



Sandy To

## *China's Leftover Women: Late Marriage among Professional Women and its Consequences*

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reviewed by [Arianne M. Gaetano](#)

1. This dissertation-based book by Sandy To is a detailed sociological study of the phenomenon of late marriage among educated career women in urban China. Unlike in the UK or US, marriage in China is a traditional and still nearly universal expectation, and postponement is thus a 'big deal' (p. xvi). Educated women professionals who are unmarried in their late twenties are known as 'leftover women' (p. xiii). The term perpetuates a stereotype that such women are 'too picky' or 'not trying hard enough' (p. 7). To dispels this notion along with the belief that 'leftover women' are marriage averse; the women in her study 'exuded considerable idealism' toward marriage (p. 5) and made 'tremendous efforts to find marriage partners' (p. 6). To approaches her subject seriously and with empathy; she seeks not just to study the phenomenon, but also to offer strategies for 'leftover women' to achieve their marriage goal (p. xiv).
2. To introduces her topic in the Preface and elaborates upon it in the Introduction, where she also elucidates the research methods and her main arguments. Using purposive sampling in four phases over three years (2008–2011), To interviewed fifty never-married women aged twenty-six–thirty-four, and specifically selected those who, like most 'leftover women,' aspire to marriage and do not reject marriage (Appendix A). All interviewees were working in Shanghai and most were from that city; some were from other cities of the Mainland, Hong Kong, or Taiwan (p. 7). All had a university diploma, and nearly half also held advanced degrees from institutions outside the Mainland, mainly Hong Kong, the US, UK, and Australia (p. 7). To infuses the book with the voices of these women by including numerous quotations from these interviews.
3. From her findings, To argues that the 'leftover woman's' inability to find a suitable partner and marry in a timely manner is due to external and not internal factors (p. 8). Professional women are thwarted in their quest to get married by patriarchal constraints that limit their potential partners in the marriage market and also force them to reject marriage with the men who are available to them. However, 'leftover women' are not passive; they respond to constraints with creative 'partner choice strategies' that will lead them to marriage.
4. Chapter 2 describes the women's 'traditional marriage views': their strong cultural investment in the ideal of (heterosexual, monogamous) marriage and to a 'gendered resources' marital relationship

model, wherein the husband is the primary breadwinner, and the wife quits or slows down work to focus on domestic duties (p. 21). To states that the women are motivated to seek marriage in order to fulfill traditional family values or to uphold social conventions, rather than due to the pressures of the 'leftover woman' stigma (p. 31). They may be keen to marry, but some interviewees, for example Olivia (p. 30), also express an ambivalence toward marriage that warrants further explanation. Moreover, I find traditional cultural values insufficient to explain why these women ascribe to the gendered resources model. To might have considered the possibility that these career women's aspirations also reflect new ideals of womanhood and social class distinctions characteristic of contemporary, cosmopolitan society.

5. The next two chapters explore patriarchal constraints. Chapter 3 focuses on discrimination in the marriage market, which adheres to a customary gendered criterion of *mendang-hudui* (similar backgrounds) that 'actually inferred [female] hypergamy' (p. 37). For women of already high socio-economic status, the pool of eligible bachelors is necessarily small. Few Chinese men are willing to 'marry up,' due to the 'patriarchal norm' that men be socioeconomically superior to women (p. 42). To attributes men's rejection of high-achieving women in the marriage market today to these 'old-fashioned' rules dictated by traditional Confucian, patriarchal culture (p. 54). But she could also consider how a fast-changing global economy undermines men's ability to fulfill norms of masculinity, as implied by the (jobless) boyfriends of Isabelle, Veronica and Melody (pp. 42–45), thus decreasing the number of desirable bachelors.
6. Even after finding a promising marriage partner, professional women face tough choices due to patriarchal demands on their future marital role. In Chapter 4, To revisits the 'gendered resources' model of Chapter 2 to clarify that most women desire only 'slightly asymmetrical role divisions' in their marital relationship (p. 57), but do not wish to give up careers entirely. Decades of socialism made women's participation in paid employment a norm (p. 58). Economic independence and status as 'only daughters' empower these women to resist traditional expectations of virilocal postmarital residence and to reject suitors who hold traditional values of male superiority and control (p. 68). As presented in this chapter, To's study participants are unwilling to compromise their desire for an egalitarian marriage (p. 80). For this perplexed reader, Chapter 2 could have better addressed women's contradictory desires for traditional asymmetrical as well as modern egalitarian marital relationships.
7. In Chapters 5 and 6, To demonstrates how 'leftover women' adjust their partner choice strategies in response to the gender discriminatory marriage market and/or the unacceptable patriarchal demands of potential spouses, in order to attain their ultimate goal of marriage. To also shows the limitations of these strategies. In response to discriminatory constraints, some women select Western men, whom they believe to be more open-minded about gender relations. Yet, they may later discover the men harbour patriarchal 'Orientalist' views of Chinese women as subservient or submissive (p. 87). Some women conceal their accomplishments in the introductory stage of courtship, and only reveal their true socio-economic status once their potential suitor is already smitten. Others employ 'deviance neutralization techniques' (p. 97), downplaying their competitive personality and emphasising feminine qualities, while extolling their partners' masculine strengths. Still others set their sights on finding a man of such elevated socio-economic standing that he would not feel humiliated or threatened by a high-achieving wife.
8. In order to negotiate more gender-egalitarian marital relationships, women employ a host of partner selection strategies, such as choosing a 'B-grade man,' someone considered more inferior by conventional measures (p. 111). To references the theory that 'economic status determines household status' (pp. 46, 109) to argue that such men lack the patriarchal authority to demand their wife sacrifice her career to spend more time on domestic tasks (p. 109). Here, To acknowledges that

patriarchal ideology also burdens men, and speculates that some men might feel constrained by the breadwinner role, particularly in today's competitive economy (pp. 113–4). She also expects parents to object to 'inferior' matches for their 'only daughters' (p. 121)

9. Chapter 6 also contains a very important exploration of these women's expectations of the marital relationship and future family, which could best have been included in Chapter 2. While some prefer a role-segregated traditional marriage, others desire an egalitarian marriage and can envision a range of alternative relationships, including single parenting and platonic friendships. Their views seem to vary according to their unique experiences of spouse seeking as well as their age and family background. To might have elucidated these many differences more clearly.
10. In Chapter 7, drawing upon her widely cited 2013 article (see p. xvi, n1), To attempts to tie together the information from the previous chapters to construct a typology of partner choice strategies that 'leftover women' develop in response to patriarchal constraints, and reflect their individual perceptions about marriage, economic goals and gender roles. 'Maximizers' ascribe to traditional, unequal gender roles and seek a husband who can be the breadwinner; their ideal match is a high-income earning Chinese or Western man. Maximizers may downplay their own strengths initially, to woo the 'superior' man (p. 142), and thus achieve their goals of marriage and economic security. 'Traditionalists' likewise prioritise marriage to a breadwinner, but they are not as skilful at overcoming gender discrimination in the marriage market and are unlikely to succeed. 'Satisficers' hold more egalitarian outlooks; they are willing to 'marry down' and use their breadwinner position to negotiate a more equitable marital relationship. 'Innovators' are women who, having encountered patriarchal demands in courtship, decide to eschew marriage and seek companionship and emotional fulfilment elsewhere.
11. I applaud To's effort to identify patterns in women's spouse selections and construct a typology that can guide other 'leftover women' to reach their goal of marriage. But I am sceptical of its usefulness, as these types are 'fluid entities' that shift over time as women modify their expectations and values (p. 160). For example, women are prone to change strategies under parental pressure—'filial constraints' (p. 138). Indeed, the data presented in this book indicate spousal choices and outcomes are varied, complex and unpredictable. To's focus on partner choice strategies reveals 'leftover women' to be resourceful in achieving their marriage goals. But it also depicts them as flatly instrumental, driven to reach their goals of marriage with economic security, or marriage with a gender-equal marital relationship, without concern for fulfilment of sexual and emotional needs or intangible desires.
12. *China's Leftover Women* will interest scholars of gender and marriage in the Asia–Pacific. The detailed stories and testimonials of To's interviewees are an especially rich source of information, though it was difficult to follow each woman's spouse selection process from chapter to chapter. To foregrounds women's agency within constraints of traditional unequal gender ideologies and gender role expectations but does not explore the institutional structures and practices that reinforce such cultural norms. Leta Hong Fincher's (2014)<sup>[1]</sup> presents an alternative view on this social phenomenon. Fincher identifies and critiques the institutional structures and practices of family, law and the housing market, as well as unequal gender ideologies, that impede women's ability to achieve desired egalitarian marriages, but does not explore individual strategies. Clearly, China's 'leftover women' is a complex phenomenon that requires multifaceted analysis. *China's Leftover Women* presents one valuable perspective.

## Note

[1] Leta Hong Fincher, *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China*, London: Zed Books, 2014.

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