to change attitude and opinions of the viewers by providing information that is seemingly undebatable.

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<sup>54</sup> McQuail, "The Influence and Effects of Mass Media," 11.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

In China, the message of the “leftover women phenomenon” campaign is clear to parents and older generations: if your daughter does not get married and produce a child (by solving the “problems” we provide information on how to “fix”), your family lineage will end, and there will be no one to take care of you or her. For already married peers of a *shengnü*, the message is also clear: your friend needs help to be happy like you (and she can do so by “fixing” her “problems” with the information we provide). The message is clearest to the *shengnü* themselves: there is something wrong with you and you must rectify it before you can find a husband (and you can do so by looking at our information on how to “fix” your “problems”). The message is promoting traditional Confucian ideals and marriage norms to each of its viewers, and thus endemically reinforcing anachronistic ideas that a woman must “fix” herself to serve in a male-dominated society. By targeting parents and peers in addition to the *shengnü*, the “leftover women phenomenon” campaign is highly effective; family and peers are paying attention to these women’s lives and doing exactly what the government wishes them to do: encourage these women to give up some aspect of themselves to marry and have children for the “betterment” of the state. Since most media in China is owned and sponsored by the government, the message is ubiquitous. “The more channels carrying the same campaign messages, the greater the probability of acceptance,” and in turn the more *shengnü* who will give up their careers or goals for marriage.<sup>57</sup>

On the definition of social reality and the formation of social norms in the “leftover women phenomenon” context, there are two main points to what occurs during a campaign. There is the “provision of a consistent picture of the social world which may

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 13.

lead the audience to adopt this version of reality, a reality of ‘facts’ and of norms, values, and expectations.”<sup>58</sup> Also present is a “continuing and selective interaction between self and the media which plays a part in shaping the individual’s own behavior and self-concept.”<sup>59</sup> Viewers can begin to expect the mass media to tell them about “different kinds of social roles and the accompanying expectations, in the sphere of work, family life, political behavior and so on.”<sup>60</sup> Because there are almost no truly independent news agencies in China (since every agency must be cognizant of government censorship and abide by unwritten rules or risk being “asked to tea” by government officials), the “lack of diversity of media does not allow ample choice nor healthy contradictions” to the “leftover women phenomenon.”<sup>61</sup> Additionally, “terms like ‘amplification’ and ‘sensitization’ and ‘polarization’ have been used to describe the tendency of the media to exaggerate the incident of a phenomenon, to increase the likelihood of it being noticed and to mobilize society against a supposed threat.”<sup>62</sup> The “supposed threat” to Chinese society is the group of highly-educated, single urban women. This group of single, highly-educated women “receives the polarizing treatment, and comparable to other targets of the media, are relatively small in number, rather powerless, and already subject to broad social disapproval.”<sup>63</sup>

Researchers and analysts have suggested that the “media helps to establish an order of priorities in a society about its problems and objectives.”<sup>64</sup> McQuail believes that

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 14.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. This statement does not include personal blogs which do not often possess the scope that the government news agencies have.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 16.



“they do this, not by initiating or determining, but by publicizing according to an agreed scale of values that is determined elsewhere, usually in the political system.”<sup>65</sup> To counter China’s “leftover women phenomenon,” the government has utilized the ACWF to encourage single women to change themselves to be more desirable for marriage. Outside of the ACWF articles, other articles have been published and circulated among other Chinese news and blog sites. These articles share the same headlines or the same content and can be seen on a dozen or more sites through one search. The uniformity and repetition of the “leftover women phenomenon” message are essential to the campaign; the “more consistent the picture presented and the more exclusively this picture gains wide attention, then the predicted effect is more likely to occur.”<sup>66</sup> The more one article or image is republished by various news or blog sites, then the more people are exposed to a certain depiction of the *shengnü* and the more likely it is that this depiction is likely to be believed and opinions formed by the public. The more an article or picture depicts *shengnü* at odds with societal norms and gender norms, the more likely it is for the “leftover women phenomenon” to dissolve, since the message circulates at higher volumes, and more women succumb to pressure to marry.

This chapter will evaluate two different types of media that have an important role in the “leftover women phenomenon” campaign. Print media concerning the *shengnü* play the most integral role in determining public and state opinion on the *shengnü*. The main print media source for *shengnü* news and discussion is the All-China Women’s Federation, where the earliest Chinese-language articles that carried the most pejorative view of *shengnü* originated. The ACWF has published several dozen articles pertaining

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 16.

to *shengnü*. These articles have been picked up by various other Chinese news sites online, but the original ACWF articles have been deleted. The ACWF carries a sense of governmental authority backing up their articles and opinions, while the non-ACWF articles that are circulated carry the authority of popular opinion.

The second media used in the “leftover women phenomenon” campaign is that of the reoccurring images used in *shengnü* articles, since certain cartoon images of the *shengnü* have a wider breadth on the internet than the articles do. To discuss the role of cartoon and photograph images in the “leftover women phenomenon” campaign, a brief discussion of how images shape individuals and society psychologically will be provided, then the photos will be grouped into common themes and analyzed for meaning and effectiveness. The combination of text and images in the “leftover women phenomenon” campaign provides a powerful and compelling image of the single, highly-educated Chinese woman that many people, including a *shengnü* herself, are likely to believe due to pervasiveness.

### **The ACWF and Reoccurring Articles**

As stated on their English language website, the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) was founded on April 3, 1949 as a mass organization for uniting and emancipating the women of all nationalities and walks of life in China. Officially, the ACWF is a “non-governmental organization,” formed out of the movement to “eradicate the idea that women are inferior to men,”<sup>67</sup> promote the social and economic welfare of women, and

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<sup>67</sup> Justina Ka Yee Tsui, “Chinese Women: Active Revolutionaries or Passive Followers? A History of the All-China Women’s Federation, 1949-1996,” (Master’s thesis, Concordia University, 1998).

act as an “umbrella organ for existing women’s organizations,”<sup>68</sup> all while acting under the male-dominated Chinese government. Four years after its founding and after gaining wide support and popularity among the newly-liberated Chinese women, the ACWF had a staff of 40,000 counting just the levels about counties and municipalities, reaching more than 70,000 branches by 1994.<sup>69</sup> The size of the ACWF implies that it plays an important role in Chinese women’s daily lives and that messages and opinions of the ACWF are far-reaching.

Overall, the ACWF has positively impacted the lives of and empowered the country’s women in various ways, yet not everyone is convinced the organization has women’s best interests at heart. Non-governmental women’s organizations or independent feminists have argued that the ACWF is not a true supporter of women’s rights or women’s groups (as many of these groups are unable to obtain funding or support) and its role in women’s lives is more detrimental than beneficial. Wang Zheng, for instance, argues that the Women’s Federation consists of ‘state feminists,’ or “feminist mouthpieces utilized by the state to further its agenda.”<sup>70</sup> Many believe that the ACWF would undoubtedly choose to be in good favor with the government than truly push for increased women’s rights, with Zheng arguing that the ACWF is “no more than an organ of the party-state that takes on the project of making Chinese women into statist subjects.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Tania Angeloff, and Marylène Lieber, “Equality, did you say? Chinese feminism after 30 years of reforms,” in *China Perspectives* 4(December 2012): 17-24.

<sup>69</sup> Wang Zheng, “‘State Feminism’? Gender and Socialist State Formation in Maoist China,” in *Feminist Studies* 31(2005): 519-551; Jude Howell, “The struggle for survival: Prospects for the Women’s Federation in Post-Mao China,” in *World Development* 1(1996): 129–143.

<sup>70</sup> Wang Zheng, “‘State Feminism’? Gender and Socialist State Formation in Maoist China.” This ‘state feminist’ is a contradictory term, as in the centralized patriarchal state that is the PRC, laws and policies supposedly favoring women were not always clear *de facto* terms until the 1980s.

<sup>71</sup> Wang Zheng, “‘State Feminism’? Gender and Socialist State Formation in Maoist China,” 520.

In the 21st century, the ACWF has continued to play an active role in women's lives, publishing news reports and offering services from various functional and affiliated departments. The ACWF's current president Shen Yueyue, already serving as a vice chairperson of the Standing Committee of the 12th National People's Congress, was elected president of the ACWF in 2013. Since Shen's time in office, she proclaimed that "family is a fundamental part of building a harmonious society and a happy life" during her "Seeking the Most Beautiful Families"<sup>72</sup> campaign launched in 2014, aiming to find the local model families to promote a civilized and healthy lifestyle within communities. Shen's "Seeking the Most Beautiful Families" campaign builds upon the aforementioned "Harmonious Society" campaign launched by former Chinese president Hu Jintao. Although Shen has not directly commented on the *shengnü* of China, similar to how Hu Jintao's "Harmonious Society" campaign in its later years did not, her "Seeking the Most Beautiful Families" campaign solidifies the ACWF's stance in the "leftover women phenomenon" debate. "Seeking the Most Beautiful Families" campaign emphasizes beauty and family, both of which the *shengnü* allegedly lacks and must "fix" her "problems" in order to achieve. Although the ACWF is the leading authority for women's rights and equality, it believes that highly-educated, urban women should change themselves or give up something to attract a suitor and get married, thus leading to the harmonious society that both Hu and Shen aim to create. In this sense, critics would once again point out that the ACWF does not, in fact, have the best interest of Chinese women at its core, even if the ACWF is convinced that marriage is the best way for a woman to better herself. In-

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<sup>72</sup> Peter Yin, ed., "Campaign Seeking the 'Most Beautiful Families' Nationwide," *Women of China*, December 20, 2014, accessed December 29, 2014, <http://www.womenofchina.cn/womenofchina/html/1412/2615-1.htm>.

stead of promoting women's wellbeing regardless of her marital status, the ACWF, acting as a government mouthpiece, chose to publish articles that ultimately harmed the image of thousands of women.

Analyzing reports and articles published by the ACWF and then reposted or republished by other news agencies is crucial in understanding the message and scope of the "leftover women phenomenon" campaign. In the ACWF English language archives, nearly all of the articles discussing *shengnü* adhere to same tactic: the outward appearance is positive and encouraging, yet in reality is anti-*shengnü* rhetoric. In order to provide a comprehensive analysis of the articles published by the ACWF and to determine the overall opinion the ACWF promotes towards the *shengnü*, a select few of the most popular English-language articles will be analyzed.

On August 31st of 2009, the All China Women's Federation's English site published an article titled "The Single Urban Woman Conundrum," which discussed the definition of China's *shengnü* and the six different classifications. Prior to this article's publication, an article promoting four types of *shengnü* existed online. The categorization of *shengnü* by age contains seemingly very few negative remarks about the *shengnü*. Not coincidentally, each category has a title that is a play on the word "*sheng*" in Chinese that could be considered lighthearted and nonthreatening towards *shengnü*, indicative of the early-on neutrality of the term. The categories are:

The first category is leftover women aged 25 to 27 years, who are called "leftover fighters," *sheng dou shi*, a play on the title of a popular martial arts film. It says these women "still have the courage to fight for a partner."

The next category is 28 to 30-year-old women, or "the ones who must triumph," *bi sheng ke*, a play on the Chinese name for Pizza Hut. It says these women have limited opportunities for romance because their careers leave them "no time for the hunt."

The final category, 35 and older, is called the “master class of leftover women.” The term, *qi tian da sheng*, plays on the name of an ancient Chinese legend, the Monkey King. It says this category of woman “has a luxury apartment, private car and a company, so why did she become a leftover woman?”<sup>73</sup>

These four categorizations of *shengnü* based on age are by no means negative compared to the six classifications of *shengnü*. In the “The Single Urban Woman Conundrum” article published in 2009. The writer explains that the six types of *shengnü* are not classified by age but rather by unique personality traits responsible for their singlehood. Not surprisingly, each category describes a negative personality trait that the ACWF hopes will allow the *shengnü* to identify with and begin to “fix” their “problem.” From the article:

Type A -- her specific requirements, as regards a marriage partner's appearance, personality, talents, academic credentials, economic wherewithal, and even place of birth, limit her scope of potential spouses.

Type B is a feminist, and would rather stay single than compromise her principles by settling for other than the ideal life partner.

Type C is egocentric and often obsessively house proud.

Type D has failed to make up her mind after having had a higher than average number of suitors. She believes the best is yet to come.

Type E is disillusioned after a romance that ended unhappily.

Type F is a successful career woman who devotes her energies to work and is happy to spend her leisure time with family, friends and colleagues rather than a husband.

Each category describes the *shengnü* in a negative light. Type A is too demanding, type B is too enthralled in her ideals, type C is just “too much,” type D is never satisfied, type E

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<sup>73</sup> Original text from: Zihua Zhi, ed., “Diaocha cheng guoren xuan banlü ai wending nan gongwuyuan nü jiaoshi chixiang” (The survey says when choosing a partner, people love men with stable government jobs and women with teaching jobs), December 16, 2010, accessed November 9, 2014, [http://www.china.com.cn/news/txt/2010-12/16/content\\_21552148.htm](http://www.china.com.cn/news/txt/2010-12/16/content_21552148.htm).; Translation provided by: Leta Hong Fincher, “China’s ‘Leftover’ Women,” *Ms. Blog Magazine*, November 22, 2011, accessed November 9, 2014, <http://msmagazine.com/blog/2011/11/22/chinas-leftover-women/>.

is too sad, and type F is too concerned with “non-essential” relationships. The purpose of this type-casting system is to allow both the *shengnü* and her peers to understand what her “flaws” are and why she is unable to find a husband. This strict categorization of *shengnü* implies that a single woman must be one of these six types, and in turn must have one of these six things “wrong” with her. *Shengnü* are plagued by “problems” that make them unattractive to suitors, but if she can “fix” herself, then she can find love and happiness – it is as easy as selecting type A through type F.

Other *shengnü* articles published by the ACWF are just as troubling. In the 46 English language *shengnü* articles published by the ACWF, more than half identify and describe the “negative” characteristics of China’s *shengnü* for viewers to sift through at their leisure. Several articles claim to be “helping” the *shengnü* find love when in reality these articles show that happiness will only come when individual goals are lowered and desires are cast aside (along with a healthy dose of self-help transformations). In an article published in April of 2012 titled “The Startling Plight of China’s Leftover Ladies,” the author described a renowned marriage and love expert to whom thousands of young single women flock for relationship and dating tips. Her advice? A woman needs to lower her standards. The love expert, Wu Di, also coincidentally a contributor to the Chinese edition of *Cosmopolitan*, explains that “it’s unrealistic to expect that you [a Chinese woman in attendance] will be madly in love with one person forever, or even that passion can be the right guide to marriage.”<sup>74</sup> She then encourages women to lower their expectations. Wu believes that a woman is unable to find a singular man for whom she has deep feelings and owns a house and a car, so women need to lower their standards and “bear

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<sup>74</sup> Christina Larson, “The Startling Plight of China’s Leftover Ladies.”

the shortcomings and sufferings of men to be able to get married.”<sup>75</sup> Wu’s advice coincides with the “Single Urban Woman Conundrum” article’s point: women must change themselves and lower their expectations in order to find (unfulfilling) love.

Other articles like “To Be Single or Not? It’s Your Choice,” “Being Picky is a Right, Not a Fault,” “China’s Single Ladies Confess: We’re Happy,” and “Nühanzi<sup>76</sup> Brings a Woman’s World” are also popular and widely circulated on the internet.<sup>77</sup> Although being single is up to the discretion of the *shengnü*, as time passes, she should consider that the next suitor might not be better than the previous one. While the *shengnü* has the right to be picky, she should be conscious that her education attainment is considered overpowering by men and that she is too outstanding, thus less-tempting to men. There is a decision that has to be made for every woman between education and attractiveness – to find a suitor, *shengnü* has to give up something from her life. Additionally, although these ladies are confessing to being happy, articles have hinted that this happiness is fake and that many women are desperately vying for love and marriage. Lastly, the term *nühanzi*, while describing an independent woman with traditional male work ethic and values (both of which could be considered positive attributes in Western countries) is seen as a threat to the traditional male gender roles. Such women should learn to be more feminine for a healthy relationship. Each of these articles outwardly promotes the *shengnü*, but each offers advice for the *shengnü* on how to *truly* be happy.

For an agency that supposedly supports women’s rights, interests, and economic advancement, the ACWF’s statements that unmarried, urban women are single because

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> *Nühanzi* is a term to describe a woman with a man’s values and work ethic.

<sup>77</sup> All articles are found in the ACWF English language archives.



of various character flaws is profoundly absurd. Most articles describe “flawed” character traits of *shengnü* to “enlighten” unmarried female urbanites on how to achieve love. What the summation of these articles also implies is that the fiercely independent *shengnü* should not rely on herself to find a suitor or that she is incapable herself of finding love and being happy without listening to other’s advice. The *shengnü*, due to the “leftover women phenomenon” campaign, is stripped of her freedom to find love on her own, and instead given several how-to guides on “fixing” herself. Because of the ACWF’s articles, the public is deeply concerned with this aspect of her personal life (although usually not in a compassionate way) and thinks they can solve her “problems” for her – the “problems” of which were created out of a changing societal structure.

Unlike the articles published by the ACWF, which as an agency carries more authority and therefore produces a message guaranteed to be received by millions, the non-ACWF articles about *shengnü* became popular on the internet because of content. Non-ACWF articles are less formal and “fair” in tone that a government agency must convey, and this “realness,” while sometimes crude, is what popularizes these articles. In a series of *shengnü*-related internet searches, some of the top results were again flawed character or personality traits lists like those published by the ACWF lists that explain a *shengnü*’s singlehood.

One of the most popular lists describing the so-called “plight” of the *shengnü* and the reasons why she is single is found on Baidu’s online dictionary entry for *shengnü*. As the country’s leading search engine accessed by nearly 70 million users per day, it is not hard to imagine that a Chinese person interested in *shengnü* would start with a Baidu

search.<sup>78</sup> Once searched, the Baidu page on *shengnü* contains several sections about the woman that viewers can reference in quick links.<sup>79</sup> Sections could be entries on their own in terms of length, and many have appeared in other news and blog sites, either copied verbatim or with the author's added opinion. One of the most circulated non-ACWF articles contains information published from Baidu's "reasons for being and remaining single" section of the *shengnü* entry. There are eleven unique reasons to why a *shengnü* is single, simplified to her: high standards, feminism, narcissism, perpetual discontent, emotional scarring, too career-oriented, an object of ridicule by her peers, lacking interest in marriage, codependency, lacking social skills, and disillusionment.<sup>80</sup>

These reasons coincide with other lists online that provide reasons for why a *shengnü* is still single. One such list provides interesting answers for a *shengnü*'s singlehood, like: overvaluing oneself, persistence in old ways, because of prayer, an aggressive personality, pretending that the single life is very exciting, lacking female virtues, inability to find fault in oneself, and a lazy or troublesome demeanor.<sup>81</sup> Similar articles claim that there are as few as four specific reasons why a *shengnü* cannot find love: she is selfish and aloof, she has excessively high standards and is always looking for something better, she has an ugly outward appearance, or she is unable to accept the facts about herself.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Craig Smith, "By the Numbers: 50+ Amazing Baidu Facts and Statistics," *DMR*, last modified April 12, 2015, accessed April 18, 2015, <http://expandeddrablings.com/index.php/baidu-stats/>.

<sup>79</sup> The definition of, current status of, her specific characteristics broken down into subcategories, type, reasons for being and remaining single, the risks surrounding late marriage and late birth, emotional obstacles, and the situation in other countries for single women.

<sup>80</sup> Original text and translation can be found in the appendix

<sup>81</sup> Original text provided in appendix

<sup>82</sup> Original text provided in appendix

While it is hard to definitively say how many Chinese people have read, reposted/reblogged, or heard about them via friends, family, or acquaintances, it is clear that because several sites have used or repurposed ACWF and non-ACWF articles, that these articles probably have been read by a huge number of people. Searching key words or phrases has produced several pages of related, if not the same, material. The “leftover women phenomenon” campaign has clearly had some impact on society, as the frequency of similar “informative” articles shows. Since this “leftover women phenomenon” campaign relies on participants believing the message, the effectiveness can be interpreted from the fact that these articles and lists are forwarded and reposted on blogs and other news sites in the first place, with little or no changes made to the “information” that they provide. Chinese people believe enough in what the article is saying about the *shengnü* (for these articles validate the reasons and faults for why a *shengnü* is single) to repost and reblog.

### **Other media, Cartoon Images**

Cartoons and photographs have played an equally important and influential role in analyzing how the Chinese state run media portrays *shengnü*. In David Nelson’s famous sensory semantic theory, he describes how pictures hold two advantages over words: pictures are perpetually more “distinct from one another than are words, thus increasing their chance for retrieval and that pictures are believed to assess meaning more directly than words.”<sup>83</sup> In searches with keywords such as “*shengnü*” and “still not married, highly-educated women,” there are reoccurring images. Reoccurring cartoons and photographs

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<sup>83</sup> McBride and Doshier, “A comparison of conscious and automatic memory processes for picture and word stimuli: a process dissociation analysis,” in *Consciousness and Cognition* 11(2001): 423-460.

were not exclusive to the ‘images’ section of the various search engines, but also found in articles and blogs about *shengnü*.<sup>84</sup> Among these images, there are three common image types and ‘messages.’ The first type of cartoon portrays a woman on a very high pedestal, sometimes using binoculars, sometimes holding a weapon, and always with a crowd of men below her. This woman is a *shengnü* and looking for a suitor more compatible with her own high societal status (an equally tall pedestal) – therefore she does not see the group of potential suitors below her. The first cartoon’s message signifies the *shengnü*’s nonconformity to traditional marriage norms and inability to find a mate due to high standards. In a normal situation, the woman would be found among men or below him, but for a *shengnü*, she is standing above everyone else, signifying her status as both highly successful and ostracized. In the second type of cartoon, there is a woman in a wedding dress, but without a groom. She might be wearing a mortar board to signify her high education or be holding a sign with some plea for help. This type of *shengnü* is ready for love, but for some reason (usually her educational background, signified by her mortar board) is not married. The second cartoon’s message signifies that the *shengnü*, even if her standards are not too high and she is ready to marry someone of a societal standing not like her own, is unable to find a husband because of the stigma her educational and career achievements carry. Although she abandons her goals and expectations, she is still unable to re-conform to society. The third type of cartoon depicts the dating woes of *shengnü*, from both a male and female perspective, and relays the message that although the man might have some flaws, the woman is more flawed. The dating woes of the man depict a woman as too materialistic or too tied to virtual reality. These three types of car-

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<sup>84</sup> I used Google, Sina Weibo, Baidu, and Tianya

toons and the messages they carry are broadcasted to each viewer with bright colors and eye-catching illustrations, both of which catch the viewer's attention and stay in his or her memory.

Several image searches of *shengnü* also yield staged photographs of a single woman seated across from various types of men. These photographs seem to be part of a photo project illustrating the reasons why *shengnü* are single. The author believes *shengnü* is single due to her unwarranted dissatisfaction with all men. The project is titled “You Absolutely Won’t Believe It, 99% of All Leftover Women Are Like This [Blind Date],” and has eleven photographs in total.<sup>85</sup> Each picture shows the same woman with a different man and a caption of why she is refusing the man. The captions of the *shengnü* refusing each man range from his wealth, his age, his occupation, his culture, or his size.<sup>86</sup> These cartoons and photographs are helpful in understanding what the media’s opinion on *shengnü* is. Some viewers initially believe the images are humorous and do not think much past the initial meaning of the captions or cartoon drawings. However, the images that viewers see become stored in their memory and regardless of how the viewer interacts with them initially, the subtle, anti-*shengnü* message is subconsciously present. These images, like the articles and lists, are widely circulated and can be seen on various search engines and media sites. Circulation of specific images implies that people relate to and support the message behind each image enough to continue to share. All of the images in some way or another tell the reader that the *shengnü* is faulty and unable to marry, and the wide circulation of certain images implies that those reposting and reblogging

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<sup>85</sup> Huishi Jingji, “Ni juehui xiangbudao, 99% de shengnü dou shi zheyang xiangqin de” (You absolutely won’t believe it, 99% of all leftover women are like this on a blind date), January 31, 2015, [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_137b8067f0102va3o.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_137b8067f0102va3o.html).

<sup>86</sup> Original text in appendix

believe in the message of the campaign, just like the people reblogging the *shengnü* articles.

## Analysis of Images

### Category 1: “On a pedestal looking for love, everyone is below her”

The following images depict a *shengnü* standing or sitting atop a very high pedestal, or her “throne” of accomplishments. Standing below her are the potential suitors, which are towered by [who cower in the face of?] her achievements. This type of cartoon suggests that the *shengnü* has achieved too much or is too picky/too educated/too proud to find a husband on an equal pedestal. All who are left for the *shengnü* are beneath her.

**Figure 2.1: “Shengnü in a Tower”**

Source: Womenofchina.cn



Figure 2.1 above shows a woman using binoculars to look for her suitor. However, she is unaware that her potential suitor is beneath the tower. Her position in the tower illustrates the “3 heights” that make her a *shengnü* and blind her when looking for a suitor. If the *shengnü* were just to look down (aka by lowering her standards for a suitor),

she would find a man. But, would these men beneath the *shengnü* really want her even if she did lower her standards?

**Figure 2.2: “Shengnü Throwing Rocks”**



Source: Womenofchina.cn

Figure 2.2 above shows a *shengnü* throwing rocks over the side of her pedestal. Her parents, depicted by the older people standing in front of her tower facing out, smiling proudly behind a blockade. Male onlookers watch as the *shengnü* throws things over the edge, potentially symbolic of her throwing out her “bad qualities” or throwing out traditional marriage values. One side of the pedestal says “doctorate” while the other says “academic credentials.”

**Figure 2.3: “Shengnü with Her Crown”**



Source: Baidu

Figure 2.3 above shows a *shengnü* with a somewhat reddened and pained expression sitting atop her own pedestal, wearing a crown and a sash that indicate she is past the initial stages of *shengnü* and has become the Monkey King who has defeated all her suitors. The dead bodies surrounding her were potential suitors, yet the *shengnü*'s ambition and quest for personal success slayed them all.

**Figure 2.4: “Shengnü Holding a ‘Marriage Partner Conditions’ Sign”**



Source: Baidu

Figure 2.4 above shows a somewhat more scantily dressed *shengnü* sitting atop her mortar board holding what seems to be a list of her “marriage partner conditions.” She has her back turned to the man and her nose is pointed upwards indicative of dissatisfaction. The man is depicted as a hardworking businessman ready for love, but the woman still does not want him. This image implies that the *shengnü* is looking for something better than the “ideal” Chinese man, and her rejection of him is therefore symbolic of her rejection of traditional marriage values.



**Figure 2.5: “Shengnü Looking for Love”**



Source: Baidu

The last image, figure 2.5, is similar to the first, in that the women on top of the pedestal are looking for love “in all the wrong places.” The women are using binoculars to search for a suitor on a pedestal. Some of the men are standing on the first tier of the pedestal marked “highly educated,” but the following two tiers, high career position and high salary, remain empty. If only the *shengnü* were to lower their standards and look below their societal status to the men waiting below, they would find a plethora of men to choose from.

### **Category 2: “Ready for love, but there’s no one to marry”**

The images in this category were used less frequently in blogs and in articles than the first type of cartoon, and most of the images depict a disappointed bride presumed to be a *shengnü*, looking for her husband.

**Figure 2.6: “Bride with Sign”**



Source: Womenofchina.cn

In figure 2.6, the bride is holding a sign that says “This scene is to give public notice of vacancies to be filled, aka the bridegroom’s name.” The groom-less bride is standing under a spotlight in hopes of attracting attention to herself and showing that she is ready for love, her expression hesitant, possibly anxious. But, as a *shengnü*, there is no one coming to love her due to her flaws. Additionally, she does not have a mouth, letting the sign do the talking, and possibly indicative of her willingness to become weaker to attract a suitor.

**Figure 2.7: “Disappointed Bride”**



Source: Womenofchina.cn

In figure 2.7 above, the *shengnü* is standing in a wedding dress looking both distressed and saddened. It seems as if she is confused at why she is left alone, and even a little embarrassed to be all dressed up with no one to be her groom.

**Figure 2.8: “The Bride Going Fishing”**



Source: Womenofchina.cn

The third image, figure 2.8 above, depicts the *shengnü* in a wedding gown, but she appears to be happier than the other two. She is wearing her mortar board, indicative of her high education degree – and dangling a man’s wedding suit from a long, fishing pole-like stick. The suit is dangling like bait in front of the Chinese character for ‘double happiness’ used traditionally at wedding ceremonies. Although she has no one to fill the man’s suit, she does not look disconcerted by the absence of a man, and maybe hopeful that she will “lure” one in. Compared to the other images, this *shengnü* seems strong and happy with herself. The right man will come along when he is meant to come along for this *shengnü*, but for now she is fishing for a groom.

### Category 3: “Dating woes of the *shengnü*, from a male perspective”

The following four images all in some way depict the dating woes of the *shengnü*, from the male or third party perspective. The first image is from a third party perspective, while the following two are from the perspective of a male.

**Figure 2.9: “Man and Woman on First Date”**



Source: Womenofchina.cn

The first image, figure 2.9 above, shows both a man a woman sitting at a table, possibly on a first date. Both look flustered and embarrassed while thinking about the qualities they are looking for in a partner, and whether or not their date possesses them. The woman is thinking about a luxury brand car, a mansion, and a “*gaofushuai*” or a man who is tall, rich, and handsome. The man is thinking about the woman’s age, whether or not she is good looking, and whether or not she has a nice figure. This image suggests that both men and women are superficial when it comes to love, but that the woman focuses too much on wealth.

**Figure 2.10: “Woman and Her Computer”**



Source: Womenofchina.cn

Figure 2.10 above shows a woman holding her computer tightly by the arm. The woman looks happy and content, while the computer looks either frustrated or triumphant. It appears as if the computer is frustrated and stressed out at the *shengnü*'s demands. The symbol indicative of male and masculinity is shooting out of the computer. This action could imply that the computer and online dating has become the *shengnü*'s way of finding love, and without the computer, the *shengnü* would be helpless and feel hopeless. From the male's perspective, this image shows that the *shengnü* are more interested in internet love and disillusionment than real life love and marriage.

**Figure 2.11: “Nühanzi Grips the World”**



Source: Womenofchina.cn

The third, and final reoccurring image depicted in figure 2.11 above, is a personification of the sign for female and femininity using her strong muscles to crush or contain the entire world, potentially seen as a *nühanzi*, or a man-like woman who is in direct violation of gender norms. From the perspective of a man, this is how many view the *shengnü* and “leftover women phenomenon.” It seems as if the women are in control of the world and being too aggressive in how they handle it. This image is unsettling to men and makes men view *shengnü* as threatening – since the image lacks any traditional feminine values or characteristics. Men view *shengnü* as a threat to their own masculinity.

### **Photo project**

In researching images that focus on the *shengnü*, most were cartoons as seen previously. However, several similar photographs surfaced, showing a scantily dressed woman (by Chinese standards of modesty). Several of the images were published individually on blogs or articles, but one site had all of the images posted as a photo project. The cartoons of *shengnü* successfully grab the viewer’s attention through vivid colors and simplistic drawings, but the photo project is more successful by using actual human subjects and putting a real face to the *shengnü* label. By using an attractive woman dressed in little clothing, the photographer suggests that this type of woman, the *shengnü*, is either a “tease” or not a “docile, modest” woman that a Chinese man who abides by gender norms should want to marry. While the photo project implies that the *shengnü* believes she is too good for all different types of men, an alternative interpretation shows that the woman is the problem – a man could change form to attract her, yet she would remain the same for any type of man, unwilling to fix herself or lower her standards. The audience is once again redirected to the same argument: a *shengnü* woman has several personal

“problems” that prevent her from seeing what is right in front of her and that she must change herself or “fix” her “problems” before she finds someone to marry. A sampling of these photographs is below.

**Figure 2.12: “*Shengnü* and a Chic Suitor”**



Source: “You Absolutely Won’t Believe It, 99% of All Leftover Women Are Like This [Blind Date]”

The photograph above, figure 2.12, represents the *shengnü* and her potential suitor. In each photograph, the woman and man are shown across from one another at the table, as the suitor changes in each shot, the *shengnü* positions herself in a way representative of her reaction to the man. In the above photograph, the accompanying caption is “[He is] handsome and chic, but [according to you (the *shengnü*)] is not a quality man.” The *shengnü* has most of her body facing away from the man, showing her overall disapproval and desire to flee, yet her upper body is turned facing the man, her head tilted in an inquisitive yet hesitant way, and her right arm extending across the table in a somewhat shut-off yet welcoming way. The way the *shengnü* is depicted reveals her materialism - she likes that the man looks and acts hip, yet she is not truly interested in him past his sense of style.



**Figure 2.13: *Shengnü* and the Working Class Man**



Source: “You Absolutely Won’t Believe It, 99% of All Leftover Women Are Like This [Blind Date]”

This second image, figure 2.13 above, is accompanied by the caption “[He is a] working class man, but you (the *shengnü*) again look down on him.” The *shengnü*’s entire body is turned away from this man as she talks on the phone, completely disinterested in the construction worker, yet her purse is on the table. The man, who appears to be sitting on a stool or on one knee rather than in the chair, is looking at the *shengnü* with interest, and appears to be calling to her. What is interesting about this photo is that the *shengnü* still remains somewhat close to the man that she does not think deserves her time. Her purse on the table could symbolize her “obsession” with money (as her purse is where her money would be held), and this act could be symbolic of either her “I’m too good for you, look at this bag and my money” mantra or her desire for a man who will buy her things. The photographer once again provides ample reason for the audience to look scornfully upon this *shengnü* - while construction work is not valued highly in Chinese society, this man is representative of the hard working men that help



build China and could be a potential suitor. The *shengnü* is not only rejecting this man, but rather rejecting China and its values.

**Figure 2.14: *Shengnü* and a Young Suitor**



Source: “You Absolutely Won’t Believe It, 99% of All Leftover Women Are Like This [Blind Date]”

This third photograph, figure 2.14 above, is accompanied by the caption “[He is] thoughtful and romantic, however [he is] too naive.” Both the man and the *shengnü* are standing, potentially indicative of a more level economic or social standing (in comparison to the construction worker who was kneeling), yet the man is slightly bowing and offering a flower to a welcoming, yet annoyed *shengnü*. This man seems to be younger, most likely a college student, and potentially not gainfully employed, inferred from his clothing. This photograph is the only one in the series where the man shows real respect and admiration for the *shengnü* – which is in turn misunderstood by the *shengnü* as the man being naive. The *shengnü* appears to be enjoying the attention, but does not seem convinced that this man is a good suitor. Her posture indicates that she, the

*shengnü*, is in fact a tease and has unrealistic expectations. When faced with a man who loves her, she still does not like him because of what he cannot offer her in terms of wealth or maturity. Love alone is not enough for the *shengnü*.

The role of these articles and images in the portrayal of the *shengnü* is useful in the campaign, yet troubling for the *shengnü* herself. The state-run media outlets, including the ACWF, have promoted negative connotations and images in association with the highly-educated, single Chinese woman instead of applauding them for achieving economic independence. Non-state run media outlets also provide highly negative visual evidence against the *shengnü*. The cartoons and photographs were published in order to entice and provoke viewers into believing that the *shengnü* are flawed or do not possess or accept traditional Chinese gender norms. Regardless of how the viewer responds to these articles and images, the messages they broadcast (both obvious and inferred) remain in his or her mind to be mulled over. Eventually, the viewer (regardless of sex) may begin to believe the message and align themselves with the opinions of the state-run and independent media. Despite how successful or happy a *shengnü* is, she begins to think that something is wrong with her or that she is not reaching her full happiness by remaining single – all of which is suggested through these cartoon and photograph images.

### CHAPTER 3: WHAT THE 'LEFTOVERS' HAVE TO SAY

In the 21st century, the use of social media has greatly impacted the world and its inhabitants. The transformative power of social media plays a critical role in societal development and change throughout the world. In certain regions, social media has even aided rebellion and revolution. In China, although censorship impedes and limits mass organization and certain discussions, social media continues to play a crucial role in the development of both the individual and society. The role of social media in society is a popular topic for research and debate, as the specific social media platforms and functions thereof change so frequently that new data is being produced constantly. Social media is valuable in several ways, by “providing a forum for support and safety information during a crisis, an aid for crime-solving, as a form of political influence, as the best-yet way to connect across vast distances, and as a revolutionary catalyst in consumer-brand engagement.”<sup>87</sup> With all other aspects aside, social media exists in its most basic form as a tool to state individual beliefs in a way that others can see and comment on in a public space.

It is not hard to imagine that China, with nearly 1.4 billion people, is the world’s largest internet consumer. Of the world’s nearly 3 billion internet users,<sup>88</sup> China claimed

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<sup>87</sup> Samantha Rupert, “Social Media’s Top 5 Contributions to Society,” *Social Media Today*, April 18, 2013, accessed April 2, 2015, <http://www.socialmediatoday.com/content/social-medias-top-5-contributions-society>.

<sup>88</sup> The site <http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/> tracks new internet users over time, current estimates are near 3.01 billion users.

21.97% of the total with roughly 650 million users in 2014 - nearly 350 million more users than second place internet user, the United States.<sup>89</sup>

Since the introduction of China's first microblogging site fanfou.com in 2007, more than 30 websites have been operating or introducing information sharing tools similar to Twitter. Preexisting sites like Sina, Sohu, RenRen, and Tencent also introduced Twitter-like functionality shortly after fanfou.com, which tremendously aided the popularization of microblogs.<sup>90</sup> Since the increase in popularity of microblogs in the past several years, internet usage in China has skyrocketed, as more Chinese are attracted to the brevity and simplicity of Twitter-like sharing sites to talk with friends, voice their opinions, etc.<sup>91</sup> Internet users in China utilize both microblogs and traditional blogs as a platform to express their opinions and connect with other users on common interests and issues. Briefly scanning blogs and Twitter-like posts from Sina Weibo, Sohu, RenRen, and Tencent, myriad topics and forums fill up the screen. Ranging from recipes to rants, from a photo album of recent travels to an old guitar for sale, internet users are equipped with search engine tools to find whatever they desire. Worldwide, social media users range from old to young, female to male, across all races and religions, etc. The consumer studies company Nielsen has compiled several brief summaries of internet usage, social media usage, etc. and created a brief overview of male and female social media user statistics from nearly 100 countries. Nielsen found that:

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<sup>89</sup> "Internet Live Stats," accessed February 16, 2015, <http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/>.

<sup>90</sup> Wang Hongguang, "Microblog: Micropower to a Civil Society" (paper presented at the Proceedings of the 8th International Conference on Innovation & Management, Lisbon, Portugal, July 25-27, 2014).

<sup>91</sup> Microblogs are a form of real-time blog that allows users to write a brief text update (usually less than 140 characters - including spaces) and publish it instantly on the internet through a variety of digital channels and share them with friends, coworkers, and online contacts. Wang Hongguang, "Microblog: Micropower to a Civil Society."

“Both men and women around the world agree that the growth of social media as a news source is more positive (78%) than negative (22%). In fact, a greater percentage of women (28%) get more than 50 percent of their news from social media sources than men (25%)... Women are connecting for social reasons more than men. In fact, staying in contact with family and friends is the top reason women use social media (65% vs. 53% for men). More women also use social media than men as a creative outlet, particularly for blogging and uploading/sharing photos (28% women vs. 23% men) and for entertainment purposes (48% women vs. 45% men). Comparatively, more men use social media than women for business reasons (27% vs. 22% for women), but less than women for “how to, information, and self-help” needs (30% men vs. 37% for women). Men are also twice as likely as women to use social media for dating (13% vs. 7% for women).”<sup>92</sup>

While the statistics above are an average of information pulled from over 100 countries (including China), these statistics could be seen as similar to statistics pooled from China. As of June 2014, the total number of Chinese female internet users was more than 280 million (roughly half of all internet users in the country).<sup>93</sup> Chinese female mobile internet users, ranging between the ages of 19 to 35, accounted for 56% of all mobile internet users.<sup>94</sup>

Chinese microblogs are referred to as “*weibo*” or “微博” and translate roughly to “microblog” – however, the term *weibo* also can refer to a traditional blog, as in the case of Sina Weibo, where users can access both microblogging and traditional blogging platforms. With the introduction of microblogging in China in 2007, sociologists have been tracking the role and influence of social media, specifically microblogging, in Chinese society. While numerous reports have been published on the emergence of Chinese microblogging and its specific characteristics in China, these properties are not entirely

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<sup>92</sup> “The Female/Male Digital Divide,” The Nielsen Company, accessed March 2, 2015, <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2014/the-female-male-digital-divide.html>.

<sup>93</sup> Cecelia, “Chinese Female Internet Users Insight,” China Internet Watch, accessed March 2, 2015, <http://www.chinainternetwatch.com/10199/female-internet-users-insight/>.

<sup>94</sup> “Chinese Female Internet Users Insight.”

unique to the microblogging platforms that they describe. Lu and Qiu cite eight features of Chinese microblogs: “a platform for opinion, opposition to authority, organization of campaigns, development of opinion leaders, participation of government and mass media, violence and the rise of internet mobs, rumor and manipulation, and ephemerality.”<sup>95</sup> These eight features of microblogs more or less describe traditional blogging sites, if at a lesser degree. Since microblogging differs from traditional blogging in its unique “content fragmentation<sup>96</sup>, multichannel integration<sup>97</sup>, and viral dissemination<sup>98</sup>,” traditional blogs exist more so for the user’s benefit than the viewer’s.<sup>99</sup> That is, longer blog posts are beneficial for individuals looking to express their opinions with ample reasoning and discussion - these blogs are usually more in depth and cohesive than the 140 character microblogs.

The presence of female internet consumers in the market is profound and suggests that women are just as likely as men to discuss and debate topics online. When looking at social media users by sex, 43% of total users were female, and 30% of the total users, male and female, were between the ages of 26 and 30.<sup>100</sup> That is to say that a large portion of internet users and specifically social media users are females that fit the age range to qualify as a *shengnü*. With such a large percentage of internet and social media users being women, and then a large portion of those women being in the age range of being a

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<sup>95</sup> Ephemerality here is describing a scenario where public opinion events on Chinese microblogs usually are only closely followed by the public for a period around fifteen days.

Jia Lu and Yunxi Qiu, “Microblogging and Social Change in China,” in *Asian Perspective* 37 (2013).

<sup>96</sup> Content is typically smaller in both actual and aggregate file size. Microblogging generally allows 140 characters in both English and Chinese.

<sup>97</sup> Accessible by a variety of communications devices. Users can post messages through webpages, SMS, mobile internet, and instant messaging.

<sup>98</sup> Messages can be transmitted from one point to a vast number of points in a very short time.

<sup>99</sup> Lu and Qiu, “Microblogging and Social Change in China.”

<sup>100</sup> “Social Media in China – Statistics and Trends [Infographic],” Go-Globe, last modified March 12, 2013, accessed March 18, 2015, <http://www.go-globe.com/blog/social-media-china/>.

*shengnü*, it is curious to see so much negativity towards the group of single, highly-educated women online. Even if the *shengnü* themselves are only a fraction of total internet and social media users, the chances of their public disapproval of this term and the backlash that comes from it should be just as evident online. Do the negative articles and images greatly outweigh the blogs and posts by *shengnü*, or do these retorts exist at all?

Chinese media portrays a certain version of *shengnü* that is starkly contrasted with the testimonials and stories of the women behind the label. In response to the internet's remarks about what certain characteristics describe a *shengnü* and what reasons *shengnü* provide for their singlehood (as mentioned in the previous chapter), I sought to collect a series of responses to these labels by these self-proclaimed *shengnü* to show how these women were responding to these harsh, yet widely-accepted criticisms. What I initially found was not a plethora of defiant, single women defending themselves against the both subtle and outright incessant attacks on her highly educated, highly paid, high-standard life, but rather a cesspool for self-loathing and pleas for help. Dozens of netizens proudly typed, as they were hidden behind the keys of their message board, "I am a leftover woman!" yet the bold declaration often devolved to a mixture of introspection and existentialism, as the realization of "leftoverness" triggered an identity crisis. "Without marriage, a husband, or a child, who am I?" these women more or less wrote, either in poem or prose.

However, between the more depressing posts about being a *shengnü*, several posts began to emerge where the tone of the message was not so bleak. Several posts even went so far as to firmly stand behind the *shengnü* label and explain the reasoning behind why the woman wanted to remain single. Not surprisingly, the reasons these *shengnü* gave

were the exact same reasons why the Chinese media said they were *unable* to get married. For example, the media defends that a *shengnü* is too picky and too materialistic because she does not want to marry a man who does not already own a car and a house - aka financially prepared for a partner. From the *shengnü*'s perspective, it is not fair to herself to marry someone below her economic class. The *shengnü* has already worked hard to accumulate her wealth and capital and would rather build upon her estate with a man than end up financially supporting him.

In one blog post, user 'Loveym' explained that over the years, she was able to establish good rapport with her *shengnü* identity. Loveym writes that she was truthful about her *shengnü* title and was not afraid of her age. Even though other people in her situation felt that being *shengnü* was frightening, Loveym said she that she has always been content in spirit. Loveym explains that as she sees it, she likes her freedom and the characteristics she has cultivated over the years, and that even though being *shengnü* does not have a good "taste," that she would rather bear the pressures and stigmatism that comes with being leftover than follow a man the rest of her life. Loveym says she still sometimes longs for the married life and to have a child, but that she will not choose the wrong man. Her thoughts are mature, especially when contrasted with the more depressing blogs by other *shengnü*. In the grand finale, Loveym writes,

"No matter if I am a *shengnü* or not, or if I am a "saint," I do not threaten or harm society, more times than not I become the conversation of some people. Although I become those people's conversation for a typical, stubborn woman, I am living this life of aloofness and freedom. It doesn't matter if later on I meet the right person or if I am single for the rest of my life, I will face all these situations calmly. I clearly know what I want, and what I am able and unable to bear... We must love each other with constant love. To those who like to harm the *shengnü*, please respect your



own character. Whether I am a *shengnü* or a “saint,” I am still very proud to live!”<sup>101</sup>

Loveym has clearly reached a deeper understanding of herself in terms of her “leftoverness,” but her defiance in the face of societal pressure to marry might cause some to believe that she has either given up on marriage or is confused about what a “happy” life is.

Other posts with titles such as “Being a happy *shengnü*,”<sup>102</sup> or “When it is time for me to be a *shengnü*, why can’t I be picky?”<sup>103</sup> articles also offer a positive note on being a single woman, yet at a fraction of what Loveym has described. Both mention the societal pressure and subsequent woes of being a *shengnü* in a marriage-driven society, but both also deviate from the question at hand: what are the *shengnü* saying in response to the media campaign against them? Author\* of “When it is time for me to be a *shengnü*, why can’t I be picky?” discusses the pressures both men and women face in society. It is only near the top of the post that the author describes that so-called “pickiness” is not the *shengnü* being picky at all. Instead, the *shengnü* is just making a calculated decision that will affect both herself and her parents for the rest of their lives. Pickiness is not a result of materialism, as the media would twist it, but rather out of love for oneself and one’s family. The author of “Being a happy *shengnü*” also admits that being “leftover” can lead to some problems - but not if you are proactive in your singlehood. The author explains that being single is a blessing in disguise - think of how much a married woman has to forfeit for her husband, the author writes. As a single woman, the *shengnü* is free to learn

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<sup>101</sup> Translation from original text: Loveym, “Wo shi shengnü,” *CLM and ALM Blogs and Forum*, November 4, 2013, <http://blog.chinalovematch.net/forum/post/我是剩女>.

<sup>102</sup> Translation from original text: Ban Biantian Xiaoyuan'er, “Zuo yige kuaile de ‘shengnü’,” *CNTV Blogs*, October 28, 2008, <http://blog.cntv.cn/7064689-165990.html>.

<sup>103</sup> Translation from original text: Fan Yi, “Dang wo shi shengnü shi, wo weihe buneng tiaoti?” *Fashion.Sohu.com*, January 14, 2015, <http://fashion.sohu.com/20150114/n407784448.shtml>.

yoga, Pilates, how to cook, how to have a tea ceremony, etc. The *shengnü* woman can cultivate her interests if she takes advantage of her situation. These two authors share unique takes on what the media has spun into the negative branding of a single lady. When the media says “the *shengnü* is too materialistic and picky and that is why she cannot find a man,” the *shengnü* explains that her pickiness is just and rightful and that she has worked too hard in life to be careless in choosing a partner suitable for herself and family. When the media says that the *shengnü* is lonely and does not actually live a meaningful, content life, the *shengnü* can show them all the things she has accomplished and all of the hobbies and interests she has mastered in her spare time.

In answering the question, “why are so many Chinese women becoming *shengnü*?” the media would explain that it is due to the faults of the woman herself, that there is something inherently wrong with her thinking or how she is as a person, and that is why she cannot find a husband. The author of “Why Foreigners Secretly Like China’s *Shengnü*”<sup>104</sup> describes the situation differently; it is not a problem of the *shengnü* themselves that they are not married, but rather because the Chinese men in their lives are the ones not fit for marriage. The author explains that Chinese *shengnü* are confident, mature, and independent. All of these things are revered in Western society. In China’s extremely patriarchal society, these are not good characteristics for a woman to possess. Western men believe that the Chinese men are not appreciating perfectly good “leftovers,” and the *shengnü* are catching on, looking overseas for meaningful and fair love. On the question of whom to marry, other blogs offer the alternative that both the Chinese media and government do not want: remaining single. Many *shengnü* believe that they should not get

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<sup>104</sup> Qiangguo Huainian, “Jiemi laowai weihe zui xihuan Zhongguo shengnü,” *Blog.People.com.cn*, May 14, 2013, <http://blog.people.com.cn/article/1368492451962.html>.

married right away for the sake of getting married and having a child. Many *shengnü* would rather wait a lifetime to find the perfect partner. The media argues that this “perfect” partner does not exist, and some *shengnü* agree. Perfect, to them, is relative, and the *shengnü* admit that some things would have to become a compromise, but that there is no negotiation on major items, like financial stability and personality traits. Some women are turning towards Westerners for the answer while some women are holding off on marriage altogether. Both of these choices make something clear to the reader – the blame is not to be placed on the *shengnü*, as you can see many getting married to foreigners, but rather the blame should be placed on the Chinese men themselves.

While the pro-*shengnü* blogs mentioned above are few in number, do these messages represent a small stand against the negative media portrayal of *shengnü* and possibly as reclamation of the title? According to these blogs, the *shengnü* debate is not settled by the media, showing that the “leftover women phenomenon” campaign is not as effective as the government would like (since not every Chinese person believes the media’s “leftover women phenomenon” campaign). Do these pro-*shengnü* blogs (and the possibility of more with more extensive searching) make the case that from the “leftover women phenomenon” campaign there is an emerging civil society in China for women and feminist thought?

The idea of a civil society commonly refers to a society that is considered as a community of citizens linked by common interests and collective activity. From the World Health Organization’s website on civil society:

“Civil society is seen as a social sphere separate from both the state and the market. The increasingly accepted understanding of the term civil society organizations (CSOs) is that of non-state, not-for-profit, voluntary organizations formed by people in that social sphere. This term is used to

describe a wide range of organizations, networks, associations, groups and movements that are independent from government and that sometimes come together to advance their common interests through collective action. Traditionally, civil society includes all organizations that occupy the 'social space' between the family and the state, excluding political parties and firms. Some definitions of civil society also include certain businesses, such as the media, private schools, and for-profit associations, while others exclude them.”<sup>105</sup>

The presence or absence of a civil society in China is a difficult question to definitively answer. Researchers have postulated a limited social society, where Chinese citizens are linked by common interests, but there is little to no collective activity outside of the internet and social media. Others have suggested the complete absence of any form of civil society, claiming that the Chinese government’s firm opposition to large, non-governmental action hinders the emergence of a true civil society. Others still claim that there exists a presence of a government-sponsored civil society that is disguised as somewhat complete [what does somewhat complete mean?] freedom of speech and mobility. Several reports made by Western media outlets such as the *Guardian* and the *Economist* claim that civil society does exist in China, and is evident by both the growing number of state-registered NGOs and the NGOs operating without the consent of the state.

However, outside of the ACWF, few NGOs withstand the test of time in the increasingly anti-NGO government of Xi Jinping. Despite the ‘state feminist’ label the ACWF carries, it is not simply a federation constituting a monolithic block offering women no space for freedom of action.<sup>106</sup> Advocates for increased women’s rights in mainland China are typically an extension of the government-controlled ACWF, yet

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<sup>105</sup> “Civil Society,” *World Health Organization*, accessed March 30, 2015, <http://www.who.int/trade/glossary/story006/en/>.

<sup>106</sup> Wang Zheng, “‘State Feminism’? Gender and Socialist State Formation in Maoist China.”

throughout the recent decades, certain women's rights activists have emerged and remained public in China, regardless of how many failed women's groups or NGOs sprouted up. While there is almost no information available on women's groups emerging specifically from the 2007 "leftover women phenomenon" campaign, other women's groups have tried to form and prominent women's rights activists have rallied around pressing issues like more public utilities for women and domestic violence laws. Whether or not these groups advocate specifically for *shengnü* is yet to be determined, since most famous activists take on issues that affect all women, regardless of marital status. One could argue that the continual attempted formation of women's rights groups and other NGOs, along with protests and demonstrations by activists, suggest that there is an emerging civil society within China, albeit a small force. However, this small force fighting for the betterment of women's rights is continually oppressed by the increasingly anti-NGO, anti-activism government led by Xi Jinping. One day after International Women's Day 2015, five of China's premier women's rights activists were detained, just days after an initial detainment of ten other women's rights activists. The five women, Li Tingting, Wei Tingting, Zheng Churan, Wu Rongrong, and Wang Man, were detained for questioning in an attempted protest highlighting sexual harassment on public transportation.<sup>107</sup> The detainment coincides with a larger event that took place around International Women's Day, the annual National People's Congress. While the activists claimed to have considered this sensitivity issue, they believe their real crime was in gaining a substantial following online in the various microblog services. Following the arrest of leading wom-

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<sup>107</sup> Matt Sheehan, "China Celebrates International Women's Day by Arresting Women's Rights Activists," *Huffington Post*, March 9, 2015, accessed March 16, 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/09/china-arrests-womens-activists\\_n\\_6832630.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/03/09/china-arrests-womens-activists_n_6832630.html).

en's rights activists, many have called into question the so-called advancement of women's rights and the accompanying civil society.<sup>108</sup>

In an interview with the Association for Women's Rights in Development group, Cai Yiping, Executive Committee member of Develop Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN)<sup>109</sup>, was asked a series of questions about women's rights and organizing in China.<sup>110</sup> When asked how she would describe the status of women's rights in China at present, Cai stated that gender gaps have widened and that "women still experience gender discrimination and inequality on a daily basis and throughout their lifecycle, from gender-selective abortion, inequality in education, employment and income..."<sup>111</sup> Cai states that in the past people were "inclined to attribute gender inequality to a protracted and deep-rooted patriarchal culture. However, many activists realize that gender inequality and injustice are caused not only by traditional patriarchal culture, but also institutional discriminatory policies."<sup>112</sup> NGOs are working to resolve some of the issues and sources of gender inequality, but Cai points out that wanting to solve a problem and actually taking steps to do so are two completely different things. Cai says that "women's NGOs face a legal status barrier and financial constraints. Despite a call for relaxing NGO registration policy, registration constriction remains the biggest barrier for NGO development in China."<sup>113</sup> Without more relaxed registration policies, NGOs that want to become official groups to attract members have a hard time establishing themselves in

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<sup>108</sup> Matt Sheehan, "China Celebrates International Women's Day by Arresting Women's Rights Activists."

<sup>109</sup> DAWN is a network of feminist scholars, researchers and activists from the economic South working for economic and gender justice and sustainable and democratic development.

<sup>110</sup> "Women's Rights and Organizing in China," *AWID*, August 31, 2008, accessed March 20, 2015, <http://www.awid.org/News-Analysis/Friday-Files/Women-s-Rights-and-Organizing-in-China>.

<sup>111</sup> "Women's Rights and Organizing in China."

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

China. Instead of operating within an NGO, many women's rights activists choose to act alone or in small, core groups of activists. However, without the backing of a large, registered group, these women are easily arrested or detained.

Xi Jinping has not only cracked down on women's rights NGOs and activists, but also on NGOs in general, making it harder for groups to volunteer or provide service to areas in the country. In 2014, several branches of a rural library chain called "*Liren*" were shut down following increased pressure from local officials, which many have suggested were acting under the guidance of leaders closer to Xi Jinping.<sup>114</sup> These libraries were operated under the volunteers' collective belief that children should have access to books (none of which criticized the government in any way), but were still shut down for ambiguous reasons. It seems as if Xi Jinping is not only demonstrating his aggressive attitude towards women's rights, but also to rural education as well. With such a strong grip on the lives of his country's citizenry, one begins to wonder if, despite claims that there are, there actually is an emerging civil society, not just one that exemplifies women's livelihood. While in the "leftover women phenomenon" case there are women who proudly stand behind the label or reject the idea that *shengnü* is inherently flawed or a societal abnormality, nothing significant has come from the non-media side of the "leftover women phenomenon" debate. These proud *shengnü* women are brave and are a wonderful example of everyday women fighting for women's rights, but their presence is greatly outweighed by that of the media's. The few pro-*shengnü* blogs online do not make the case for an emerging civil society. There exists no such linkage between these

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<sup>114</sup> Vanessa Piao, "Rural Library Chain Closes, Citing 'Tremendous Pressure'," *Sinosphere*, September 22, 2014, accessed March 16, 2015, [http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/09/22/rural-library-chain-closes-citing-tremendous-pressure/?\\_r=2](http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/09/22/rural-library-chain-closes-citing-tremendous-pressure/?_r=2).

bloggers on the topic, and additionally, the leading women's rights activists, while working to further equality for all women, have not had any demonstrations protesting *shengnü* or rallies to link these women on common interests. For now, the women who have responded to the *shengnü* label are a small group against a larger opponent.



## CONCLUSION

What started in 2007 as a way to comprehend a group of women who were not following the customary Chinese life, the “leftover women phenomenon” has morphed into something larger and more negative than one person or one women’s rights protest can solve. Reasons why the state-run media blatantly portrays the *shengnü* as an abnormality are due to a deeply engrained patriarchal attitude that exists in all facets of Chinese life, and faced with the future problem of millions of unmarried men, the Chinese government believed it had no other option to combat this problem then to launch a media campaign, injecting anxiety into the hearts and minds of urban, middleclass women. Articles and images published from 2007 to present have portrayed the *shengnü* in extremely negative light, as evident from previous analysis. The campaign has been successful in that almost everyone in urban China knows about the plight of the *shengnü* and that multiple sources publish the same material over and over again, meaning that the same information is continuously broadcasted. While few women respond to the *shengnü* label on their personal blogs, the media greatly outmaneuvers these women, while the government continually censors women’s rights activists. Combined, these two occurrences indicate that while a civil society might be forming in response to the “leftover women phenomenon,” it is extremely fragile and almost unknown.

China faces a huge population problem, and it needs to be solved. However, the “leftover women phenomenon” campaign is not effective when considering the gender disparity. *Shengnü* might rush to get married once feeling the societal pressures of single-

hood, yet there will still be a huge discrepancy between men and women. The way to solve population problems is not through a name-smearing campaign that equates women with leftover food, but rather through a societal change, where families are proud to bear a daughter and women (regardless of marital status) are revered as a strong player in maintaining the peace and harmony of society, if not the strongest player China has. One can conclude that the only way this societal transition can occur is if the government recognizes societal flaws, not the “flaws” of urban women, and find a way to let NGOs and civil society form that strengthens the state. Xi Jinping might fear the breakdown of his power with the formation of NGOs and a civil society, but it is not my belief that these women want to demolish and rebuild the Chinese government. Rather, these women want to be recognized for their positive roles in society and what they could bring to the table, if they were only allowed. Equating anyone with leftovers and scraps is demeaning and detrimental to the future of China – perhaps a *shengnü* is the one who will possess the key to solving one of China’s most pressing issues, but she is disheartened by what society thinks of her and instead of pursuing her education or her career, she marries, has a child, and forgets about her dream.

Some women and the majority of men view typical *shengnü* qualities negatively, where being highly educated may imply arrogance, gainful employment suggests that the woman does not adhere to gender roles or respects the man’s place in a family, and knowing what she wants may describe a picky and materialistic woman. Conversely, many Chinese women and men view *shengnü* positively, where a highly educated woman symbolizes patience and persistence, gainful employment represents industriousness and hard work, and knowing what she wants exemplifies integrity and honesty - all of which

are traditional Chinese values.<sup>115</sup> If only the extremely patriarchal government could see that these *shengnü* are upholding Chinese values, then they would not so aggressively target these women as a way to fix society, and instead start to alleviate gender inequality and population problems through owning up to previous governments' mistakes. These women are not "leftover" by any means, but rather the main course that no one is able to appreciate during this heightened time of the "leftover women phenomenon" campaign.

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<sup>115</sup> Jeffrey Hayes, "Chinese Personality and Character: Confucianism, Asian Values, Communism and Nationalism," in *Facts and Details*, last modified December 2012, accessed March 18, 2015, <http://factsanddetails.com/china/cat4/sub18/item117.html>.

## APPENDICES

### **List of economic reforms and legislative policies that directly influence women:**

Source: Angeloff, Tania, and Marylène Lieber. "Equality, did you say? Chinese feminism after 30 years of reforms." In *China Perspectives* 4(December 2012): 17-24.

1950– Law on marriage

1954– Constitution incorporates the principle of equality between women and men

1980– Second law on marriage

1982– Constitutional amendment stipulating equality between the sexes (women's right to participate in political, economic, and family decisions).

1983– China ratifies CEDAW – second marriage law amended

1985– Law on succession granting equal rights to women and men

1986– Law on universal compulsory education; regulations on women's employment and care of infants

1988– Regulations on women's employment: protection of workers and employees during pregnancy

1990– Formation of a National Working Committee on Children and Women under the State Council

1992– Law on protection of rights and interests of women

1994– 1950– Law on marriage

1954– Constitution incorporates the principle of equality between women and men

1980– Second law on marriage

1982– Constitutional amendment stipulating equality between the sexes (women's right to participate in political, economic, and family decisions).

1983– China ratifies CEDAW – second marriage law amended

1985– Law on succession granting equal rights to women and men

1986– Law on universal compulsory education; regulations on women's employment and care of infants

- 1988– Regulations on women's employment: protection of workers and employees during pregnancy
- 1990– Formation of a National Working Committee on Children and Women under the State Council
- 1992– Law on protection of rights and interests of women
- 1994– Employment law, with mention of the principle of non-discrimination against women; passage of law on health of mothers and children
- 1994– Prohibition of sex-selective abortion
- 1995– Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing; publication of first programme of action (1995-2000) for women's development in China
- 2001– Amendment of marriage law (outlawing bigamy and domestic violence); launch of second programme of action (2001-2010) for women's development in China.
- 2002– Law on population and family planning (specially reiterating ban on selective abortions)
- 2003– Launch of campaign to "Care for girls"
- 2005– Revision of law on protection of women's rights and interests
- 2008– Law on job promotion; contract labour law; law on rural land use
- 2011– Launch of third programme of action (2011-2020) for women's development in China

**The eleven unique reasons to why a *shengnü* is single:**

Source:

[http://baike.baidu.com/link?url=X0NGWBaM37PAHuvwna\\_yWOWxawMfoMtpv2dfqYRRhrAzCDZyQGd07bCuxj2hXGTdiFaSiwIzhMFGVMLy0qjGscM\\_h\\_e1ETgSnaiD4yrVG](http://baike.baidu.com/link?url=X0NGWBaM37PAHuvwna_yWOWxawMfoMtpv2dfqYRRhrAzCDZyQGd07bCuxj2hXGTdiFaSiwIzhMFGVMLy0qjGscM_h_e1ETgSnaiD4yrVG).

一、总认为自己很优秀，择偶眼光过高，对男方的长相、才华、学历、人品、经济、地域等各方面都很挑剔，结果择偶范围狭窄。

1. Always thinking that oneself is superior, the standard for their potential mate is too high, [considering] the male's appearance, talents, education, character, economy, area (where they live), etc. [*shengnü*] are too picky, and the result is a narrow range [of suitors to choose from]. (High standards)

二、女权主义意识甚强，相处中，男方一旦有与自己观念不同的地方，她们便立即产生反感情绪。

2. Feminist consciousness [of the *shengnü*] is very strong, when getting along [with a man], once the man disagrees [with the *shengnü*] on something, this immediately creates a bad mood. (Feminist thought)

三、习惯使她们只重视自己的感受，越来越个性化，越来越自我。比如，很多“剩女”有洁癖，一旦对方在卫生习惯等方面有她看不顺眼的地方，她便无法忍受。

3. [The *shengnü*] grows accustomed to only placing importance on her own feelings, she increasingly is individualistic, she is increasingly narcissistic. For example, a lot of *shengnü* are clean, and once their mate has not pleased the *shengnü* in terms of cleanliness habits or other areas like that, she is unable to bear [him]. (Narcissism)

四、猴子掰包谷，最后错过了最佳择偶时期。在当“剩女”之前，她们常常是众多男子追求的对象，可她总是觉得还会有更好的男士在等着她，最后就被剩下了。

4. The monkey severs the corn, finally she misses the optimum time to find a mate. Before being a “*shengnü*,” they often are the pursuit of many men, but she always is thinking that there will be an ever better man waiting for her, finally she just becomes leftover. (Perpetually dissatisfied)

五、很多人可能会因为一次刻骨铭心的恋爱所伤，从此固执地认为，她此生不会再有真正的爱了。于是，便有一种自残的心理。

5. A lot of people might because of a one-time bad love experience that is deeply engrained in their memories, from this they persistently believe that she (the *shengnü*) will never have a real love. Therefore, they change to have a type of autotomy heart. (Emotionally scarred)

六、事业上要追求成功，不仅仅她自己这样认为，就连她的家人、朋友和同事也如此鼓励她。加上情感上的伤害和空虚，导致她躲在自己的事业中，以此为寄托。

6. In their career, if they want to want to seek success, she not only herself believes, but even her family, friends, and her coworkers encourage her to be successful. Adding the emotions of hurt and emptiness, this will lead to her hiding in her career and for this reason her career becomes her only hope. (Too career-oriented)

七、女权主义思想、自视过高、心灵的伤害等使几乎所有的剩女都有了不同程度的心理障碍。她们生怕找不到比周围女性朋友的丈夫更优秀的男人，遭人笑话。

7. Feminist thinking, thinking oneself is better than they actually are, heartache, etc. more or less describes the varying obstacles in a *shengnü*'s heart. They fear that they will be

unable to find a superior man than those of her surrounding females, so the shengnü becomes a joke for other people. (Because of the people around her making fun of her)

八、受晚婚晚育、不婚不育等消极观念的影响，甚至认为其是一种时尚，等意识到问题后为时已晚。

8. They suffer from the influence of late marriage and late childbirth, not marrying and not birthing, etc. negative ideas, even to the extent that they think this is a trend, and by the time they realize this is a problem, it is already too late. (Not placing urgency on marriage)

九、不良的家庭教育，迟迟不能“断奶”。有相当部分的剩女只要没结婚，哪怕 30 岁，35 岁，40 岁，还跟父母住在一起，她们被父母照顾得无微不至，她们在家里的身份永远是“女儿”，而非一个独立的单身女人。她们在法律上是单身，但是在生活方式上不是。

9. There is not good home education, slowly not able to “wean.” There are a considerable amount of *shengnü* that do not want to get married, even if they are 30, 35, or 40, they still are living with their parents, they are treated to the meticulous caring of their parents, at home they are always considered the “daughter,” not an independent woman. In terms of the law, they are single, but in terms of their lifestyle they are not. (Codependency)

十、苍白保守的生活方式。很多剩女从学生时代开始就是两点一线的生活方式，大学也是走读每天回家，好像是在上高四高五高六。工作了还是两点一线，只不过把学校换成了工作单位。朋友就是中学大学的小猫几只，出了校门好像就丧失了交朋友的能力了。很多中国人的生活都是如此，只有家庭生活+职业生活，完全没有非常重要的社会生活，没有社交。剩女们都习惯把生活圈子小的原因归结为“因为我的工作特性，所以没有社交”。

10. [*Shengnü*] have a somewhat conservative lifestyle. A lot of shengnü, from the time they are students, they are torn between two lives. At college, they usually attend school during the day and then everyday go home, seemingly as if they are attending high school year 4, year 5, or year 6. When they are working, they are still torn between two lives, they are only switching out the school for their place of work. Their friends are the same from middle school to college, and it seems as if once they leave the gates of their school that they lose the ability to make friends. A lot of Chinese people's lives are like this, they only have their home life plus their working life. They completely don't have an important societal life, also do not have any social skills. *Shengnü* all have grown accustomed to taking the small reasons in the circle of life and blaming them on “because of the features of my work, so I don't have any social interaction.”(No social skills)

十一、把爱情当童话，受挫力差。很多剩女到了 25 岁，30 岁，还不能从童话公主梦里醒过来，她们对爱情没有体验经历，只有想象。一旦初恋失败，就痛不欲生，



然后彻底否定男人，否定婚姻。最雷的一句典型话就是：婚姻是女人的坟墓，我再也不相信爱情了。

11. They make love out to be a fairytale and they suffer setbacks. A lot of shengnü reach 25, 30 and are still not able to sober up from the fairytale prince dream, they don't have a lot of experience when it comes to love, they only have their imaginations. Once an early love failure, they are unable to bear the pain, then they thoroughly deny men, deny marriage. The most ridiculous typical sentence is: marriage is a woman's tomb, I again do not trust love. (Disillusionment)

### **The eight shortcomings of *shengnü* and why they are still single:**

Source: <http://health.yynet.com/xw/junshi/8716.html>

#### 1、对自己评价过高 (Overestimation of oneself)

想结婚却结不了婚的男女，大多对异性持批判性观点，时刻摆出一副高高在上的样子，动辄就给对方“差评”，无法享受恋爱的甜蜜也在情理之中。剩女惯有的优势心理作怪，常给人自尊心超强，自我评价过高的不良印象。如果是年轻漂亮、工作麻利的完美女性自然另当别论，但普通人还是学会客观评价自己比较好。

#### 2、我行我素 (Persist in old ways)

“工作以外是私人时间，不想被打扰”，“稍不如意，就把周围人折腾得够呛”等大小姐型的女性让不少男性望而却步。诚然，被当做中心人物的感觉很不错，但是无法配合别人却犯了大忌讳。必须是能够互相退让、互相扶持的双方才能走进婚姻的殿堂，我行我素的女性自然就被无情地淘汰了。

#### 3、求神拜佛 (Because of praying)

很多女性不是不想结婚，而是非常想结婚，但是似乎搞错了努力的方向。佩戴魔法石手链、祈祷旺桃花、带南美福神 Ekeko 娃娃等等，使出了浑身解数还是找不到男朋友，更别提结婚了。其实，只要有这份执着，与其求神拜佛，不如花点心思扩大交际圈。

#### 4、性格具有攻击性 (Aggressive personality)

“猛烈攻击别人时似乎有快感”，“也不知道和谁在暗暗较劲，总之浑身充满了攻击性”，“对已婚朋友赤裸裸的敌意和醋意”，对于这样时刻处于临战状态的女性，男人可是不敢靠近的哦。甚至女性朋友都不敢给你介绍男人。因此，拒绝攻击，学会平和是走向婚姻的第一步。

#### 5、装作一个人活得也很精彩

(They pretend that living the single life is very exciting)

虽然一直宣称“我不需要男朋友，我没想过结婚”，但是看到朋友恋爱或是结婚便会脸色大变的女性，在周围人看来，无非是逞强而已，甚至让人可怜。与其这样，还不如摆正心态，大大方方地表示“想结婚、求介绍”比较靠谱。

#### 6、缺乏女性美德 (Lack of female virtue)



粗鲁、散漫，连家务活都不会好好做的女性在男性眼中印象分很低。并不是要求成为“家务能手”，但最起码的煮饭、洗衣、打扫还是要会的，而且穿着打扮也不能太邋遢。

#### 7、永远不从自己身上找原因 (Always looking everyone but oneself for reasons)

经常有女性抱怨“没人理解自己”，然而，结婚需要的不是一方无条件地理解另一方，而是相互理解。自以为是，不顾对方感受的女性不从自己身上找原因，而只会自怨自艾，因此也就遇不到“真命天子”了。

#### 8、懒散、嫌麻烦 (Lazy, troublesome)

有的女性就是嫌麻烦，总是把自己束缚在狭小的空间内孤芳自赏，懒得出去结交异性。但其实，只有扩大人际交往圈子，才是通往结婚的不二法则。

剩女并不可怕，对于“剩女”和“怨妇”只有一墙之隔，她们为了不变成怨妇，虽然积极的寻找自身的缺点，适时改变自己，并且多和异性交往，多发现他们身上的优点。但是由于自身眼光过高，始终找不到称心的另一半。只要把你的眼光放低些，相信很快就会有美好姻缘在等待着你。

### **Photo project, photo titles**

Source: [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_137b8067f0102va3o.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_137b8067f0102va3o.html)

你绝对想不到，99%的剩女都是这样相亲的  
有钱没文化的,你看不上  
演艺界的,你没兴趣。  
劳动人民,你又看不起。  
传统男人,不堪束缚。  
小男人面前,你就是女皇。  
父母代为相亲的,没感觉。  
心理变态的,只能做姐妹。  
帅气潇洒的,嫌没素质。  
体贴浪漫的,却太幼稚。  
好不容易碰上对眼的,又是个衣冠禽兽。  
所以,你就自己过一辈子吧

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