

**WHITHER THE STIGMA OF  
UNMARRIED WOMEN  
IN CHINA**

LIM Tai Wei

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## Executive Summary

1. The term “Sheng-nu” (literally translated as ‘leftover women’) is a derogatory term that refers to a woman who is well-educated and single in China aged 27 and older; the usual imageries conjured up in the mass media are that of a “lonely, desperate, overqualified and intimidating” woman.
2. In rural areas, there are fewer marriageable women due to out-migration to urban areas in search of employment; and in urban areas, changing values among both men and women, particularly the more educated ones, are more accommodative of delayed marriages or singlehood.
3. Traditional ideas of women in China including a patriarchal relationship and the expectations of marrying “up” have some dissonance with the contemporary confident and educated Chinese women who are interested in career advancement instead of familial domestic duties.
4. Marriage is increasingly postponed for both male and female with tertiary education. Although female college graduates are nearly 60% less likely to marry by 30 than their counterparts with no education, most do eventually marry.
5. Some argue that anxieties about unmarried women in China is exaggerated in the Chinese media because their research indicated almost all Chinese women eventually marry regardless of their educational background. In urban cities like Beijing, while 10% of female university graduates remain unmarried at age 30, almost all women in Beijing are married by 40.
6. Values have changed over time as well. With greater awareness of personal freedoms after China’s reform era, Chinese millennials no longer regard marriage as an obligation but as an individual choice. They are also socially more tolerant of cohabitation, premarital sex and romantic relationships outside marriage.

7. Single women exude economic power and material consumerism in Chinese society today so conspicuous consumption serves the dual purpose of neutralising social stigma and expressing resistance against a traditional system.
8. Cartoons motivating women to marry and speed-dating events have been put together. The Communist Youth League has organised large blind date activities for singles while non-profit organisations like Marriage Consumption Subsidy Foundation is the first organisation in China to serve couples who have been married for one year or less to promote the healthy development of marriage and family.
9. The Foundation also dispenses a three-yuan (approximately US\$0.50) cash money for each gram of gold purchased for wedding bands and 500 yuan (US\$79) for each car purchased, and offers 5% discount on services like wedding photography while subsidising wedding hall costs, honeymoon vacations, house décor and appliances.
10. While singlehood is rising in urban China, it remains comparatively low compared to its East Asian counterparts. China had less than 10% of urban Chinese women between the age of 30 and 34 staying single in 2015, much lower than the above 30% of singlehood rates in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan.