

The Dilemma of China's Leftover Women: Navigating Conflicts in Traditional Ideology and Feminist Consciousness

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Abstract. In recent years, there has been a notable increase in the trend of late marriage among Chinese youth, particularly women, leading to the emergence of the phenomenon known as “leftover women”. This study explores the complex dynamics of “leftover women” choices in the context of late marriage, considering the intersection of traditional values and inherent feminist consciousness. The study draws on social constructionism to investigate how traditional culture influences these women’s perceptions and decisions. Although society has changed, conventional Confucian concepts still exist and affect the marriage choices of contemporary Chinese women. This study highlights the influence of parental expectations. It uses secondary data to reveal the struggles and compromises “leftover women” faced in the negotiation between personal values and social norms. The findings highlight the intricate interplay between tradition and modernity in Chinese women’s marital decision-making, revealing the challenges and internal conflicts they face in their pursuit of autonomy and personal fulfillment.

Keywords: Leftover women, Confucianism, late marriage, parents’ expectation.

1. Introduction

Late marriage has become widespread among Chinese youth, particularly in urban areas [1]. The phenomenon of late marriage among women, often referred to as “leftover women”, has gained more attention in media and public discourse than its male counterpart [2]. Media and popular culture continually propagate the image of these “leftover women” as involuntarily single and eager to sell themselves in the marriage market, perpetuating and exacerbating stereotypical perceptions of these women and intensifying the marriage pressure commonly experienced by women from both family and society [1].

As a crucial component of Chinese traditional culture, Confucianism underscores the family’s continuity and stability, deeming it essential for national and societal development [3]. Confucian thought’s profound and enduring influence has significantly shaped China’s family ethics and societal values. Marriage, a key element within the family institution, is notably gendered in Confucian tradition [4]. Women are usually considered the family caregivers, while men are naturally regarded as the breadwinners. However, as economic, political, and cultural reforms in contemporary China have raised the status of women and increased their participation in higher education, women’s roles have gradually moved away from the traditional family, and most women have begun to exhibit titles in traditionally male-dominated fields. This is one of the main reasons for the increasing number of “leftover women” in recent years. The widespread spread of feminist consciousness has also triggered a growing academic interest in these “leftover women”. Despite the considerable attention given to “leftover women”, there has been limited research exploring whether they grapple with conflicts between traditional ideologies and internal feminist consciousness in their decision to delay marriage. This study aims to probe deeper into the dynamics of “leftover women” by addressing how leftover women navigate the conflict between traditional values and their internal feminist consciousness in the choice of marriage. This research unveils the interplay between conventional beliefs and women’s inner consciousness.

2. Literatures Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Social constructivism posits the significance of culture and background in understanding societal events and constructing knowledge based on such understanding [5]. In other words, social constructivism asserts that an individual's thoughts and knowledge are shaped within specific cultural and societal contexts. Individual perspectives, beliefs, and values are profoundly influenced by the cultural and social environment in which they exist. Since implementing the Reform and Opening-up policy, China has undergone continuous political, economic, and cultural reforms. Women's status has gradually improved, and gender awareness has been strengthened [6]. However, traditional Confucian notions regarding family and marriage still influence these women's internal constructions. Studies reveal that even though these women acknowledge the importance of personal development, traditional beliefs remain deeply ingrained in the culture, shaping their perspectives on marriage.

Social constructivism also emphasizes the impact of societal expectations on individuals' cognitive understanding of behaviour [7]. In Chinese society, late marriage might be seen as deviating from traditional gender roles and societal expectations. These "leftover women" are often part of the highly educated and high-income demographic. Despite their awareness of the importance of personal development and resistance against traditional gender roles, the predominant influence of Confucian societal expectations and gender roles in China continues to impact their internal perceptions, making them feel the need to conform to traditional expectations.

2.2. The Current Situation of Leftover Women in China

In recent years, with the trend of Chinese women delaying marriage becoming a widespread phenomenon, an increasing number of researchers have turned their attention to the issues of female singleness and late marriage. Since the early 2000s, the term "leftover women" (sheng nü) has emerged in Chinese media and online discussions. It describes independent, well-educated, and financially secure women in their twenties and older who choose not to get married [1]. Many Chinese academics and feminist researchers claim that the term "leftover women" refers to rigid, conventional marriage traditions that view marriage as a woman's primary and that she should get married before she becomes "old" [8]. The close relationship between marriage and childbirth implies that the impact of marriage on women's lives is often more significant than that on men's lives. Past research indicates that "leftover women" face substantial pressures from their families and society. According to the findings of Sharp and Ganong, the period between the twenties and thirties is typically when unmarried women deeply contemplate their future family development [9]. Therefore, single women often confront immense pressure from parents, relatives, and society during this period. Those who have not found a husband at the "appropriate" age may be simplistically deemed as "failures". Furthermore, in the face of marriage, these women's values and experiences are often overlooked.

2.3. The Inner Conflict Regarding Marriage

According to a survey of 50 single women aged 26-34 in Shanghai, participants commonly experienced conflicts between personal values, lifestyle, and the pursuit of romantic relationships and marriage [10]. Notably, this conflict primarily stems from the clash between their pursuit of a more personalized lifestyle and the expectations rooted in traditional cultural norms. Ji's research further supports this viewpoint [2]. In her study conducted in Shanghai, she found that educated single professional women place a greater emphasis on gender equality and personal value development, criticizing the marriage institution under traditional male-centric cultural norms. However, they also indicated that influenced by parental and societal marital values, they may still find it necessary to compromise with patriarchal expectations when deemed essential.

2.4. Parental influence on marriage choice

In past studies, many participants have mentioned their natal families, referring to the influence of their parents on their marital choices. In traditional Confucian thought, carrying on the family line is highly important [11]. The traditional Chinese family values prioritizing filial piety and procreation have endured despite the significant transformations that Chinese society underwent during the 20th century [12]. Therefore, the marital decisions of young people in China still cannot escape the pressure and involvement of their parents. For instance, Gui's on-the-ground research into China's parent-organized matchmaking market indicates that parents frequently push their adult children to get married when they reach a particular age [4]. Parents view marriage more from a practical standpoint and see themselves as active participants in their adult children's dating lives. This suggests that when parents support traditional marital ideals, they force these ideas on their kids, overtly or covertly. This active participation shows the power parents have on their children's marriage choices, especially in a culture that still places a premium on maintaining the family line, fosters filial piety, and recognizes marriage as a reproductive institution. People are frequently limited in their ability to choose a spouse and make decisions about marriage as they negotiate the impact of conventional values and family views.

However, To's study also pointed out that while these "leftover women" criticize traditional marital patterns, a significant portion still adheres to and select marriages following the standard male-dominated model [10]. Despite advocating for the celebration of singledom with slogans like "Long live the single life", many of these women also experience sadness and shame due to their unmarried status. On the one hand, they defend their "leftover women" identity regarding economic and personal development. On the other hand, they harbor concerns about their emotional status as they age, actively seeking potential male partners. Nevertheless, previous literature has seldom delved into the inner conflict experienced by these "leftover women" when choosing to marry later, navigating the tension between traditional ideologies and feminist empowerment. Given that contemporary "leftover women" find themselves at the crossroads of tradition and modern changes, the rising force of feminism continually prompts academia to focus on the self-development of these women.

3. Methodology

This study explores the conflict between traditional ideologies and inherent feminist consciousness faced by contemporary Chinese "leftover women" when making marital choices. Therefore, qualitative analysis is chosen as the research method, as it is considered the most appropriate way to delve into women's experiences and narratives. Quantitative research is perceived to reflect male perspectives and experiences primarily. Thus, qualitative analysis provides a better space and opportunity for this study to explore these women's understanding of self-awareness and meaning construction [13]. Due to the short duration of the research and the difficulty in collecting primary data, secondary data is predominantly utilized, mainly through the analysis of a documentary by an Israeli director. However, it must be acknowledged that the participants in the documentary are limited, and their discourse may not directly address the research questions, thus imposing constraints on the study. The findings of this study can only represent the viewpoints of some women from the secondary data documentary. Hence, conclusions drawn may still be biased.

4. Results

Social constructivism posits that objective factors like biology or physics do not predetermine reality; instead, they gradually form through sustained influences of interpersonal interactions. These interactions encompass language, a shared understanding of symbols and representations, and many other communicative practices that shape people's world perception [5]. Confucianism reinforces the association between female age and marriage through a series of linguistic and symbolic interactions,

such as family upbringing and media propaganda. This results in individuals perceiving a woman's marriage at an appropriate age as a "natural" societal fact.

A documentary of *Leftover Women*, filmed by Israeli directors, highlights the diverse experiences of three single women in their late marriages, providing a direction for research answers. One of them, a 35-year-old lawyer named Huamei, outlined her marriage and relationship goals to the staff at an internet matchmaking centre:

"I hope he is well-educated, and most importantly, he must respect women's wishes and be willing to share household responsibilities with me." [14]

Before she could finish, the staff eagerly launched an attack on her appearance, age, personality, and profession:

"Firstly, you are not a conventional beauty in the traditional sense; secondly, 35 years old is considered advanced maternal age; what? Do you even entertain the idea of not wanting to have children? If you want to enter marriage, you cannot choose not to have children. It might be related to your profession, your personality is too strong, try to be gentler." [14]

As social constructivism suggests, individuals form distinct perceptions when they establish specific meanings and understandings unique to a particular culture through continuous interaction. In the traditional marriage beliefs of Chinese society, women are considered to be "young", "gentle", and "beautiful". Women are not expected to have high-paying jobs; instead, they are hoping to invest all their energy into caring for their husbands, children, and parents. If a woman's age falls into the category of "late marriage", regardless of her value, she will be considered a "failure". Furthermore, having a high salary and social status fails to help you stand out and may be a stumbling block to finding a partner. In more severe cases, if a woman lacks the consciousness of herself as a reproductive resource, thinking that she is competitive in the marriage market and wants to uphold independence, it is purely "self-deception".

When having dinner with friends, Huamei also mentioned:

"I feel that (late marriage) really worries them (parents), and this issue truly troubles them. So, I think I have the obligation and responsibility to help them resolve this problem, to make them worry less."

Huamei's friend: "Do you truly agree with it in your heart?"

Huamei: "I don't agree, I just want to alleviate their concerns." [14]

Despite Huamei's impressive educational background and enviable career, at 35, she actively participates in various dating and matchmaking activities. While she is well aware that age is not the sole determinant of marriage, it is evident that her pursuit of matrimony is primarily influenced by the pressure and concerns of her parents. Balancing her independent mindset with the traditional expectations of her parents and the external society, Huamei finds herself compelled to navigate compromises and trade-offs in the realm of marriage.

There is constant pressure to marry in the current comparatively conventional society. However, the most intense pressure originates from parents and relatives. Their primary concern revolves around the future life of their daughters, fearing that they might end up lonely and lacking companionship. As a result, there is a palpable sense of insecurity regarding their daughters' future lives. In addition to Huamei, the family has four other daughters, all already married, and some have even started their own families. One of the elder sisters remarked about Huamei's unmarried status at the age of 35:

"How old are our parents now? They are still worrying about you. If you don't get married, who will take care of you when you get old or sick? Even if you're happy without marriage, it's not real

happiness. Don't be too selfish. Do you know what the neighbors will say about us if you remain unmarried? Do you want to bring shame to our family?"

"After you graduated from university, I've always been proud of you. Since you were little, I've done everything I could to provide for you. I even said I would sell my blood to support your education. But what are you doing now?" (Huamei's father) [14]

Despite significant changes in Chinese society, the ideological influence of traditional Confucian values persists among the older generation. Due to the Confucian emphasis on filial piety and the importance of hierarchical structures within families, parents hold absolute authority and decision-making power. Therefore, children are expected to follow their parents' opinions and respect their viewpoints unquestioningly. Additionally, in Chinese families, marriage for women at an appropriate age is seen as conforming to social norms and remaining unmarried beyond the expected age is often regarded as disgracing oneself and the family. As illustrated by Huamei's experience, her delayed marriage is perceived as a disgrace to the family. Faced with pressure from her relatives, Huamei has been navigating the marriage market, attempting to alleviate her family's concerns and avoid disgracing them. This underscores that, despite harboring independent feminist consciousness, "leftover women" are still constrained in their development by Confucian principles of filial piety and family honor.

On the other hand, within traditional culture, parental care and upbringing are viewed as investments, with the expectation of unconditional obedience and compliance from children as a form of repayment. This notion is evident from Huamei's father's remarks. The reinforcement of gender roles for women in terms of familial dedication and childbearing aligns with parents' expectations regarding marriage and reproduction. However, any deviation from these traditional expectations, particularly if women consider resisting them, often results in being labelled as "disobedient" and may subject them to significant pressure within marriage. Many women, to avoid disappointing their parents or, worse yet, becoming a disgrace to the family, hastily enter marriage under various pressures.

In the documentary, another "leftover woman" named Guiqi, to meet her parents' expectations, ultimately decided to have a quick marriage and give birth. She said:

"I must accomplish these things (marriage and childbirth) within a year. My mom seems even happier than I am. Of course, I made compromises, like coming to Guangzhou and having a child to appease him (her husband). I might say that the single life is interesting and fulfilling; now it's a bit dull but happier." [14]

In a society where early marriage is widely expected, and traditional views prevail, many "leftover women" find themselves compelled to swiftly enter marriage to cope with pressure from parents and society, sometimes merely to "appease" their parents and respond to societal scrutiny. Despite harboring feminist aspirations and emphasizing the pursuit of individual value and professional development, these women find it challenging to fully break free from the constraints of traditional gender roles under the intense pressure of conventional culture. Like Guiqi, some modern "leftover women" ultimately choose to enter into marriage to conform to the traditional culture prevalent in society, completing what they perceive as their "mission". While Guiqi may not explicitly mention her more profound thoughts in the documentary, her whirlwind marriage doesn't seem to be a random outcome. This decision likely reflects internal anxieties about age and the impact of societal norms, creating a sense of urgency to fulfill the traditional family model's phased tasks. Such pressure might lead them to make hasty decisions, including quick marriages and rapid childbirth, to meet societal expectations regarding women completing marriage and childbirth within a specific age range.

On the other hand, some "leftover women" may internally uphold the persistence of individual value and autonomous choice. Still, societal pressure makes it challenging for them to break free from traditional expectations. Therefore, swift marriages and rapid childbirth may represent a compromise,

a way to outwardly align with societal standards and alleviate negative pressures from family and society. As a result, it can be observed that whether it is Guiqi or Huamei, they have recognized the patriarchal ideology embedded in marriage under the current waves of modern development. They are actively defending their internal feminist convictions, attempting to confront traditional culture. However, given the unique nature of Chinese families and the authoritative role parents hold in Chinese culture, most “leftover women” ultimately find it challenging to attain their ideal marital status. They are compelled to make compromises, reluctantly entering marriages that still adhere to traditional patriarchal norms and opting for marital arrangements more in line with conventional expectations.

5. Conclusion

The “leftover women” phenomenon in China reflects a complex interplay between traditional values and evolving societal dynamics. This study delves into the intricate web of influences shaping these women's choices in the context of late marriage. Social constructivism provides a lens to understand how cultural factors contribute to the perceptions and decisions of individuals within a changing societal landscape.

Despite substantial progress in women's status, Confucian ideals, emphasizing filial piety and traditional gender roles, continue to impact the choices of Chinese women. The enduring influence of parental expectations becomes evident, with “leftover women” facing considerable pressure to conform to traditional norms. This pressure often leads to compromises and hastened decisions, such as swift marriages and rapid childbirth, as a response to societal scrutiny and parental concerns.

The study emphasizes the internal conflicts experienced by “leftover women”, torn between individual values and societal expectations. While many express feminist aspirations and value personal development, the weight of tradition often compels compromises in their pursuit of autonomy and personal fulfilment. The results highlight the necessity of a comprehensive comprehension of the difficulties these women encounter navigating the nexus between tradition and modernity.

However, as mentioned in the methodology, this study did not extensively collect primary interview data, resulting in limitations in the discourse of the study participants. Furthermore, with the limited number of cases among the secondary data documentary participants, this study may have only focused on a small portion of “leftover women's” inner consciousness. It must be acknowledged that there may still be some “leftover women” who, until the end, choose not to conform to societal expectations. They may opt to remain single or persist in pursuing true love rather than entering marriage merely to meet societal expectations. Additionally, there are even cases where “leftover women”, who seemingly compromised and entered marriage hastily, choose to divorce after marriage. These broader samples still require future scholars to collect more extensive data for further analysis.

In conclusion, the experiences of “leftover women” highlight the persistence of traditional ideologies within the evolving landscape of Chinese society. The tension between individual aspirations and societal expectations underscores the ongoing complexities of marriage choices. As China continues to undergo social transformations, further research is warranted to explore the evolving dynamics of late marriage and the intricate negotiations between tradition and modernity in the lives of Chinese women.

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